

Syria: Unlawful Missile Attacks Kill More Than 140 Human Rights Watch February 26
2013 The

Syrian government launched at least four ballistic missiles that struck populated areas in the city of Aleppo and a town in Aleppo governorate during the week of February 17, 2013. The attacks killed more than 141 people, including 71 children, and caused immense physical destruction.

The extent of the damage from a single strike, the lack of aircraft in the area at the time, and reports of ballistic missiles being launched from a military base near Damascus overwhelmingly suggest that government forces struck these areas with ballistic missiles. Human Rights Watch visited the four attack sites, all in residential neighborhoods. Human Rights Watch found no signs of any military targets in the vicinity of any of the four sites, which would mean that the attacks were unlawful.(...) Human Rights Watch compiled a list of those killed from cemetery burial records, interviews with relatives and neighbors, and information from the Aleppo media center and the Violations Documentation Center, a network of local activists.(...)

The three neighborhoods, all in the eastern part of Aleppo, were controlled by the opposition. While opposition fighters move throughout opposition controlled areas, there had been no ground fighting in these neighborhoods for months, local residents said. The opposition military headquarters known to Human Rights Watch are in other neighborhoods.

At the time of the attacks, many people who had initially fled the fighting in August 2012 had returned to the area, as well as people displaced from other parts of the Aleppo governorate. There is ongoing fighting around Aleppo's international airport, south of the neighborhoods that were struck, but local residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch at each of the sites attacked said that there had been no bases for opposition fighters in the vicinity and that opposition fighters had staged no attacks from these neighborhoods. During its visit, Human Rights Watch confirmed that there was active fighting close to the airport, but not in these neighborhoods.(...)

Human Rights Watch research indicates that at least 141 people, including 71 children, were killed in the four attacks. Human Rights Watch was not able to establish the first name of six of the 141 documented casualties.

The total casualty number is probably higher, Human Rights Watch said. Since many families left the areas after the attack and buried family members in surrounding villages, the records are probably incomplete.(...)

Human Rights Watch did not find weapons remnants at the attack sites, and so was unable to identify the exact weapons used. However, a group of local activists in the Damascus countryside reported on their Facebook page that they had observed missiles being launched toward the north before three of the four strikes. (...)

The level of destruction and witness statements describing a single explosion at each site is consistent with the use of ballistic missiles. Witnesses also told Human Rights Watch that they did not see or hear any airplanes before or after the attack, which makes it unlikely that the

attacks were airstrikes. Syria stockpiles several types of ballistic missiles according to the authoritative publication *Military Balance 2011* by the International Institute of Strategic Studies.

A Syrian government official denied that the authorities had used Scud-missiles against the opposition. Several videos from different dates posted on YouTube, however, show Syrian military forces launching ballistic missiles. In addition, a weapon used in an attack on Belouin in Jabal Zawiye in December, 2012, has been identified as a Luna-M ballistic missile (also called FROG-7), according to identification marks on the remnants.

Syrian government forces used ballistic missiles for the first time in December 2012, the *New York Times* reported. Since then, activists have counted more than 30 attacks with such missiles before the attacks documented in this report. Several of them have landed in fields without causing any damage, they said. Activists in Yabroud have claimed on their Facebook page that the government has launched the missiles from the nearby al-Nasiriyeh air base, north of Damascus city. The Local Coordination Committees, a network of opposition activists, have accused the 155th Brigade based near Damascus of launching the missiles.

“Using ballistic missiles against its own people is a new low, even for this government,” Solvang said. “There was no sign of fighters or their bases in these areas, only civilians, many of them children.”

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