

From 'Days of Rage' to raging conflict - Two years of turmoil in Syria

Amnesty International

15 March 2013

(...) Emboldened by the fall of repressive governments in Tunisia and Egypt, Syria's opposition activists started taking action in early 2011. Their uprisings grew wings – on social media and on the streets – and in March, Syria's Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) were born. They organized local protests and shared information with other activists and the media, nationally and abroad. (...)

On 18 March 2011, a group of around 30 people gathered at a mosque in Homs, a city 150km north of the capital, Damascus. When Friday prayers finished and people began to leave, they erupted into chants of "Allah, Syria and freedom".

Some onlookers were surprised or shocked. Many had never even seen a protest before – let alone taken part in one. Others pushed back against the security forces, allowing protesters to run away before getting caught. (...)

Scenes like these were being replicated across Syria by mid-2011. The country was still virtually closed to foreign reporters and international human rights organizations. (...)

After the information had been rigorously checked, Amnesty concluded that crimes against humanity were being committed in Syria. We made strong calls for the international community to take action to end the abuses.

And we repeatedly called for the UN Security Council to refer the situation to the International Criminal Court, to ensure that all those responsible for crimes against humanity and, eventually, war crimes, would be investigated and prosecuted.

As Syrian security forces increasingly used excessive force against mainly non-violent protesters, an armed opposition emerged. From late 2011 onwards, some government opponents increasingly began revenge killings and armed attacks against government forces.

As opposition groups began to gain control of neighbourhoods in large cities and rural areas, they launched more brazen attacks. Government forces responded with a significantly wider and more violent crackdown, even using heavy weapons and artillery in full-scale assaults on opposition-controlled areas. (...)

Armed opposition groups very quickly learned to "dance around" government forces. These punitive raids carried on for months, with devastating consequences for civilians. When the soldiers couldn't find their elusive armed opponents, they punished local residents. Extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detention, torture, and disappearances were widespread. They also deliberately destroyed homes and properties. (...)

While armed confrontations became more frequent in many areas, peaceful protests continued elsewhere. “At the end of May 2012 in Aleppo, Syria’s largest city, I saw government forces and paramilitary shabiha militias fire live rounds at peaceful demonstrators every day, killing and injuring protesters and bystanders alike. Activists in the city were also being arrested and tortured, sometimes to death, and disappeared,” she continued. (...)

This has dramatically increased the number of civilians killed, injured and displaced. “Towns and villages where displaced people had been sheltering suddenly emptied,” said Donatella. Hundreds of thousands fled to already-heaving refugee camps in neighbouring Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. Many more are displaced within Syria.

Air strikes often targeted large groups of civilians – including people queuing for bread as food supplies dwindled, or those gathered near hospitals. Aleppo’s Shifa hospital was bombed repeatedly until it was put out of use, Donatella said.

Lack of access to medical care has been a serious issue throughout Syria’s conflict. Donatella described how security forces would detain and often torture anyone being treated for bullet wounds – accusing them of being “terrorists”. The regime uses that term interchangeably for both peaceful protesters and the armed opposition. (...)

Abuses on all sides

As the conflict rages on, Syria’s government forces and paramilitary (state-armed) militias does not have complete monopoly on human rights abuses.

Armed opposition groups too have committed serious abuses, including summary killing and torturing captured security forces, militia members and suspected informers. Amnesty International continues to document potential war crimes committed by all parties. (...)

As Syria’s conflict rages on, the international community's inaction has unfortunately conveyed a message that accountability for war crimes is not a priority. That is a dangerous presumption. Amnesty International will continue to press for concrete action at the international level stop violations on the ground and hold all those responsible to account.

See the full article [here](#) .