

Opening Statement at the 23rd session of the Human Rights Council, Geneva UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay

27 May 2013

On 27 May 2013, The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, spoke before the Human Rights Council in Geneva. The issue of the Syrian crisis is central in her remarks, and Pillay refers to the principle of the responsibility to protect civilians:

Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,
Excellencies and colleagues, (...) I come to this task today in the hope that we will be able to spark tangible action to stop the escalating bloodshed and suffering in Syria, which after 26 months has become an intolerable affront to the human conscience.

What began as non-violent protests has spiralled into a brutal and increasingly sectarian civil war, to some extent fuelled by external actors. Civilians bear the brunt of this crisis in which human rights violations have reached horrific dimensions. Confronted with the flagrant disregard of international law and human life on every side, I feel utter dismay.

In March this year, I dispatched a team to monitor the situation in Syria from neighbouring countries, where a tide of desperate families has sought refuge. The team has received information suggesting that the Syrian Government continues to use indiscriminate and disproportionate force in residential areas, and that the Syrian armed forces have directly targeted schools and hospitals.

I am extremely concerned at current reports suggesting that hundreds of civilians have been killed or injured, and thousands may remain trapped, by indiscriminate shelling and aerial attacks by Government forces in Al Qusayr. Safe passage must be given to any civilians wishing to leave.

Wanton human rights violations are also being committed by anti-Government groups. Accounts gathered by our monitoring team suggest that armed groups have apparently used civilians as human shields, and that abductions are increasing. The accounts include allegations that certain opposition groups have forced young women and minor girls to marry combatants. And we continue to receive reports of anti-Government groups committing gruesome crimes such as torture and extrajudicial executions.

Whenever their governments cannot or will not protect them, frightened human beings are

dependent on the international community for protection and assistance. We cannot — we must not — continue to ignore their plea.

Time and again, delegates from all the countries present here today have solemnly agreed that the world must not permit the most extreme kinds of human rights violations. We have agreed that we have a duty to protect our fellow human beings — even if they are born in other countries; and even when they are being crushed by governments that have a claim to sovereignty over their territory.

Twenty years ago, the 7000 delegates to the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna gathered less than one day's drive away from the killing fields of the former Yugoslavia. The member States of the United Nations made powerful statements about the struggle against impunity.

Since then, much progress has been made in prosecuting people responsible for the commission of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide. And there has been much discussion of the international community's responsibility to protect civilian populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

Yet today, appalling violations of the most basic human rights are occurring in Syria, and I fear that we in the international community are failing to meet our fundamental obligations to the victims.

A humanitarian, political and social disaster is already upon us, and what looms is truly a nightmare. Humanitarian workers struggle to devise increasingly complex ways to deliver a modicum of assistance. One out of three people in Syria today needs international aid. Yet the international community seems unable to make a strong commitment to resolving the crisis. I urge States to make every effort to forge an end to this humanitarian disaster, for it sometimes seems that we can do little more than cry out in the darkness and try to count the dead.

Once again I urge the Security Council to refer the Syrian crisis to the International Criminal Court. These war crimes and crimes against humanity cannot be allowed to go unpunished. We must make it clear to both the Government and the armed opposition groups that there will be consequences for those responsible. And the world must take action to end this terrible conflict. (...)

[See full statement.](#)