

Syria: Crimes Against Humanity in Homs Human Rights Watch 11 November 2011 The systematic nature of abuses against civilians in Homs by Syrian government forces, including torture and unlawful killings, indicate that crimes against humanity have been committed, Human Rights Watch said in a new report released today. Human Rights Watch urged the Arab League, meeting in Cairo on November 12, 2011, to suspend Syria's membership in the League and to ask the United Nations Security Council to impose an arms embargo and sanctions against individuals responsible for the violations, and refer Syria to the International Criminal Court.

The 63-page report, "We Live as in War': Crackdown on Protesters in the Governorate of Homs," is based on more than 110 interviews with victims and witnesses from Homs, both the city and the surrounding governorate of the same name. The area has emerged as a center of opposition to the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The report focuses on violations by Syrian security forces from mid-April to the end of August, during which time security forces killed at least 587 civilians, the highest number of casualties for any single governorate.

As in much of the rest of Syria, security forces in Homs governorate subjected thousands of people to arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and systematic torture in detention. While most were released after several weeks in detention, several hundred remain missing. Most detainees were young men in their 20s or 30s, but security forces also detained children, women, and elderly people. (...)

Local residents told Human Rights Watch that since June, army defections had increased and that many neighborhoods had about 15 to 20 defectors who would sometimes intervene to protect protesters when they heard gunfire. In addition, the security forces' violent crackdown and increasing sectarian mistrust have led residents of some neighborhoods in the city of Homs, notably Bab Sba` and Bab `Amro, to organize in local defense committees that are often armed, mostly with firearms but in some cases with rocket propelled grenades (RPGs).

Violence by protesters or defectors deserves further investigation. However, these incidents by no means justify the disproportionate and systematic use of lethal force against demonstrators, which clearly exceeded any justifiable response to any threat presented by overwhelmingly unarmed crowds. Nor would the existence of armed elements in the opposition justify the use of torture and arbitrary, incommunicado detention.

The decision of some protesters and defectors to arm themselves and fight back shows that the strategy adopted by Syria's authorities has provoked a dangerous escalation in the level of violence, and highlights the need for the international community to ensure an immediate cessation of lethal force lest the country slip into bloodier conflict, Human Rights Watch said. (...)

Read the full [press release](#) and read the full report ["We Live as in War": Crackdown on protesters in the governorate of Homs](#)