

Syria: Thousands of Houses Unlawfully Razed Human Rights Watch 30 January 2014

Satellite imagery, witness statements, and video and photographic evidence show that Syrian authorities deliberately and unlawfully demolished thousands of residential buildings in Damascus and Hama in 2012 and 2013, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

The 38-page report,

[“Razed to the Ground: Syria’s Unlawful Neighborhood Demolitions in 2012-2013,”](#) documents seven cases of large-scale demolitions with explosives and bulldozers that violated the laws of war. The demolitions either served no necessary military purpose and appeared to intentionally punish the civilian population or caused disproportionate harm to civilians, Human Rights Watch found.

“Wiping entire neighborhoods off the map is not a legitimate tactic of war,” said Ole Solvang, emergencies researcher at Human Rights Watch. “These unlawful demolitions are the latest additions to a long list of crimes committed by the Syrian government.”

The Syrian government, as part of its Geneva II negotiations, should make a commitment to immediately end demolitions that violate international law and to compensate and provide alternative housing to the victims, Human Rights Watch said. The United Nations Security Council should refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The seven cases Human Rights Watch documented took place between July 2012 and July 2013 in the following areas: the Masha` al-Arb`een and Wadi al-Jouz neighborhoods in Hama, and the Qaboun, Tadamoun, Barzeh, Mezzeh military airport, and Harran Al-`Awamid neighborhoods in and near Damascus.

The total building area demolished, based on analysis of the satellite imagery, is at least 145 hectares – an area equivalent to about 200 soccer fields. Many of the demolished buildings were apartment blocks several stories high, some as many as eight. Thousands of families have lost their homes as a result of these demolitions. All of the affected neighborhoods were widely considered by the authorities and by witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch to be opposition strongholds.

Government officials and pro-government media outlets have claimed that the demolitions were part of urban planning efforts or removal of illegally constructed buildings. However, the demolitions were supervised by military forces and often followed fighting in the areas between government and opposition forces. As far as Human Rights Watch has been able to determine, there have been no similar demolitions in areas that generally support the government, although many houses in those areas were also allegedly built without the necessary permits.

These circumstances, as well as witness statements and more candid statements by government officials reported in the media, indicate that the demolitions were related to the armed conflict and either served no necessary military purpose and appeared to intentionally punish the civilian population, or caused disproportionate harm to civilians in violation of the laws of war.

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Some of the demolitions took place around government military or strategic sites that opposition forces had attacked. While the authorities might have been justified in taking some targeted measures to protect these military or strategic locations, the destruction of hundreds of residential buildings, in some cases kilometers away, appears to have been disproportionate and to have violated international law.

Local residents told Human Rights Watch that government forces gave little or no warning of the demolitions, making it impossible for them to remove most of their belongings. Owners interviewed by Human Rights Watch also said that they had received no compensation.

One local restaurant owner from the Qaboun neighborhood of Damascus told Human Rights Watch that security forces arrived one morning unannounced with bulldozers and ordered him to leave the premises: “When I asked why, the soldier said ‘no more questions’ or else I would be detained.”

He said they denied permission to remove anything from the restaurant and forced him to leave on foot, leaving his motorcycle behind. “As I was walking I looked back and I saw the bulldozer demolishing my shop,” he said. “The shop was opened by my grandfather many years ago. I personally managed the restaurant for eight years. Before my eyes, all of my family’s hard work was destroyed in one second.”

The report is based on detailed analysis of 15 “very-high resolution” commercial satellite images and interviews with 16 witnesses to the demolitions and owners whose houses were demolished. In addition, Human Rights Watch reviewed media reports, government decrees, and videos of the destruction and its aftermath posted on YouTube.

“No one should be fooled by the government’s claim that it is undertaking urban planning in the middle of a bloody conflict,” Solvang said. “This was collective punishment of communities suspected of supporting the rebellion. The UN Security Council should, with an ICC referral,

send a clear message that cover-ups and government impunity won't stand in the way of justice for victims.”

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