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'Absentees law' could see millions of refugees lose lands

Legislation could allow government confiscate properties of displaced Syrians unless they prove ownership in 30 days

By Arwa Ibrahim

Al Jazeera (07.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2uU2vg1> - As thousands of Syrians flee their homes in Eastern Ghouta to escape a fierce air and ground offensive led by pro-government forces, President Bashar al-Assad has introduced a new law which can potentially see the state confiscating the lands of millions of displaced people.

Law Number 10, introduced earlier this week, calls on Syrians to register their private properties with the Ministry of Local Administration within 30 days.

Titleholders must either provide proof of ownership documents themselves, or ensure a relative does so on their behalf. Otherwise, they face having to relinquish their properties to the state.

According to Article 2 of the law, a regulatory body will be responsible for drawing up a list of real estate owners - conditional on receiving documentation in support of ownership claims - for areas under government control.

Properties that are not reclaimed by their owners within the month-long period will otherwise become part of a plan to reorganise the areas they belong to into new residential zones.

But with about 13 million Syrians, internally or externally displaced and therefore unable to access their lands, many families face the potential of losing their homes forever.

"This law can effectively deprive millions of Syrians of their lands and properties," said Nizar Ayoub, an international lawyer and expert on conflict resolution.

"It is the latest in a series of measures taken by the state to punish those who have opposed the Assad government by denying them their rights to their lands," added Ayoub, founder of Al-Marsad, the Arab Centre for Human Rights in Golan Heights.

Syria's 'absentees law'

Legal experts have been quick to liken the recently introduced legislation to the Israeli Absentees' Property Law.

That law was brought in after the 1948 war to allow arriving Israelis to move into the homes of millions of Palestinians forced off their lands.

"Just like the 'Absentees Law' allowed Israelis to take over the properties of Palestinians forced off their lands in 1948, Assad's new law could see the state confiscating the lands of millions of displaced and refugee Syrians," said Ayoub.

In recent years, the Absentees' Law has been used by right-wing groups seeking to increase Jewish presence in East Jerusalem, which is traditionally dominated by Arab neighbourhoods.

'If I go back, I'll either be killed or arrested'

The move by Assad's government comes just days after the latest batch of about 19,000 Syrians left their homes in Eastern Ghouta for the northern province of Idlib following two evacuation deals reached with the Russian army in March.

"This law is simply an extension to the enforced evacuations which aim to empty opposition areas of its rightful owners and give these lands to Assad," said Abu Jawad, one of the thousands of Syrians who fled their homes in Eastern Ghouta in recent weeks.

"It is impossible for me to go back home to prove my right to my lands and properties," the 27-year-old, who owns two homes and an electronics shop in Hammouria, told Al Jazeera.

"If I attempt to do so, I'll either be killed or arrested by pro-government forces," added Abu Jawad who fled to the northwestern province of Idlib earlier this month.

To date, an estimated 150,000 residents of Eastern Ghouta have been evacuated to northern Syria.

Enforced change

The government says the new law aims to address the issue of squatter areas and the reconstruction of lands impacted by war.

Experts argue, however, that it aims to punish those who have opposed Assad as well as create demographic changes on the ground in Syria.

"It is completely illogical that a law which aims to rebuild Syria and repopulate areas affected by the war is introduced while the war is still ongoing," Diala Shehade, a human rights lawyer, told Al Jazeera.

"Carrying out this transitional phase of reconstruction and re-population before addressing the issue [that] millions of Syrian are refugees or internally displaced, points towards the ill intentions of the Assad government," she added.

Ayoub agrees: "The most dangerous thing about this law is that it has been issued in the midst of the ongoing armed conflict, and as millions of Syrians are unable to return to their homes to prove ownership of their properties," he told Al Jazeera.

According to Ayoub, the law may, therefore, play into what has been described as a plan to change the demographics of Syria, which according to reports since 2015 has seen Shia communities from across Syria, Lebanon and Iraq resettle in areas previously inhabited by Sunnis who were forced to leave their homes.

Population exchanges have reportedly been key to a plan to make demographic changes to parts of the country.

The goal, some have argued, is to enable the government and its allies to pursue their strategic interests even further by creating specific areas under their direct control.

"If we take Eastern Ghouta as an example, the thousands of families who are now displaced for opposing Assad might be replaced by people who have supported him instead," said Ayoub.

SETF applauds Spanish Court's admittance of first criminal case based on Caesar file and welcomes as key step toward Syrian accountability

Syrian Emergency Task Force (27.03.2017) - The Syrian Emergency Task Force applauds today's decision by the Spanish National Court to admit the first criminal complaint against Syrian security forces for crimes documented in the Caesar photos, and welcomes the move as the first tangible step by the international community toward holding Syrian war criminals to account.

The decision, issued by Judge Eloy Velasco of the Spanish Central Court of Instruction, grants Spanish courts jurisdiction to prosecute 9 senior members of the Syrian Security and Intelligence Forces for their responsibility in the commission of the crime of state terrorism. These charges, investigated by the nonprofit Guernica 37, with support from former U.S. Ambassador Stephen J. Rapp, will be presented as part of a case filed on January 31 on behalf of a dual Spanish-Syrian citizen identified in the war crimes photos Caesar smuggled from Syria in 2013.

"Today's unprecedented decision by the Spanish National Court dispels the notion that regime officials can continue to perpetrate mass war crimes with impunity," said Mouaz Moustafa, Executive Director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force and representative of the Caesar Team. "This step toward justice would not be possible without the enormous sacrifices made by Caesar and his family and without the partnership of Guernica 37, the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Their continued support will prove imperative in developing the element of justice in our time."

The announcement caps the end of Caesar's week-long visit to the United States to speak with policymakers about his experience in regime prisons, the prospects for justice, and the greater need to include protection from regime bombardment as a key part of U.S. policy to end the conflict in Syria. His visit this week marked his first semi-

public appearance since he came to the United States to testify before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 2014.

In public statements during his visit, Caesar lamented the previous administration's failure to advance international accountability, but he expressed his hope that the current U.S. administration would prioritize justice and accountability mechanisms as part of a negotiated peace agreement for Syria.

Syrian civil society works toward a sustainable peace

By Elisabetta Baldassini

HRWF (20.09.2016) - On Tuesday 13 September 2016, the European Peace Liaison Office (EPLO) organised a lunchtime discussion on the vision of Syria's civil society for the future of their country. The event came in response to the noticeable absence of political progress in Geneva to end the war in Syria, prodding Syrian civil society to step up efforts to ensure equal rights in the post-war period. Two civil society activists, **Assaad Al Achi** and **Mutasem Alsyufi**, shared their vision of the current situation and future prospects for a sustainable peace. They also made recommendations for EU policy makers to help in realizing this vision.

Assaad Al Achi is the Executive Director of a leading grassroots organisation, *Baytna*, and a founding member of the *Syrian Local Coordination Committees* and the *Civil Society Geneva Declaration Initiative*. Mutasem Alsyufi will soon move into the position of Executive Director of *The Day After*, an organisation supporting a democratic transition for Syria.

Before the 2011 Revolution, there was little space for civil society to function and any attempt of protest was banned. The revolution finally broke down these obstacles and Syrian civil society began to come into its own. Beginning in 2014, civil society actors have had a consistent presence at consultations in Geneva to end the war. In 2016, a Civil Society Room was set up to establish a working space for Syrian civil society to contribute meaningfully to the peace process and to represent the voice of civil society within the country during the official Geneva talks.

At first, the Civil Society Room worked behind the scenes and in a consultative role with the Office of the Special Envoy. It functioned in four different working groups, making it sometimes very difficult to reach consensus on very challenging issues.

Even still, Assaad Al Achi stressed the importance of civil society, as it can transmit the voices from the ground up, something which the big implementers of diplomacy have trouble delivering. The grassroots movement that was raised up at the time of the 2011 revolution needs to be reckoned with. A public statement of nearly 300 organisations and 1033 individuals in support of civil society's commitment to the peace process is testimony to the strength of this movement.

The delegation also made recommendations for reforming the functioning of the Civil Society Room as well as supporting the EU in its role of monitoring and cooperation in implementing UN Security Council Resolutions. Together they hope to forge a more hopeful future for their country.

ISIS says it executed a Chinese and Norwegian hostage

Slate.com (18.11.2015) - <http://slate.me/1OhvI4m> - ISIS announced on Wednesday it had executed two hostages, publishing images in its English-language magazine that appeared to show a Chinese and a Norwegian citizen had been shot to death. A full-page photo of the men included a caption, according to Agence France-Presse, that read: "Executed after being abandoned by the (infidel) nations and organizations."

It's not exactly clear when 48-year-old Ole Johan Grimsgaard-Ofstad from Norway and 50-year-old Fan Jinghui were killed or when exactly they were captured. They appeared in the September issue of the magazine where ISIS appeared to be demanded a ransom. "The Norwegian government had declined to pay, with Prime Minister Erna Solberg saying paying would increase risks for other Norwegians," according to the Wall Street Journal. "The Chinese government said in September that it was taking emergency steps in response to reports one of its citizens had been kidnapped, but it didn't elaborate."

It remains unclear how the two were abducted, although the Journal reports, Grimsgaard-Ofstad may have been in Syria working as an aspiring freelance journalist of sorts. The Associated Press refers to him as "a graduate student in political philosophy." Jinghui is described as a freelance consultant in media reports, although the AP characterized him as a "self-described 'wanderer' from Beijing who once taught middle school." There is no indication of why he was in or around Syria. Authorities are working to confirm the authenticity of the images, but appear resigned to their authenticity.

Syria – Alleged "adulteress" survives militant stoning

AFP (30.01.2015) - A Syrian woman stoned by the militant Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) group for alleged adultery and left for dead has miraculously walked away from the brutal punishment, a monitor said Friday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the militant group sentenced the woman to be "stoned for adultery" in the town of Raqqa, the ISIS stronghold in northern Syria.

Militants carried out the punishment and "stoned her until they thought she had died," said the Britain-based monitor.

But just as they had stopped pelting her with stones, the woman stood up and tried to flee.

"An ISIS militant was about to open fire at her when an Islamist jurist intervened and stopped him saying it was God's will that she did not die," said the Observatory, without specifying when it happened. The ISIS jurist told the woman she can walk free but that she must "repent".

According to the Observatory, at least 15 people, nine of them women, have been executed by militants in Syria, including al-Qaeda-linked militants, since July for alleged adultery and homosexuality.

ISIS and al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's Syria branch, hold large swathes of Syria and have imposed a brutal version of Islamic law in territory under their control.

The missing piece in the Syria-Iraq debate: The Turkmen

The Turkmen across Syria and Iraq are stuck between sectarian conflict and Kurdish nationalism

Fair Observer (13.10.2014)

http://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/the-missing-piece-in-the-syria-iraq-debate-01428/ Unlike the Kurds — the largest stateless ethnic group in the region — the Turkmen are not armed and are now struggling for their survival. Their continued existence is important because, as traditional moderates and natural links to Turkey, the Turkmen could be vital in building peace after the dust settles.

Who are the Turkmen?

Though the Turkmen are culturally and linguistically similar to their kin in Turkey, their tribes first settled in the region in the 9th century. Renowned for their horsemanship and soldiering, Turkmen tribes, in one way or another, were part of the military elite up until the early 1900s. They became part of the Ottoman Empire with the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, the Ottoman's legendary victory over the Safavid Empire. The Ottomans took care to settle Turkmen along the cities on route to the Hijaz — present-day Saudi Arabia — to secure the pilgrimage path.

As the Ottoman Empire disintegrated in the wake of World War I, the Turkmen found themselves as a minority in the two Arab-majority Kingdoms of Syria and Iraq. The past century then brought de-colonization, Arab nationalism and war. Yet Turkmen have managed to preserve their way of life. They speak a dialect of modern Turkish at home, but many are more comfortable with Arabic. Their practice of Islam remains close to the moderate Anatolian tradition.

Syria's Turkmen

Syria's Turkmen are located in the Levantine Latakia province and the northern regions of Aleppo and Raqqa, close to the Turkish border, as well as the central city of Homs. The Syrian regime, headed by President Bashar al-Assad, has often fudged their population numbers, leading experts to think of the Turkmen as a tiny minority. The true figure of Syrian Turkmen is likely to be much higher. Turkmen leaders claim they number 3.5 million. No reliable census exists to verify these claims, but taking a number of known Turkmen-majority villages into account, these authors estimate that there are between 2-3 million Turkmen in Syria.

The Turkmen had a good start in Syria. Two of the Arab Republic's early presidents were Turkmen, including the two-term President Hashim al-Atassi, whose family remains influential in Homs. Starting in the 1960s, however, the pan-Arab Baathist movement sidelined non-Arabs from politics. Then-President Hafez al-Assad's rule was devastating to the Turkmen. He banned Turkish-language education, eradicated traces of Turkmen culture and redistributed the community's land. Squeezed out of their possessions and way of life, the Turkmen identity was pushed out of the public eye.

Syria and Iraq are now one battleground involving local militants, governments and foreign jihadists. In this mix, ethnic Turkmen are the largest population that is seldom talked about.

The civil war in Syria of the past three years has rekindled Turkmen politics. At the beginning of the conflict in 2011, most Turkmen joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a moderate rebel group. As more Syrians took up arms, they formed their own brigades under the FSA umbrella. What is certain is there are currently more than ten armed Turkmen groups defending their positions against the Assad regime or IS. Despite being

Sunni-majority, very few Turkmen seem to have joined IS ranks — certainly the least of all other Sunni groups. “They couldn’t find people among us because the Turkmen way of life is different from theirs,” Abdurrahman Mustafa, the president of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly said. “That made us ISIL’s [IS] number one target.”

The Iraqi Turkmen

Iraq’s roughly 2 million Turkmen are spread over a strip of land between the Kurds and Arabs, ranging from Mosul to Diyala province. Their recent history has not been easier than their kin in Syria. Starting in the late 1950s, the Iraqi regime massacred Turkmen elites, closed their schools, renamed their villages and, in many instances, forced them to change their names under a policy of Arabization. This was done by the communist regime, as well as the Baathists and Saddam Hussein later on. Despite the merciless campaign, however, they held onto more of their wealth and social standing than Syria’s Turkmen. Nouri al-Said, a former Iraqi prime minister and the son of a Turkish Pasha, and many of his colleagues who served before the coup in 1958 were Turkmen. More recent notables include journalists Nermin el-Mufti and Abbas Ahmet, or the poetess Munevver Molla Hassun.

In 1995, Iraq’s Turkmen founded the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) with Turkey’s assistance. The ITF served as an umbrella group for regional Turkmen political leaders, which allowed them to organize in the wake of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. That stands in contrast to Syrian Turkmen, who only formed political organizations at the onset of the civil war. By the time Iraq formed its first government in 2005, the Turkmen had a civil body of elected leaders, representatives in the Iraqi parliament and offices in foreign capitals, including Ankara, Washington DC and London. But the organization lacked one critical element to wield power in Iraq: weapons. To this day, its lightly armed militia can barely protect its leaders from assassination attempts.

This inability to take and hold territory has come at a high price to the Turkmen community during the IS surge this summer. The Turkmen suffered terrible blows in Tuz Kharmatu, Tel Afer, which is their biggest territory, and Amirli, a city between Kirkuk and Baghdad. Most affected Turkmen tribes had no choice but to flee from IS advances. Shiite Turkmen were subject to the worst massacres, but Sunni tribes have also fallen prey to IS. One Sunni Turkmen leader allegedly killed his two daughters with poison upon IS’ approach. The only group strong enough to put up a fight have been the Abbasiyun, the largest of Tel Afer’s Sunni Turkmen tribes.

Yet the sectarian division in Iraq’s Turkmen tribes has become undeniable. Sunni Turkmen, who make up roughly half of its community in Iraq, were a double minority during Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s Shiite-majority rule. When IS called for Sunni tribes to rise up against Baghdad, some of them answered. Sources suggest that a number of Turkmen are now in high-ranking positions in IS. The group might also be taking advantage of its Turkmen members for its contacts with Turkey. When IS attacked the Turkish consulate in Mosul and took 46 citizens hostage, it was the jihadist group’s Turkmen members who communicated with the captives, according to some accounts.

But the ITF remains devoted to its founding principle of including both sects among its members. Ersad Salihi, the ITF’s leader, pointed out in a talk in Ankara that three of its candidates for Mosul’s elections were Sunnis and have been kidnapped by IS. The ITF, he says, has been the jihadist group’s main target in Mosul, despite the entirely Sunni makeup in the city.

Turkmen: Kurdish Relations in Iraq

One important dynamic for Iraqi Turkmen’s future is their relationship with the Kurds. Nominally, the two communities are allies. The Turkmen occupy a handful of seats in the

Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament, and Turkmen forces have fought alongside the Peshmerga — Kurdish armed forces — against IS. Under the surface, however, things are more complicated.

The Turkmen do not receive the protection Christian minorities get, nor do they have the institutional makeup to defend themselves the way the Kurds have. They are alone on the frontlines of the IS onslaught and their numbers are thinning by the day.

The Kurds have held up better against the IS onslaught than the Iraqi army, giving them more sway in the country's future. When the army fled the city fearing an IS attack, Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), ordered his forces to seize control of Kirkuk, which Kurds see as their historical capital. For Turkmen, this was a serious encroachment on their presence.

Kurdish and Turkmen territories overlap across several critical territories. Turkmen leaders like to point out that half a century ago, most of Erbil's population was Turkmen. More importantly, however, the Turkmen were the majority in Kirkuk's center before 2003. After the Saddam regime was toppled, Peshmerga troops stormed into the city's downtown area and vandalized many Turkmen and Arab properties. They also had the foresight to burn land deeds from Kirkuk's Land Registry Office, to prevent Turkmen from taking back their property in future lawsuits. The Turkmen who remained in Kirkuk have been struggling to hold onto their place ever since. Now that the city is entirely in Kurdish hands, the Turkmen fear they will be forced out entirely.

Yet Salihi has not abandoned hope of Turkmen-Kurdish cooperation. He wants to negotiate with the Kurdish leadership to lend Kirkuk a special status that would allow it to flourish as a pluralistic city after the war. "We shared the suffering and prison of the Saddam years with our Kurdish brothers," he said at a meeting in Ankara, "but we wish that we had been included in the political process after 2003, just like they were."

International Help

Part of the Turkmen's dire situation is due to the lack of foreign aid. The US and Europe have been timid about arming rebel groups, much less identifying the Turkmen specifically as a community in need of protection.

In August, when IS laid siege to Amirli in Iraq, the only aid the Shiite Turkmen town had for nearly two months was a helicopter that carried supplies in from Baghdad twice a week. For months, the only foreign power to help them during the siege was Iran, sending its famous Gen. Kassim Suleimani to the Shiite Turkmen's aid. Only in September did US drones provide enough air cover for the population to be evacuated. That stands in stark contrast to the sensitivity Western countries have showed for Christian and Yazidi minorities.

At least part of this is due to the assumption that Turkey stands as a natural ally to the Turkmen and will provide any aid necessary. However, that has not entirely been the case. Ankara does have good relations with the Turkmen, donning out generous educational scholarships in the past and, more recently, humanitarian assistance.

But the big brother to the north has proved timid when it comes to war. Syrian Turkmen lament that Turkey has provided little beyond a trickle of light weaponry — none more, according to Turkmen leaders, than it gave to Sunni Arab groups. "If we had received the weapons we desperately asked Turkey for," a Turkmen commander said, "the majority-Turkmen areas would have been free of the ISIS [IS] threat." The president of the Syria Turkmen Council, Abdurrahman Mustafa, said: "As ISIS [IS] parades around with the scud missiles and tanks it got from its Raqqa raid, we have to worry about how to save ammunition for our rifles."

The matter has become a sore point with Turkey's AK Party government. The Nationalist People's Party (MHP), the country's second-largest opposition party, has repeatedly called on the government to increase its aid to the Turkmen. Ahmet Davutoglu, then-foreign minister and the current prime minister, periodically assures them that his government has been helping the Turkmen as much as possible. Yet the MHP does not seem convinced. This summer, parliamentarians got into a fistfight when Sinan Ogan of the MHP gave a fiery speech condemning the government's inaction. More recently, leftists such as the Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of the main opposition People's Republican Party (CHP), have also accused the AK Party of neglecting the Turkmen.

That leaves the Turkmen in a precarious position. The Turkmen do not receive the protection Christian minorities get, nor do they have the institutional makeup to defend themselves the way the Kurds have. They are alone on the frontlines of the IS onslaught and their numbers are thinning by the day.

If that continues, it will significantly impoverish the region. The Turkmen have much to offer by helping to rebuild Syria and Iraq — whatever shape those territories will take. Economically, they are a natural link to the commercial centers across the border in Turkey. More importantly, the Turkmen are moderates with a tradition of local, representative government. That is why anyone with a stake in the region's stability should be concerned about the Turkmen's predicament between Arab sectarianism and Kurdish nationalism today.

Huseyin Rasit Yilmaz is a Turkish analyst on ethnic conflict, terrorism and nationalism. He has been a researcher at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) since January 2011 and is a graduate student of politics and social sciences at Gazi University. Yilmaz has authored three books: "Being a Turk in Turkey," "Breaking Points of Turkish History" and "The Turks and Kurds/The Project of a Social Rehabilitation"

Selim Korum is an Ankara-based researcher on energy markets and foreign policy. He has worked and interned with various media institutions such as the Turkish daily Sabah, Al Jazeera's Arabic and English offices in the US, and The Hill newspaper in Washington DC. He is currently a researcher at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV). He holds a Bachelor's in History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a Master's in International Relations and Economics from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

U.N. says Syria death toll tops 190,000, rights envoy raps world powers

Reuters (22.08.2014) <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/22/us-syria-crisis-deaths-idUSKBN0GM0KH20140822> - More than 191,000 people were killed in the first three years of Syria's civil war, a U.N. report said on Friday, and the world body's human rights envoy rebuked leading powers for failing to halt what she branded a "wholly avoidable human catastrophe".

U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said war crimes were still being committed with total impunity on all sides in the conflict, which began with initially peaceful protests against President Bashar al-Assad's rule in March 2011.

"It is a real indictment of the age we live in that not only has this been allowed to continue so long, with no end in sight, but is also now impacting horrendously on hundreds of thousands of other people across the border in northern Iraq, and the violence has also spilled over into Lebanon," said Pillay.

Pillay, in a statement issued a week before leaving office, added: "The killers, destroyers and torturers in Syria have been empowered and emboldened by the international paralysis.

"It is essential governments take serious measures to halt the fighting and deter the crimes, and above all stop fuelling this monumental, and wholly avoidable, human catastrophe through the provision of arms and other military supplies."

The report by her Geneva office was based on data from four rebel groups and the Syrian government. They were cross-checked to eliminate duplicates and inaccuracies, including non-violent deaths or alleged victims later found to be alive.

It said the number of men, women and children killed in the conflict as of April 30, 2014, totaled at least 191,369. Of them, some 62,000 - both civilians and combatants - were killed in the past year alone, Pillay's spokesman Rupert Colville said.

The figure is more than twice the number of deaths documented a year ago and is probably still an under-estimate, Pillay said.

Colville told a news briefing in Geneva that around 5,000 to 6,000 people were being killed on a monthly basis.

Men and boys account for the bulk of the deaths but nearly 18,000 women and more than 2,000 children under the age of nine are also among those killed, he said.

Assad's government supplied just one set of figures on killings to the United Nations in March 2012, Colville said.

"We consider their information important because it's a little bit of a different perspective and possibly different groups of people that they focus on," he said, adding they were "almost exclusively military or police".

All groups involved in the fighting -- including the government, the army, police, Islamist militants and other opposition groups -- have committed killings, Colville said.

The U.N. report said it had excluded from its analysis an additional 51,953 killings that were reported but lacked required information of full name, date and location of death.

A further "significant" number may not have been reported by any of the five sources, it added.

The highest number of documented killings were recorded in Rural Damascus province, Aleppo and Homs.

Pillay repeated her longstanding call on world powers on the U.N. Security Council to refer alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by all sides in Syria's conflict to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Neighbours plead for international help

BBC news (30.09.2013) - Syria's neighbours have asked donors for support in dealing with the huge influx of refugees at a meeting in Geneva.

Foreign ministers from Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq presented reports at the meeting, hosted by the UN.

More than two million Syrians have fled the conflict in their country, and many more have been displaced internally.

Meanwhile, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said he would comply with a plan to rid his country of chemical weapons.

"Of course we have to comply. This is our history. We have to comply with every treaty we sign," he told Italy's RAI News 24.

On Friday, the UN Security Council passed a binding resolution to eliminate Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons by mid-2014.

Inspectors from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is tasked with implementing the plan, left for Syria on Monday.

A separate team of inspectors, from the UN, has been investigating allegations of chemical weapons attacks and left Syria after concluding its work there.

These include an attack on 21 August in Damascus that left hundreds dead and triggered a threat of international military action against Mr Assad's forces.

At the United Nations in New York, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem accused "well-known" countries of backing "terrorists" fighting the Syrian government and of threatening "blatant military aggression outside the mandate of the Security Council".

He said Syria had "repeatedly embraced" a political solution, and would co-operate with the OPCW - but added that outside states which he accused of supplying chemical weapons to Syrian rebels had to abide by their commitments as well.

"Any political solution in light of the continued support of terrorism, whether through supplying arms, funding or training, is mere illusion and misleading," he said.

Struggling to cope

The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, has been warning that the number of Syrian refugees is threatening the political and social cohesion of the whole region.

"Syria has been burning for too long," UNHCR chief Antonio Guterres said as he opened the Geneva meeting. "This burden is far too heavy to be borne by only the neighbouring countries."

He said the international community should put in place more robust measures to share the burden of sheltering "an unrelenting flood of Syrian refugees" with Syria's neighbours.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said the arrival of more than 240,000 Syrian refugees since mid-September in Iraqi Kurdistan "had created a substantial burden on available resources and local economies".

The number of refugees might reach 350,000 by the end of 2013, he continued, and as winter approaches, "we require increased support from the international community".

Jordan's Foreign Minister, Nasser Judeh, said pressure on resources and public services were reaching "unbearable levels" and that the cost the Jordanians were paying as a result of this crisis was "unprecedented".

"The host communities' resilience has been undermined dramatically and public opinion is changing," he said.

Meanwhile, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said the international community had "fallen short" in its response to the humanitarian crisis and "failed to provide an effective humanitarian response to put an end to this senseless violence".

Lebanon does not have the money, housing, schools or hospitals to cope, while Jordan and Turkey, with some 500,000 refugees each, are believed to have spent at least \$2bn (£1.25bn) caring for them, the BBC's Imogen Foulkes reports from Geneva.

In an attempt to prevent Syria's neighbours closing their borders, traditional donors are being asked financial support and offers to host some of the most vulnerable refugees, she says.

But the UN's \$4.4bn appeal for Syrian refugees is only 50% funded, and there has been little response to appeals for Western states to resettle Syrians.

Britain and the US have not committed to accepting any so far, Germany will take 5,000, Austria 500.

Earlier, UNHCR spokesman Peter Kessler said the agency would appeal "for more support for the host countries including direct budget support but also of course aid in areas like provision of health care, education, infrastructure and other projects".

"For many of these countries such as for small Lebanon and Jordan, the influx of Syrian refugees represents a huge proportion of those countries' current population," he told the BBC.

Unrest in Syria began in March 2011, developing into a conflict in which more than 100,000 people are estimated to have been killed.

Syrian refugees 'sold for marriage' in Jordan

BBC News (10.05.2013) - Before the war began, Kazal was in love with her neighbour in Homs. "He was 20 years old and I dreamed of marrying him one day," she says. "I never thought I would marry someone I didn't love, but my family and I have been through some hard times since coming to Amman."

Kazal says she is 18 but looks much younger. She has just got divorced from a 50-year-old man from Saudi Arabia who paid her family about US \$3,100 (UK £2,000) to marry her. The marriage lasted one week.

"I lived with my husband in Amman, but we weren't happily married. He treated me like a servant, and didn't respect me as a wife. He was very strict with me. I'm happy that we're divorced."

Her huge, blue eyes fill with tears when she talks about the marriage.

"I agreed to it so I could help my family. When I got engaged I cried a lot. I won't get married for money again. In the future I hope to marry a Syrian boy who's my own age."

'Survival sex'

Andrew Harper, the Representative of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Jordan, is concerned that some of the 500,000 Syrian refugees in the country are increasingly turning to such desperate measures.

"We don't have enough resources to give aid to all those who need it. The vast majority of refugees are women and children. Many of them are not used to going out to work, so survival sex becomes an option."

His office in central Amman is surrounded by hundreds of newly arrived refugees, waiting in long lines to register for aid. He says the UNHCR has intervened with some families who have been offering their daughters up for early marriage.

"I can't think of anything more disgusting than people targeting refugee women... You can call it rape, you can call it prostitution, you can call it what you want but it's preying on the weakest.

"The government and people of Jordan are doing what they can but people are poor and we have to get more resources into the community so families aren't forced into something that deep down I believe they don't want to do."

Kazal's agreed to the marriage to help her family

Short-term marriages between men from the Gulf and Syrian girls reportedly happened before the war began. But Kazal's mother Manal, who dresses conservatively like her daughter in an abaya and headscarf, says she would have never considered such an arrangement in the past.

"Life here is very hard and we receive very little aid. We have a baby who needs lots of milk every day, and we can't afford to pay the rent. So I had to sacrifice Kazal to help the other members of the family."

She says that the marriage was arranged by an Amman-based NGO called Kitab al-Sunna, which gives cash, food and medicines to refugees. It is funded by donations from individuals across the Arab world.

"When I went for help at the NGO they asked to see my daughter. They said they would find a husband for her."

Syrian matchmaker

The director of Kitab al-Sunna, Zayed Hamad, says that he is sometimes approached by men who want to marry Syrian women.

"They ask for girls who are over 18. They're motivated by helping these women, especially those whose husbands died as martyrs in Syria. Arab men see Syrian women as good housewives, and they find them very pretty, so traditionally it is desirable to marry one."

Um Mazed is a 28-year-old Syrian refugee from Homs who has started earning money by arranging marriages between Syrian girls and Arab men.

In a grubby room covered with mould, she fields phone calls from prospective brides and grooms.

"The men are usually between 50 and 80, and they ask for girls who have white skin and blue or green eyes. They want them very young, no older than 16."

She says she has presented more than a hundred Syrian girls to these men, who pay her a fee of US \$70 for an introduction, and about US \$310 if it results in a marriage.

"If these marriages end in divorce after a short time, that's not my issue, I'm just the matchmaker. As far as I'm concerned it's not prostitution because there's a contract between the groom and bride."

Um Mazed means "Mother of Mazed", one of her three children. She doesn't want her identity known because she's ashamed of what she is doing for a living, but claims she has no choice.

"How are we supposed to live when the NGOs give us so little help? How are we supposed to pay our rent? We're not getting enough help to live decently, that's why I'm doing this - so my family and I can survive."

A very busy man behind the Syrian civil war's casualty count

The New York Times (10.04.0213) - Military analysts in Washington follow its body counts of Syrian and rebel soldiers to gauge the course of the war. The United Nations and human rights organizations scour its descriptions of civilian killings for evidence in possible war crimes trials. Major news organizations, including this one, cite its casualty figures.

Yet, despite its central role in the savage civil war, the grandly named Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is virtually a one-man band. Its founder, Rami Abdul Rahman, 42, who fled Syria 13 years ago, operates out of a semidetached red-brick house on an ordinary residential street in this drab industrial city.

Using the simplest, cheapest Internet technology available, Mr. Abdul Rahman spends virtually every waking minute tracking the war in Syria, disseminating bursts of information about the fighting and the death toll. What began as sporadic, rudimentary

e-mails about protests early in the uprising has swelled into a torrent of statistics and details.

All sides in the conflict accuse him of bias, and even he acknowledges that the truth can be elusive on Syria's tangled and bitter battlefields. That, he says, is what prompts him to keep a tight leash on his operation.

"I need to control everything myself," said Mr. Abdul Rahman, a bald, bearish, affable man. "I am a simple citizen from a simple family who has managed to accomplish something huge using simple means - all because I really believe in what I am doing."

He does not work alone. Four men inside Syria help to report and collate information from more than 230 activists on the ground, a network rooted in Mr. Abdul Rahman's youth, when he organized clandestine political protests. But he signs off on every important update. A fifth man translates the Arabic updates into English for the organization's Facebook page.

Mr. Abdul Rahman rarely sleeps. He gets up around 5:30 a.m., calling Syria to awaken his team. First, they tally the previous day's casualty reports and release a bulletin. Then he alternates between taking news media calls - 10 on a slow day, 15 an hour for breaking news - and contacting activists.

He transmits his last e-mail around 9 p.m. and continues monitoring news reports and YouTube videos until at least 1 a.m. But urgent news developments frequently disrupt that schedule.

Recently, for example, rumors of the assassination of Col. Riad al-As'aad, a founder of the rebel Free Syrian Army, erupted about 11 p.m. Mr. Abdul Rahman stayed up contacting activists near the eastern city of Deir al-Zour until 5 a.m. before confirming that the colonel was very much alive, but had lost a leg in a car bombing.

In March, when rebel forces near the Golan Heights kidnapped 21 United Nations peacekeepers from the Philippines, his phones rang incessantly. "I wanted to shatter my mobile," said Mr. Abdul Rahman, who often has a cellphone on each ear.

He said his ultimate goal was to hold accountable those responsible for Syria's destruction. Focusing on human rights will eventually bring the country a better, democratic future, he said.

"We have to document what is going on in Syria," he said, because each side is trying to "brainwash" the people to accept its version of events. "The country is headed toward destruction and division," he added. "We have to try to preserve what hasn't been destroyed."

Mr. Abdul Rahman, who founded the observatory in 2006 to highlight the plight of activists arrested inside Syria, faces constant scrutiny over his numbers.

He has been called a tool of the Qatari government, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Central Intelligence Agency and Rifaat al-Assad, the exiled uncle of Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, among others. The Syrian government and even some rebels have accused him of treachery.

"Rami's objectivity is killing us," said Manhal Bareesh, an activist from Saraqib who knew him before the war. But he and other activists in Syria credit him with working hard to document all the cases, and not hesitating to document potential war crimes.

Alexander Lukashovich, the spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, once described him to the state-owned RIA-Novosti news agency as a man with "no training in journalism nor law, nor even a complete secondary education."

(In fact, he graduated from high school and studied marketing at a technical school.)

Mr. Abdul Rahman's toll for the Syrian conflict just passed 62,550, somewhat below the United Nations' figure of more than 70,000. March was the deadliest month yet, with 6,005 deaths, he said, more than the combined total of the uprising's first nine months.

"I think our numbers are close to reality, but nobody knows the entire reality," he said. "I make sure nothing is published before crosschecking with reliable sources to ensure that it is confirmed."

The ultimate toll, he said, may be twice what has been documented, given Syria's size, the number of skirmishes and communications problems.

Activists in every province belong to a Skype contact group that Mr. Abdul Rahman and his aides tap into in an effort to confirm independently the details of significant events. He depends on local doctors and tries to get witnesses. On the telephone, for instance, speaking in his rapid-fire style, he asked one activist to visit a field hospital to count the dead from an attack.

With government soldiers, he consults contacts in small villages, using connections from his youth on the coast among Alawites, the minority sect of Mr. Assad, which constitutes the backbone of the army.

Mr. Abdul Rahman has been faulted for not opening his list up for public access online, but the world of nongovernmental organizations gives him mostly high marks. "Generally, the information on the killings of civilians is very good, definitely one of the best, including the details on the conditions in which people were supposedly killed," said Neil Sammonds, a Mideast researcher for Amnesty International.

The intense workload has taxed Mr. Abdul Rahman's family life. His only child, Amani, 6, springs from bed without so much as a "good morning," said his wife, Etab Rekhamea. "She asks: 'What is the news from Syria? What is the news about the Nusra Front?'"

Mr. Abdul Rahman spends so much time locked upstairs in his tiny study that Amani figured out how to Skype him from the living room. Once when he agreed to a picnic, he showed up carrying his two cellphones and his laptop. "He has taken a second wife," his wife said with a groan.

Mr. Abdul Rahman grew up in Baniyas, on the Syrian coast, but would not speak for the record about his family still there, lest that bring further unwanted government attention.

His exposure to politics started at age 7, he said, after his family's landlord hit his sisters for sitting on the building's roof. Neighbors who saw the altercation refused to testify because the landlord was an Alawite with a brother in military security.

Mr. Abdul Rahman owned a clothing store but secretly wrote pamphlets denouncing unfair privileges granted to a few while most Syrians had to line up for basic goods. Born Osama Suleiman, he adopted a pseudonym during those years of activism and has used it publicly ever since.

When two associates were arrested in 2000, he fled the country, paying a human trafficker to smuggle him into England. The government resettled him in Coventry, where he decided he liked the slow pace. He says his main regret is having to drive 30 minutes to Birmingham for a decent Arab restaurant.

Money from two dress shops covers his minimal needs for reporting on the conflict, along with small subsidies from the European Union and one European country that he declines to identify.

The war has dragged on far longer and has been far more destructive than he ever anticipated, and for the moment, he said, his statistics are as much a tactic as a resource.

"The truth will make people aware," Mr. Abdul Rahman said. "Hearing the number of people killed every day will make them ask the government, 'Where are you taking us?' "

Unveiled Syrian Facebook post stirs women's rights debate

BBC News (19.11.2012) - Among the dozens of Facebook groups spawned by the Syrian uprising, a page supporting women's rights has suddenly received a wave of attention, because of an image posted there by one of its followers. The picture was of 21-year-old Dana Bakdounis, without the veil she had grown up wearing - and it polarised opinion.

Dana Bakdounis has been brought up in conservative Saudi Arabia, but it was as a reaction against conformity that she first removed her veil in August 2011.

"The veil did not suit me, but I had to wear it because of my family, and the society," she says.

"I did not understand why my hair was covered. I wanted to feel the beauty of the world... I wanted to feel the sun and air."

By then, she was already following The Uprising of Women in the Arab World page on Facebook.

With nearly 70,000 members, it has become a forum for debate on women's rights and gender roles in the Arab world. Women, and men, from non-Arab backgrounds also comment on its photos.

On 21 October, Dana decided to do something for the page, and for oppressed women and girls around the Arab world by posting a photo of herself.

Looking right into the lens, her short-shorn hair in full view, she held an ID picture of her previously veiled self, along with a note that read: "The first thing I felt when I took off my veil" and "I'm with the uprising of women in the Arab world because, for 20 years, I wasn't allowed to feel the wind in my hair and [on] my body".

The image proved hugely controversial, attracting over 1,600 likes, nearly 600 shares, and more than 250 comments.

Dana has received much support, and while many of her friends have un-friended her, many more have sent friend requests.

Some previously veiled women have even posted cypcat pictures in support, and the Twitter hashtag #WindtoDana has been created as a channel through which to express solidarity.

'Brave girl'

She has also received hundreds of messages of derision, along with threats.

Her mother, with whom relations have cooled because of her disapproval of her daughter's actions, received a death threat against Dana's life.

"Everything has changed for me since I took my veil off," says Dana.

The debate is growing more nuanced. One woman comments that opposition to the veil is misplaced, saying instead "our fight should be for equality in society... that's what we should be fighting for; when a veiled woman is refused a job because she covers! Take pride in your veil women, it's a blessing!"

For Dana's part, she is pleased to have provided a source of optimism for many of her religious, veil-wearing friends, and strangers alike.

"I was so happy when I received lots of messages from girls wearing the veil. They showed their support for me, saying 'we respect what you did, you're a brave girl, we want to do the same but we do not have the audacity'. I even received messages from old women."

Causing almost a bigger stir as the image itself has been what many perceived as a heavy-handed and censorial reaction by Facebook to the picture.

The administrators of the Facebook page [have vocally claimed](#), both through the page and in local and international press, that Facebook administrators removed Dana's photograph on 25 October, four days after its original posting, blocking Dana, along with the accounts of the administrators of The Uprising of Women in the Arab World page.

They also alleged that copies of the photo reposted by supporters of Dana were also removed, and that the group's entire account was blocked between 29 October and 5 November.

Facebook, when asked to comment, were at pains to make the point that the issue was never the cause that the page itself is supporting, but merely a couple of mistaken enforcements of their rules.

A member of their PR team explains: "The images of the woman were not in violation of our terms. Instead, a mistake was made in the process of responding to a report on controversial content", going on to say that "what made this situation worse is that we made multiple mistakes over a number of days, and it took time to rectify each of these missteps."

Mistakes aside, the allegations alone have raised interesting questions about the non-formalised and seemingly omnipotent role that one of the best-known social media channels plays in this process of intense regional change and upheaval.

Online nexus

But it will take more than threats and barriers to stop 21-year-old Bakdounis.

"I want to take another picture, but from inside Syria, just to show that I could be a fighter against injustice and power. With my camera, I can help the people and support the Free Syrian Army."

Increasingly, reports from inside Syria highlight the presence of fundamentalist Islamist factions within the anti-regime movement, hijacking the struggle.

With the influx of these non-Syrian jihadi fighters, there are growing fears for the future of women's rights in the nation and the region.

Dana and those like her want to see a new Syria.

"[A Syria] full of rights, with justice between men and women. I want justice because I already have my freedom, and I'm not afraid of anything now, now I can do whatever I believe it is right to do."

Dana is just one of the women who are making their voices heard despite the uproar.

She and others like her are expressing a feeling of newfound liberation, some are de-veiling, and many are engaging in a global debate about women's rights, forming a brave and vocal online nexus to a region that is often, at least in the West, synonymous with extremism and female submission.

Early marriage - a coping mechanism for Syrian refugees?

IRIN (19.07.2012) - Some Syrian refugees arriving in Jordan are opting to marry off their daughters at a young age believing that marital status offers a form of protection and insurance.

"In Maraq, we have come across around 50 cases of early marriages since the day we started helping out Syrians. Most of them are married to Syrians, especially cousins," said Khaled Ghanem, from the Islamic Society Centre (ISC).

Hana Ghadban, a volunteer with the Syrian Women Association (SWA), told IRIN that in the Syrian cities of Homs and Dera'a many girls are married at the age of 13 or 14. "We know of so many girls who got married after moving to Jordan. Most of them were engaged in Syria."

Syria's personal status law sets the minimum age of marriage at 17 for boys and 16 for girls. However, religious leaders are allowed to make an exception and approve informal marriages at the age of 13 for girls and 16 for boys. These marriages are only registered with the authorities when both spouses turn 18. This informal marriage allows the couple to live together and have children.

Jordanian law sets the minimum age for marriage at 18 for both spouses, though in exceptional circumstances marriages involving 15-year-olds are allowed. It is illegal for anyone under 15 to get married.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) is aware of the problem, said local representative Dominique Hyde: "We're concerned about early marriages - using that as a coping mechanism. Jordan has a very strict law: You can't be married before 18 but you can get a waiver, with authorization of two judges, for younger ages."

Difficult living conditions for Syrians in Jordan are also pushing families to marry their daughters off at a young age. Um Sarah, a Syrian refugee mother, arranged marriages for her daughters aged 15 and 14, because she could not support them.

"As a single mother, I cannot support them. I cannot feed them. I wanted to make sure they are OK, so I asked around if people know of good Syrian men they could marry," she told IRIN.

"They rape girls who are as young as her in Syria now. If they raped a nine-year-old girl, they can do anything. I will not feel OK if I do not see her married to a decent man who can protect her," said the father of Hanadi, a pregnant child bride in Jordan aged 14.

Hanadi's father told IRIN his daughter was engaged to her cousin Ahmad, 20, last year in line with tradition in Homs. "It is our tradition, but now it became a necessity. Syria is not a good place for women and girls any more," he said.

Informal marriages

In order to register their marriages at a Shariah court in Jordan, foreign nationals must provide a letter from their embassy declaring they are single. Given the current conflict in Syria, it is impossible for Syrians to obtain any documents from their embassy in Amman, which leaves them with only one option - informal marriages ('urfi') performed by religious leaders, an aid worker who preferred anonymity, told IRIN.

However, Eva Abu Halaweh, a lawyer from the local human rights group MIZAN, warned that informal marriages leave girls vulnerable. "This is dangerous. It means girls could lose their rights if they are divorced or if they encounter disputes with their partners."

"Early marriage can have severe risks for girls including health risks. Early pregnancy is more likely to lead to birth complications and sometimes even prevent girls from having children later in life," said Samir Badran of UNICEF.

According to aid workers, lack of education on family planning and reproductive health is leading to early pregnancies among Syrian child-brides.

"Child-mothers come here and ask for assistance. People do not know about family planning methods, and that is why most girls get pregnant immediately after marriage," an SWA volunteer said.