

## CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA: HUMANITARIAN RELATED CRISIS

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### **Introduction**

The on-going Civil War in Syria is one of the most devastating war in the recent history of mankind. It was started in early 2011 with a popular uprising for restoration of democracy in Syria; and it is dragging on till today without an end in-sight.

The war has brought untold and a unimageble tragedies to men, women, children and aged people. Hundreds and hundreds of people were mowed down for reason not known to them and for no fault of their own. Even world's most dreaded weapons, the chemical weapons, banned by the Geneva Convention were used for killing innocent men, women and children. The war has now thoroughly devastated the country as a result of which millions and millions of people flee to other places in other part of the world. Casualty had been mounting each passing day, there were rampant human right violations and manmade humanitarian crisis is dominating the entire length and breadth of the country. There was no question of winners and losers; for everyone is the war is the loser.

### **1. Casualties of the War**

Based on data of Syrian National Council, as on 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 2012, 60,000 people had already been killed. that is, within a little over 2 years, as many as 60,000 people were killed. Speaking about heavy loss of life, the UN Commissioner for Human rights, Navi Pillay said "The number of casualties is much higher than we expected, and is truly shocking" Four months after this report, the UN updated the figure of casualties saying that the number of people killed

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reached 80,000. This figure was again updated by UN on 13<sup>th</sup> June the same year according to which the real toll was guessed to over 1,00,000. According to the UN sources, maximum lost of life was to be seen in Homs the affect of Civil War in Syria was disproportionate.

The UN, on 20<sup>th</sup> august, 2014 confirmed that atleast 1,91,369 people were so far killed in the war in Syria. the UN had, thereafter, stopped collecting data relating to casualties of war. However, a Study of Policy Research released in February, 2016 reported that the death toll in the war would be over 4,70,000 with 1.9 million wounded. This in other words means 11.5% of the total population of Syria were either killed or wounded.

The concern here is as to how many innocent unarmed civilians are included among the people killed or wounded and as to how many combatants on both side of the conflict killed or wounded. In a war, the killing or death of armed combatant is a natural phenomenon in the War but the death and killing of unarmed civilian is an unnatural phenomena. One of the most disturbing phenomena in Syrian Civil War is the death of thousands of unarmed civilians UNICEF has reported that over 500 children had been killed by early 2012 and another 400 children had been reportedly arrested by the Syrian government. It has been reported that over 600 detainees and political prisoners are known to have been tortured to dead.

In mid 2012, the opposition activists group, SOHR reported that the number of children killed in the ongoing Syrian conflict has risen to 2,300 and in March, 2013 the same sources reported that over 5,000 children had been killed and in January, 2014 the same sources stated that the Syrian Government conducted systematic killing of 11,000 detainees.

This is the human cost of civil war in Syria and as it is an ongoing process many more will be killed and many more will be wounded, unless step could be taken by international community to give a full stop to the war the possibility and likelihood which seems to be remote. Solution to the civil war in Syrian rests with the international community led by the big power in unison.

## **2. Refugee related humanitarian crisis**

Civil War in Syrian forced millions of people to flee their homes. Al-Jazeera, in March 2015 estimated that over 10.9 million Syrians belonging the two warring parties or nearly half of the total population of Syria have been displaced and 3.8 million were made to flee their homes as refugees to become unwanted quests in foreign lands.

Al-Jazeera has also reported that about 6,67,000 Syrians sought safety in Lebanon and the rest fled to Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Turkey has accommodated 1,70,000 Syrian refugees in 2015. The Syrian refugee crisis, as per the UN report, the number of Syrian refugees had far exceeded 3 million. the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs stated that the Syrian refugee crisis has caused the “Jordan is Palestine” threat to be diminished due to the onslaught of new refugees in Jordan. The report further stated that the West Bank is undergoing emigration pressured which will certainly be copied in Gaza if emigration is allowed. Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregarious III claims, more than 4,50,000 Syrian Christians have been displaced by the conflict in Syria. The European Union on its part maintains that there are 13.5 million Syrian in need of assistance in the country.

Though, the bulk of Syrian refugees and Syrians internally displaced are from rebel held territories of Syria, a sizeable number of them are also from government held territories. However, whether refugees are from rebel held territories or they are from government held territories, the problems and crisis, any way constitutes humanitarian crisis. It is for UN and its specialized agencies to face the crisis.

## **3. Human Right Violations**

As per report of UN and other human right organizations, human right violations have been committed by both the conflicting parties, government forces and rebel forces. But human right violations have been in majority cases, committed by government forces as per report of three international lawyers whose names have been withheld. Syrian officials could face war crimes charges in the light of evidences smuggled out of the country showing the systematic killing of about 11,000 detainees. Most of the victims were young men and many corpse were emaciated, blood stained and bore signs of torture. Some had no eyes, others show signs of strangulation or

electrocution. As per the opinion of experts, this evidence is more detailed and on far larger scale than anything else that has yet emerged from the 34 months of the crisis. UN also from its own sources said that siege warfare is employed in a context egregious human rights and international human law violation. the fact is that the warring parties involved in acts of human right violation had no fear for being held and accountable for their acts. Armed forces of the warring parties to the conflict blocked access of humanitarian convoys, confiscated food, cut of water supplies and targeted farmers working in their fields. The report further pointed out that four places, Muadamiyah, Yarmouk camp and old city of Homs, as well as two areas under siege of rebel groups Aleppo and Hama. As reported, 20,000 residents of Yarmouk camp were facing death by starvation due to blockade by the Syrian Government forces. In July, 2015 it was reported that the UN removed Yarmouk from the list of besieged areas in Syria, despite the fact that the UN was not able to deliver aid.

Among the opposition rebel forces, the UN reported that the ISIS is the group that perpetrated most of the human right violations. it is reported to have carried out a number of public executions, amputations of the body of their captives.

As reported by the UN, among the rebel forces, the ISIS forces are involved in a number of horrifying human right violations, including public execution of Christian minorities and foreign journalist. The report of UN stated, “forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham have committed torture, murder, acts tantamount to enforced disappearance and force displacement as a part of attacks on the civilian population of Aleppo and Raffa governorates, amounting to crimes against humanity” enforced disappearance and arbitrary diction have been reported in areas controlled by ISIS forces. On the other hand, forces loyal to President Assad are also reported to have adopted the method of enforced disappearance. As per the report of Amnesty International, the government forces are involved in committing enforced disappearance and forced displacement of people who they believed to be sympathizers of forces loyal to rebel groups.

The report stated that, forces loyal to the government committed forced disappearance of more than 65,000 people since the beginning of the war in 2011. The report of Amnesty International

was made in November, 2015. Also, according to a report of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in May, 2016 at least 60,000 people have been killed since March, 2011 through torture or from poor humanitarian conditions in prisons run by the government.

Amnesty International in its report in February, 2017 accused the Syrian government of murdering an estimated 13,000 persons mostly civilians at Saydnaya military prison. It is the worst incidence of massacre of civilians after the World War II. The report said, the killing began in 2011 and were still ongoing. It (Amnesty International) described this as “a policy of deliberate exterminations”. It further stated that “these practices which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity are authorized at the highest levels of the Syrian government”.

The US State Department, three months later stated that a crematorium had been identified near the prison. According to US, it was being used to burn thousands of bodies of those killed by the government’s forces and to cover up evidence of atrocities and war crimes. Amnesty International, on its part expressed surprise at the claims about the crematorium as the photograph used by the US are from 2013 and they did not see them as conclusive. The fugitive government officials have stated that the government buries those it executes in cemeteries on military ground in Damascus.

#### **4. Crime Wave**

With the conflict, spreading throughout the length and breadth of the country many cities and towns have been engulfed with crime waves. A number of police stations stopped functioning. Cases of theft and robbery have been on the rise. Random looting of houses and business establishments are the order of the day. Rebel fighters were seen engaged in stealing of vehicles and other valuable properties. There was an instance of destructions of restaurant where Syrian soldiers are found eating. There were numerous instances of rape and sexual assault. Crimes against women were believed to have been committed by the Shabiha and other pro-government militias. In July, 2012 the human right group, Women Under Ueized had documented over 100 cases of rape and sexual assault on women of different age groups. 80% of the victims are women and girls of tender age.

Local National Defense Forces Commanders are believed to have engaged “in war profiteering through protections rackets, looting and committing organized crimes” Members of NDF were also implicated in “waves of murders, robberies, thefts, kidnappings and extortions throughout government held areas of Syria since the formation of the organization in 2013 as reported by the Institute for the Study of War.

## **5. Health Related Crisis**

As the war moves on, there are instances of infectious diseases spreading in rebel held areas due to poor sanitation and deteriorating living conditions. The diseases primarily affected children. Measles, typhoid, hepatitis, dysentery, tuberculosis, diphtheria, whooping cough and disfiguring skin disease, leishmaniasis are increasingly common in areas held by rebel groups. Of particular concern is the contagious and crippling poliomyelitis. As of late 2013, doctors and international public health agencies have reported more than 90 cases of such disease. Critics of the government complain that even before the outbreak of the war, it contributed to the spread of diseases by purposefully restricting access to vaccination, sanitation and access to hygienic water in areas considered politically unsympathetic to the government in power.

## **6. Peace Initiatives**

Several peace initiatives were taken both at the regional as well as international level through the Arab League and the United Nations. However, the Syrian government so far refused to negotiate with what it calls, “Terrorist Organisations” The UN for the first time announced formal start of UN mediated Geneva Syrian Peace talk on February 1, 2016 with the official support of International Syrian Support Group (ISSG) in Vienna. However, the UN peace mediators suspended the peace talk for some time and it was resumed on 14f March, 2016 at Geneva. the Syrian government insisted that discussion of Bashar Al-Assad’s presidency is a red line. However, President Assad said that he hoped peace talk in Geneva would lead to concrete results, and the need for a political process in Syria.

On 24 January, 2017 a new round of peace talk between Syrian Government and some groups of Syrian Rebel was concluded in Astana, Kazakhstan with Russia, Iran and Turkey supporting the cease fire agreement broker in late December, 2016. The Astana talk was

considered by Russia as a complement to the UN led Geneva Peace Process. On May 17, 2017 the fourth round of talk was a held at Astana in which a memorandum of understanding for the creation of defalcation zone which was signed by representatives of Russia, Iran and Turkey. However, till date no peace efforts could produce the desired result of peaceful resolution of the conflict. The war is still an ongoing war and as late as 21 August, 2017 killing, kidnapping continued to persist. On 21 August, 2017, it was reported that the Russian jets were engaged in a bombing campaign against the ISIS forces inside Syria in which more than 200 ISIS fighters were reported to have been killed.

The Syrian crisis, though is an internal crisis of Syria between Assad's government and combined rebel groups, has now assumed international character as there are many forces from across the border fighting for and against the government. These foreign fighters both state and non-state actors, largely contributed to vexed nature of the crisis as it is even difficult to ascertain as to who fight for whom and for what.

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