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Human Rights Council



Statement of Ms. Navi Pillay

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

**Introduction of preliminary report on the situation of
human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic**

Geneva, 15 June 2011

Mr President,
Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-16/1 of 29 April 2011, I am introducing today my preliminary report on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic.

In accordance with that resolution, I established a team to carry out a Fact-Finding Mission under the leadership of the Deputy Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Kyung-wha Kang. The team consists of officials with substantive, technical and administrative expertise, who began their work on 23 May with the gathering and analysis of information from a range of sources.

I regret to report that, despite several official communications requesting the Government of Syria to grant access to the Fact-Finding Mission, I have received no response from the Government. This lack of responsiveness severely hampers our work. Due to the impossibility to deploy to Syria, my team is gathering information from outside the country. Some of its members are now in southern Turkey, close to the border with Syria, which thousands of refugees have crossed. As the human rights situation on the ground continues to deteriorate, I take this opportunity to strongly urge the Syrian Government to cooperate with my Office.

Mr. President,

Like other people in the Middle East, the people of Syria are eager to attain dignity, equity, and justice for all in their country. They are calling for change and seek a democratic system of government that respects their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Government has responded with excessive violence against unarmed protestors. I am gravely concerned about the human rights and humanitarian crises that the country is facing.

Scores of frightened people from the town of Jisr al-Shughour and surrounding areas in the northwest of the country are crossing the Syrian-Turkish border to join thousands of others who have already fled in the past week, fearing reprisals by the security forces.

This development comes in the wake of the Syrian Government's claim that "armed gangs" are responsible for killing some 120 security forces personnel in Jisr al-Shughour on 6 June. After its forces entered the town on 12 June, the Government also claimed it had found a mass grave with the remains of around ten security personnel who were allegedly killed by "armed gangs". There are concerns, however, that these might be the bodies of military deserters or officers who disobeyed orders.

Both claims and counterclaims require independent investigation and verification. To this end, I consider wholly inadequate the Syrian Government's invitation to hand-picked journalists to visit selected areas in order to document the existence of an alleged mass grave and the "confessions" of members of "armed groups". This initiative comes at a time when both foreign journalists and independent human rights groups are barred from Syria. Further, the Government has severely curtailed communications to prevent news of the crackdown from filtering through.

The increasing use of heavy weaponry against protestors and bystanders has had grave consequences as we saw from the disturbing reports from Dara'a a few weeks ago. Tanks now have been deployed in urban areas and, according to initial reports emerging from the town of Jisr al-Shughour in the past few days, helicopter gunships were used in the assault on the town without apparent regard for civilian lives. Reports of incidents involving the use of live ammunition and sniper fire to quell demonstrators are numerous.

The mounting casualty rate among civilians is alarming. It underscores the Syrian Government's lack of restraint in its efforts to crush dissent. The number of those killed in incidents involving protests is believed to have exceeded 1,100 persons, including women and children. Violations of economic rights are increasingly reported, particularly in those towns and villages which remained under siege for prolonged periods, causing critical shortages of food and medical supplies. Mass displacement of the civilian population ensued as Syrians fled to neighbouring countries or elsewhere in Syria. The number of persons

arbitrarily detained following waves of arrests and house-to-house searches is estimated at more than 10,000, with numerous cases emerging of the torture and ill-treatment of detainees.

On 9 June, I publicly condemned the dire human rights situation in Syria and reiterated my request that my Fact-Finding Mission be granted access and cooperation. And once again, I call upon the Syrian Government to halt this assault on its own people, to desist from using excessive force and to respect its obligations under international human rights law. I remind the Syrian authorities that violations of international law are serious crimes for which perpetrators can be held accountable.

I welcome the measures taken by neighbouring countries to allow Syrians fleeing their homes to cross their borders into safety. The Government of Turkey, which opened its borders to several thousand Syrians, has also taken measures to provide them shelter and medical treatment. Given the gravity of the situation in Syria, I urge all neighbouring countries to keep their borders open for as long as necessary and to extend their collaboration to my team.

This concludes my presentation today. Hopefully, I will be able to provide a more extensive assessment of the human rights situation in Syria in my follow-up report to the 18th session of the Human Rights Council.

Thank you.