

## **Syria: Urgent call to protect civilians caught between fires in besieged Yarmouk Camp**

*9 April 2015.* In view of the dramatic deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian Yarmouk refugee camp (located South Damascus), the undersigned organizations urge all parties on the ground to abide by their obligations under international law and to ensure protection of the lives of civilians trapped in the fighting. The international community should take urgent measures to protect thousands of civilians at risk and alleviate the suffering of the most vulnerable.

For almost two years, the area has subjected to a lengthy siege imposed by Syrian governmental forces backed by allied militias, which already resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis characterized by unprecedented starvation of civilian populations and shortage in basic food and aid supplies. On April 1 2015, the organization “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)” launched an attack on the Yarmouk camp seemingly coordinated in an alliance with the Al Qaeda-linked “Jabhat Al Nusra” Front.

As ISIS fighters took over several areas in the camp which were previously controlled by the anti-governmental battalion “Aknaf Beit al-Maqdis”, random mortar shelling reportedly resulted in the death of media activist Jamal Abu-Khalifah and civil society activist Abdallatif Al-Rimawi. Scores of others were injured, including medical personnel of the Palestine Hospital which was targeted by governmental forces on 1<sup>st</sup> April, an attack which resulted in the death of two ISIS fighters and several casualties, according to information provided to the EMHRN by activists based inside the camp.

On 4 April, the Syrian Air Force launched air raids on the camp and dropped explosive barrels on civilian populated areas, including Magharba St., Palestine St. and Said Alas St. Governmental forces and supporting militias tried to invade the camp from the North, causing scores of casualties and injuries amongst civilians, thus escalating the suffering of a civilian population already weakened by the siege imposed on the camp for two years.

A number of civilians who attempted to flee through the Northern part of the camp - controlled by pro-governmental forces – remain detained in the Zeinab Al Hilalia School in the Tadamon area, which is adjacent to the camp, according to local rights activists. In parallel, hundreds of civilians were compelled to seek refuge outside the camp in neighboring areas South of Damascus including a large proportion of women and children. These events occur in a context where the international community, including UN agencies, is failing to address the urgent humanitarian needs of the civilian population in Syria, notably Palestinian refugees.

At this date, thousands of civilians, including a large proportion of women and children, remain stranded and are suffering under a siege imposed by both governmental forces and the ISIS. The situation in the camp continues to rapidly deteriorate and is expected to turn

into a large scale humanitarian tragedy if safe humanitarian corridors are not immediately secured.

As basic medical supplies run out in health facilities in the camp, such as the Palestine Hospital and al-Basil Hospital, fighting parties refuse to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to provide humanitarian aid to civilians in the camp and to evacuate the scores of injured civilians.

The undersigned organizations urge the international community to take urgent steps to facilitate access of humanitarian aid in compliance with UN Security Council resolutions 2139 (2013) and 2165 (2014) which demand unhindered passage to all areas for humanitarian personnel, equipment and transport as well as safe and unhindered evacuation of all civilians who wish to leave certain areas. The Syrian government should therefore allow the ICRC unfettered access to the camp in order to deliver food and medical supplies and evacuate wounded civilians.

Targeted measures also need to be urgently enforced in order to protect humanitarian and human rights defenders who are exposed to critical threats from both armed groups and governmental security apparatus. Before the recent assault, several activists were assassinated inside the camp by unknown assailants, such as the case of Mr Firas Al Naji, member in the Palestinian Human Rights League in Syria who was shot dead on 23 February 2015, as well as Mr Yehia Hourani, a Red Crescent activist, who was killed on 30 March in the camp. An unknown number of aid workers were reportedly arrested by governmental forces for attempting to smuggle aid inside the camp.

The Syrian government should abide by its obligations under IHL by immediately ending the siege imposed on Yarmouk Camp, and cease indiscriminate and disproportionate air shelling and the use of explosive barrels. All fighting parties should cease their military operations in civilian populated areas in the camp, refrain from targeting non-violent activists, humanitarian workers and civilians regardless of their political affiliations.

Signatory Organizations:

Assyrian Human Rights Network - AHRN

Committee for the Defense of Prisoners of Conscience in Syria

Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies - DCHRS

Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network - EMHRN

Front Line Defenders - FLD

Palestinian Human Rights Organization - PHRO

Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research

Syrian Center for Statistics and Research

Syrian League for Citizenship - SL4C

Syrian Network for Human Rights - SNHR

The Day After - TDA

Palestinian League for Human Rights- Syria

Violations Documentation Center in Syria - VDC