

Syria: End Indiscriminate Shootings of Civilians Fleeing Country
By: Human Rights Watch
27 June 2012

(Amman) – Syrian soldiers on the border with Jordan appear to be shooting indiscriminately at anyone - including civilian women and children - trying to flee from Syria, Human Rights Watch said today. The Syrian authorities should immediately order its armed forces on the border to end all indiscriminate attacks and take all feasible measures to avoid injuries to civilians crossing into neighboring countries, and to respect their right to leave the country.

In mid-June, Human Rights Watch spoke with 17 Syrian refugees in Jordan who said that when they fled in May and June across the border in groups of up to 200 civilians accompanied by members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Syrian soldiers subjected them to sustained machine gun and sniper fire, killing three civilians and wounding 11. All of the refugees described incidents in which the Syrian army opened fire without warning, and fired on everyone who was crossing the border, FSA fighters and civilian men, women and children alike.

“Syria says it is fighting armed terrorists, yet its border forces appear to shoot at everyone crossing the border without distinction, attacking civilian men, women, children and the wounded the same way they attack fighters,” said Gerry Simpson, senior refugee researcher and advocate for Human Rights Watch. “By indiscriminately attacking civilians fleeing across its borders, Syria violates fundamental human rights, including the right to life, the right to leave one’s country, and the right to seek asylum in another country.”

A Syrian army defector told Human Rights Watch that fellow defectors from the Jordanian-Syrian border guard told him they had been ordered to shoot at anyone trying to leave or enter the country without passing through an official border post, and that some of the soldiers refused to carry out the order.

Human Rights Watch also spoke to civilian refugees who were shot at by Syrian soldiers when crossing the border into Iraq. Refugees International and a number of media reports also indicate that Syrian soldiers have shot civilians fleeing the violence into Lebanon.

During a three-day period in Jordan in mid-June, Human Rights Watch interviewed a total of 21 Syrian refugees who had recently arrived in Jordan who said that they and around 1,100 other civilians had fled across the border to Jordan with the help of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

17 of them said Syrian soldiers fired on their groups when they were crossing the border at night. They said they had seen, or later heard, that the Syrian army killed three civilians, wounded 11 - including a pregnant woman – and arrested around 170 civilians, including over 100 women and children whose fate is unknown to Human Rights Watch.

Most crossed in groups of 30 to 200 people, including infants and people injured in fighting elsewhere in Syria, and were accompanied by members of the FSA near the only remaining official border crossing between the two countries, near the Syrian town of Dar`a and the Jordanian town of Ramtha.

Only four refugees said their groups had not been fired upon while crossing.

The vast majority of the refugees said soldiers on foot and in trucks appeared close to the border and that without warning fired machine guns at them from what was usually a distance of 200 – 300 meters. The refugees said the FSA generally did not shoot back at the Syrian soldiers, having told them they wanted to avoid a gun battle in which civilians would likely get caught in the cross-fire, although the FSA did shoot back if the soldiers came close. Some of the fleeing civilians were pinned down for as long as three hours when the FSA with them returned fire.

A mother of five children who was caught, and who then escaped to Jordan on her second attempt following her release, described what happened the first time she tried to cross the border:

I was with my five young children in a group of 250 people, with many women and children, the elderly and injured people. The FSA was with us. We walked for an hour and reached the Syrian side of the border and realized we were almost in Jordan. Then we heard shooting from nearby and the group scattered. I threw myself onto the ground and covered three of my children with my body. The other two ran away and I heard later they managed to escape across the border. The shooting lasted for an hour and then the [Syrian] soldiers reached us and took us away [to detain us].

Many refugees said they were forced to crawl through the sand or run as fast as they could to cover the remaining 50 – 100 meters before they reached the Jordanian border line.

Human Rights Watch spoke with five refugees who injured themselves when they crawled underneath or through the barbed wire marking the Jordanian side of the border. Many more said they knew of people who had suffered severe cuts from the barbed wire.

A young man who fled fighting in his home town of Maraa in late May said:

Bedouin guides working with the FSA guided us through the border area at night. We were around 50 men and women, and a few children. Suddenly a military truck appeared and people in the truck started shooting at us, without any warning. We scattered and I ran as fast as I could to reach the barbed wire on the Jordanian side, about 100 meters away. I cut myself badly as I crossed. Only 22 of us, mostly men, made it. The other 30, mostly women, must have been arrested and taken away. One of the others who made it later called the Bedouins who said one woman had been shot and killed during the shooting and that two men and a child had been injured.

“Syria is forcing its own desperate civilians to crawl out of their country under a hail of bullets,” said Simpson. “Firing indiscriminately on civilians attempting to flee their homeland is damning evidence of Syria’s abysmal failure to meet its sovereign responsibility to protect its own citizens.”

Refugees said that as soon as they crossed the border, the Jordanian military was present and helped them reach safety.

Syria and Jordan share a 375-kilometer border, most of which is desert and uninhabited on both sides. For civilians trying to flee to Jordan, this leaves a stretch of approximately 100 kilometers located in Jordan’s north-west that is suitable for crossing. Civilians are generally crossing with FSA members in Syria’s Daraa governorate, opposite the Jordanian border town of Ramtha where the FSA is better able to operate compared to other parts of the border.

According to Jordanians in Ramtha, the only official border crossing on the Syrian-Jordan border that is theoretically open to anyone wanting to leave or enter Syria is the Naseeb-Jader crossing about 20 kilometers to the north east of Ramtha, while since June 2011 the Ramtha-Daraa crossing has only been open for traders.

But many refugees said they or their relatives had been turned back by Syrian guards at the border crossing for no official reason. Some refugees told Human Rights Watch they knew of other families who had managed to bribe Syrian border guards at the Naseeb-Jader crossing to let them leave Syria, paying around 30,000 Syrian Pounds (USD 470) per family.

Syrian refugees in Iraq also told Human Rights Watch that they came under fire while fleeing Syria. One 19-year-old Syrian refugee in Iraq said that a Syrian border patrol shot at his mixed group of 37 civilians and FSA fighters on April 8 at 2 a.m. when they were about 400 meters from the border. “Shots rang out from the border patrol base toward us,” he said. “I saw two from our group getting shot and dropping to the ground. I don’t know if they survived because after that we all scattered in different directions.”

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Syria has signed, provides that any person is entitled to leave his or her country, which includes long-term residents such as Palestinians in Syria, and that this right may only be restricted under circumstances "which are provided by law, are necessary

to protect national security, public order, public health or morals or the rights and freedoms of others” and which “are consistent with the other rights recognized in the present Covenant.” Syria has made no declaration explaining why civilians, including women, children and the injured, may not leave the country, nor explained why it is using lethal force to try and stop them.

Human Rights Watch said that even when FSA fighters are present with the civilians, and engaged in fighting, the Syrian soldiers must take all feasible steps to minimize harm to the civilians, including ensuring its attacks only target military objectives. FSA fighters must also take all feasible steps to ensure that civilians are not harmed, including by ensuring that their deployment does not draw attacks onto the civilians. But all the accounts given by the refugees state that the Syrian army has opened fire without warning on everyone crossing the border, without drawing any distinction between the civilians and the FSA fighters.

Since the beginning of anti-government protests in Syria in March 2011, just over 26,000 Syrians have registered as refugees in Jordan.

“If Syria wants to prove it has its own citizen’s interest at heart, allowing its civilians to leave the country without killing them is the place to start,” said Simpson.

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