

**U.N. Rights Officials Urge Syria War Crimes Charges**  
**By Nick Cumming-Bruce, New York Times**  
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GENEVA — The United Nations Security Council should refer Syria to the International Criminal Court in The Hague to prosecute those responsible for war crimes and other abuses committed in nearly two years of conflict, Carla del Ponte, a United Nations human rights investigator, said Monday.

“Now, really, it’s time — it’s time,” Ms. del Ponte said. “We are pressuring the international community to act because it’s time to act.”

Ms. del Ponte was speaking as the United Nations Human Rights Council commission investigating Syria, of which she is a member, reported that violence in Syria was worsening, “aggravated by increasing sectarianism” and radicalized by the increasing presence of foreign fighters. It said the conflict was also “becoming more militarized, because of the proliferation of weapons and types of weapons used.”

The panel’s 131-page report detailing evidence of war crimes and other abuses in the six months up to mid-January said, “The issue of accountability for those responsible for international crimes deserves to be raised in a more robust manner to counter the pervasive sense of impunity in the country.”

The top United Nations human rights official, Navi Pillay, has also urged that Syria be referred to the International Criminal Court. Authority to make such a referral, however, lies exclusively with the Security Council or the country concerned.

“It’s incredible the Security Council doesn’t take a decision,” said Ms. del Ponte, who had been chief prosecutor for international tribunals on the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. A referral must be made urgently, she said, “because crimes are continuing, and the number of victims is increasing day to day. Justice must be done.”

The report released Monday is to be discussed in the Human Rights Council in March, when member nations appear likely to extend the commission’s mandate. Diplomats in Geneva point out that the panel is the only United Nations-mandated machinery shedding a spotlight on abuses, and that its reports provide the most comprehensive and factual account of how Syria’s conflict is being waged.

In their latest report, based on 445 interviews, the investigators said they had found credible evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by both government and opposition forces in the six months to mid-January. The report cited accounts of massacres, summary executions, torture, attacks on civilians, sexual violence and abuses against children.

Pro-government forces committed massacres in August in Daraya, where more than 100 people, including women and children, reportedly died, and in Harak in the Dara’a governorate, where witnesses said more than 500 civilians had been killed.

Government forces involved in Harak included the Syrian Army as well as military and political intelligence units, the report said, noting that they may have been accompanied by members of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. The panel said it was still investigating other reports of mass killings.

Drawing on the accounts of defectors and “insiders,” the report said government forces had deliberately targeted civilians to punish people in areas seen as supporting the opposition. Neighborhoods in Damascus have been destroyed by government forces, and bread lines in several towns have been targeted when the concentration of civilians would be at their highest.

“Indiscriminate and widespread shelling, the regular bombardment of cities, mass killing, indiscriminate firing on civilian targets, firing on civilian gatherings and a protracted campaign of shelling and sniping on civilian areas have characterized the conduct of the government,” the panel said.

Investigators also cited “credible admissions against their own interest” by witnesses of the mass killing of five members of one family whose execution was filmed and posted on the Internet. They said a member of the rebel Free Syrian Army had acknowledged that his brigade captured and executed five Alawites, members of the Shiite Muslim minority that provides the bedrock of support for President Bashar al-Assad.

The panel expressed particular concern over “an increase in acts of unrestrained violence” associated with the proliferation of armed groups that appeared to serve no strategic purpose but to foment sectarian tensions and spread terror among civilians. The report warned that “this trend risks becoming a malignant feature of the conflict.”

It also said that foreign intervention had helped radicalize the conflict by empowering Islamist militant groups such as the Al Nusra Front, “and even encouraged mainstream insurgents to join them owing to their superior logistical and operational capabilities.”

The report added that “regional and international actors hampered the prospects of a negotiated settlement owing to their divergent interests. The position of key international actors remains unchanged.”

Panel members said Monday that their ability to report on activities of the opposition was seriously hampered by what they called the Assad government’s persistent refusal to give its investigators access to Syria.

The panel said last year that it had already accumulated a “formidable and extraordinary body of evidence” against those responsible for war crimes, and it again said that it would provide the United Nations human rights office with the names of leaders who may be responsible for abuses, as well as the individuals and units that carried them out.

Release of the latest report came against a backdrop of what appeared to be part of a new public relations effort by President Assad to present himself as an empathetic leader who believes his enemies are losing the war, in interviews that seemed to ignore a string of tactical and logistical setbacks suffered by his side.

Last week insurgents claimed to have captured Syria’s largest hydropower dam, important oil fields in the northeast, an airfield full of usable warplanes and troves of other weapons, corroborating their claims with videos posted on the Internet. Syria’s state-run news media has said nothing of these claims.

An article published Monday by Al-Quds, a London-based pan-Arab daily newspaper, quoted Mr. Assad as telling a recent delegation of Jordanians to Damascus, “Those who oppose Bashar, seek to destroy Syria and talk about me forget an essential truth, which is: I am human, made of blood and flesh, at the end of the day.”

In a separate audience with visiting Lebanese politicians, reported by the pro-Assad Lebanese newspaper As-Safir, Mr. Assad was quoted as saying, “We are sure we will win, we are reassured by the political and military developments,” according to a translation of the article by Agence France-Presse.

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