

Violations of International Humanitarian Law

In the Northern Countryside of Hama

October 22, 2019

After initiating a military campaign in the northern countryside of Hama on April 29, 2019, the Government of Syria (GoS) and its Russian ally took control of the entire northern countryside of Hama, displacing its inhabitants. Shortly thereafter human rights abuses began in the area, with the following violations documented:

- Looting and thefts: The GoS forces and their allied militias started a systematic campaign of looting and destruction of civilian property and livelihoods. Locals in the northern countryside of Hama stated that they experienced the theft of all their belongings, including household items, windows and doors. In some cases even the electricity cables were taken out of the walls of the houses and stolen.

Abu Qasim, a member of the Local Council told us, "The people have lost all the belongings they left in the city of Morek, which they hastily left for fear of their lives and families. Residents refuse to return to their city even if the regime allows them to because they do not believe that they will be protected from arrest or recruitment of their children. The regime brought some civilians from Morek and made them speak to the media to make the world think things were back to normal, but the fact is that these cities and towns are all empty of the population except the military forces of the regime and its thieves stealing houses and logging the trees."

- Logging: There were reports of GoS forces conducting logging operations on tree farm in the northern countryside of Hama, where these trees are sold as firewood on the market. This threatens to remove two million trees by this winter, effecting one of the most important sources of livelihoods for the people in the region.

Abu Abdullah, an IDP who fled Kafr Zita four months ago, says, "I had a piece of land planted with pistachio trees and I lived there, now I live in camps and I have nothing for the coming days. I'd like to go back to my city and land but I can't go back as long as the regime forces occupy my city, and in addition currently there is not a single civilian by order of the regime forces."

- Theft of artesian wells: The people in the city of Karnaz in Hama's countryside, which is under GoS control, confirmed that it had only been hours since the GoS took control of the remaining areas of the northern countryside of Hama, and its cranes went to the wells and took out all the equipment of the wells, including "pipes, submersibles, and engines." It proceeded to sell them to dealers at low prices. These practices weaken the region and its inhabitants economically if they return.

Recommendations:

The practices of systematic looting and theft are a clear pattern in all the areas in which the GoS has taken control. The pattern cannot be considered to be unrelated individual incidents, but rather as a means against the opposition. This pattern violates international humanitarian law, which stresses the

protection of civilians in armed conflicts is one of the fundamental rules characterizing international humanitarian law.

Article III of the Fourth Geneva Treaty in 1949 establishes the humanitarian protection of civilians and the respect and protection of their personal rights, dignity and honor, prohibits their starvation and protects the factors indispensable to their lives. The additional Protocol to the Geneva Treaty II of 1977 also affirmed the prohibition of deportation and forced transfer of civilians, the protection of vital installations and individual property, and the protection of medical personnel.

Accordingly, the Syrian Civic Platform requests from the international community and the guarantor countries:

- Immediately stop the logging of the trees in the northern areas of Hama countryside, which are a source of livelihood for the residents.
- Immediately stop the looting of citizens' property that they have forcibly abandoned.
- Facilitate the safe return of IDPs to their areas, with guarantees that they will not be subjected to arbitrary arrest, or detained.
- Work to start a process of local civil governance of the people of the region in areas recently controlled by the GoS, to manage their own affairs.