

Syria: Extrajudicial Executions
Human Rights Watch
9 April 2012

(New York) – Syrian security forces summarily executed over 100 – and possibly many more – civilians and wounded or captured opposition fighters during recent attacks on cities and towns, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

The 25-page report, “In Cold Blood: Summary Executions by Syrian Security Forces and Pro-Government Militias,” documents more than a dozen incidents involving at least 101 victims since late 2011, many of them in March 2012. Human Rights Watch documented the involvement of Syrian forces and pro-government shabeeha militias in summary and extrajudicial executions in the governorates of Idlib and Homs. Government and pro-government forces not only executed opposition fighters they had captured, or who had otherwise stopped fighting and posed no threat, but also civilians who likewise posed no threat to the security forces.

“In a desperate attempt to crush the uprising, Syrian forces have executed people in cold blood, civilians and opposition fighters alike,” said Ole Solvang, emergencies researcher at Human Rights Watch. “They are doing it in broad daylight and in front of witnesses, evidently not concerned about any accountability for their crimes.”

Human Rights Watch called on the UN Security Council to ensure that any UN mission mandated to supervise the six-point plan brokered by the UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan would be in a position to document such crimes. This would be best achieved by sending, alongside military observers, properly equipped human rights monitors able to safely and independently interview victims of human rights abuses, while protecting them from retaliation.

Since the end of 2011, when Syrian forces intensified their military campaign on cities and towns that they believe to be opposition strongholds, hundreds of other people have died as a result of artillery attacks, sniper fire, or lack of medical assistance.

The exact number of victims of the extrajudicial executions is impossible to verify given the difficulties of accessing and evaluating the information from Syria. But Human Rights Watch documented at least 12 cases of executions in Idlib and Homs governorates. Human Rights Watch has received additional reports of many more similar incidents, but included in this report only cases in which researchers personally interviewed witnesses to the incidents.

In the cases documented by Human Rights Watch, at least 85 victims were Syrian residents who did not take part in the fighting, including women and children. The report describes in detail several cases of mass executions of civilians, including the killing of at least 13 men in the Bilal mosque in Idlib on March 11, the execution of at least 25 men during a search-and-arrest operation in the Sultaniya neighborhood of Homs on March 3, and the killing of at least 47 people, mainly women and children, in the `Adwiyya, Karm al-Zaytoun, and Refa`i neighborhoods of Homs on March 11 and 12.

In these cases, Syrian security forces, operating alone or together with pro-government Shabeeha militias, captured and executed people who were trying to escape as the army took over their towns, shot or stabbed people in their homes as the security forces entered the captured towns, or executed detained residents while conducting house searches.

For example, Louai, a resident who stayed in the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs after the army took it over, described the execution of his brother and four of his neighbors on March 2. Louai, who asked that his real name not be used for fear of reprisals, said that the army first entered his neighbors' house, dragged the four men who were there outside, and slaughtered them with knives in front of their families. The soldiers then came into Louai's house, and, when he and his brother raised their hands, shot at them both, wounding Louai and killing his brother.

Human Rights Watch also documented the executions of at least 16 opposition fighters, whom the Syrian security forces shot point blank after they had been captured or wounded and were no longer fighting. Those cases raised concerns that the army has adopted a policy, official or unofficial, of taking no prisoners.

An opposition fighter from Kafr Rouma in Idlib governorate described to Human Rights Watch an execution of fighters from his unit in the beginning of March:

One of the fighters was injured in his right leg by machine gun fire. He was lying on the street and we could not rescue him as the army was firing and shooting at our position. Then a tank approached, around 15 soldiers with military uniforms surrounded our comrade and started insulting him and kicking him. They were shouting to us that we should surrender or they would kill him. Then they put a black cloth around his eyes, handcuffed him, and one of them shot him dead with an [assault rifle]. When they left, we buried him in the graveyard in the village.

International human rights law unequivocally prohibits summary and extrajudicial executions. In situations of armed conflict in which international humanitarian law applies, combatants are legitimate targets if they are taking part in hostilities. But deliberately killing injured, surrendered, or captured soldiers would constitute a war crime.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented and condemned serious abuses by opposition fighters in Syria. These abuses should be investigated and those responsible brought to justice. These abuses by no means justify, however, the violations committed by the government forces, including summary executions of opposition fighters.

Human Rights Watch has called on the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, impose an arms embargo on the Syrian government, and impose sanctions on Syrian officials as well as rebel commanders involved in serious human rights violations. Human Rights Watch also urged other countries to join the mounting calls for accountability by supporting a referral to the ICC as the forum most capable of effectively investigating and prosecuting those bearing the greatest responsibility for abuses in Syria.

“Syrian security forces will stop the executions only if they sense that accountability is inevitable,” Solvang said. “It is up to the Security Council to send this message.”

© Copyright 2012, *Human Rights Watch*