

UN panel investigating 20 massacres in Syria
By John Heilprin, The Huffington Post
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GENEVA — A U.N.-appointed commission is collecting evidence on 20 massacres in Syria, a reflection of the civil war's growing brutality, the panel's chairman said Monday.

The massacres include three in the central city of Homs since December, commission chair Paulo Sergio Pinheiro said. It's indicative of the destructive standoff between President Bashar Assad's regime and anti-government rebels that is fueling a spike in the intentional mass killings of civilians in violation of international humanitarian law along with an increase in the recruitment of child soldiers by both sides.

"There are no more enclaves of stability in Syria today, and the civilian space is almost completely eroded," Pinheiro told reporters after giving an update on Syria to the U.N.'s top human rights body.

Pinheiro and three other members of the expert commission, which began its work in August 2011 after being appointed by the 47-nation U.N. Human Rights Council, described Syria as a "marketplace of war," opening the door to rampant corruption and extortion.

Another of the most alarming features, it added, has been the use of medical care as "a tactic of war," with medical personnel and hospitals deliberately targeted and medical access denied on political and sectarian grounds.

Commission member Vitit Muntarbhorn told reporters that both sides are committing war crimes, but it appears that "government authorities have been involved more in regard to crimes against humanity."

The panel's report to the Geneva-based council, covering Jan. 15 to March 3, said Syria appears condemned to "an unimaginably bleak future" as government forces target civilians in bakery lines and funeral processions, and while anti-government rebels continue to use protected objects, such as mosques, as bases or for weapons storage.

It blamed both sides for failing to do enough to protect civilians in Syria, where 2.5 million people are internally displaced and another 1 million have fled to bordering countries as refugees.

The United Nations estimates more than 70,000 people have been killed in the Syrian civil war, which started two years ago as a popular uprising against Assad's authoritarian rule.

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