

## Syria: Aerial Attacks Strike Civilians Human Rights Watch 10 April 2013

(Aleppo) – The Syrian Air Force has repeatedly carried out indiscriminate, and in some cases deliberate, air strikes against civilians. These attacks are serious violations of international humanitarian law (the laws of war), and people who commit such violations with criminal intent are responsible for war crimes.

The 80-page report, [“Death from the Skies: Deliberate and Indiscriminate Air Strikes on Civilians,”](#) is based on visits to 50 sites of government air strikes in opposition-controlled areas in Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia governorates, and more than 140 interviews with witnesses and victims. The air strikes Human Rights Watch documented killed at least 152 civilians. According to a network of local Syrian activists, air strikes have killed more than 4,300 civilians across Syria since July 2012.



“In village after village, we found a civilian population terrified by their country’s own air force,” said Ole Solvang, a Human Rights Watch emergencies researcher who visited the sites and interviewed many of the victims and witnesses. “These illegal air strikes killed and injured many civilians and sowed a path of destruction, fear, and displacement.”

Media reports, YouTube videos, and information from opposition activists show that the Syrian government has conducted air strikes all over Syria on a daily basis since July 2012.

Through the on-site investigations and interviews, Human Rights Watch gathered information that indicates government forces deliberately targeted four bakeries where civilians were waiting in breadlines a total of eight times, and hit other bakeries with artillery attacks. Repeated aerial attacks on two hospitals in the areas Human Rights Watch visited strongly suggest that the government also deliberately targeted these facilities. At the time of Human Rights Watch’s visits to the two hospitals they had been attacked a total of seven times.

In addition to the attacks on the bakeries and hospitals, Human Rights Watch concluded in 44 other cases that air strikes were unlawful under the laws of war. Syrian forces used means and methods of warfare, such as unguided bombs dropped by high-flying helicopters, that under the circumstances could not distinguish between civilians and combatants, and thus were indiscriminate.

In the strikes Human Rights Watch investigated, despite high civilian casualties, damage to opposition headquarters and other possible military structures was minimal. As far as Human Rights Watch could establish, there were no casualties among opposition fighters.

For example, a jet dropped two bombs on the town of Akhtarin in northern Aleppo at around 1 p.m. on November 7, 2012, destroying three houses and killing seven civilians, including five children. The strike injured another five children, all under 5. Human Rights Watch identified a possible military target in the vicinity, a building about 50 meters away that was used by opposition fighters at the time. This building was only lightly damaged in a subsequent attack, however.

A neighbor who rushed to the site after the attack told a Human Rights Watch researcher who visited the area:

It was tragic. The buildings had turned into a heap of rubble. We started pulling people out using just our hands and shovels. A cupboard and a wall had fallen on the children. They were still alive when we found them, but they died before we could take them to their uncle's house. There is no clinic or medical center here.

In addition to the attacks on bakeries and hospitals, some attacks documented by Human Rights Watch, particularly those in which there was no evidence of a valid military target in the vicinity, may have deliberately targeted civilians, but more information is needed to reach that conclusion, Human Rights Watch said.

The government's use of unlawful means of attack has also included cluster munitions, weapons that have been banned by most nations because of their indiscriminate nature. Human Rights Watch has [documented](#) government use of more than 150 cluster bombs in 119 locations since October 2012. Human Rights Watch also documented that the government used incendiary weapons, which should, at a minimum, be [banned in populated areas](#).

The obligation to minimize harm to the civilian population applies to all parties to a conflict. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other Syrian armed opposition groups did not take all feasible measures to avoid deploying forces and structures such as headquarters in or near densely populated areas. However, an attacking party is not relieved from the obligation to take into account the risk to civilians from an attack on the grounds that the defending party has located military targets within or near populated areas.

Human Rights Watch was able to visit only sites in opposition-controlled areas in northern Syria because the government has denied Human Rights Watch access to the rest of the country. While further investigation is needed, interviews with witnesses and victims of air strikes in other parts of the country indicate that a similar pattern of unlawful attacks have taken place there.

Human Rights Watch believes this report should galvanize international efforts to end deliberate, indiscriminate, and disproportionate air strikes and other attacks on civilians, including all use of cluster munitions, ballistic missiles, incendiary weapons, and explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas. The information we have gathered should also assist those seeking to bring the perpetrators of these crimes to justice.

In addition, Human Rights Watch calls on governments and companies to immediately stop selling or supplying weapons, ammunition, and material to Syria, given compelling evidence that the Syrian government is committing crimes against humanity, until Syria stops committing these crimes. The international community should in particular press Iraq to verify that no arms from Russia or Iran for Syria are passing through its territory, and to that end allow independent, third-party monitors to inspect convoys and airplanes crossing Iraqi land or airspace and bound for Syria.

"The Security Council, largely due to the Russian and Chinese veto, has failed to take any meaningful steps to help protect civilians in Syria," Solvang said. "But that should not stop concerned governments from stepping up their own efforts to press the Syrian government to end these violations."