

Statement by Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro
Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry
on the Syrian Arab Republic – 1 March 2021

Good afternoon,

This past decade in Syria has seen **fluctuating waves of arbitrary detention campaigns of varying kinds by the main duty bearers** – from mass arrests of demonstrators in the early days – to mass internment of men, women and children today.

There has been one constant: **tens of thousands of people in Syria are being unlawfully deprived of their liberty.**

All parties that have held territory since 2011 have subjected civilians to a multitude of detention related violations as outlined in the report.

The **Government** forces' arbitrary detention of political opponents, journalists, human rights activists and demonstrators were both a root cause and a trigger of the conflict.

Armed groups and UN-designated terrorist organizations such as HTS and ISIL then also started depriving people of their liberty, committing heinous violations against them, often with **sectarian undertones.**

The violations have largely been coordinated in order to intimidate perceived political opponents, dissenting civilians and their families.

Former detainees who lived to tell **describe abhorrent detention conditions** - not seeing daylight for months, only unclean water to drink, mouldy food to eat. Hundreds of detainees sharing one overcrowded cell without any toilet, having to sleep sitting, no medical care. Upon release, many emerged skeletal and emaciated.

They **describe torture** – being beaten, electrocuted, having nails and teeth pulled out, being forced to hang by one or two limbs, folded into a car tyre, or tied up for long periods while being beaten again. Having to write forced confessions or sign documents they were not even allowed to read. Women, men, girls and boys as young as 11 were **raped or sexually abused.**

They **describe executions** of fellow detainees without any semblance of a trial - or following unfair trials in the Government's Counter-Terrorism and Field Military Courts or makeshift proceedings by armed groups and terrorist organizations.

It is no exaggeration to say that nearly all Syrians have been victims, one way or another. The fate of tens of thousands who were disappeared by Syrian

Government forces remains unknown. Many are presumed to have died or been executed, while some are believed to be still alive, still held incommunicado in appalling detention conditions in one of the many detention facilities that the Commission has investigated.

Hundreds of thousands of family members are still searching for them; the Government, and other parties, are **deliberately prolonging their suffering**. Their focus has been on **concealing rather than investigating crimes** committed in detention facilities, as our investigation into mass graves shows.

This month marks 10 year since protests started in Syria. **It is appropriate for us to think of the victims of violations who have suffered an unimaginable plight for so long.** We need to reflect on how we can better assist them. **There must be swift action by the parties in this conflict and their supporters to immediately cease violations and prevent future ones.** Releasing those arbitrarily detained and accounting for the disappeared would bring a much-needed reprieve from the picture I just presented and would be an important first step in obtaining justice for all Syrians.

Thank you.