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Human Rights Watch Oral Statement

Human Rights Watch has documented grave violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by Russian military forces in occupied areas of Ukraine, including summary executions, rape, and other threats and abuses against civilians. For example, in Bucha, Russian forces rounded up five men, forced them to kneel on the side of the road and shot one of the men in the back of the head. Russian soldiers in the village of Vorzel threw a smoke grenade into a basement, then shot a woman and a 14-year-old girl as they emerged from the basement where they had been sheltering. The child died from her wounds two days later.

Civilians we met who had fled Mariupol described it as “Hell on Earth” -- a once beautiful city damaged beyond recognition by explosive weapons, streets layered with bodies, rubble and shell fragments.

"March 15 was a black day," said Halyna, who stayed in a shelter with her family while Russian forces repeatedly shelled the city. She heard a whooshing sound. Her ears started ringing, she was in a daze, her face was bleeding and the right side of her body felt like it was on fire. Her daughter, who was buried under the rubble, lost her right eye and suffered a fractured skull and broken jaw and arm, and multiple deep cuts on her face. Two other people in the room with them were killed.

Indiscriminate attacks harming civilians are serious violations of the laws of war. Commanders who ordered such attacks or knew or should have known about them and took no action to stop them are responsible for war crimes.

We welcome the international community’s strong commitment to accountability for grave crimes committed in Ukraine. It is imperative to ensure effective coordination among the different justice initiatives. States should formalize that commitment by ensuring sufficient resources for the Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine to carry out its mandate; ratifying the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, ensuring that their national legislative frameworks allow for the prosecution of international crimes, and fully cooperating with the ICC. Further, this principled support for accountability should be replicated in other situations where civilians suffer widespread abuses, such as in Yemen, Ethiopia, and Palestine. To do otherwise would undermine the international justice system as a whole.