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IN COLD BLOOD

Summary Executions by Syrian Security Forces
and Pro-Government Militias



In Cold Blood

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Pro-Government Militias**

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Summary

Syrian security forces have summarily executed scores, and possibly hundreds, of civilians and opposition fighters during their intensified offensive on cities and towns since December 2011.

This report is based on more than 30 interviews with witnesses to executions whom Human Rights Watch interviewed in person or over the phone. It documents the involvement of Syrian forces and pro-government *shabeeha* militias in summary and extrajudicial executions of defecting soldiers, opposition fighters, and opposition supporters, as well as civilians who appeared to have had no part in the confrontation with the authorities other than being residents of opposition strongholds.

In this report we regard as extrajudicial executions the Syrian security forces' killing of people whom they were detaining or otherwise controlling at the time of the killing and who posed no conceivable threat to them. Hundreds of other Syrians have died as a result of Syrian government forces' artillery attacks on residential areas, sniper fire, and denial of medical assistance.

The exact number of victims of summary and extrajudicial executions is impossible to verify given the difficulties of accessing and evaluating the information from Syria. In this report, Human Rights Watch has documented 12 cases of executions in Idlib and Homs governorates, some involving scores of victims. Human Rights Watch has received additional reports of many more such incidents, but included in this report only those cases where researchers personally interviewed witnesses to the incidents.

For some of the incidents, Human Rights Watch interviewed separately several witnesses who provided similar, detailed accounts of the executions. In three of the cases there is also video or photo evidence that support the eyewitness accounts. We have also included in this report cases that are based on interviews with one witness when we found the witness to be credible and when other aspects of their accounts were independently verified. These cases should be investigated further.

In cases documented by Human Rights Watch, at least 85 victims were described by witnesses as residents who did not take part in the fighting, including women and children. The report describes in detail several cases of mass executions of local residents, including the killing of at least 13 men at the Bilal mosque in Idlib on March 11, 2012; the execution of at least 25 men during a search and arrest operation in the Sultaniya neighborhood of Homs on March 3, 2012; and the killings of at least 47 people, mainly women and children, in the `Adwiyya, Karm al-Zaytoun and Refa`i neighborhoods of Homs on March 11-12, 2012.

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 they entered the captured towns, or executed detained residents while conducting house searches.

For example, “Louai,” one of the residents 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 said that the army first entered his neighbors’ house, dragged the four men who were there out of the house, 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, injuring Louai and killing his brother.

As with other witnesses in this report, Human Rights Watch is not using Louai’s real name, to protect him against possible reprisals.

Human Rights Watch also documented the execution of at least 16 opposition fighters whom the Syrian security forces shot at point blank range after they had been captured or wounded, raising concerns that the army had adopted a policy, official or unofficial, of executing opposition fighters.

In an illustrative case, an opposition fighter from Kafr Rouma in Idlib governorate described to Human Rights Watch an execution of fighters from his unit at 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. He was twisting with pain and couldn’t escape.

Then a tank approached; around 15 soldiers in 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 finished him with an [assault rifle]. When they left, we buried him in the graveyard in the village.

Some witnesses also described finding bodies that gave the appearance that the victims had been subjected to sexual violence, and some described having heard accounts of rape from women in the towns taken under army's control.

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 as long as they take part in hostilities, but deliberately killing injured, surrendered, or captured soldiers (those *hors de combat*) 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 called on the UN Security Council to ensure accountability for these crimes by referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court. The Security Council should also subject the Syrian government to an arms embargo and impose a travel ban and asset freeze on officials involved in serious human rights violations. If the Council authorizes the deployment of a UN mission to supervise the six-point plan brokered by the UN-Arab League joint special envoy Kofi Annan, it should ensure the mission includes a properly staffed and equipped human rights component able to safely and independently interview victims of human rights abuses, while protecting them from retaliation.

I. Executions in Idlib Governorate

Execution of Fighters in First Defense Line, March 11, 2012

Human Rights Watch has collected information about several incidents of extrajudicial executions during the authorities' offensive to regain government control of Idlib city on March 10-11, 2012.

Two opposition fighters provided separate, detailed accounts about the execution of several wounded and captured fighters on the morning of March 11, when government forces started advancing into the city from the west.

According to the witnesses, about a dozen opposition fighters from the Abu Bakr battalion formed a first defense line in an olive garden just in front of a school on the western edge of the city on the morning of March 11. "Mahmud," who was observing the first defense line from the corner of the schoolyard about 100 meters away, told Human Rights Watch:

Around 7:30 a.m. the army fired a tank shell at the defense line, killing at least two fighters. When the others were running to help, they were also hit by shells. It was a total chaos. Then four tanks started advancing towards their position. When they got close, one officer – he was not a regular soldier because he had distinctions on his shoulders, but I couldn't see which ones – walked up to the defense line.

One of the fighters who had not been killed or wounded, but had run out of ammunition, threw away his weapon and raised his arms. But the officer just shot him in the head. Then he walked around to all the wounded laying on the ground and shot them in the head with his Kalashnikov. At this point, the soldiers in one of the tanks noticed me and started turning the turret of the tank towards my position, so I had to run away.¹

"Omar," another opposition fighter, watched the same incident from the other corner of the schoolyard. He told Human Rights Watch that he believes that about half of the fighters

¹ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 26, 2012.

were killed by the shells. “When the army reached the garden they killed those who had only been wounded by shooting them in the head,” he said.²

Photos and video taken in the courtyard of the nearby Bilal mosque the following day show what appear to be the bodies of about 10 opposition fighters lying on the floor, many of them with head and face wounds.³ “Ali,” an opposition fighter from the second defense line, identified several of the bodies in the photos as those of opposition fighters manning the first defense line.⁴

After reviewing the photographs at Human Rights Watch’s request, a medical expert said that “the disfigured faces/heads [...] are consistent with what you would see as a result of gunshot wounds to the head.”⁵

Mass Executions at the Bilal Mosque, March 11, 2012

Four witnesses interviewed separately by Human Rights Watch said that government forces executed several people in the Bilal mosque in Idlib city on the afternoon of March 11.

Medical personnel told Human Rights Watch that local mosques were used as initial collection points for injured and killed during the army offensive. Human Rights Watch has therefore not been able to establish exactly how many people were executed and how many people were otherwise killed during the fighting. It is also possible that bodies in the mosque stemmed from more than one execution incident.

Two witnesses told Human Rights Watch that they saw government forces executing local residents outside the mosque. “Walid,” an opposition fighter, said that his group of 13 fighters was hiding at the Bilal mosque when 200-300 soldiers with pick-up trucks and armored infantry vehicles approached. According to Walid, the soldiers surrounded the mosque, and some went inside. The soldiers gathered many local residents in front of the

² Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 18, 2012.

³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with local activist who filmed the video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1MUTsUFhS4>) and took the photos (<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.267014830045572.63827.135332999880423&type=3>), April 7, 2012.

⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 21, 2012.

⁵ Human Rights Watch e-mail communication with medical expert, March 21, 2012.

mosque and checked their identification papers. Those who were not wanted were released after the soldiers took their fingerprints on a white paper. He told Human Rights Watch:

They kept 18 people, including the 13-year-old brother of a man they could not find, and three women. They brought them inside the mosque. Then they brought 13 of them back out again. They were blindfolded. They put them against the wall of the mosque. Then 13 army soldiers were placed in front of them and opened fire with their Kalashnikovs. The commander then shot them with his arm at point-blank range in the head.⁶

“Salim,” an opposition fighter who was hiding behind a wooden column about 50-150 meters away from the Bilal mosque, provided a similar account. He explained that several people were going to the mosque to retrieve the bodies of their family members who had been killed. Salim said that while these family members were at the mosque to identify their relatives, he saw from his hiding place that Syrian soldiers entered the mosque and then lined the local residents up outside. He estimated that about 40 people were lined up. He said:

There were 15-20 soldiers with russets that opened fire on them. There were women and children among them. They were spraying them with bullets. I stayed hiding until after they were done shooting. They moved them inside the mosque after they killed them. About thirty minutes after killing them the soldiers pulled out. After that I realized I needed to run away.⁷

A third opposition fighter, “Malek,” who also was hiding nearby, told Human Rights Watch that he first saw government forces dragging several bodies into the mosque. He said that when the soldiers started shouting to people that they should come to identify the bodies, some people – mostly young men – came down from the surrounding buildings and entered the mosque. Malek said that sometime after the local residents entered the mosque he could hear multiple gunshots from the area of the mosque, but that he does not know what happened next because he decided to flee.⁸

⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 20, 2012.

⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview, April 6, 2012.

⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 16, 2012.

Testimony by “Ghassan,” a university student who was helping transport those wounded and killed during the Idlib offensive, seemed to corroborate the above-mentioned accounts. He told Human Rights Watch that he and other medical volunteers received information that several dead bodies were located in the Bilal mosque around midday on March 11. When he and two others went to the mosque, they discovered about 15 bodies in the mosque’s courtyard and decided that they needed more help to transport them. When they returned to the hospital for additional help, however, they were told that there was shooting at the Bilal mosque and they decided to wait before going back. Electricity, which had been cut, returned around 8 or 9 p.m., Ghassan said, and they went back to the mosque around 10 p.m. Ghassan told Human Rights Watch that when they returned to the mosque they discovered another 15 bodies inside the mosque itself.⁹ He said:

The types of injuries between the bodies in the courtyard and in the mosque were different. The faces of the bodies in the courtyard were disfigured and some had very serious injuries, for example to their arms. The bodies inside the mosque all had multiple gunshot wounds. Most of them also had gunshot wounds to the head.¹⁰

Ghassan said that several things, including blood and broken glass on the floor, the location of the bodies, and the absence of shoes on some of the bodies, led him to believe that the bodies inside the mosque had been killed where he found them. Human Rights Watch has not been able to independently establish whether some of the victims were killed inside the mosque.

Ghassan said that they had no time to photograph or film the bodies inside the mosque because they were afraid that the army would come back. They buried the bodies in an ad hoc cemetery in a nearby park.

Executions of Four Residents in Ayn Larouz Village, Mid-March 2012

Three residents of Ayn Larouz village, located just north of Jisr al-Shughour in the Idlib governorate, told Human Rights Watch that government forces killed four residents, including three children, whom they had detained in mid-March.

⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 18, 2012.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The witnesses said that government forces stationed in Arnaba, about one kilometer away from Ayn Larouz, entered the village on March 9, shooting from tanks.

According to “Fatma,” as government forces were entering the village, they detained 34 residents, including a 52-year-old woman, her nine-year-old daughter, and at least three teenagers under 18. Fatma said that when the forces arrived at the mosque in the village, they announced that four soldiers who had defected from the Arnaba base had fled to Ayn Larouz and that the army would kill the 34 detainees unless the defectors surrendered within 24 hours. The forces left the village after about four hours, taking the 34 detainees with them.¹¹

The government forces came back the next day as well, placing children on their vehicles to protect them against attacks.¹² According to the three residents, government forces opened fire on people trying to flee through the fields, killing ten, including Fatma’s 27-year-old son. Human Rights Watch has not been able to independently verify the circumstances of their death.

According to the three Ayn Larouz residents, the government forces released thirty of the detainees after five days; the next day, the residents discovered the remains of the other four in the mountain. “Majed,” who helped retrieve the bodies, told Human Rights Watch:

The four bodies were completely burned. When we carried them down to the village their body parts were falling off. The people who were killed were all from the Kantar family, aged 14, 15, 16, and 50. We could recognize the old man because he was missing an eye before he was detained. We recognized one of the boys because he was missing a phalange on one of his fingers. The dead bodies were lying in a position as if their hands had been tied behind their back.¹³

¹¹ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 21, 2012.

¹² “Syria: Armed Opposition Groups Committing Abuses,” March 20, 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/20/syria-armed-opposition-groups-committing-abuses>.

¹³ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 21, 2012.

Majed confirmed to Human Rights Watch that a video posted to YouTube on March 14 shows the four burned corpses that he had helped retrieve from the mountain.¹⁴

Execution of Two Opposition Fighters in Kherbet al-Jouz, March 18, 2012

On March 18 government forces executed two opposition fighters they had captured in Kherbet al-Jouz, a small Syrian town near the Turkish border. According to “Khaled,” a 27-year-old resident of Kherbet al-Jouz, army soldiers and pro-government *shabeeha* militias gathered around 400 people from the town in the central square around 6 p.m. on March 18. Khaled, who was present in the square, told Human Rights Watch that the soldiers then brought two people, who were handcuffed and blindfolded and wore only trousers, out of an army truck. He said:

Their upper bodies and faces were all bruised and swollen. The soldiers started beating them, saying that they were terrorists and that this should be a lesson to the rest of us. The detainees were lying on the ground. Then the commander – a lieutenant-colonel – gave orders to kill them. Four soldiers opened fire. They emptied their ammunition clips, put in new ones, and continued shooting. I think they must have fired 30 times each.¹⁵

After the soldiers left, the villagers buried the two bodies in the local cemetery. Their identities were not established.

Khaled, who used to serve in one of Syria’s security agencies, told Human Rights Watch that he recognized the insignia from the Syrian army’s 4th Division and Special Forces on the uniforms of some of the soldiers.¹⁶ According to Kherbet al-Jouz residents, the army has maintained checkpoints both inside and at all entrances to the town for months. They said that it would have been impossible for anybody to enter the town without going through the army checkpoints.

¹⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgaHqVdvtv8&feature=youtu.be>. Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 21, 2012.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 21, 2012.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Another resident from Kherbet al-Jouz provided a similar account to Human Rights Watch, which he had heard from his brother when they spoke on the phone the day that the executions happened.¹⁷

Witnesses believed that the two detainees were captured during a battle between government forces and the opposition earlier in the day. According to a commander in charge of a nearby opposition base, government forces launched an attack early in the morning, injuring two fighters in a battle that lasted for several hours. According to the opposition commander, government forces also captured two of his fighters, but he did not know what happened to them.¹⁸

Execution of at Least Seven People in Wadi Bedmaya, December 20, 2011

Human Rights Watch interviewed six witnesses who described the mass killing of civilians and opposition fighters who were fleeing the army attack on Jabal al-Zawiya. At least 74 people died when the army opened fire at residents and defected soldiers hiding in the Wadi Bedmaya valley. Some witnesses said that the opposition fighters who had weapons fired back, and that it is hard to verify how all of the victims died.

However, the witnesses told Human Rights Watch that at least seven people from the group, including a local sheikh, surrendered to the army, and were later found shot execution-style, or with their throats cut and hands bound.

“Suleiman,” who was in the valley during the attack but managed to escape, told Human Rights Watch:

There were more than 100 people in the Wadi. That was the fourth time we hid there. We were all running there, men and boys, from 17 to 35-years-old. We were hiding from death, hiding because we go to demonstrations, because we call for freedom.

At around 10 a.m. the army started shooting at us from the north and south. They were attacking us until 5 p.m.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 19, 2012.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In all, 74 people were killed. Seven gave themselves up and when they were handcuffed they were shot. Sheikh Ahmed was one of the people who surrendered and was killed. He had his throat cut. After the massacre, the women went with the children to the valley to retrieve the corpses and started to shout. They retrieved 74 corpses altogether.¹⁹

Another witness, “Walid,” an opposition fighter from Kafr Awaid who was present in the valley during the attack, told Human Rights Watch, “Some people gave themselves up and afterwards they were killed. Some of them had their throats cut and some were shot. I saw two without their heads. Their hands were tied behind their backs.”²⁰

A third witness, “Wassim,” also told Human Rights Watch that when they returned to bury the bodies they saw that several people were blindfolded with their hands tied behind their backs.²¹

Other Incidents of Executions in Idlib Governorate

In addition to the incidents mentioned above, which were documented through corroborating accounts of multiple witnesses, Human Rights Watch has collected first-hand witness accounts about other incidents of extrajudicial executions. Human Rights Watch has not been able to corroborate these accounts, but found the witnesses to be credible based on the amount of detail they provided about the incidents, and the fact that they describe patterns of abuse very similar to those described above.

Dabbit Square, Idlib city, March 11, 2012

As the army advanced into the city on March 11, a group of about 12 opposition fighters withdrew to Dabbit square, about 500 meters from the western edge of the city. The government forces shelled the square and attacked from two sides, according to “Ali,” an opposition fighter who observed the attack through binoculars from the intersection by the hospital 250 meters away. After some opposition fighters were killed by the shelling and others wounded, the soldiers approached them and finished off the ones who were still alive. The witness told Human Rights Watch:

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, January 10, 2012.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview, April 7, 2012.

About six of them died instantly [in the shelling.] Two were very badly injured. The tanks and soldiers then entered the square. They dragged the bodies and the wounded to the middle of the street. The soldiers peed on them. Then they shot those who were still alive – I could see some of them moving – before they ran over the bodies with a tank.²²

Kafr Rouma, March 6 or 7, 2012

On March 6 or 7, government forces executed a wounded opposition fighter in the center of Kafr Rouma, a town of 20,000 people in the Jabal al-Zawiya area. An opposition fighter who witnessed the execution told Human Rights Watch:

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. He was twisting with pain and couldn't escape. Then a tank approached; around 15 soldiers in 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 finished him with an [assault rifle]. When they left, we buried him in the graveyard in the village.²³

Ablin, December 15, 2011

“Wassim,” an opposition fighter operating in the Jabal al-Zawiya region, told Human Rights Watch that on December 15, 2011, his battalion received information from an army informant that the army was planning to re-establish control over Ablin village the following day. The following morning, the battalion set up an ambush on the road between Ablin and Maryan, but they decided to withdraw when they saw that they were vastly outnumbered by the government forces. Wassim told Human Rights Watch:

²² Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 21, 2012.

²³ Ibid.

As we were withdrawing, government forces opened fire and wounded one, Ismail, in the leg. When he was wounded he dropped his weapons and was trying to crawl away, but he was not able to climb the mountain where we were hiding.

From our hiding place we were able to watch Ismail and the government forces. Ismail was lying about 10-15 meters from the road when the tanks approached. Two soldiers who were walking off the road alongside the tanks walked up to him. One was talking on the walkie-talkie. Then, suddenly, the other soldier shot him many times.²⁴

The next day, when the army had moved on, the opposition fighters were able to recover Ismail's body. Wassim said that Ismail had been shot about 50 times and that they buried him in the cemetery in Ablin.

Attempted Execution in Taftanaz

On January or February 26, government forces shot a wounded opposition fighter in Taftanaz, a town just north of Idlib city.²⁵ According to an opposition fighter from the Abu Daijana battalion who witnessed the incident, the fighters were battling the army when the government forces injured one of them. He told Human Rights Watch:

We were five fighters confronting the army in one of the streets of Taftanaz. The army surrounded us; we could escape through the small alleys but Firaz Badaoui was injured by a gunshot in his shoulder. He was not killed by the bullet. He was lying on the ground, bleeding from his wound. The soldiers surrounded him. Then an officer came, took a Kalashnikov from one of the soldiers, and then he shot at him.²⁶

²⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 25, 2012.

²⁵ The witness interviewed by Human Rights Watch remembered the date clearly, but was not sure of the month when the incident took place.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch interview, Hatay, March 20, 2012.

The witness said that Badaoui sustained serious injuries; however, when the opposition fighters were eventually able to drag his body away from the square, they realized that he was still alive. To the best of Human Rights Watch's knowledge, the victim survived.

II. Executions in Homs Governorate

Mass Execution in Sultaniya, Homs, March 3, 2012

Sultaniya is a Homs neighborhood just to the south of Baba Amr. According to residents, the Syrian army had checkpoints in many parts of the neighborhood, and had used a neighborhood checkpoint located at the corner of Kefraya Street to fire mortars during its offensive on Baba Amr.

According to “Mustafa,” a resident of Sultaniya, the Syrian army launched a large scale search and arrest operation in the neighborhood on March 3:

On March 3 I hid in the attic because I heard the voices of army soldiers in the neighborhood and expected them to search our home. From the attic I saw a group of men dragged outside by the Syrian army soldiers. Some of them were residents of Sultaniya; others were from Baba Amr. My 70-year-old father, 36-year-old brother, and brother-in-law were among them.

The men were lined up into two rows, and men wearing black masks carrying weapons stood in front of them. The men in masks opened fire at the people standing in one of the rows ... I don't know why they shot at one row and not the other. All of our IDs, even if we are from Sultaniya, say Baba Amr. For one row they just checked the IDs, the other row was shot at.

During the shooting some men managed to run away and hid in a building under construction. The Syrian soldiers started shooting at the people running away. I saw men falling on the ground but some got away alive. Some men from the row that was not fired at also tried to run away.

After they finished, the Syrian soldiers loaded the corpses into a car and took some of remaining away in another car.²⁷

²⁷ Human Rights Watch interview, Tripoli, Lebanon, March 11, 2012.

Mustafa told Human Rights Watch that he was shocked and for thirty minutes stayed in the attic, afraid to move. He said that his house – which is on the main road of the neighborhood, around 200-300 meters away from the Kefraya checkpoint – was 25 meters from where the executions happened. From where he was, he saw about 25 men being shot. His father, who was in the row that did not get shot at, told him that he saw 60 people die. His brother, who was standing in the same row as the father, was arrested but was released later that day after appeals from their mother.

Mustafa provided Human Rights Watch with the names of three people who died during the execution: Walid al-Melhem, Ismail al-Kurdi, and Amar al-Melhem.

Mass Killing in the `Adwiyya, Karm al-Zaytoun, and Refa`i Neighborhoods, Homs, March 11-12, 2012

`Adwiyya is a poor neighborhood in Homs, located near the opposition strongholds of Karm al-Zaytoun and Bab Sba` neighborhoods. The neighborhood is also close to areas that are generally considered pro-government, such as Wadi al-Zahab, Akrama, and Nuzha. According to two residents, `Adwiyya is composed of Sunnis, Palestinians, and a small Muslim sect that exists only in Syria known as al-Murshidyah (named for the founder of the sect, Salman al-Murshid).

The Syrian army shelled a number of neighborhoods in Homs on March 11. “Anas,” an activist based in a field hospital in Bab Sba`, told Human Rights Watch that he saw many wounded arrive at the field hospital that day from the neighborhoods of Karm al-Zaytoun, Nazeheen, `Ashira, and Bab Dreib:

At around 9 p.m. [on March 11], news of a massacre in `Adwiyya reached us in the hospital. I started heading over to `Adwiyya with other activists to film the bodies. But on my way, I saw five women and around 15 children who had escaped `Adwiyya and they were in terrible shape. I stopped to talk to them. They told me that the *shabeeha* got into the houses, mostly through the rooftops. Some were wearing civilian clothes, others were in military outfits. The women were very scared, saying that the *shabeeha* robbed everything, destroyed everything, raped women, and killed anyone who had remained in the neighborhood. I tried to film them but they

refused. I accompanied the women to an area near Bab Sba` and when I was about to head to `Adwiyya some people told me that members of the Free Syrian Army had gone into `Adwiyya and managed to pull some of the bodies from `Adwiyya and had taken them to Bab Dreib [near Bab Sba`] and that I should go there to film the bodies.

When I got to Bab Dreib, there were 16 corpses, all women and children. Some of the children had been hit on the head with sharp objects. The brain was outside the skull. Some had traces of gun wounds to the head and sensitive areas. Some of the women were naked, almost completely. We transported them in a small Suzuki truck to Bab Sba`. I was in the truck that carried them.

After we got to Bab Sba` and dropped off the bodies, I and other activists decided to start live broadcasting images of the bodies. During the broadcasting, people brought another 12 corpses from `Adwiyya, and they were all burnt. Some we could not even identify. Two cars had brought them over. So we had a total of 28 bodies.

In the morning [of March 12], at around 10 a.m., we took the bodies to the cemetery in Tal al-Nasr. It is a cemetery on the road to Hama.²⁸

Anas confirmed to Human Rights Watch that a video posted on YouTube on March 13 showed the dead bodies brought to the hospital on March 11 and that he was the one who filmed the video.²⁹

After the funeral in Tal al-Nasr, Anas said, nine additional bodies were brought to the cemetery and immediately buried. He said that the corpses had also been found in `Adwiyya on March 11.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, March 2012.

²⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFw4UZP8dXo&feature=youtu.be>. Human Rights Watch interview, March 2012.

In addition to the bodies buried in Tal al-Nasr, Anas told Human Rights Watch that other corpses from `Adwiyya had been buried near where they were found. He knew of three such cases, but he thought there could have been more.

“Shadi,” a Homs activist who was on the outskirts of Karm al-Zaytoun after he escaped from the Homs on March 12, told Human Rights Watch that the army and *shabeeha* had entered the neighborhoods of Karm al-Zaytoun, `Adwiyya, and al-Refa`i on March 11. He said that residents who escaped from the `Adwiyya neighborhood told him that the *shabeeha* had entered their area around 3 p.m. The residents had told him that some women had been raped and some families had been killed in their homes. He said that FSA members had managed to enter some houses on the outskirts of Karm al-Zaytoun and had retrieved 47 bodies from six separate families. They found the bodies in five separate homes, according to Shadi.³⁰

He said that he believed the number of dead bodies was higher but that once the activists started broadcasting the images of the bodies being pulled out, the FSA had to leave the area to avoid being attacked by the army. “Khalil,” another activist who was on the outskirts of the neighborhood of Karm al-Zaytoun trying to help the families escape the area, confirmed that the army and *shabeeha* had encircled the neighborhood on the evening of March 11. He said that many families had tried to leave the area but were unable to due to the military encircling the area. He said that residents told him that *shabeeha* began entering people’s homes around 11 p.m. At around 3 a.m., he saw smoke and fire coming out of certain homes, and that subsequently *shabeeha* withdrew from the neighborhood. At that point, he said that he as well as other activists and members of the FSA managed to enter into the outskirts of the neighborhood:

We went into about five homes. We would go into the houses through small side windows. We found four dead families in four separate homes. There were children, women, men. Some were burned. In total we found 45 people. All were dead. Some had bullet wounds, others knife wounds, others were just burnt. Some were under rubble cause by the heavy shelling of previous days. We managed to get some of the bodies out that same evening and we buried them in small gardens attached to homes.

³⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, March 2012.

The next day [March 12], we entered one house and started destroying side walls to get to other houses. This way, we found two additional dead families. We found five bodies of men who were piled on top of each other. One man was clearly over 80 and had been slaughtered. We found five women in a second house. Some had no clothes on them. We buried them in any small garden we could find.³¹

Syrian state TV had not denied the killings in Karm al-Zaytoun but has accused “armed terrorist groups” of committing a “massacre against children, women, and elderly in Karm al-Zaytoun.”³² On March 15, Addounia TV, a private channel very close to the government in Syria, aired a televised confession of Nawar Mhaymed, a “terrorist who reportedly confessed to killing the families.”³³

The credibility of these accusations, however, is questionable. Aside from the confession, the authenticity and voluntariness of which is impossible to verify, the government has presented no evidence that the massacre has been committed by anti-government groups. The reports also contradict multiple witness accounts suggesting that the army and *shabeeha* entered the neighborhood just before the killings happened.

Execution of Five Men in Baba Amr, Homs, March 2, 2012

The Syrian military began its assault on Baba Amr, a residential area that was a stronghold for elements of the armed opposition, on February 3, 2012. The intense shelling of the neighborhood lasted until March 1, when residents told Human Rights Watch that the Free Syrian Army retreated. The Syrian army entered the neighborhood on March 2.

“Louai,” a resident who stayed in the Baba Amr neighborhood, described the execution of his brother as well as four of his neighbors, after the Syrian army entered Baba Amr on March 2:

The next day, on Friday [March 2], it was the first time in a month that we see members of the Syrian army inside Baba Amr. It was as if death is

³¹ Human Rights Watch interview, March 2012.

³² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7z6aGj8X_aY

³³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oShK7YfLFxQ>

coming our way. It was too late to run away. I live on the ground floor with my two brothers, the wife of one of them, and their children. I saw around 50 Syrian soldiers walking on the street with military trucks driving next to them. They were breaking into houses and loading furniture and other utilities in the trucks. As they approached our house we knew that they were going to enter ours but we couldn't do anything. They first broke into our neighbor's house, where there were four men, their wives, and children.

We heard intense screaming. I stood at the entrance of our house with my brother peaking, trying to see what was happening. The Syrian army dragged the four men, Abou Anas Qarout, two from al-Omar family, and Abou Diab Sharouq al-Hassan. They slaughtered them with a knife on their necks in front of their family. I couldn't breathe anymore and panicked a lot. I have never been that afraid in my life.

In [about] two-to-three minutes they broke into our house. They first saw me and my brother. We had no weapons, and I raised my hands as if I wanted to surrender. They shot my brother in his stomach; the bullet exited. After two minutes they shot me in the shoulder and the other bullet passed between my fingers. It only scratched them. I fell on the ground but was awake and I could see everything outside because they kept the door open. My brother was dead. They took my third brother and his wife and children and the three women from my neighbor's house. They made them lie down facing the ground. Then five members of the Syrian army started walking on their backs and stepping on them. Then I heard the captain in command ordering my brother to bury the bodies and they left. After two minutes, my brother stands up and starts running after them asking for help. I don't remember anything else.³⁴

Louai was transported to Lebanon to receive medical treatment. Human Rights Watch interviewed him in the hospital and could confirm that he had been wounded but has not been able to independently verify his allegations.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview, Tripoli, Lebanon, March 11, 2012.

Recommendations

To the UN Security Council

- Demand that Syria immediately end the widespread human rights abuses committed by government forces, including summary and extrajudicial executions of civilians and opposition fighters;
- Authorize the deployment of a UN mission to supervise the six-point plan brokered by the UN-Arab League joint special envoy Kofi Annan. Ensure that the mission includes a properly staffed and equipped human rights component, to address the issues of arbitrary detention, free assembly, and access for journalists, as outlined in the plan;
- Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC);
- Adopt targeted sanctions on officials shown to be implicated in abuses;
- Require states to suspend all military sales and assistance, including technical training and services, to the Syrian government, given the real risk that the weapons and technology will be used in the commission of serious human rights violations;
- Demand that Syria cooperate fully with the UN Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry and with the U.N. supervising mission;
- Demand access for humanitarian missions, foreign journalists, and independent human rights organizations.

To All Countries

- Acting individually or jointly through regional mechanisms where appropriate, adopt targeted sanctions against Syrian officials credibly implicated in the ongoing serious violations of international human rights law;
- Under the principle of universal jurisdiction and in accordance with national laws, investigate and prosecute members of the Syrian senior military and civilian leadership suspected of committing international crimes;
- Call for a referral to the ICC as the forum most capable of effectively investigating and prosecuting those bearing the greatest responsibility for abuses in Syria.

To the Arab League

- Acting individually or jointly, maintain and strengthen targeted sanctions against Syrian officials credibly implicated in the ongoing grave, widespread, and systematic violations of international human rights law in Syria since mid-March 2011;
- Support the deployment of a strong UN supervising mission.

To Russia and China

- Support strong Security Council action on Syria (as described in the recommendations above);
- Support the U.N. supervising mission and urge the Syrian authorities to unconditionally facilitate its work;
- Suspend all military sales and assistance to the Syrian government, given the real risk that weapons and technology will be used in the commission of serious human rights violations;
- Condemn in the strongest terms the Syrian authorities' systematic violations of human rights.

To the Syrian Government

- Immediately stop and condemn summary and extrajudicial executions by the security forces and pro-government militias;
- Provide immediate and unhindered access to and cooperate fully with the UN mission to supervise the six-point plan brokered by the UN-Arab League joint special envoy Kofi Annan;
- Provide immediate and unhindered access and cooperation to independent observers, journalists, and human rights monitors, including the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; the UN Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry on Syria; and the special rapporteur on Syria;
- Conduct prompt, thorough, and objective investigations into allegations of summary and extrajudicial executions, including the ones described in this report, and bring the perpetrators to justice;
- Suspend members of the security forces against whom there are credible allegations of human rights abuses, pending investigations;

- Annul Legislative Decree No. 14, of January 15, 1969, and Legislative Decree 69, which provide immunity to members of the security forces by requiring a decree from the General Command of the Army and Armed Forces to prosecute any member of the internal security forces, Political Security, and customs police;
- Immediately stop and condemn all acts of sexual violence by security forces and pro-government militias, and hold perpetrators of sexual violence accountable.

IN COLD BLOOD

Summary Executions by Syrian Security Forces and Pro-Government Militias

Syrian security forces executed over a hundred, possibly many more, civilians and wounded or captured opposition fighters during their recent attacks on cities and towns.

This report documents 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.

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 sanction Syrian officials as well as rebel commanders involved in previously documented serious human rights violations.