



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Syria's Humanitarian Crisis: What More Can We Do?

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Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing titled *Syria's Humanitarian Crisis: What More Can We Do?*

I especially want to welcome our witnesses today. I thank them for their dedication to the well-being of the people of Syria, and their perseverance in seeking to uphold human rights and international humanitarian norms in the midst of the Syrian civil war.

Let me begin by saying that I deeply regret and strongly condemn the renewed bombing of civilians, medical facilities, and humanitarian aid convoys by forces under the command of President Assad and Russia in recent days. Today's renewed bombing of Aleppo signals an end to the ceasefire that was just put into place a few days back and makes even more difficult the path to ending the Syrian conflict. Nonetheless, I hope and expect the United States to persevere in its diplomatic path, because there is no alternative.

We are here today because we are appalled by the brutality of the Syrian conflict, and in particular, its impact on civilians. In war we expect killing, but it is combatants whose killing is legal and in principle justified. The killing of non-combatants – women, children, the elderly, the disabled, and anyone else not wearing a uniform or carrying a gun – is generally illegal under international humanitarian law, and immoral and unjustified in the minds of most people. If there must be war, civilians are supposed to be protected.

But as we are only too well aware, in Syria civilians have borne the brunt of the impact of the war. It's not just the question of deaths, although the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights

has documented nearly 87,000 civilian dead, including thousands are children and youth, out of an estimated 430,000 killed to date. It's the 6.5 million who have been forcibly displaced within the country, and the 4.8 million who have been forced to flee Syria – half of the country's population has been uprooted.

In terms of sheer numbers, the Syrian conflict has generated the largest humanitarian crisis the world has seen since World War II. At the beginning of 2016, the United Nations expected that 13.5 million people affected by the Syrian conflict would need humanitarian assistance during this year.

I think people get overwhelmed by these numbers, even as they – as we -- are brought to tears by the photo of a single child dead on a beach or alive in an ambulance.

We could spend a lot of time analyzing how we got here, but that is not our purpose today. I would just note for the record that the initial protests in 2011 were peaceful, and motivated by genuine, longstanding grievances against a regime that has been ruled by the same family for over four decades.

It's not the origins of the opposition movement that set Syria apart. It's the way the government has prosecuted the war -- its purposeful, indiscriminate attacks against civilians. The use of chemical weapons, aerial bombardment of opposition areas, the continual targeting of medical personnel and facilities, the besieging of cities, the denial of humanitarian access.

Away from the battlefield, as documented by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry (IICI) in August, civilians are “disappeared, taken hostage, tortured and subjected to sexual violence.” Unlawful killings are a “hallmark” of “this blood-soaked conflict.”

The Syrian government is not the only party to the conflict that systematically ignores human rights and international humanitarian law. Also in its August report, the IICI reported that from February to June of this year, indiscriminate attacks by ISIL, using IEDs and suicide bombers in crowded civilian areas, claimed unprecedented numbers of casualties in government-held areas. In areas it controls, ISIL used extreme violence against civilians and captured fighters, and plants landmines that injure and kill civilians. Other anti-government armed groups have shelled civilian neighborhoods.

I could go on, but the point is that in the Syrian war the norms created last century to protect civilians are being systematically ignored by those doing the fighting. So it has fallen to the “international community” to respond – the UN, humanitarian organizations, bordering states, the United States.

But when we see images everyday of children dying, hospitals blown up, and convoys destroyed, I understand why the response seems completely inadequate, and why there is such anguish, especially in the Syrian American community, which has been doing its utmost to help since the beginning. And so the question today: what more can we do to prioritize the protection of civilians?

First, in order to know what more we can do, we need to recognize what is already being done. The humanitarian crisis in Syria is growing because the war is continuing and in fact has intensified since the collapse of the ceasefire last spring. But between January and October of 2015, the UN reported that an average of 6 million people per month received food assistance; a total of 8.1 million were provided with adequate drinking water; and 1.5 million children and adolescents benefitted from education interventions. That's surely not enough, but it's also not nothing. I know that humanitarian actors, and especially Syrians, are making remarkable efforts to deliver assistance, and it is very important to recognize these, and to learn from what is working.

Second, I want to say for the record how important I believe it is that humanitarian action be consistent with and reinforce established humanitarian principles. Humanitarian aid should be provided based on need and without discrimination, wherever affected populations are found. At a time when humanitarian norms are being undermined all around us, it is so important to continue to be guided by the ideals of universality and impartiality.

Third, as I noted at the beginning, we have to recognize the political reality that without a peace process of some kind, the Syrian conflict and the human rights and humanitarian crisis it feeds will continue. Humanitarian access, if achieved, is not a substitute for ending the conflict. The reality is that we must operate at two levels. We need to bring the war to an end, which is a diplomatic and political task – and for that reason we must continue diplomatic efforts. In the meantime, we also must make sure we are doing all we can to respond to the humanitarian crisis and to prioritize civilian protection. I say this recognizing that the events of the last couple of days are a huge blow on both fronts.

Fourth, I would encourage everyone to make sure that we are making the best possible use of the tools we already have in hand. For example, since 2011 President Obama has issued several executive orders that authorize imposing sanctions on Syrian officials responsible for human rights abuses. There is legislation pending in the House that I know many in the audience support that would reinforce many of these same sanctions. Even without that legislation, though, the U.S. government already has the authority to sanction Syrians engaged in human rights violations. In fact, the existing Syria sanctions program is one of the most comprehensive of the U.S. sanctions programs. It's worth asking whether more could be done with these authorities.

Fifth, as I'm sure everyone is aware, there is an ongoing debate in Washington over the merits of establishing a safe zone, as a way to improve protection for civilians in Syria. One of the many issues this idea raises is the question of enforcement.

Protected areas or safe zones are either set up with the agreement of the parties to a conflict, or they have to be imposed. If imposed, they have to be enforced or defended. In Syria, the persistent obstacles to humanitarian access suggest that the prospects for reaching agreement on a protected area are not good. That leaves the option of imposing a safe zone, with or without a UN Security Council resolution. According to the Pentagon, this would require a military footprint of 15,000 to 30,000 troops.

I personally am not persuaded that imposing a safe zone is a good option. But Congress should debate this question. It's our job to authorize the use of military force, and we haven't been doing our job. So I encourage you to advocate for a full, informed Congressional debate on the idea of safe zones.

Finally, and I'm sure that I speak for all my colleagues, I can't begin to express the sorrow, anger, and frustration I feel as I watch the brutal, wanton murder of the Syrian people – whether by barrel bombs or slow starvation. For the record, I must recognize and respect the incredible resilience of the Syrian people. It is mostly Syrians who are on the ground doing what they can to help people survive. As someone pointed out to me recently, those providing humanitarian assistance go in and out of the country. They could stay out, but they don't. As we think about what more we can do, I am reminded that our contribution pales in comparison to theirs.

With that, I would like to introduce the first panel of witnesses, all of whom represent humanitarian organizations that are operating in Syria. They will discuss their efforts to provide humanitarian assistance inside the country, what they have achieved, the obstacles they face and their recommendations ...

... I turn now to our second panel of witnesses, who come from organizations that specialize in protection and accountability, and will discuss measures to reduce the vulnerability of civilians as the war continues, and to create the conditions for accountability for war crimes in an eventual post-war context.