

Endless war crimes and enormous human suffering: the people of Syria are in need of justice and peaceful support

Syria's war has created the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. Six years have passed since violent repression by the Assad regime turned what began as a peaceful uprising for freedom and dignity into a brutal war. The consequences are unspeakable: half the country's pre-war population — more than 11 million people — have been killed or forced to flee.¹

Pax Christi International is appalled by the continuation of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Our movement unequivocally condemns the chemical gas attack that killed 72 people, including 20 children², in Khan Sheikhoun. Many of our member organisations have also expressed their concerns.³ Despite Syria's ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), the supposed destruction of Syria's chemical stockpile by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and UN Security Council resolutions, these despicable weapons obviously remain available in Syria – possibly to different sides – and have once again caused enormous suffering.

We fully support the ongoing investigation of the OPCW into the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The OPCW is investigating the incident under the continued mandate of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) and has initiated contact with the Syrian authorities.⁴ The OPCW should have full access to attack sites and report to the UN Security Council as soon as possible. The international community should collect evidence and build criminal cases for perpetrators, including individuals, to be held criminally accountable so that justice be brought to victims. In this regard individual countries should step up their concrete support for the recently established international, impartial and independent UN mechanism for accountability in Syria.

Rather than holding perpetrators of atrocities to account or contributing to a just solution in Syria, other nations have intensified the violence in pursuit of their own interests. We hear the frustration and can imagine the heartbreak of the people of Syria. However, we deeply believe that more military action, including the U.S. missile strikes on Syrian government airfields, will not lead to a just resolution of the war

¹ Mercy Corps, 'Quick facts: What you need to know about the Syria crisis', 9 March 2017, online available at: <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>.

² Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 'Warplanes re-bomb Khan Shaykhun and the death toll of Black Tuesday massacre rise to 72 more than half of them are women and children', April 5th 2017, online available at: <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=64136>.

³ Dutch member organisation PAX calls on the UN Security Council to take action after chemical attack', April 4th 2017, online available at: <http://www.paxchristi.net/news/syria-pax-calls-uns-council-take-action-after-chemical-attack/6622#sthash.MlJy9zxy.dpbs>. Pax Christi Australia has also issued a statement condemning the violence on April 8th 2017, online available at: <http://www.cathnews.com/media-releases/721-170408-pax-christi-church-groups-condemn-us-retaliatory-air-strikes-on-syria/file> as well as Pax Christi Italy on April 6th: <http://www.paxchristi.it/?p=12803> and Pax Christi USA on April 10th: <https://paxchristiusa.org/2017/04/09/statement-bombing-syria-will-not-create-peace/>.

⁴ Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), 'Media Brief: Reported Use of Chemical Weapons, Southern Idlib, Syria', 4 April 2017, online available at: <https://www.opcw.org/news/article/media-brief-reported-use-of-chemical-weapons-southern-idlib-syria-4-april-2017/>

and could lead to the further escalation of violence, exacerbating the suffering of Syrians. Moreover, the U.S. attack lacked a UN Security Council mandate and further contributes to the erosion of international law taking place over the past years. It is a responsibility of all members of the Council to address this problem.

We urge the international community to work with Syrian civil society, with all nations committed to a just peace in Syria, with respected faith and civil society leaders from around the world, and others to implement strategic nonviolent actions, including lifting sieges and securing humanitarian access throughout Syria; deploying independent UN monitors to re-establish a national cease-fire; supporting local peacebuilding programs in Syria; ending weapons sales and arms trafficking in the region; and urgently renewing a multinational commitment to make progress in the Geneva peace talks, which should lead to a credible political transition, as agreed upon last week at the Brussels Conference on “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region”.⁵

In this regard we support the position by the EU and other countries to make reconstruction support conditional on meaningful progress towards a political transition. Individual countries should develop concrete benchmarks to assess such progress. This is also in line with the UN Secretary General who urged ‘to avoid any escalation of the situation in Syria and that these events underscored his belief that there is no way to solve the conflict other than through a political solution.’⁶ Intense negotiations to stop abuse of the veto in the UN Security Council are also essential if UN member states are ever going to act together effectively to protect civilians, stop war crimes, end impunity and work with Syrians to implement a viable political strategy.

Pax Christi International strongly affirms Pope Francis’s message of last year in which he stated that ‘peace in Syria is possible, but that the only way to achieve it is through a political solution.’⁷ We believe that a fully inclusive and nonviolent political process is the only way to end this brutal conflict. All support for ongoing military action and transfers of weapons or ammunition that are prolonging the war should immediately be stopped by the parties involved. Massive humanitarian assistance for the victims of violence and displaced communities is needed, as well as international investment in local and national peacebuilding strategies.

Next to our political work in support of the people of Syria, we call upon our members, partners and those who want to join us in a day of fasting in the coming days in support of Syria and in the light of Easter hope.⁸

~ Brussels, 11 April 2017

⁵ EU External Action Service, ‘Brussels Conference on “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region” agrees holistic approach to the crisis and 5.6 billion euros in pledges for 2017’, April 5th 2017, online available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/24256/brussels-conference-supporting-future-syria-and-region-agrees-holistic-approach-crisis-and-56_en.

⁶ UN News Centre, ‘Syria: As US responds militarily to chemical attack, UN urges restraint to avoid escalation’, April 7th 2017, online available at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56524#.W0txsWdcKM9>.

⁷ Crux, ‘Pope Francis says there’s no military solution in Syria’, July 5th 2017, online available at: <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2016/07/05/pope-francis-says-theres-no-military-solution-syria/>.

⁸ Pax Christi International is supporting an initiative taken by Pax Christi Italy and Caritas Italy who are calling for a day of fast on Wednesday April 12th. Further information can be found on this website of Pax Christi Italy: <http://www.paxchristi.it/?p=12803>.