Special Report on Syria

International Community Calls for Action as Violence Worsens
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*The Peace & Justice Updates are written by the interns at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice at the University of San Diego.*

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International Community Calls for Action as Violence Worsens

By Alexandra Copper, acopper@sandiego.edu

The previous two weeks have seen the development of the diplomatic and physical battles for Syria. As the country stands firmly in the spotlight of international censure, internal violence not only continues but escalates, as Syria is confronted by what many have labeled a “humanitarian crisis.”

Syrians Vote on Constitutional Referendum
On February 26, Syrians voted on a draft constitution, which outlined the end of the political monopoly held by the ruling Arab Baath Socialist Party and the establishment of two seven-year terms for future presidents. Government officials announced a voter participation rate of 57.4 percent, with an approval rate among those who voted of nearly 90 percent. According to Major General Muhammad Ibrahim al-Shaar, the interior minister, “89.4 percent of voters, or nearly 7.5 million people, backed the new Constitution in the referendum on Sunday, while 735,000, or about 9 percent, voted against it. About 132,000 ballots, or 1.6 percent, were invalid.”

The results of the February 26 referendum have been hailed by government officials and the country’s allies as an important step toward reform while the international community has largely dismissed the vote as a rigged election, yielding manipulated results. As Haithem el-Maleh, a Syrian lawyer and human rights activist, questioned, “For its entire existence, this regime has forged elections. How can they hold a referendum in the shadow of war and tanks? Aren’t they embarrassed?”

Abbreviated Timeline

February 16 – Non-binding UN General Assembly resolution calls for respect of human rights and an end to attacks on civilians.
February 26 – Syrian Constitutional Referendum takes place.
February 28 – UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay calls for an immediate ceasefire; UN political chief B. Lynn Pascoe estimates death toll in Syria over 7,500 people in the past 11 months.
March 1 – UN Human Rights Council passes resolution strongly condemning Syrian human rights situation.
March 3 – UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon reports on Syria’s inaction in response to the General Assembly resolution; Kofi Annan appointed by the UN and the Arab League as Joint Special Envoy for Syria.
March 5 – U.S. Senator John McCain calls for air strikes against Syria.
March 6 – President Obama vows a path of diplomatic rather than military intervention; Russia confirms its support of Syrian policy.
Violence Throughout the Country Escalates

In the aftermath of the February 26 elections, the level of violence throughout Syria has continued to escalate. The city of Homs, located in southern Syria, has been the epicenter of the battle between military and security forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and oppositionist groups. On March 1, the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main armed opposition group, announced its strategic withdrawal from the Homs neighborhood of Baba Amr, which has been under a targeted siege by government troops for over a month. Citing their diminishing weapons supplies as well as their desire to minimize civilian casualties, the FSA withdrew, allowing al-Assad’s forces to take the city. As al-Assad’s forces have moved in, witnesses report large-scale abuses by government troops, with reports and footage surfacing of arbitrary arrests, murders, rapes, and torture. One man who managed to escape to Lebanon described the scene in Homs, “The smell of death was everywhere. We could smell the bodies buried under the rubble all the time. We saw so much death that at the end the sight of a dismembered body ... stopped moving us.”

On March 5, the BBC’s Channel 4 aired footage shot in secret of Syrian patients reportedly being tortured by medical staff at a state-run hospital in Homs. The video showed injured, blindfolded men chained to hospital beds, with evident signs of severe beatings. The unidentified individual who made the video recounted, “I have seen detainees being tortured by electrocution, whipping, beating with batons, and by breaking their legs. They twist the feet until the leg breaks.”

The Syrian government also stands accused of directly targeting civilians from Homs attempting to seek refuge across the Lebanon border. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports military attacks on a bridge on the Orontes River, near the Lebanese border, the main route by which refugees are fleeing the country. According to Dana Suleiman, the spokesman for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in Beirut, Lebanon, “as many as 2,000 Syrians have crossed into Lebanon since Sunday [March 4].”

While rebel forces have relinquished their hold on Homs, violent clashes within Syria are not expected to dissipate in the near future. The brutality of government forces carries with it the potential to radicalize more of the population and “if people are treated this way, more and more will take up arms.” Many experts fear that Syria is now facing a long, protracted battle for control of the country, as Salman Shaikh of the Brookings Doha Center explains: “The conflict is transitioning into a civil war. Both the regime and the opposition have sufficient forces to sustain armed confrontation. Opposition groups are likely to grow stronger as Gulf states, primarily Qatar and Saudi Arabia, provide more arms and logistical support.”

On February 28, the Under-Secretary General of the United Nations for Public Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe estimated the death toll in Syria during the past 11 months to be more than 7,500 people, nearly
2,000 more than previously reported.

*International Community Grapples With Appropriate Response*

In the shadow of Syria’s questionable referendum and the country’s escalating violence, the Syrian government has come under increasing pressure from the international community to address humanitarian concerns. The United Nations General Assembly and Human Rights Council have both passed non-binding resolutions on the situation in Syria, but the Security Council has proved the true battleground of international debate, as two resolutions have already been vetoed by Russia and China and the fate of a new resolution proposed by the United States remains uncertain.

On February 16, the United Nations General Assembly passed a non-binding resolution calling for the immediate end to all human rights violations and attacks perpetrated against civilians by government forces. Reporting back to the General Assembly on March 3, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon expressed his dissatisfaction with Syria’s compliance: “This Assembly called upon the Syrian Government to immediately put an end to all human rights violations and attacks against civilians, protect its population and fully comply with its obligations under applicable international law. The Syrian authorities clearly have not done so.” He also rebuked the international community for failing to act appropriately in the defense of human life, “To date, the international community has failed in its duty. In fact, the actions – indeed, the inaction – of the international community seems to have encouraged the Syrian authorities in their brutal suppression of their citizens.”

Ban’s condemnations came only days after the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, Navi Pillay, on February 28 publicly called for an immediate ceasefire in Syria and condemned government actions, insisting that, in the face of “unspeakable violations that take place every moment…I remain convinced that referring the situation of Syria to the International Criminal Court will be a step in the right direction.”

Her urgings met with strong disapproval from the Syrian delegation, which stormed out of the council meeting. Syria’s ambassador contended, “We are convinced that the real aim behind holding this session today is to cover up for the violence and murder perpetrated by the armed groups against innocent civilians… We are not pretending that the human rights situation in Syria is perfect… This is due to the armed groups that are using residential areas as bases.”

Despite objections by Syrian government officials, the UN Human Rights Council passed a non-binding resolution that “strongly condemns the continued widespread and systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Syrian authorities” and calls on Syrian President al-Assad to allow “free and unimpeded access by the United Nations and humanitarian agencies.” Russia, China, and Cuba voted against the resolution.

*“For us to take military action, unilaterally, as some have suggested, or to think that somehow there’s some simple solution, I think is a mistake.”*

While the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have voted overwhelmingly to condemn the Syrian humanitarian situation, all actions within the Security Council have been blocked. Russia
and China have vetoed two resolutions, claiming they were unbalanced and biased against Syrian government forces. While the United States is proposing a new resolution to end violence in Syria, first by government troops and then by opposition groups, on March 6 Russia and newly re-elected President Vladimir Putin maintained dedication to veto any measure criticizing the Syrian government. “We are deeply convinced that we are right,” said Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov.

With binding diplomatic action at a relative stand-still, some in the international community have advocated more direct military intervention in Syrian affairs. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have pushed for arming rebel forces to combat al-Assad’s forces and, on March 5, Senator John McCain called on the United States to launch airstrikes against al-Assad’s regime. The senator’s urgings were dismissed the following day by President Obama who, while acknowledging how “heartbreaking and outrageous” the situation is, insisted, “for us to take military action, unilaterally, as some have suggested, or to think that somehow there’s some simple solution, I think is a mistake.” UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon maintains “further militarization of the Syrian opposition is not the answer.”