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Statement by Adama Dieng, United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and Ivan Simonovic, United Nations Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, on the situation in Eastern Ghouta and Idlib, Syrian Arab Republic

(New York, 18 January 2018) The United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, and the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, Ivan Simonovic express concern at the devastating impact of escalating hostilities in Eastern Ghouta and Idlib in Syria on civilians.

Both Eastern Ghouta and Idlib are designated de-escalation areas under the Astana process and should therefore be places where civilians should expect a minimum level of safety. However, since mid-November 2017, the estimated 393,000 people in Eastern Ghouta have been subjected to airstrikes, shelling and bombardment on an almost daily basis by government forces and their allies. These people are living under extreme conditions as a result of a siege of the area by the Syrian Government, with some facing severe food shortages and malnutrition. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has confirmed at least 85 civilian deaths in Eastern Ghouta between 31 December 2017 and 10 January 2018, of whom at least 30 were children. Rockets fired by armed opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta into residential areas of Damascus have reportedly further aggravated the situation.

In southern Idlib and northern rural Hama, there has been an escalation in fighting since December 2017 between government forces and their allies, and the Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham alliance of armed opposition groups that controls the majority of Idlib governate. The fighting has resulted in numerous civilian deaths and the displacement of more than 200,000 civilians in recent weeks. On 8 December 2017, for example, airstrikes hit an IDP camp in Khwin village, south of Idlib, killing three children and their mother, according to OHCHR reports. On 17 December ten civilians, six women and four children, were reportedly killed in Khan Shaykun in southern Idlib bordering Hama by airstrikes and on 20 December 18 civilians, including seven women and five children, were killed in Maar Shurin town, south of Idlib. At least four attacks on health care facilities and two attacks on education facilities have also been reported between 3 and 10 January 2018.

A continued escalation in hostilities will worsen the situation for civilians. An estimated half of the estimated two million people in Idlib governate have taken refuge there after fleeing or being relocated as a result of violence in other areas of the country, making them even more vulnerable.

Attacks that are indiscriminate or directly target civilians or civilian objects are a violation of fundamental principles of international humanitarian law. All actors involved in the conflict in Syria have an obligation to ensure that these fundamental principles are respected. The level of violence and suffering inflicted on the Syrian people after almost seven years of conflict should not be tolerated. More than six million people have been internally displaced by the conflict,

many displaced multiple times, and more than five million Syrians have sought refuge in other countries. It is estimated that more than half of the country's basic infrastructure is damaged or destroyed and over 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.

“We cannot stand by silently in the face of indiscriminate violence and violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. All the parties to the Syrian conflict, as well as the international community, have a responsibility to protect civilians from atrocity crimes. We urge all stakeholders, including the Security Council, to condemn this violence, and we urge the parties to the conflict to ensure that basic principles of humanitarian law are protected, in particular with regards to proportionality and distinction.”

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