



Date : Thursday 1 March 2012

UN Human Rights Council resolution calls for end to impunity for Syrian regime

While the human rights and humanitarian situation in Syria is still deteriorating rapidly, the UN Human Rights Council (the Council) this morning concluded an urgent debate on the crisis in the country. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) commends the decision to convene this debate as both a significant and necessary display of responsibility by the Council.

<http://www.fidh.org/UN-Human-Rights-Council-resolution,11388>

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Following the debate, the body adopted a resolution by an overwhelming margin of thirty-seven votes to three with three abstentions (1). Russia, China and Cuba were the only states to reject the text, and the near-consensus by the rest of the Council in support of the resolution unequivocally shows that the position of these three states is firmly out of step with the international community at large. While the last resolution on Syria adopted by the Council (in December 2011) enjoyed the support of 37 states, this already broad majority was widened still further today, with an unprecedented number of 39 member states standing in favour of the resolution (2). This week's debate marked the fourth major initiative undertaken by the Human Rights Council on Syria in the past nine months, following the three Special Sessions that took place last year, of which the first inaugurated a Commission of Inquiry.

As well as insisting on the importance of ending impunity for those violating human rights in Syria, the Council resolution also "deplores the brutal actions of the Syrian regime over the past 11 months" and calls for it to put an end to human rights violations and attacks against civilians. Furthermore, the resolution also calls for "free and unimpeded access by the United Nations and humanitarian agencies," which is all the more crucial in light of a reported ground assault on the Bab Amr district of Homs today, as well as yesterday's refusal by the Syrian authorities to allow UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos access to the country (3).

Reacting to the adoption of the resolution, FIDH President Souhayr Belhassen commented that "the text is particularly significant due to its emphasis on accountability, which signals an important evolution in the discourse on Syria at the international level." Belhassen continued by stating her hope that "the members of the Security Council seize upon the momentum gained in Geneva by referring the Syrian crisis to the International Criminal Court (ICC)." As pointed out by FIDH during its oral intervention, "only when international law is applied consistently and universally does it allow for sustainable peace and democracy to emerge." As Belhassen noted, "discord in the Security Council has created a wall behind which the Assad regime has been able to act with perceived immunity. This perception will only change when agreement is reached at all levels of the UN system."

As pointed out in FIDH's oral statement to the Human Rights Council on Thursday, the decision to hold a debate within the Council could not be more timely, with hundreds of people killed over the past month alone and Homs remaining besieged by government forces. This position is confirmed by statistics emerging from the UN this week, which put the death toll in Syria in excess of 7,500 since the start of the uprising a year ago (4). At the opening of the debate, UN Human Rights Commissioner Navi Pillay emphasized the gravity of the situation, noting that conditions have significantly worsened in Syria as of late, and called for an end to the killings (5).

In highlighting the importance of a strong follow-up to the debate, FIDH made a series of recommendations and underlined a series of additional themes to the Council. These included the imposition of an arms embargo, the release of political prisoners and the importance of guaranteeing safe and unhindered access for humanitarian organizations.

ENDNOTES :

1) Yes: Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Chile, Congo, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Djibouti, Guatemala, Hungary, Indonesia, Italy, Jordan, Koweit, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Nigeria, Norway, Peru, Poland, Qatar, Republic Moldova, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, United States of America, Uruguay No: China, Cuba, Russian Federation Abstention: Ecuador, India, Philippines. Absent from the room: Angola, Burkina Fasso, Kyrgyzstan, Uganda (Kyrgyzstan and Burkina Fasso later declared they would have voted yes and Angola declared they would have abstained)

2) Bangladesh and Cameroon had abstained in December but voted yes today. Ecuador had voted no in December, but abstained this time.

3) The Syrian authorities have continuously refused to allow the Commission of Inquiry mandated by the Council access to the country.

4) <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/28/world/meast/syria-unrest/>

5) <http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2012/02/navaneetham-pillay-debate-on-situation-of-human-rights-in-syria-19th-session-human-rights-council.html>