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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Physicians for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Physicians for Human Rights Shadow Report to the United Nations Human Rights Council on the Syrian Arab Republic August 2022

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is an international human rights organization that works at the intersection of medicine, science, and law. For more than 35 years, PHR has used medical and scientific expertise to document and redress severe human rights violations around the world.

PHR submits the following information related to the 22 September review of the Syrian Arab Republic by the UN Human Rights Council. PHR is deeply concerned over the persistent humanitarian and human rights crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic and urges the Council's strong support for sustained and unfettered cross-border humanitarian access and for the emerging mechanism on enforced disappearances.

Physicians for Human Rights welcomes the opportunity on 22 September for the UN Human Rights Council to be informed of the Commission of Inquiry's review of the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. This is part of the Council's critically important work to continue raising awareness about the vast, needless human suffering in the Syrian Arab Republic and to secure life-saving humanitarian access along the Syrian Arab Republic - Türkiye border at Bab al-Hawa. PHR also appreciates the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' ongoing efforts to produce a gap-analysis report at the earliest possible opportunity.

Humanitarian Crisis

In the 11 years since the Syrian conflict began, more than 14 million Syrians who remain in the country have required humanitarian assistance.⁽¹⁾ More than four million people in the northern part of the Syrian Arab Republic alone need regular humanitarian aid. At the moment, the Bab al-Hawa border crossing remains the only entry point for UN humanitarian aid to directly reach populations in the northwest, which make up nearly a quarter of the Syrian population. Without access to this crossing, Syrians in the northern part of the country will struggle to access humanitarian aid, exacerbating an already dire situation. Also, local health organizations will lose access to essential medical supplies that are only available from the World Health Organization (WHO), including COVID-19 vaccines and other essential medications and medical equipment.

Cross-border humanitarian access for Syrians facilitated the implementation of multiple rounds of polio campaigns, ensured that children received routine vaccines, and allowed UN agencies to reach 18.5 million beneficiaries with life-saving medical supplies following the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in 2020. PHR has called upon the UN Security Council to renew cross-border humanitarian access.⁽²⁾ The July renewal of SC Resolution 2585, which ordered the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Türkiye reopened for another six months only instead of a year as a minimum, was a compromise that ensured the continuation of the humanitarian aid flow to Syrians but will have negative impact on the sustainability and stability of the humanitarian operations.

However, PHR research has revealed that one operating crossing with a six-month window for four million people is the bare minimum. Furthermore, keeping the Bab al-Salaam and al-Yarubiyah crossings shuttered in lieu of the misguided crossline alternative is a potential humanitarian catastrophe for millions of Syrians. The narrow timeframe is a disgraceful compromise and restarts the clock for health and humanitarian workers to plan their missions to the Syrian Arab Republic and reach millions of Syrians in enough time before their last lifeline is up for debate in the winter.

Attacks on Health Care

For more than a decade, the Syrian government has systematically targeted health care workers and criminalized their role in provision of nondiscriminatory care for perceived opposition supporters, while using the health care system to brutalize and oppress the civilian

population. To this day, PHR regularly hears from health care providers of the absence of even the most rudimentary medical care due to years of physical attacks on health care infrastructure and medical professionals in the Syrian Arab Republic. Indeed, according to PHR's December 2021 field research, *Destruction, Obstruction, and Inaction: The Makings of a Health Crisis in the northern part of the Syrian Arab Republic*, attacks by the Russian Federation and its Syrian-government allies have had a devastating effect on health and health care delivery especially to vulnerable populations such as women and girls, internally displaced people (IDPs), and people with disabilities.⁽³⁾

The Russian Federation's persistent vetoes against the renewal of humanitarian crossings is dangerous and detrimental to the lives and wellbeing of millions of Syrians. While the Russian Federation's role in the Syrian Arab Republic and in Ukraine complicates efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic, PHR remains hopeful if the UN system acts now to safeguard health and human rights.

Mechanism on the Disappeared in the Syrian Arab Republic

One of the few promising humanitarian and human rights developments in the Syrian Arab Republic currently under discussion is the creation of a new mechanism to investigate enforced disappearances and seek humanitarian resolutions to millions of disappeared, missing or dead in the Syrian Arab Republic. With 6.6 million Syrians internally displaced and 5.6 million more forced to flee the country, countless families have told PHR of the relief such a mechanism could afford them from the anguish of not knowing where their loved ones are.

PHR reports: "My Only Crime Was That I Was a Doctor" and "The Survivors, the Dead, and the Disappeared: Detention of Health Care Workers in Syria, 2011-2012" provide qualitative and quantitative evidence that indicate that the government of the Syrian Arab Republic has targeted health workers for arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture. After 11 years, it is time for the international community to prioritize the needs of the survivors and the families of the missing and to empower them through endorsing the mechanism to seek the truth about the fate and whereabouts of missing and forcibly disappeared. ⁽⁴⁾ Such a mechanism could offer relief to families of at least 1,133 missing health care providers, who were detained between March 2011 and December 2012 by the Syrian government.

While mechanisms of this Council such as the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic are critical to a long-term accountability process for human rights atrocities committed in the Syrian Arab Republic, PHR calls on Member States to likewise support parallel efforts to address the vast humanitarian needs brought about by this conflict. PHR urges UN Member States to endorse and support the creation of a new humanitarian mechanism on enforced disappearances in the Syrian Arab Republic.

(1) "The world must not grow numb to the suffering of the Syrian people," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, May 18, 2022.

(2) See, for example, <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/security-council-must-act-to-save-lives-and-secure-humanitarian-access-for-northern-syria/>.

(3) See, for example, *The Survivors, the Dead, and the Disappeared: Detention of Health Care Workers in Syria, 2011-2012*, November 2021, and "My Only Crime Was That I Was a Doctor": How the Syrian Government Targets Health Workers for Arrest, Detention, and Torture, December 2019.

(4) Houssam al-Nahhas, MD, MPH, Andrew Moran, Adrienne L. Fricke, JD, MA, Diana Rayes, MHS, "Destruction, Obstruction, and Inaction," Physicians for Human Rights, December 2021.