

DEATH SQUADS: UN Security Council issues statement condemning Houla Massacre

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Global Research, May 28, 2012

Russia Today 28 May 2012

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [United Nations](#)

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The UN Security Council has issued a statement condemning “*in the strongest possible terms*” the massacre of civilians in the Syrian village of Houla, during which more than 100 people are reported to have been killed.

28 May 2012



John Moore / Getty Images / AFP

“The members of the Security Council condemned in the strongest possible terms the killings, confirmed by United Nations observers, of dozens of men, women and children and the wounding of hundreds more in the village of Houla, near Homs, in attacks that involved a series of government artillery and tank shellings on a residential neighbourhood,” the statement reads “The members of the Security Council also condemned the killing of civilians by shooting at close range and by severe physical abuse.”

The statement also chided the Syrian government for violating international laws under UN Security Council resolutions 2042 and 2043. The Security Council members also reiterated that “*all violence in all forms by all parties must cease*” and that those responsible for it must be held accountable. The statement also asks the Secretary-General and the UNSMIS to continue the investigation of the attacks and to report the findings to the Security Council.

The document also called on the Syrian government to stop using heavy weapons, and to withdraw its troops and heavy weaponry from population centers. At the same time, the

Security Council members reaffirmed their commitments to the “*sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity*” of Syria.

The statement to the press was at the end of an urgent session of the UN body. The meeting was convened at the initiative of Russia, which insisted on listening to a briefing by the head of the UN observers’ mission in the country, General Robert Mood. Earlier, the UN Security Council discussed a joint French-British draft statement, which also censured the Houla massacre, but unilaterally put the blame on the Syrian government.

Norwegian General Robert Mood, who heads the UN observer mission in Syria, told the gathering that 116 people were killed and 300 more injured in the massacre in Houla, Reuters reports. A spokesman for Kofi Annan, the UN-Arab League envoy to Syria, said those killed include 49 children and 34 women.

There are concerns that most “*civilians killed in Houla were victims of a blatant murder: they were either shot in the temple from a short distance, or their throats were cut,*” Russia’s UN envoy deputy Aleksandr Pankin told journalists before the session began.

“*Very few of the people who died in Houla were killed by artillery shelling,*” he added.

UN Security Council statements are issued by consensus. These statements, presidential or to the press, are non-binding. Presidential statements are drawn if a resolution cannot be passed, and are meant as a warning that the Council is paying attention to the situation and further action may follow.

Russia opposes putting all the blame on forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, say sources in the Council. Moscow wanted to introduce references to “*a third party,*” implying terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda could be behind the attack in western Syria.

“*The tragic events in Syria and the deaths of dozens of people deserve condemnation. However it is necessary to seriously examine the causes of what happened,*” Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said on Twitter.

After the session was over, Martin Briens, France’s permanent representative at the UN, said the Assad government was plunging into horror and chaos, and was threatening regional security.

“*Tanks and artillery cannons from the government shelled residential areas killing civilians,*” he added, as quoted by Reuters.

Britain’s envoy to the UN, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, called the statement “*important,*” but not sufficient. He stressed that there was evidence of “*deliberate government shelling against a civilian neighborhood*” in Houla.

Russian deputy UN ambassador Aleksandr Pankin underscored that according to Mood’s briefing, it wasn’t clear who was responsible for most of the deaths in Houla.

“*It still remains unclear what happened and what triggered what,*” Pankin noted. “*Tanks were there and heavy artillery was used there, however he [Mood] did not link directly shelling with numbers of deaths.*”

Pankin also pointed to the fact that it was difficult to imagine the Syrian government shooting women and children at point-blank range.

Syria's envoy to the UN also said that no government would massacre its own citizens to achieve political victory over its opponents.

"It's a terrorist crime," Bashar Ja'afari stated. "We cannot describe it with different terms."

The Syrian government denies involvement in the massacre. Damascus condemned the attack Saturday, saying "terrorist" groups were behind it.

Initially the massacre was reported by opposition activists, who claimed that the city was shelled by government forces during an anti-regime demonstration. Reports also suggested that troops entered the city, butchering dozens of people.

A team of UN observers arriving in Houla to investigate the killings said the casualties included 32 children under the age of 10 and dozens of women.

Syria is trying to implement a peace plan drawn by UN special envoy Kofi Annan. The plan is meant to stop bloodshed in the country, which has been trapped in a violent civil turmoil for over a year. The popular uprising against President Assad's regime has taken over 9,000 lives, the UN estimates. Assad says he is a fighting foreign insurgency.

Annan's plan demands a ceasefire from all parties to the conflict starting on April 10, 2012, and deployment of a UN observing mission. The massacre in Houla comes as the biggest incident since the observer mission began. Now the *Free Syrian Army*, the biggest opposition force fighting Assad's troops, says it will pull out of the plan *"unless the UN Security Council takes urgent steps for the protection of civilians."* *'Russia absolutely right in calling for thorough briefings'*

Former Pentagon official Michael Maloof believes it is extremely difficult to lay blame on anybody at this point without further investigation.

"I think the Russian government is absolutely correct in its calling for thorough briefings," he told RT. "And I might add that even the UN Secretary-General hasn't ruled out the possibility that insurgents were very much involved in this. The question is, how did it all start? I don't think the Syrian government would be just shelling a town for the sake of shelling a town without a provocation."

He pointed to the fact that the massacre, in which children had their throats slit, was indicative of very close-up work, with the Syrian government out of town at that moment.

"But again, all of this is subject to investigation," he stressed.

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