

Provide Urgent Aid, Halt Flow of Arms to Abusive Forces, Support ICC Referral, Human Rights Watch said.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH – The discussion about Syria when G20 leaders meet in St. Petersburg on September 5 and 6, 2013, should address the member countries' abysmal response to the Syrian crisis as a whole over the past two years, Human Rights Watch said today. While G20 leaders are unlikely to agree on the response to the alleged chemical attack on Syria's suburbs or the big picture for Syria, they should at least agree on concrete measures that can provide protection, justice and assistance to Syria's victims.

In particular, Russia and China have blocked any meaningful initiative at the Security Council to ensure accountability or improve access to humanitarian aid. Meanwhile, influential governments of the global South, namely India, Brazil and South Africa, have expressed concern for the situation but have not supported concerted action to help civilians in need.

"There are no innocent bystanders to the Syrian conflict," said Peggy Hicks, global advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. "None of the G20 countries have done all they could to help save Syrian lives, and it's high time they did. We know what most G20 members are against, but what are they for?"

Human Rights Watch urged G20 countries to provide urgent humanitarian relief for millions affected by the Syrian crisis; stop arms flows to abusive forces; and press for the prosecution of war crimes suspects.

Provide Urgent Relief for Syrian Refugees and other Civilians in Need

There shouldn't be any controversy about helping people in desperate need of food, fuel, health care and other basic needs, but Syria's humanitarian crisis is catastrophic and getting worse. According to the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, the number of refugees from the Syrian conflict recently topped 2 million, plus another 4.2 million people internally displaced. Half of those needing assistance are children. The International Committee of the Red Cross has reported acute shortages of vital medical supplies.

The United Nations' appeals to member countries for aid for Syria are woefully underfunded. UNHCR reported on September 3 that less than half the funds required to meet basic refugee needs have been received. Russia has given UNHCR only US\$10 million and China just \$1 million. The US, at \$228 million, is the leading donor to UNHCR's appeal. Of the \$4.4 billion in aid sought to address the humanitarian crisis overall for 2013, the UN was \$3.1 billion short as of July. G20 countries, with 90 percent of the world's gross domestic product, are ideally placed to come together and fill the gap in assistance to Syrians in need, Human Rights Watch said.

But there is more to be done on the humanitarian front. An estimated 2.8 million Syrians inside the country face life-threatening assistance gaps not only because of insufficient resources, but because they have little access to assistance. Syria has insisted that all humanitarian aid must be sent from government-held territory, making it extremely difficult to get aid to people in opposition-held northern Syria.

G20: No excuse for inaction on Syria

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G20 countries should make clear that aid needs to reach the Syrian people through the most direct channel possible, including across borders. To make sure this gap is met, G20 members should greatly expand their aid to humanitarian agencies doing this work and support further engagement by the UN to allow expansion of this aid. G20 countries should also insist that Syria acquiesce in aid delivery from neighboring countries, but should not allow any dissent from Syria to deter them from increasing the flow of aid to all those in need.

Stop the Arms Flow to Abusive Forces

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria has concluded that Syrian government forces are committing crimes against humanity through widespread and systematic attacks on civilians, a conclusion consistent with Human Rights Watch findings. A number of governments and multilateral organizations have agreed to or have carried out embargoes on the sale and supply of arms, ammunition, and materiel to the Syrian government.

Two principal suppliers of arms to the Syrian government – Iran and Russia – continue to supply weapons to the Syrian government in the face of continuing atrocities by the Syrian armed forces. Despite Russian claims that it has only supplied “defensive weapons,” reports point to provision of weapons including fighter jets and other assistance used in offensive operations. According to media reports such support may be increasing.

G20 members should insist that governments and arms suppliers stop providing arms to the Syrian government so long as it continues to commit crimes against humanity, and should jointly press Russia, a G20 member, to cut off the Syrian government from weapons supplies and military assistance. G20 countries should also insist on verification from Syria's neighboring countries, particularly Iraq, that arms are not being shipped to Syria across their territories.

To pressure companies to stop supplying the Syrian government with arms, G20 members and other arms purchasers should suspend any current dealings with companies that are supplying Syria and sign no new contracts with them until the arms shipments to Syria stop.

Similarly, providing weapons and materiel to national armed forces or non-state armed groups known to commit widespread abuses could make G20 members complicit in their abuses. G20 members should not sell or supply any groups committing widespread human rights abuses with arms or materiel.

Ensure those Committing War Crimes are Brought to Justice

In the face of the grave violations of the laws of war documented in Syria, including abuses by opposition forces, Human Rights Watch has called for the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Because Syria is not a member of the ICC treaty, the Security Council would have to give the court jurisdiction.

A total of 64 countries have called on the UN Security Council to refer the Syria case to the ICC, including 6 Security Council members: France, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, Argentina, Australia, and South Korea.

Eleven G20 members have not publicly supported ICC referral, including China, Russia, and the

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United States, all permanent Security Council members. The others are: South Africa, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, India, Indonesia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Russia has described the effort to seek an ICC referral as “ill-timed and counterproductive.”

G20 countries that have not yet supported ICC referral should publicly do so, and should take all available steps to encourage Russia to drop its opposition, Human Rights Watch said.

The record from past conflicts such as in the Balkans in the 1990s confirms that criminal indictments of senior political, military and rebel leaders can actually strengthen peace efforts by delegitimizing and marginalizing those who stand in the way of the conflict’s resolution. At the same time, the failure to hold perpetrators of the most serious international crimes to account can fuel future abuses.

An ICC referral would send a clear message to all parties to the conflict in Syria that grave crimes will not be tolerated and that the commission of such abuses could carry serious consequences, Human Rights Watch said. The threat of ICC referral would put on notice those in senior positions in both the government and opposition that they could be held responsible for crimes they order or commit, or for crimes they fail to prevent or punish – whatever the outcome of the Syria conflict.