

## Letter to the UN Security Council Members on the escalation of violence in Daraa

(VDSF - 18 August 2021) Since June 24, around 50,000 civilians have been besieged and under heavy bombardment in Dara'a Al-Balad with all humanitarian services, medical care, food production, and the delivery of medicine and basic needs halted.<sup>1</sup> The intensity of the shelling has forced 24,000 people so far to be displaced to nearby areas.<sup>2</sup> The mobilisation of more military forces towards the city indicates the tendency for the expansion of the military operations in similar tactics used before in Homs, Aleppo, Ghouta, and other cities in rural Damascus. Local communities have communicated that they are anxious about the worst-case scenario that the current offensive may expand to all Dara'a districts resulting in a wider-scale humanitarian crisis, forcibly displacing tens of thousands of Syrians.

We condemn the repeated violation of the International Humanitarian Law by the Syrian government in indiscriminate attacks on civilians, women, and children as well as the prevention and interruption of the safe and timely delivery of medical services, food, and humanitarian aid during an imminent humanitarian catastrophe.

Voices for Displaced Syrians Forum (VDSF) calls upon the UN Security Council to urgently demand the following:

1. Take immediate action to stop the recent aggression carried out by the Syrian Government and its allies against Daraa al-Balad and neighbouring areas and ensure the protection of civilians from indiscriminate attacks.
2. Ensure the safety of civilians is guaranteed at their home locations without justification for forced displacement that is being proposed as a bargain for safety.
3. Urge the Syrian authorities to lift the siege imposed on more than 50,000 people, depriving them of the most basic needs, including food, water, and medicine and secure immediate and safe access for UN-led humanitarian operations to reach civilians trapped in Daraa al-Balad.

We recall that UNSC Resolution 2585, which was unanimously passed by the UNSC on July 9, 2021 calls on the increase the cross-line humanitarian operations. Now is the time for action. Russia, as the guarantor of the Dara'a reconciliation agreement, must work with local actors to ensure cross-line humanitarian aid is delivered to the thousands of at-risk Syrians in Daraa and the surrounding region.

### Context:

The longstanding tragic crisis has severely deteriorated in Daraa, in the south of Syria. Since June 24, the Syrian military and allied militias have imposed a siege on Daraa al-Balad, affecting over 50,000 persons, including women, children, and Palestinian refugees.<sup>3</sup> This siege began following the Syrian

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<sup>1</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/some-50000-evacuate-daraa-amid-regime-bombardment>

<sup>2</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-dara-flash-update-hostilities-dara-governorate-2>

<sup>3</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-crisis-unfolding-daraa-syria>

presidential election in May 2021, after the residents of Daraa refused to participate in the election and accept its result.<sup>4</sup> Local actors in Daraa stated that the latest World Food Programme (WFP) convoy was supposed to arrive on June 25, but was denied access by the Syrian authorities. Later on, only half of the goods and which were insufficient to supply local needs, were allowed into Daraa via the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).

On July 24, a deal between the Syrian government and the city of Daraa's negotiating committee was agreed upon that should have resulted in the establishment of three government checkpoints in the city and the surrender of specified light weaponry by opposition forces.<sup>5</sup> In exchange, the Syrian government would withdraw its forces from the city, disarm its allied militias in the area and issue pardons for certain opposition members.<sup>6</sup> However, the deal never materialized with allegations from both sides of not honouring the deal. The Syrian government said Daraa residents did not hand in enough light weapons and that many of the surrendered weapons were damaged. On the other hand, the opposition accused the government of changing their requests to demanding the establishment of 10 checkpoints in the city and the deployment of the Syrian military and Iranian-backed militias in the city.<sup>7</sup>

Following the breakdown of the deal, a large contingent of Syrian Army forces then began to gather outside Daraa al-Balad, bringing in reinforcements and military vehicles from neighbouring cities, once again closing routes in and out of the city. On August 9, the last bakery in Daraa was forced to close due to the shortage of flour and fuel.<sup>8</sup> Since August 10, Syrian authorities have been attempting to push into Daraa al-Balad, despite the absence of necessary conditions that may call for this military action, as reported number of armed individuals in Daraa al-Balad do not exceed 200 individuals and are armed on an individual and non-organized level, carrying light and medium weapons, in accordance to the 2018 reconciliation agreement with the Syrian government that was facilitated by Russia.<sup>9</sup>

With the rapid deterioration in the security situation and increased atrocities committed against civilians over the past few days, Daraa al-Balad and the surrounding region are facing the most intense offensive in southern Syria since the establishment of the de-escalation agreement in 2018. Dozens

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<sup>4</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/syrian-regime-storms-daraa-al-balad-displacing-residents>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/bread-runs-out-daraa-al-balad-regime-tightens-siege>

<sup>9</sup> More information can be found at:

(a) SACD, "Reconciliation agreement" in Daraa: Insecurity, continued repression and collective punishment <https://tinyurl.com/hrudvkkj>

(b) Carnegie, How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg <https://tinyurl.com/3vj8cuhh>

(c) Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Reconciliation Initiatives in Daraa: A Testimony for History <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/reconciliation-initiatives-daraa>

of civilians have been killed in the offensive,<sup>10</sup> showing no signs of de-escalating.<sup>11</sup> Immediate action by the international community is required to save the lives of women and children.

Finally, it is important to note that the Syrian government continually calls for Syrian refugees to return to the country so a new future can be realized. However, the Syrian government and its allies still insist on moving forward with a military solution, ignoring the framework for the Syrian crisis solution in accordance with Resolution 2254 and in accordance with the reconciliation agreements that Russian guarantees. Therefore, in view of the systematic mechanisms of continued killing, arrest and torture, indiscriminate bombing, and forced displacement in Daraa, there is no credibility to any return messages.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27363&LangID=E>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/syrian-crisis/stopping-attacks-on-daraa-is-humanitarian-duty-syrian-opposition>