

April 6, 2011

To: All Member States of the UN Human Rights Council

Call for United Nations Human Rights Council Special Session on the Human Rights Situation in the Syrian Arab Republic

Excellency,

As Human Rights non-governmental organizations from all regions of the world, we express our serious concerns over the deteriorating human rights situation in Syria since the country's security forces started using live ammunition against protesters on 18 March 2011. We call on the UN Human Rights Council to pursue its mandate by responding to the grave on-going crisis by convening a special session as soon as possible.

Since 18 March 2011, Syrian security forces have used live ammunition to silence growing protests, almost entirely peaceful, calling for greater freedoms in the country. Scores of protesters – at least 100 – have been killed, apparently by live ammunition fired by the security forces, in Dera'a, al-Sanamayn, Latakia, Duma and elsewhere. Under international law and applicable standards, lethal force may only be used when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. The violent crackdown over Syria should be stopped immediately.

Security forces have also detained a number of journalists, activists, lawyers, and protestors who have reported on the protests or called for further protests, in an attempt to prevent anyone from documenting or criticizing the on-going crackdown. Syrian human rights activists compiled a list of 326 individuals who have been detained since the beginning of March for participating or calling for demonstrations. While security forces released at least 131 of them, most remain held in incommunicado detention and without charge.

The current repression in Syria is taking place while authorities have a long record of human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest and detention of human rights defenders and political activists, restrictions on free expression and arbitrary detention of journalists and bloggers, travel bans on activists, enforced disappearances and practices amounting to torture.

On 26 March, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights "urged Syria to listen to the voices of its people who are rising up and demanding change in the country". She also qualified as "particularly disturbing" the fact that the violent repression of protests by security forces continued the day after the Government had announced reforms. She finally called for the release of all detained protesters and human rights defenders, and for an independent, impartial and transparent investigation into those recent killings.

On 31 March, according to the Syrian state news agency SANA, President Bashar al-Assad directed the establishment of a committee to "launch immediate investigations into all the incidents which claimed the lives of a number of civilians and military personnel in Dara'a and Latakia". However, given the repeated failures over the years of the Syrian authorities to conduct independent and thorough investigations into numerous abuses, the limited scope of the investigation and the fact that the Syrian authorities have been blaming "armed gangs" for the violence, it is highly unlikely that any such investigation established by the Syrian authorities will be sufficiently independent, thorough and robust. Given these concerns and the past human rights record of the Government of Syria, we believe the international community should pressure them to immediately end the bloodshed and to hold into account those responsible for any unlawful shooting against demonstrators.

The grave human rights abuses committed by the Syrian government in the context of the on-going crackdown against protesters include violations of the right to life, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression and freedom of movement. **We therefore urge the Members of the UN Human Rights Council to convene as soon as possible a Special Session on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic.**

The recent crackdown against protesters in Syria is taking place in the broader context of protest movements in the Middle East and North Africa since December 2010. Some Governments have responded to these calls for reforms through increased violence. It is the responsibility of the Human Rights Council to remind all States that fierce repression of generally peaceful protests is contrary to international human rights obligations of these governments, and to take appropriate measures to help the victims and ensure accountability. In this context, the signatories of this letter reiterate the calls upon the Human Rights Council to also address the massive repressions in Bahrain, circulated on 18 March 2011, and in Yemen, circulated on 28 March 2011. We believe that these situations still warrant the full attention of the Human Rights Council.

Trustfully,

Signatories:

- African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies
- African Democracy Forum
- Amnesty International
- Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
- Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC)
- Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
- CIVICUS World Alliance of Citizen Participation
- Conectas Direitos Humanos
- Corporacion Humanas (Chile)
- Damascus Centre for Human Rights Democracy Coalition Project
- East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project
- Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (Egypt)Haithem Malah Foundation
- Human Rights Agenda Nigeria
- Human Rights Watch
- International Commission of Jurists
- International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
- International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
- Partnership for Justice, Nigeria
- West African Human Rights Defenders Network (WAHRDN)