

**Arab Human Rights Fund
Human Rights in the Syrian Conflict
Beirut Lebanon
February 23, 2013,
Sessions' Highlights**

Introduction

The Arab Human Rights Fund concluded on February 23, 2013 a multiple stakeholders' consultative meeting to discuss human rights issues pertaining to the Syrian conflict.

The meeting, held in Beirut and supported by the Open Society Foundations, was attended by 85 delegates representing UN agencies, international governmental agencies, international non-governmental organizations, regional and national organizations, representatives of the neighboring countries hosting Syrian refugees as well as Syrian rights' activists (around 25 persons) invited via a network of connections built through the Fund's work in Syria since 2009.

AHRF aimed, through the meeting, at offering an opportunity for an interaction between the largest possible number of stakeholders and Syrian actors involved in human rights interventions in Syria or carrying out protection activities for the Syrian and Palestinian refugees (from Syria) in the neighboring countries.

Prior to the meeting, the Fund commissioned two discussion papers: one on the situation of human rights inside Syria and one about the rights and protection issues pertaining to Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. Hence, two parallel sessions were held during the day; each focusing on one of the above mentioned topics. The below summaries are neither exhaustive nor do they reflect all what was mentioned during the discussions. These are highlights that we decided to disseminate to all those who attended the meeting as well as other relevant parties, hoping that they will inform their decisions on the Syrian crisis.

Session 1: Human rights inside Syria

The discussions during this session focused on several issues with a focus on the capacity of the local actors to monitor and document human rights violations.

The lack of proper networking among individuals and organizations working on documenting human rights violations in Syria was discussed. Enabling Human Rights Organizations through organizational capacity building was recommended with priority given to the use of media and new technologies as well as training field activists on relevant technical skills. It was highlighted that there is a lot of information on the ground but a lack of capacity to capture it and use it. It was therefore recommended to build on the capacity of the volunteers as well as the organizations and institutions, specifically on how to turn the information they have into real publishable findings. Given the diversity of actors involved in human rights activism (various types of organizations, individuals...), the idea of instigating a code of conduct that governs the work of activists was discussed. It was also suggested to consolidate and centralize the information about all human rights violations and to differentiate between armed and civilian opposition when it comes to identifying the authors of human rights violations committed by opposition groups.

Several persons expressed their concerns about makeshift courts that hold no real jurisdiction in areas that were now outside the government's control. The issue of transitional justice was discussed and it was recommended that more studies should be undertaken about how to deal with this issue based on models that have happened in other areas of conflict.

The issue of systematic torture in detention centers by both sides of the conflict was discussed, as well as the plight of political prisoners and the special challenges that legal counsels were facing in representing them and in getting information about where detainees were kept. It was mentioned that some hospitals had been turned into detention centers as well. The issue of recurrent human rights violations in prisons and detention centers in the absence of proper monitoring was mentioned and it was recommended to advocate for the access of the International Committee of the Red Cross to prisons and detention centers; in addition to an enhanced exchange of information about detainees. Moreover, the need to train physicians and medical staff to identify, document and report cases of torture was put forward as a priority. It was also recommended to provide financial support to the lawyers and legal staff who work

on the political prisoners issues as well as to provide financial support to the prisoners' families.

Children's and women's issues were highlighted in the discussions, and they included the targeting of civilian populations, the recruiting of child soldiers and woman specific issues such as rape, forced marriage, forced prostitution, loss of breadwinners due to the conflict, as well as reproductive and general health issues. It was recommended to lobby and put pressure on all parties to create conflict free zones, where aid and relief can be administered to civilian populations. It was suggested to pioneer a lobbying activity for the issues of women and children's education and health, and to also focus on projects that empower women. It was also recommended to support displaced women and children who have no viable sources of income or who have lost the breadwinner of the family.

Educational issues were also discussed and it was noted that many of the displaced populations, or those who were in areas that were either under siege or who are no longer under the government's jurisdiction, either had no access to education or were taught curricula that were based on religious "shari'a" and not in line with Syrian norms of education. Recommendations included creating a mechanism to document and solve the issue of the loss of legal personal documents (identity card, school certificates...) especially for children. It was also deemed a priority to mainstream one curriculum in all educational facilities and train education staff accordingly.

The rise of the rhetoric of hate and intolerance and extreme sectarian speech was also discussed in addition to the psychological impact of violence as endangering the makeup of Syrian society. It was recommended to counter the spreading of hate rhetoric in all its forms as well as promoting the concept of citizenship above all other considerations. It was also recommended to include Human Rights education in curricula.

Special issues having to do with the Palestinian population in Syria were discussed and specifically the fact that Palestinian refugees in Syria who have also been displaced internally and to neighboring countries have encountered a unique set of problems that needs to be dealt with. It was recommended that active advocacy be put in place to ensure the equal treatment of injured and displaced Palestinians residing in Syria.

Session 2: Syrian refugees in neighboring countries

The discussions in this session addressed the specific challenges faced in each of the countries hosting Syrian refugees: Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey.

Jordan's main challenges lie in the limitation of movement in the refugee camp, and lack of proper resources which has created tension and outbreaks of violence.

Lebanon's main challenges lie in increased tensions between the host country and the refugees due to scarce resources, as well as many of the refugees not registering with the proper channels for fear of prosecution, as well as border areas being attacked by Syrian forces.

Iraq's main challenges lie in the lack of work opportunities, the absence of legal papers leading to exploitation of the refugees, as well as lack of education for children.

Turkey's main challenges lie in the fact that refugees have restricted movement inside the camps and there are no employment opportunities and limited services for the refugees. The Turkish government has also requested that the refugees who leave the camps to leave the whole city as well in order to lessen the opportunity for tension.

Some common challenges were also raised such as the lack of proper documentation or accurate statistics, inequities for Palestinian refugees, lack of educational opportunities, lack of proper services, incidents of violence and rape, incidents of child abuse, psychological and trauma issues that are not dealt with, restricted freedom of movement, and insufficient basic resources.

The participants highlighted the need to address the legal status issues for the refugees in host countries in the sense of recognizing their status as refugees instead of calling them "guests" or "displaced" as is the case now, and to provide more registration centers to accommodate the number of refugees coming in to each host country.

Obviously, the discussions highlighted the need to create employment opportunities and empower the national organizations working with refugees as well as to increase interaction between local, national and international organizations.

Raising the awareness of refugees on their rights on subjects of human rights, gender based violence, access to health, and access to legal information was also deemed a priority. A formal complaint mechanism should also be put in place, in addition to other initiatives, to allow a better accountability of the various actors.

On the education level, it was suggested to have in place opportunities where refugees' children can study the Syrian curriculum as well as allow refugees who are university students to be able to continue their education.

Given that 70% of the refugees are women and children, it was suggested to enhance protection mechanisms for these vulnerable groups including legal advice and assistance. The discussions also tackled the extremely vulnerable situation of Palestinian refugees from Syria concluding that intensive advocacy should be done to ensure a fair treatment to these groups.

As monitoring the situation of the refugees prove to be challenging, the idea of establishing networks within the refugees communities to monitor and report human rights violations was also raised.

The participants raised the issue of deportation from Jordan and Lebanon and requested a close monitoring of this issue as it is depicted often by the authorities as being a “voluntary” return in addition to advocacy initiatives to curb down the deportation of Syrian refugees.

Last but not least, the need to have an enhanced coordination among actors was highlighted. In this framework, several ideas were mentioned such as establishing a platform to exchange information and improve the communication among the actors in the four neighboring countries.