Twenty-fifth Special Session of the Human Rights Council on the deteriorating situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic, and the recent situation in Aleppo

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delivering this statement on behalf of the Coordination Committee of Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council.

The ongoing conflict in Syria has led to years of continuous desperation and unimaginable suffering for millions of people living in Syria, disproportionally impacting on women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities in besieged and hard to reach areas. As news reports of the numerous heinous human rights violations and abuses taking place in the country fill our living rooms on a daily basis and echo in our minds, it is hard, if not impossible, to grasp how in this day and age the Syrian conflict has been allowed to rage on unabated for over five years without a solution in sight. Reports indicate that there are currently 6.5 million Syrians internally displaced and that an additional 4.8 million have fled the country.

On several occasions over the past years, mandate holders have publicly condemned and expressed their utter dismay at large scale violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and abuses, by different parties to the conflict, including massacres and other unlawful killings, arbitrary arrests and detentions, hostage taking and enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, sexual violence, trafficking and sale for sexual and labor exploitation, destruction of cultural heritage as well as incitement to these crimes and to sectarian hatred. Direct attacks on objects that enjoy special protection under international humanitarian law have been a feature of the Syrian conflict and led to high numbers of civilian casualties and deprivation of basic necessities, such as access to food, shelter, health care, water and sanitation, and education for those who have survived.

Mr. President,

The situation in Aleppo is particularly dire since the recent launch of a new offensive on opposition-held areas of the city by the Government and its allies. The use of indiscriminate weapons, such as high-explosive blast bombs and incendiary weapons in airstrikes, on civilian populated areas by Government and allied forces, and, albeit to a lesser extent, non-State armed groups and their allies, has resulted in the loss of hundreds of innocent lives, including more than 100 children, and destroyed the remaining infrastructure necessary to save and sustain human life. Moreover, effects of weapons used will linger as toxic remnants of war also inflict pain and suffering on civilian survivors who face chronic exposure to pollutants in air, water or food.

Recent reports of the attack on a United Nations/Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy of 19 September that destroyed aid that was supposed to be delivered to 78,000 civilians in opposition-held areas of Aleppo, of several major hospitals and trauma centers around the city earlier this months and of three centers of the White Helmets, a Syrian volunteer rescue group nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, exemplify the gravity of the destruction and violations and abuses committed by all parties to the conflict.
As humanitarian convoys are attacked, hospitals bombed and medical and rescue personnel along with mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and children are killed or injured, and families ripped apart, any hope for restoration of humanity and peace is lost by those living through these horrors.

**Mr. President,**

The Coordination Committee condemns in the strongest terms the siege tactics used by the Syrian government and other parties to the conflict and expresses deep concern about the restriction on movement of civilians out of conflict areas, especially the most vulnerable (children, the sick and wounded, older persons, persons with disabilities). It reminds the Government of the fundamental right of all civilians to seek safety and to flee conflict zones without restriction.

Moreover, the Coordination Committee is gravely concerned about the lack of access by humanitarian actors and stresses that all parties to the conflict must allow for rapid and unimpeded provision of humanitarian assistance, including provision of food and access to health care.

International humanitarian law seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict by preventing unnecessary suffering of the civilian population and this is exactly what the parties to the conflict must do. The Coordination Committee therefore calls on the Syrian government, its allies and all other parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian law and abide by their human rights obligations. The raging war and the suffering it is causing must end and a cease-fire agreement should be effected immediately to that end.

The Coordination Committee urges all parties to the conflict to grant full access to the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic to and cooperate with the Commission of Inquiry, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as well as UN agencies delivering aid. While the short visit conducted by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons to the country in 2015 is welcomed, the Committee encourages the authorities to invite more Special Procedures, in particular those that have already sent requests, to visit the country.

**Mr. President,**

The international community must do all it can to resolve immediately the international crisis the Syrian conflict has turned into and combat impunity for a solution to the conflict to be sustainable.

The acts just described to you as stated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights previously, if proven intentional, may amount to war crimes, and if knowingly
committed as part of widespread or systematic attack against the civilian population to crimes against humanity, and those responsible must be held to account.

The Coordination Committee supports the call of the High Commissioner on United Nations Security Council to, without further delay, adopt criteria to restrain members from using their veto when there are serious concerns that war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide may have been committed. The situation in Syria must be referred to the International Criminal Court, and only by restraining the use of veto will the Security Council be able to do so.

In witnessing the horrors of this conflict we are all responsible to act in any way we can. Not doing so makes us accomplices by omission. This includes accurately identifying and protecting those who are or may become victims of trafficking and other forms of exploitation from among the flow of people fleeing the conflict, as well as facilitating the reception of the many Syrians seeking refuge from persecution, bombardments and starvation by all Governments in a cooperative spirit, no matter how difficult this may be.

Moreover, the Coordination Committee calls on all Governments to increase their humanitarian funding in order to resolve the current staggering shortfall so that assistance may be provided to the estimated 13.5 million families living in Syria, including 6 million children remaining in the country that cannot survive without.

Mr. President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

We have all witnessed the mass-scale human rights violations and abuses being committed throughout Syria for far too long. As the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has stated “The Syrian people cannot afford to wait anymore”. Therefore it is now time to act and put an end to their suffering.

Thank you for your attention.