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Written statement* submitted by the Associazione Comunita Papa Giovanni XXIII, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[13 February 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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The nonviolent voice of Syrian refugees in northern Lebanon

The war in the Syrian Arab Republic is entering its 6th year. Since March 2011, the war has destroyed a country with civilians paying the biggest price. It is a war that represents a human tragedy of enormous proportions.

The international community, in spite of the efforts made, did not manage to solve the conflict through diplomacy and peaceful negotiations and to oblige the different actors to respect the international humanitarian and human rights laws.

While a political solution has still to be found, gross violations of human rights, abuses, killings and armed clashes continue to occur in a context of widespread insecurity and precariousness.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has repeatedly denounced in its reports the brutality of this war, the grave violations of the international humanitarian and human rights law, the responsibilities of the different actors and has appealed for the cessation of hostilities and for a political solution of the conflict.

The figures are uncertain because of difficulties in collecting and monitoring data, but on the five years of the war there are more than 200,000 people dead and more than a million people wounded¹. More than half of the entire Syrian population has been forced to leave their homes, even more than once: Syria is the site of the largest global displacement crisis². The Syrians have become the largest population of refugees under the mandate of the High Commissioner for Refugees of the United Nations (UNHCR). The internally displaced persons in Syria are more than 7.6 million³ and according to UNHCR, there are 3.9 registered refugees⁴, of which about 95% is accepted in five countries: 1.7 million in Turkey, 628,000 in Jordan, 248,000 in Iraq, 133,000 in Egypt, and finally to 1.2 million in Lebanon, a country of about 4.5 million inhabitants, to which many other refugees present without registration⁵ and half a million Palestinian refugees are added. Host countries in the region experience difficulties in dealing with the situation, while humanitarian aid from the international community become increasingly scarce. The funds planned by UNHCR in 2015 to respond to the regional crisis, due to the reception of Syrian refugees, have been covered of only 10%⁶.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, Lebanon has maintained open its borders and welcomed the fleeing Syrians, but five years later and without the prospect of an end of the war, Lebanon is now reaching a critical point and a high level of social and political tension. Because of the overcrowding, the economic, health and social system and basic services are collapsing, while unemployment increases with poverty for both the refugees accepted and the Lebanese.

¹ UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), <http://www.unocha.org/syria>, 15 April 2015.

² UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), <http://www.unocha.org/syria>, 15 April 2015

³ UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), Updated overview: 2015 Syria response plan and 2015-2016 regional refugee and resilience plan.

⁴ UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), Syria Regional Refugee Response, Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal, 15 April 2015

⁵ UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016*

⁶ UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), *Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2015-2016, Regional Strategic Overview, 2015 UNHCR Income as of 7 April 2015*

On the other hand, the direct involvement of Lebanon in the Syrian war, with battles that often occur along the Lebanese borders, generates a permanent insecurity and risk conditions. The civilians who attempted to escape from the war in Syria are likely to be involved in another war.

In addition, Lebanon is not a signatory of the Geneva Convention on Refugees. The Lebanese government has rejected the creation of official refugee camps and the recognition of refugee status to Syrians. The absence of refugee camps run by agencies and international organizations aggravates the precariousness of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Another critical element is the legal status of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, who face many restrictions to get a regular visa. They are often forced to live in conditions of irregularity and are exposed to the risk of being arrested by the Lebanese security forces.

The Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) is present from September 2013 in Lebanon through the volunteers of Operazione Colomba⁷, its Nonviolent Peace Corps. In April 2014 the volunteers settled in the refugee camp in the village of Tel Abbas, located 5 km far from the Syrian border. The refugees themselves explicitly requested the presence of Operazione Colomba in the camp after they had suffered threats, physical assaults, evictions and their tents were burnt.

Operazione Colomba had been an effective deterrent for violence. The volunteers live in a tent made of wood and plastic, sharing the hard daily life with Syrians, and building bridges of dialogue and solidarity with the local scared and sometimes hostile Lebanese population. The simple presence of the volunteers not only reduces the level of violence but becomes also an indirect source of security for the Lebanese who, scared by the presence of ISIS in their country, see a potential terrorist in every Syrian. The volunteers spend most of their days visiting and listening to people, and helping the refugees in obtaining aids and services (especially medical care).

In 2016, Operazione Colomba cooperated to implement a humanitarian channel that brought to Italy 400 of the most vulnerable Syrians.

As the Nonviolent Peace Corps of APG23, Operazione Colomba is committed to bring the voice of the Syrian nonviolent civil society, which has been asking for peace, justice and the right to a safe return to Syria.

These Syrians refuse the war, embrace nonviolence for resolution of conflicts and would like to be heard at the highest international institutions and at the Geneva peace talks.

These Syrian refugees rightly say: “Our country is not a battle field for the powers who want to control it and it does not belong to those who believe in violence and are ready to kill in order to dictate their supremacy; our country is a land of encounter and peace and it belongs to all the people who love it”.

Therefore, our APG23 permanent delegation in Geneva, wishes to give voice to these Syrian refugees and our volunteers of Operazione Colomba by presenting the following appeal for peace⁸:

“We the Syrians, gathered in organisations and associations, simple citizens and families, refugees in northern Lebanon, escaped from violence and death. Six years after the beginning of the war that has destroyed our country, we still live,

⁷ Operazione Colomba is the Nonviolent Peace Corps of the Association Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII. The acquired experience in the field allowed Operazione Colomba to open stable projects in different conflict areas all over the world (Africa, Latin America, Caucasus, Middle and Far East). All the projects are based on three main pillars: nonviolence, sharing life with the victims, people involvement. In the last 25 years, more than 1.500 volunteers and conscientious objectors have been operating in: protecting civilians, promoting dialogue and reconciliation between the parts, supporting local nonviolent realities, doing advocacy activities. Moreover, Operazione Colomba has established important collaborations with international and national institutions and organizations (UN, EU, NGOs, Human Rights centres, associations, local groups, religious institutions, etc.). Currently it is present in Albania, Colombia, Lebanon (in the Syrian refugee camps), Palestine and Israel.

⁸ Promoted by: Operazione Colomba, Non-violent Peace Corp of the “Comunita' Papa Giovanni XXIII” Association. Contacts: opcol.ls@apg23.org cell +39 3206171187

millions of us, without a home or the opportunity to work, without medical assistance or education for our children; we do not have a future. In our country there are more than 200 military groups that expelled us from our homes. We still get killed, are forced to fight, to live in fear, to escape and are continuously humiliated and abused.

At the peace talks, only those who have economical and political interests in Syria participate and we do not consider them bearers of our requests.

We are the real victims of this war and the only right we have is to silently choose how to die. But in the thunderous sound of weapons, we claim the right to let the world hear our voice together with those who already support us and those who will join this appeal.

We ask:

-For the creation of humanitarian areas in Syria, where people who choose neutrality instead of conflict, are provided with international protection and where armed stakeholders cannot enter, as is the case for example in the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartadó in Colombia⁹. We want humanitarian passageways to be opened in order to bring civilians in danger safely towards the end of the war and all the refugees to go back, living a secure life in their country;

-For the end of the war: an immediate end to the bombings, along with ending the supply of weapons, and the elimination of all weapons already in the country. Ending the siege of the dozens of Syrian cities¹⁰ where civilians have no access to medical and humanitarian support and that those people to be assisted immediately and kept safe;

-For prompt assistance to the victims and support for those who are helping them: Freeing political prisoners and searching for the kidnapped and missing people; that the wounded and disabled because of the war are rescued and assisted, now and in the future;

- That every sort of terrorism and extremism be fought, but not through massacring innocent and disarmed civilians as now; this situation foments terrorism itself;

-That a political solution to the war is found and the civilians who refused the war be represented at the Geneva peace talks, not only those who destroyed Syria;

- The creation of a national unity government which represents all Syrians in their diversity and which respects their dignity and their rights. We want truth and justice about who is responsible for this disaster and that the people who are trying to rebuild our country and those who are risking their lives to assist the victims are free to operate. Today, we want to call upon the best international forces, in order to promote coexistence and reconciliation, to stop the war and create a brand new future for our country.

⁹ (http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/medidas/apartado_se_05.pdf)

¹⁰ (www.siegewatch.org)