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Written statement* submitted by 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.

[6 February 2022]

Syrian refugees and their appeal for peace

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.

APG23 welcomes the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. As reiterated by the COI on several occasions, the conflict in Syria has not ended and the country can in no way be considered safe. Systematic violations have been reported by the Commission since the beginning of the conflict and are still going on.

Operazione Colomba, the Nonviolent Peace Corps of APG23, whose volunteers share life with Syrian refugees in a refugees camp in Lebanon, has also documented that Syrian refugees who go back to Syria from Lebanon get arrested, tortured and then forced to the military service.

The Commission also declared that the last elections in the Syrian Arab Republic have not produced any change, neither have they changed the attitude towards asylum seekers, still considered to be traitors, as openly declared by the highest-ranking military personnel in many public occasions.

Operazione Colomba reported many cases of Syrian people forced to vote for Assad in Lebanon, by violence or by the promise of a safe return in the country. As analysed in the reports produced by Operazione Colomba, the pressure on the Syrians to undertake a voluntary return process has consistently grown since 2019.

The majority of the returning people are women and children, mostly because they do not face forced conscription, but the risks are still very concrete.

An example can be the story of the 20 years old refugee, Fatime, and her three children aged 5 and 3 years old and 3 months old, originally from al-Qusayr, Syria. In January 2021, her husband Mohammed received a letter calling him to one of the GSO (1) headquarters. Once there, he was arrested for terrorism and sentenced by a military court to 10 years in Roumieh prison, allegedly without proof. After remaining alone, the woman decided to return illegally to Syria and to join her family in Idlib, stopping on the way to visit the husband's family in Homs. On the way from Homs to Idlib, the woman and her three children encountered a military check-point in Palmira, at which the four were arrested and disappeared for a week without anybody knowing their whereabouts. Only after a week they were discovered to be held captive in a prison in Damascus, and were later released, most probably because of her little children. Once released, both Fatime and her in-laws in Homs had their documents confiscated. To date, they have been awaiting trial whilst being under house arrest. As for many Syrians returning from Lebanon, Fatime is accused of terrorism and has been interrogated on the people she lived with while being displaced.

Another testimony comes from Marwa. In the month of July 2021, she managed to cross illegally the Syrian border to visit some relatives and has returned back to Lebanon. Marwa noted how another woman traveling with her was arrested because her husband is wanted by the Syrian police.

In the same period, during the month of July, Amina decided to go back to Syria together with her husband and their three young children, due to the economic pressure they were undergoing when they were in Lebanon. They were headed towards Homs, but as soon as they crossed the border, the army arrested Amina's husband at the first checkpoint. "I begged them to let him go, but they just got angrier. They ordered me to shut up or they would take the kids and me as well" she told Operazione Colomba. Eventually Amina went back to Lebanon, and to this day she has not received any news of her husband nor does she know where he is.

The volunteers have also collected the dramatic testimony of Abed, originally from al-Qusayr, who has decided to go back to the Syrian Arab Republic in order to be attended by a friend-doctor. He was arrested at a check-point in Jiser Iddaf, without ever being wanted or having any criminal record. He suspects the arrest was sparked by the fact that he was carrying Lebanese liras with him. He was transferred to the Qusayr police station where he was undressed and beaten. Then he was transferred to Homs, in a military security building where the beatings did not stopped. Abed was later blindfolded and handcuffed. The

beatings went on and on and he was hit with metal and plastic tubes. When the militaries finished to beat him, he was hung by his arms on the ceiling. He was covered in blood and could not move. In the room in which he was detained there were around 27 other people in a small space that was 4x10 meters. Abed was detained because he was accused of being a fighter that fought against the Syrian Armed Forces. Even if at the beginning he strongly denied, because of the violence after a while he began to write whatever they wanted him to. After some days, Abed, was transferred to the prison of the military police of Homs, where he stayed for four more days.

He was put in a cell with about other 165 prisoners, which were squished given the absence of space. As a matter of fact, they had to sleep one over another. After those days he was moved along with other 60 people to Damascus, where he understood that he was being transferred to the infamous “Palestine branch”. Out of the 60 people that travelled with him only six were left to the new prison. In this place, the tortures went on and on and the initial report on Abed that had three pages became a thick folder. There he saw a sick prisoner being taken away without ever returning back, another one being denied the treatment he was asking for. He went through many cells: all of them were dark, dirty, overcrowded and humid. He was hearing people starting to be tortured at midnight every day, he heard their screams, among them there were women too. One day a soldier came after him, and gave him an unspecified injection after which he had a terrible rash all over his body which was covered in pustules. When his turn to go into the interrogatory room came, he never received a question; it was always beaten and abused. One of the detainees that was there with him lost his mind because of the aggressions, and the following day he started talking by himself. The soldiers made him disappear too. After two months of these interrogatories the militaries took his digital prints and made him sign some paperwork he could not read, and then he was transferred again. Abed was extremely lucky because usually nobody leaves the “Palestine branch” alive. After being released definitely, later on he found out that his family had spent an enormous amount of money in order to provide proof of the fact that Abed was never a fighter. After “Palestine branch”, he went through different prisons, until a military judge declared him absolved from the accusation of terrorism, of being a fighter and shooting against the Syrian Armed Forces. When Abed asked for a certificate to demonstrate he was actually arrested and declared innocent they put a stamp on the palm of his hand. After this inhuman experience Abed managed to return to Lebanon in March 2021, alongside with his family.

APG23 asks for a concrete effort at international level, an effort for the political resolution of the Syrian conflict, given the poor effectiveness of humanitarian action that is in any case inadequate to meet the needs of Syrians. The lack of real actions is a failure, the consequences of which are firstly faced by Syrians, but also by European countries both in terms of civil society and of domestic policies.

APG23 strongly believes in the importance of giving a true representation to the Syrian refugees, as an essential condition for reaching a solution to the conflict and to the refugees’ crisis.

For this reason, APG23 wishes to give voice to these Syrian refugees by presenting an appeal for peace. The proposal consists in the creation of humanitarian areas in Syria where people who have chosen neutrality in the conflict can live safely. The area should be protected by international forces, so that no armed force can enter the area. This would be a similar scenario to what is happening in the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó in Colombia. This solution would allow displaced Syrians to go back to their country and live safely, and it would recognize human rights in this country. Furthermore, APG23 strongly believes that a peaceful solution is only possible if the voices of the real victims of the conflict are taken into account. Syrian refugees and Syrians who want to be neutral in the conflict claim the right to let the world hear their voice and claim the respect of their human rights.

(1) General Security Office