UN official says over 100,000 detained and missing in Syria

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Reports suggest that more than 100,000 people in Syria have been detained, abducted or gone missing during the 8-year conflict, with the government mainly responsible, the UN political chief said Wednesday.

A coalition vehicle drives toward the front lines in the battle for Baghuz, Syria, the last territory held by the Islamic State, on Feb. 10, 2019. The fall of Baghuz caps a four-year military operation against a so-called caliphate that once controlled the lives of up to 12 million people. But signs of the Islamic State groupâ€™s resurgence are already visible. (Ivor Prickett/The New York Times)

United Nations: Reports suggest that more than 100,000 people in Syria have been detained, abducted or gone missing during the eight-year conflict, with the government mainly responsible, the UN political chief said Wednesday.

Rosemary DiCarlo urged all parties to heed the Security Councilâ€™s call for the release of all those arbitrarily detained, and to provide information to families about their loved ones as required by international law.

She told the Security Council that the UN canâ€™t verify the figure of more than 100,000 because it has been unable to gain access to places of detention and detainees in Syria. She said its information comes from accounts corroborated by the Commission of Inquiry on Syria authorised by the UN Human Rights Council and human rights organisations since the conflict started in 2011.

DiCarlo also reiterated UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterresâ€™ call for the Syria conflict to be referred to the International Criminal Court, saying accountability for serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law â€œis central to achieving and maintaining durable peace in Syriaâ€•.

DiCarlo spoke at an open meeting following the Security Councilâ€™s unanimous approval in June of its first-ever resolution focused on the many thousands of people missing in conflicts around the world. The International Committee of the Red Cross, which was mandated by the 1949 Geneva Conventions to address and oversee the issue of missing persons in conflicts, said it registered over 45,000 missing cases in countries around the world in 2018 alone.

The council meeting, initially requested by the United States, offered a rare opportunity for the UNâ€™s most powerful body to hear directly from families of the detained.

Dr Hala Al Ghawi and Amina Khoulani, who both campaign for freedom and justice for Syrian detainees, criticised the council for its failure to end the war and urged its deeply divided members to adopt a new resolution to pressure all warring parties to reveal the names and whereabouts of all those detained â€“ and release all those arbitrarily detained.

Al Ghawi said she left Syria at the end of 2011 after her husband was detained and held in a cell â€œso tiny that he didnâ€™t have space to sit downâ€•. He was released but she said her brother, father-in-law and some cousins remain missing.

Al Ghawi said many medical colleagues were also detained by the Syrian government for helping wounded protesters, and â€œsome of them were killed under torture while in detentionâ€•.

â€œAs families, we have suffered enough and Iâ€™m here today to urge you to act,â€• she said.

She said the council must pass a resolution to put pressure on the Syrian government and all warring sides to immediately release a list of detainees, â€œto immediately stop torture and mistreatmentâ€•, and in the case of death provide â€œa report on the real causes of death and burial locationâ€• to the families.

Khoulani, whose three brothers were taken by the Syrian government eight years ago, said they all died in detention and she herself was imprisoned for six months, â€œarrested by the Air Force Intelligence Branch for my peaceful activismâ€•. Her husband was detained in a military prison for 2 1/2 years, and â€œwe were both lucky to survive, but many others werenâ€™t as luckyâ€•.

Khoulani said that while the majority of the missing were detained by the Syrian government, armed opposition and extremist groups like the Islamic State group â€œare also guilty of detention and disappearanceâ€•.

â€œThe United Nations Security Council has utterly failed Syrian detainees and their families,â€• she said. â€œItâ€™s your responsibility to protect Syrians from a system that kills, tortures, and illegally detains its own citizens, in systematic violation of international law.â€•

- AP