



A Bloody End to the Year for Schools and Hospitals in Northwest Syria

Brief Report

December - 2024

Introduction

The period from 26 November to 2 December 2024 witnessed a significant military escalation in northwest Syria between the former Syrian government forces and their Russian ally on one side, and Syrian opposition forces on the other, which began an advance on 27 November 2024 in areas previously controlled by government forces.

The former Syrian government forces and their allies did not adhere to the rules of war, launching attacks on civilians. We documented a series of grave violations against children committed by the former Syrian government forces and the Russian Air Force, which primarily targeted civilian areas and vital facilities, causing significant human and material losses. This aligns with reports from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs¹ (OCHA), the Syrian Network for Human Rights² (SNHR), and the Syrian Civil Defence³ (White Helmets) for the same period.

This joint report, prepared by Child Guardians⁴ (formerly known as Hurras Network) and the Syrian American Medical Society⁵ (SAMS), provides an overview of the attacks on schools and medical points in northwest Syria during the aforementioned timeframe.

Bloody Attacks on Schools

The attacks involved the use of a wide range of weaponry, including guided artillery shells, warplanes, rocket launchers, and cluster munitions. These targeted residential neighbourhoods populated by civilians, despite the absence of any military presence.

Documentation revealed that the military campaign particularly focused on targeting healthcare and educational facilities, in addition to civilian residential areas devoid of any military activity.

Field monitoring team from Child Guardians documented the deaths of 15 children (10 boys and 5 girls) and injuries to at least 43 others (31 boys and 12 girls), one of whom succumbed to injuries sustained on 2 December 2024. SAMS, during its health response, documented the deaths of six children (two boys and four girls) and injuries to 26 others (20 boys and six girls) during the same period.

¹ReliefWeb. (2024) North-West Syria: Escalation of Hostilities Flash Update No. 2 - 2 December 2024 [EN/AR]. [online] Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-west-syria-escalation-hostilities-flash-update-no-2-2-december-2024-enar> [Accessed 23 December 2024].

²Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). (2024) 149 civilians killed, including 35 children and 16 women, in northern Syria since November 27, 2024, up until December 3, 2024. [online] Available at: <https://snhr.org/blog/2024/12/04/149-civilians-killed-including-35-children-and-16-women-in-northern-syria-since-november-27-2024-up-until-december-3-2024/> [Accessed 23 December 2024].

³The White Helmets. (2024) Two massacres in Idlib and Russian airstrikes target two medical facilities. [online] Available at: <https://whitehelmets.org/ar/report/tqaryr-mydanymjzrtan-fy-adllbwgharat-jwyt-rwsyt-tsthdf-mjmaan-tbyaan> [Accessed 25 December 2024].

⁴Child Guardians, formerly known as Hurras Network, is a leading charity dedicated to protecting children in Syria, with the aim of ensuring they are safe, well, and educated.

⁵SAMS is a global medical relief organisation that is working on the frontlines of crisis relief in Syria and beyond to save lives and alleviate suffering.

The attacks on schools were particularly intense during this campaign, leading to the suspension of classes due to the deliberate targeting of these institutions. A total of 14 schools were targeted within a week, resulting in significant human casualties and material damage. The bombing led to the death of 3 male children and the injury of 17 others, 16 of whom were children (15 boys and 1 girl), in addition to one member of the teaching staff.

The material damage ranged from severe damage in some schools, rendering them unusable, to partial damage in others.



The impact of the bombing on a previously targeted school.

A witness recounts: "While my friends and I were sitting during our break, we suddenly heard a massive explosion. Windows and doors collapsed on us. Dust filled the room, and I heard my friend crying, 'Oh God, help us.' I tried to stand up but couldn't because a door had fallen on me, injuring my hand, and blood started pouring out. For a moment, I thought I was going to die. Then I gathered my strength when I heard my teacher shouting, 'Don't be scared, I'll get you out.' When the dust settled a little, I was horrified. Most of my friends were injured, and three of them had died. May God have mercy on them." –Mohammed, 14, a student at one of the targeted schools.

The attacks did not stop at schools but extended to hospitals and medical points, disrupting essential health services in the area and delaying treatment for the injured. This was also confirmed by SAMS.

Targeting of Health Facilities

Several residential areas and healthcare facilities in the Aleppo and Idlib governorates were targeted by airstrikes. SAMS documented the targeting of two of the hospitals it supports. On 1st of December, SAMS reported that one of their ambulance staff, working as a driver, was injured in an airstrike on Aleppo University Hospital, resulting in fractures to his jaw

On 2nd of December 2024, SAMS also documented the targeting of the Specialised Maternity Hospital & Avicenna Children Hospital in Idlib, which are parts of a medical complex that includes various clinics and hospitals. These attacks forced the facilities to suspend services until necessary repairs were completed, and incubators and some patients were transferred to safer floors and hospitals. It also hindered patients' access to medical facilities and the ability of women to remain in the hospital after giving birth, particularly due to fears of repeated attacks on hospitals.

During the same period, the field monitoring team at Child Guardians documented attacks on eight medical points: the National Hospital in Idlib, the Health Directorate, Idlib University Hospital, the Forensic Medicine Department, the Dialysis Centre, the Heart Surgery Centre, Avicenna Children Hospital, and the Specialised Maternity hospital. The attacks caused damage to the targeted facilities and resulted in civilian casualties, including a child undergoing surgery and an adult dependent on a ventilator.



A section of the damage at Aleppo University Hospital



A section of the damage at Ibn Sina Children's Hospital in Idlib

The intense shelling of the towns of Abzimo, Atarib, Darat Izza, and areas in Sarmine, Idlib, led to difficulty for staff to access medical facilities under emergency conditions, and to the complete shutdown of three health facilities and partial closure of six others. This deprived around 2,300 beneficiaries daily from accessing essential healthcare services.

A medical worker recounts: "I was making my rounds in the intensive care unit when we received a warning from hospital management about a possible attack. Five excruciating minutes passed as we waited for death, and then the terrifying sound came—the windows shattered, and the ceiling collapsed on us and the patients. Smoke and dust filled the air, and the stench of death spread. The electricity went out. I began moving from one patient to another, trying to save them. My colleagues and I evacuated them, carrying them over the rubble since the elevators had stopped. Sometimes we tripped over them; other times, we lifted them. Honestly, it was an indescribable state of panic and horror." –Sari, a doctor at a targeted hospital.



SAMS



حراس الطفولة
Child Guardians

Child Guardians' Documentation Team Leader adds: "We believe the numbers in this report are likely lower than the actual figures due to the extreme security risks and challenges our field teams face in documenting all violations."

Humanitarian workers face severe difficulties and risks in delivering protection and relief assistance to children in northwest Syria amid escalating military campaigns and ongoing violations. Indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas restricts movement and access to the most vulnerable populations, exacerbating suffering and worsening the deteriorating humanitarian crisis.

Children are the most affected by conflict, and meeting their basic needs is not only an urgent humanitarian response but also an investment in a safer and more peaceful future for the entire region.

Recommendations:

- **Accountability for war crimes:** The international community must ensure accountability for war crimes committed by Syrian government forces and their allies against children and civilians, including indiscriminate attacks on schools and hospitals, as gross violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law.
- **Prosecution of perpetrators:** Effective measures must be taken to identify and prosecute perpetrators, ensuring they do not escape justice, including those who flee across borders, under the principle of universal jurisdiction.
- **Enhanced civilian protection, focusing on children:** The protection of civilians, particularly children, must remain a top priority, ensuring their basic rights to life, education, and health in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international humanitarian law.
- **Support for international investigation mechanisms:** International and local investigation mechanisms, including the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, should be supported and provided with the necessary resources to operate effectively.
- **Protection of civilian infrastructure:** Schools and hospitals must be safeguarded as protected areas under international humanitarian law, with guarantees to prevent any form of targeting of these vital facilities.
- **Strengthened international accountability:** States and international organisations should provide legal and logistical support to bolster accountability efforts for crimes committed in Syria, including referring cases to competent international courts.



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