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HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

SPECIAL PROCEDURES OF THE
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation.

REFERENCE: UA Health (2002-7) Water (2008-1)
SYR 6/2014

14 May 2014

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacity as Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 24/6 and 24/18.

In this connection, we would like to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to information we have received regarding the **alleged deliberate cuts to water supply in Aleppo resulting in a lack of adequate access to safe water and sanitation resulting in increased illness in the context of the ongoing armed conflict.**

According to the information received:

As of approximately 5 May 2014, the city of Aleppo, has been almost entirely deprived of water leaving some three million people, including homes, hospital and medical centres without access to safe water and sanitation. Reports also suggest that the restoration of water supplies in the days that followed have been intermittent and sporadic in some parts of the city. As a result, hundreds of people have been deprived of water, including safe drinking water, with many reportedly joining long queues around the city in front of the few wells that exist in mosques, churches, public gardens and other communal spaces to fill containers with water. Many others have resorted to taking water from the river which runs through the city. Reports suggest that there has been an increase in cases of gastroenteritis and acute diarrhoea in recent weeks as a result of a lack of access to safe drinking water.

The cuts reportedly came about as a result of deliberate interference with the water supply by an armed opposition group, known as Jabhat Al-Nusra.

According to reports, the cuts were implemented in response to the insufficient provision of fuel supplies by the authorities to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent water pumping station in Aleppo by the authorities.

While we have received reports that as of today 14 May, water supplies are gradually being re-established in Aleppo, we are extremely concerned that large parts of the population have been, and continue to be deprived of access to safe water, which is not only a fundamental human right but also essential to support life and health. The deliberate targeting of the civilian population to deprive it of essential supplies such as water is a matter of very serious concern, and a breach of both international humanitarian law and human rights law.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of these allegations, the right to safe water is one of the most essential human rights, as set forth in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and UN General Assembly resolution 64/292 of 2010. Article 11 of the ICESCR consecrates the right to an adequate standard of living and article 12 of the ICESCR provides for the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its General Comments 14 and 15 establishes water as an underlying determinant of health and as a human right, derived from the right to an adequate standard of living. The allegations would further suggest that article 14 of the Additional Protocol II of 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 has been breached by failing to protect objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population.

The full texts of the human rights instruments and standards recalled above are available on www.ohchr.org /can be provided upon request.

In view of the urgency of the matter, we would appreciate a response on the initial steps taken by your Excellency's Government to safeguard the basic rights of civilians to access safe water and sanitation in compliance with international instruments.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Are the facts summarized above accurate?
2. What actions, if any, are being taken to ensure that water distribution is re-established for the entire population of Aleppo and that there will be a continuous and sufficient supply of clean and safe drinking water for its citizens?
3. What steps are being taken to prevent the recurrence of a similar situation in Aleppo and other cities??

Your Excellency's Government's response will be made available in a report to be presented to the Human Rights Council for its consideration.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person responsible of the alleged violations.

We are intending to publicly express our concerns in the near future as we are of the view that the information upon which the press release is going to be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency's Government's to clarify the issue in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Anand Grover

Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health

Catarina de Albuquerque

Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation