
ALEPPO: RUSSIA UNDER FIRE AT HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

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Country's air campaign in Syria's Aleppo prompts NGOs to call for UN member states to drop it from the council.

Russia's seat on the UN Human Rights Council is under threat due to its support of the Syrian government's air campaign in Aleppo.

More than 80 human rights and aid organisations, including Human Rights Watch, CARE International and Refugees International, have urged UN member states to drop Russia from the Geneva-based Human Rights Council over its military campaign in Syria.

In a joint statement published on Monday, the organisations urged UN member states to "question seriously whether Russia's role in Syria - which includes supporting and undertaking military actions which have routinely targeted civilians and civilian objects - renders it fit to serve on the UN's premier inter-governmental human rights institution".

"Russia's gross disregard for civilian lives in Syria and its responsibility for illegal attacks makes it unfit to serve on the council," Louis Charbonneau of Human Rights Watch, the US-based rights watchdog, told Al Jazeera.

"It is complaisant in Syrian government war crimes.

"Russia continues to sell arms to the Syrian government despite its horrific abuses. including the use of chemical weapons."

Elections to fill 14 seats at the 47-nation Human Rights Council will take place at the UN General Assembly on Friday.

Created in 2006, the council monitors violations and in particular set up a ground-breaking commission of inquiry on North Korea that led to calls for war-crimes prosecutions of the country's government.

The council last week asked the commission of inquiry for Syria to carry out a special investigation of rights abuses in Aleppo.

Rights violations

Russia, Hungary and Croatia will be running for two seats representing the Eastern European group at the council, which is entrusted with addressing rights violations worldwide.

"Russia is not the only candidate country facing criticism," Al Jazeera's Diplomatic Editor James Bays, reporting from Geneva, said.

"Campaigners point to the poor human rights records of China and Egypt and civilian casualties caused by Saudi Arabia as the leading member of the coalition in Yemen."

Russia has been supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's war against opposition fighters and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group since September 2015.

Last week Zeid Raad al Hussein, the UN high commissioner for human rights, said the siege and bombing of eastern Aleppo in Syria constituted "crimes of historic proportions" that have caused heavy civilian casualties amounting to "war crimes".

But Vitaly Churkin, the Russian ambassador to the UN, accused the nongovernmental organisations of acting "ideological" and said Russia contributed "very well" to the council.

"Often, of course they become too ideological, they talk about things in a politicised way," Churkin said.

"And I suppose people who express their views come from this political attitude towards the work in the Human Rights Council. I think we contributed very well, we were first elected in 2006 and we have things to say on an expert level."

On Tuesday, Major-General Igor Konashenkov, Russia's defence ministry spokesperson, said Russian and Syrian planes had not even approached, let alone bombed, the devastated city since last Tuesday, when Russia suspended air strikes in advance of a pause in hostilities.

Later in the day, Sergei Rudskoi, a defence ministry official, said that the moratorium on air strikes was being extended but did not specify its duration.

However, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Britain-based monitor, said air strikes had resumed since the lull in fighting ended on Saturday, focusing on major frontlines, including in the city's southwest.

For its part, Amnesty International on Tuesday accused the US-led coalition fighting ISIL in Syria of not taking enough precautions to avoid civilian casualties and underestimating the effect of its operations on civilians.

The UK-based rights watchdog said as many as 300 civilians had been killed in 11 attacks conducted by the US-led coalition since September 2014.

The US bid to keep its seat in the Human Rights Council is not yet contested.