



### VIRTUAL REALITY IN SYRIA



#### Useful background info for talking points.

1. **What are barrel bombs?** There are different types, but the usual barrel bomb is usually an oil drum filled with TNT and shrapnel that has been pushed out of a helicopter from high altitude. These weapons cannot be targeted, and they explode on contact.
  - Residents told us they were the most afraid of these weapons – usually they can see them falling through the air, and there is a specific hissing noise. You are talking about a barrel that is literally tumbling through the air, so residents have about 2 minutes to run.
  - Residents told us repeatedly that they didn't know where to run.
  - An aid worker said he had accepted multiple cases in Turkey involving the loss of hearing from the explosions, especially from young children.
2. **What is the civilian impressions of barrel bombs?**
  - **Intense fear** – top concern for Aleppo residents (2 minutes of waiting to die as they watch the barrel tumble through the air)
  - **“Double-tap”** strikes – second barrel bomb dropped on the same location, up to 30 minutes after the first one. The second strike often kills rescue workers, neighbours, or family members who come to help.
  - **Horrific injuries** – doctor said he had been dealing with injuries he hadn't seen in any medical book. The scenes described and can be seen in videos and photos, with bodies in pieces, intestines out of bodies, etc.

### 3. What is a crime against humanity?

- A crime against humanity is one of the most serious violations of international law.
- Legal definition: "Certain acts, if directed against a civilian population as part of a widespread or systematic attack, and as part of a state policy, amount to crimes against humanity."
- **Responsibility of international community to act:** any nation that becomes aware of the occurrence of crimes against humanity has a duty to report them to the international community, which must then act to end those crimes. States should seek to investigate those crimes and prosecute those responsible in their national courts; this is known as universal jurisdiction.

### 4. Why is the government doing this / why would they do this?

- We have written to the government to share the findings and have not received a response. Supporters of the government should pressure the Syrian authorities to **explain themselves**. It is difficult to speculate about their motivations, but the impact of their operations in Aleppo is clear. These attacks:
  - kill and maim thousands of civilians
  - destroy civilian infrastructure
  - cause widespread displacement
  - make it difficult for the opposition to organize and govern

### 5. How do you know these people are civilians?

- For this report, we interviewed **78** current or former residents from Turkey.
  - For each attack that we documented, we spoke to as many witnesses as possible and corroborated their accounts with other witness statements and secondary evidence available to us like videos or photos, reporting from local groups and hospital records and lists of deceased.
  - All witnesses were asked about the presence of military targets near strike sites (e.g. we asked them where the nearest checkpoints were and how far away the front line was).
  - Witness responses were also crosschecked to confirm credibility.

### 6. You haven't been there, so how do you know?

- It is important to note that Amnesty International researchers have been denied access to government-held areas of Syria, along with the Commission of Inquiry and other international monitors – we would be documenting these abuses from inside if we were allowed access. Our access to rebel-held areas has been hindered since 2013 by major security challenges and increasing restrictions by Turkish authorities on crossing into these areas.
- However, we are confident in our assessment [refer to methodology]: 78 current/former including medics, doctors, ordinary civilians; multiple witnesses to each event; crosschecked with secondary sources.

### 7. President al-Assad has denied the existence of barrel bombs. How do you know these are being used?

- Interviewed **39 individuals** who had first-hand experience of barrel bomb attacks. Every one of these people had either survived an air attack themselves or lost family members or neighbours in an air attack. [Refer to methodology.]

### 8. Why does anyone stay?

- The people who are staying in opposition-controlled areas are for the most part extremely poor, and they don't have any options to leave. One resident told us that it's now the poor and the old who stay, waiting to die.

### 9. Why is Amnesty International focusing on Aleppo?

- Aleppo is a microcosm of what's going on throughout Syria, and the types of abuses being committed in Aleppo are representative of abuses committed throughout the country.

### 10. You say these weapons cannot be guided, so how can you say they are targeting civilians?

- For the incidents we documented, military targets were not in the vicinity – these were civilian areas, public markets, mosques. The government is dropping bombs where no military targets are present. This, in combination with the fact that some civilian areas have been hit multiple times (al-Sakhour hospital, 8 times in 2014, the last time just last week) leads us to the conclusion that this is a campaign to deliberately target and terrorize civilians.
- Also important to note that Syrian government has released no information suggesting which military targets they are targeting – whether in their public statements or in response to questions from AI.

### 11. Are chemical weapons being used?

- Two points:
  - We collected eyewitness testimony for attacks on 16 March 2015 that indicated chlorine was used;
  - We agree with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) that this matter is of serious concern and we must look into these allegations as a matter of urgency.
- These attacks just add to the urgency of the recommendations we make in this report [refer to recommendations].

### 12. What does the Al-Raqqa report say?

- Government forces killed civilians in a series of aerial attacks on the city of al-Raqqa in November 2014. In a report released in March 2015, Amnesty International concluded, based on the evidence, that these attacks amounted to war crimes.

### 13. What is Amnesty International policy on the use of armed force?

- Amnesty International generally does not take a position on the use of armed force or on military interventions in armed conflict, and we are not calling for that in Syria. What we do call for is: [refer to recommendations].

### 14. How will the project be developed?

- We're hoping that this will become a useful research and content gathering tool for other campaigns and thematic issues. This may also be a tool used by munitions forensic experts gathering evidence in conflict zones.
- We'd like to start making 360 films.
- We're considering testing sending out flat pack cardboard viewers with a direct mail fundraising appeal so that donors can watch a powerful immersive film at home to bring them closer to the cause
- We might send out free flat pack viewers with the member magazine so that all supporters can have immersive VR experiences using their own phones and by visiting a URL or downloading an app to view 360 films which we would make for the movement. The New York Times did this with their subscribers by sending out over 1 million cardboard viewers, they launched with a very powerful film called The Displaced watchable on YouTube.