

Report and Appeal to the International community to support a process of dialogue and reconciliation in Syria between its people and Syrian government and reject outside intervention and war.

*BY Mairead Maguire, Nobel peace laureate. Spokesperson for Mussalaha International
Peace delegation to Lebanon/Syria 1-11th May, 2013,*

After a 10 days visit to Lebanon and Syria, leading a 16 person delegation from 8 countries, invited by Mussalaha Reconciliation Movement, I have returned hopeful that peace is possible in Syria, if all outside interference is stopped and the Syrians are allowed to solve their own problems upholding their right to self-determination.

An appeal to end all violence and for Syrians to be left alone from outside interference was made by all those we met during our visit to Syria. We have tried to forward it to the International community in our Concluding Declaration(1).

During our visit we went to refugee camps, affected communities, met religious leaders, combatants, government representatives, opposition delegations and many others, perpetrators and victims, in Lebanon and Syria.

1. Visits to refugee camps: In Lebanon we visited several refugee camps, hosted by Lebanese or Palestinian communities. One Woman said: "before this conflict started we were happy and had a good life (there is free education, free healthcare, subsidies for fuel, in Syria ,) and now we live in poverty". Her daughter and son-in-law (a pharmacist and engineer) standing on a cement floor in a Palestinian refugee camp, with not even a mattress, told us that this violence had erupted to everyone surprise's and spread so quickly they were all still in shock, but when well armed, foreign fighters came to Homs, they took over their homes, raped their women, and killed young males who refused to join their ranks, so the people fled in terror. They said that these foreign fighters were from many countries like Libyans, Saudis, Tunisians, Chechens, Afghanis, Pakistanis, Emiratis, Lebanese, Jordanians, Turkish, Europeans, Australian, and these gangs are financed and trained by foreign governments. They attach suicide vests around peoples' bodies and threaten to explode them if they don't do what they are told. One refugee woman asked me 'when can we go home'? (To my great delighted a few days later in Damascus I met a woman working on a government programme which is helping refugees to return to Syria and over 200 have returned to date).

Religious and government leaders have called upon people not to flee Syria and it is to be hoped many will heed this call, as after seeing so many Syrian refugees living in tents and being exploited in so many ways, including sexually, I believe the best solution is the stability of Syria so its people feel safe enough to stay in Syria. If refugees continue to flee Syria then surrounding countries could be destabilized, causing the domino effect and destabilizing the entire Middle East.

Many people have fled into camps in surrounding countries like Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon, all of whom are trying to manage the huge influx of Syrian refugees. Although the host countries are doing their best to cope they are overwhelmed by refugee numbers. (UNHCR's official figure of refugees is one million). Through our meetings we have been informed that Turkey invites Syrian refugees into

the country and forbid them to go back home. It is documented that Syrian refugees in Turkey and Jordan are mistreated. Some young Syrian refugee girls are sold for forced marriage in Jordan. From OHCHR reports we know that more than 4 million Syrians are displaced inside their own country, living in great need.

A representative from Red Cross, told us that there is freedom to do their work throughout Syria for all NGO and the Syrian Red crescent in co-ordination with the Ministry of Social affairs and under such dire circumstances, they are doing their best, providing services to as many people as possible. However there is a great shortage of funds for them to cope with this humanitarian tragedy of refugees and internally displaced population. The economic sanctions, as in Iraq, are causing great hardship to many people and all those whom we met called for them to be lifted. Our delegation called for the lifting of these illegal US-led sanctions that target the Syrian Population for purely political reasons in order to achieve regime change.

2- Hospitals: We visited the hospitals and saw many people injured by shootings, bombings, and armed attacks. A moderate Sunni Imam told me how he was abducted by jihadists, who tortured him, cut off his ear, tried to cut his throat, slicing his legs, and left him for dead. He said when he goes back to his mosque they will slaughter him. He told us "these men are foreign fighters, jihadists from foreign countries, well armed, well trained, with money, they are in our country to destroy it. They are not true Muslims but are religious extremist/fundamentalists terrorizing, abducting, killing our people". The government spokesman also confirmed that they have in detention captured foreign fighters from 29 countries, including Chechens, Iraqis, and many others. The Ministry of Health showed us a documentary on the terrible killings by Jihadists and the terror caused by these foreigners with the killing of medics and destruction of medical infrastructure of the Syrian State which has made it difficult to answer the needs of the population.

3- Meeting with Opposition: Our delegation participated in an open forum with many representatives of internal opposition's parties. One political opponent who was in prison 24 years under the Assad regime, and has been out for 11 years, wants political change with more than 20 other internal opposition components, but without outside interference and the use of violence. We met with 'armed' opposition people in a local community who said they had accepted the government's offer of amnesty and were working for a peaceful way forward. One man told me he had accepted money from Jihadists to fight but had been shocked by their cruelty and the way they treated fellow Syrian Muslims considering them as not real Muslims. He said foreign Jihadists wanted to take over Syria, not save it.

The 10th May a part of our delegation headed to Homs, invited by the opposition community of Al Waar city where displaced families from Baba Amro, Khalidiyeh and other rebel's strongholds seek refuge. The Delegation saw all the conditions of this city and is studying a Pilot Project for Reconciliation and peaceful reintegration between this community and the surrounded non rebel communities (Shia and Alaouites) with whom 15 days ago an agreement of non belligerence has been signed through the auspices of Mussalaha.

4 - Meeting with Officials: Our Delegation met, and spoke, at the Parliament, and also with the Governor, Prime Minister and 7 other Ministries. We were given details of the new Constitution and political reforms being put in place, and plans for elections in 2014. Government Ministers admitted that they had made mistakes in being slow to respond to legitimate demands for change from civil

community but these were now being implemented. They told us when the conflict started it was peaceful for change but quickly turned into bloodshed when armed men killed many soldiers. In the first days soldiers were unarmed but when people started asking for protection the government and military responded to defend the people and in self defence.

When we enquired from the Prime Minister regarding the allegation that the Syrian Government had used Sarin gas, he told us that as soon as news came from Aleppo that allegedly gas had been used, his government invited immediately the UN to come into investigate, but heard nothing from them. Most recently however, a UN investigator, High Commissioner Carla Del Ponte, has confirmed that it was rebels, not Syrian government, who used Sarin gas. During meeting with Justice Minister, we requested that a list of 72 non-violent political dissidents currently detained be released. The justice Minister said after checking those listed were indeed non-violent political dissidents, he would, in principal, agree to the release of these nonviolent detainees. He also informed us they they do not implement the death penalty and it is hoped that when things settle in Syria they will move to have the death penalty abolished. We also asked the Justice Minister (an international lawyer) about Syrian Government's Human rights abuses, namely the artillery shelling into no-go areas being held by jihadists and armed opposition. The Minister accepted those facts but alleged that the Government had a duty to clear these areas. We suggested there was a better way to deal with the problem than artillery shelling but he insisted that the government had responsibility to clear the areas of rebel forces and this was the way in which they were doing it

The Ministers and Governor said that President Assad was their President and has their support. There were many people we spoke to who expressed such sentiments. However, some young people said they support the opposition but in order to protect the Unity of Syria from outside destruction, they will support the government and President Assad, until the election next year and then they will vote for the opposition. They said the Doha Coalition in Qatar does not represent them and that no one outside Syria has a right to remove President Assad but the Syrian people through the elections next year. The journalists in Syria are in great danger from the religious extremist/fundamentals, and during my visit to a television station a young journalist told me how his mother was killed by jihadists and he showed me his arm where he had been shot and almost killed.

5- Meeting with religious leaders: We attended in the Omayyad Mosque in Damascus a prayer gathering led by the Grand Mufti of the Syrian Arab Republic, Dr. Ahmad Badr Al-Din Hassoun and the Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregory III Laham with the delegate of Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X Yazigi, and clerics of all traditions. The Assembly prayed for the peace and unity of Syria and the non-interference of outsiders in their country. They stressed the conflict in Syria is not a religious conflict, as Muslims and Christians have always lived together in Syria, and they are, (in spite of living with suffering and violence much of which is not of their own making), unified in their wish to be a light of peace and reconciliation to the world. The Patriarch said that from the Mosque and Christian churches goes out a great movement of peace and reconciliation and asked both those inside and outside Syria, to reject all violence and support the people of Syria in this work of dialogue, reconciliation and peacemaking.

The Muslim and Christian Spiritual Leaders are very conscious if the religious extremist/fundamentalists gain momentum and control Syria, the future of those who are not supportive of fundamentalists like moderate Muslims, Christians, minorities, and other Syrians is in great danger.

Indeed the Middle East could lose its precious pluralistic social fabric with the Christians, like in Iraq, being the first to flee the country. This would be a tragedy for all concerned in this multi-religious, multi-cultural secular Syria, once a light of peaceful conviviality in the Arab world.

AN OVERVIEW:

Following many authorized reports in the mainstream Medias and our own evidences I can stress that the Syrian State and its population are under a proxy war led by foreign countries and directly financed and backed mainly by Qatar who has imposed its views on the Arab League. Turkey, a part of the Lebanese opposition and some of the Jordan authorities offer a safe haven to a diversity of jihadist groups, each with its own agenda, recruited from many countries. Bands of jihadists armed and financed from foreign countries invade Syria through Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon porous frontiers in an effort to destabilize Syria. There are an estimated 50,000 foreign jihadist fighters terrorizing Syria. Those death squads are destroying systematically the Syrian State infrastructures (Electricity, Oil, Gas and water plants, High Tension Pylons, hospitals, schools, public buildings, cultural heritage sites and even religious sanctuaries). Moreover the country is submerged by snipers, bombers, agitators, bandits. They use aggression and Sharia rules and hijack the freedom and dignity of the Syrian population. They torture and kill those who refuse to join them. They have strange religious beliefs which make them feel comfortable even perpetrating the cruelest acts like killing and torture of their opponents. It is well documented that many of those terrorists are permanently under stimulant like Captagon. The general lack of security unleashes the terrible phenomenon of abduction for ransoms or for political pressure. Thousands of innocents are missing, among them the two Bishops, Youhanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi, many priests and Imams.

UN and EU economic sanctions as well as a severe embargo are pushing Syria to the edge of social collapse. Unfortunately the international media network is ignoring those realities and is bent on demonizing, lying, destabilizing the country and fuelling more violence and contradiction.

In summary: the war in Syria is not as depicted a civil war but a proxy war with serious breaches of International laws and the Humanitarian International laws.. The protection of the foreign fighters by some foreign countries among the most powerful gives them a kind of an unaccountability that pushes them with impunity to all kind of cruel deeds against innocent civilians. Even war conventions are not respected incurring in many war crimes and, even, crimes against Humanity.

CONCLUSION:

During our visit to Syria, our delegation was met with great kindness by everyone and I offer to each one who facilitated or hosted our Delegation my most sincere feelings of gratitude. We witnessed that the Syrian people have suffered very deeply and continue to do so. The entire population of 23 million people are under tremendous threat of continued infiltration by foreign terrorists. Many are still stunned by the horrors and suddenness of all this violence and worried their country will be attacked and divided by outside forces, and are all too aware that geopolitical forces are at work to destabilize Syria for political control, oil and resources. One Druze leader said 'if westerns want our Oil – both Lebanon and Syria have oil reserves – let us negotiate for it, but do not destroy our country to take it'. In Syria memories of next door Iraq's destruction by US/UK/NATO forces are fresh in people's minds, including in the minds of the one and a half million Iraqis who fled Iraq's conflict, including many Christians, and were given refuge in Syria by the Syrian Government.

The greatest hope we took was from Mussalaha, a non political movement from all sections of Syrian society, who have working teams throughout Syria and is proceeding through dialogue to building peace and reconciliation. Mussalaha mediates between armed gunmen and security forces, help get release of many people who have been abducted, and bring together all parties to the conflict for dialogue and practical solutions. It was this movement who hosted us, under the leadership of Mother Agnes-Mariam, Superior of Saint James' Monastery, supported by the Patriarch Gregory III Laham, head of the Catholic Hierarchy of Syria.

This great civil community movement building a peace process and National Reconciliation from the ground up, will, if given space, time, and non-interference from outside, help bring Peace to Syria. They recognize that there must be an unconditional, all inclusive political solution, with compromises and they are confident this is happening at many levels of society and is the only way forward for Syrian peace.

I support this National Reconciliation process which, many Syrian believe, is the only way to bring Peace to SYRIA and the entire Middle East. I am myself committed to this peaceful process and hope that the International Community, the Religious and Political Leaders as well as any person of good will will help Syria to bypass violence and prejudice and anchor in a new era of Social peace and prosperity. This cradle of civilizations where Syria occupies the heart is an enormous spiritual heritage for humanity, let us strive to establish a non war zone and proclaim it an OASIS of Peace for the Human Family.

MAIREAD MAGUIRE

Nobel peace laureate. www.peacepeople.com

Peace people, 224 Lisburn Road, Belfast. Bt9.

23.5.2013