

Holocaust survivors call on world to indict those responsible for Syrian atrocities

'After what we went through, we thought the world would learn something'

By Michelle Cheung, [CBC News](#) Posted: Dec 21, 2016 5:00 PM ET Last Updated: Dec 21, 2016 6:43 PM ET



Rebel fighters and civilians wait near damaged buildings to be evacuated from a rebel-held sector of eastern Aleppo on Dec. 18. (Abdalrhman Ismail/Reuters)

Five Holocaust survivors stood together in Toronto Wednesday to call on the international community to indict those responsible for the mass deaths in Syria and immediately end the violence and hostilities there.

"People who commit crimes have to know that, at the end of the day, if they're still alive, they will have to account for their activities," said Howard Chandler.



Howard Chandler said if those responsible for the deaths of civilians are not brought to justice, history will repeat itself. (Michelle Cheung/CBC)

The 88-year-old Holocaust survivor was 10 in 1939 when Germany occupied Poland, the country of his birth. His family was decimated. Only he and his brother were left when the Second World War ended in 1945.

Chandler said he can relate to the suffering of the Syrian people. He's calling on the international community to do more to help.

'Never enough being done'

"There's never enough being done for people who are suffering. When you're suffering, time doesn't go by very quickly."

Vera Schiff said she watches what's happening in Aleppo with tears in her eyes.

The 90-year-old was sent to a concentration camp when she was 15. She spent four years in the camp, and lost every member of her family.



"We cannot be bystanders. We have to be people involved to prevent atrocities," said Vera Schiff, a Holocaust survivor. (Michelle Cheung/CBC)

"You see those pictures come out of there with all this heartbreak with those maimed and crying children. It breaks my heart because I can see the replay of those children, of our children which were lined up to be gassed in the camps and the mothers who could not save them," Schiff said.

She feels it is her duty to speak out to try to prevent further atrocities against innocent civilians.

"That this is still allowed to happen, that people look at horrible pictures, shrug their shoulders and go about their day — it's not permissible."



Holocaust survivors stand with the head of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies to call on the international community to indict those who've committed war crimes in Syria. Left to right: Gerda Frieberg, Avi Benlolo, Vera Schiff, Faigie Libman, Howard Chandler, Max Eisen. (Michelle Cheung/CBC)

Tens of thousands of besieged residents of Aleppo and the surrounding area are again able to leave on buses. Last week, the evacuation stalled after rebel forces said pro-government militias fired on a convoy carrying evacuees and robbed them.

Syrian government forces and their supporters took control of the rebel-held areas of Aleppo this month, razing entire neighbourhoods.

About half a million people have been killed since the start of Syria's civil war five years ago. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 4.8 million people have fled the country, and about 74,000 refugee children are living without their fathers or both parents.

History repeats itself

"What kind of future do these children have? Turned away from their homes, from their parents, sometimes they don't have parents," said 91-year-old Gerda Frieberg. "I know what it's like to be all alone."



Gerda Frieberg holds a photo of her aunt and cousin who were killed in a concentration camp. It is one of the few mementos Frieberg has of the 127 members of her family killed during the Holocaust. (James Murray/CBC)

Frieberg lost 127 family members during the Holocaust. She now speaks to students all over the world with the message that they must speak out to protect democracy and life.

"After what we went through, we thought the world would learn something, but I see they didn't. That's the worst that could happen."

Such atrocities must stop, said Avi Benlolo, president and CEO of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies.

The centre invited the Holocaust survivors to stand with it to condemn the atrocities.

"If we don't speak out, and speak out forcefully, against these atrocities I'm concerned it's going to become normalized," Benlolo said.

"In 20 years from now, we're going to look back at ourselves and say, 'Where were we? Why didn't we speak out?'"