Intensified coalition air strikes supporting an assault by US-backed rebel forces on Syria's Raqqa are causing a "staggering loss of civilian life", United Nations war crimes investigators have said.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a group of Kurdish and Arab militias supported by a US-led coalition, began attacking Raqqa a week ago to take it from Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS).

Paulo Pinheiro, chairman of the UN Commission of Inquiry, told the Human Rights Council on Wednesday that the increased attacks have resulted "not only in staggering loss of civilian life, but has also led to 160,000 civilians fleeing their homes".

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