

Hunger strike by Palestinian political prisoners

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22 April 2017

Friday saw fresh clashes across the occupied West Bank between Israeli security forces and Palestinians demonstrating in solidarity with the Freedom and Dignity hunger strike by Palestinian political prisoners. Daily protests began Monday, when tens of thousands staged angry demonstrations to mark Palestinian Prisoners' Day and support the mass hunger strike.

Led by Marwan Barghouti, a leader of Fatah, the dominant faction in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the open-ended hunger strike is one of the largest in recent years. It involves some 1,500 prisoners in at least six jails from various Palestinian parties and factions.

It could precipitate a major political crisis for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who faces a potential corruption charge, a coalition beset with factional infighting and signs of rising social discontent among Israeli workers.

The hunger strikers are seeking to highlight the appalling conditions of their detention in Israeli jails, which reflect the broader daily suppression of the Palestinian people. They are demanding an end to solitary confinement and the stringent restrictions on family visits that include a ban on bringing in books, clothing, food and other items, and taking photographs with relatives. They want Israeli authorities to resume bi-monthly family visits, install public telephones in every prison, provide air conditioners and restore kitchens.

Palestinian "security" prisoners are not even allowed to make phone calls to their families. Their families need Israeli permits to visit them, which are regularly refused on spurious "security" pretexts.

Many prisoners suffer from medical neglect. They have to pay for their own treatment and even then are not provided with adequate healthcare. Sick patients

have even been denied water.

A crucial demand is for an end to administrative detention—prolonged imprisonment without charge, often indefinitely renewed—illegal under international law. Detention orders also violate Israeli law, which upholds the right to be informed of the nature and cause of an accusation and a speedy and public trial by an impartial jury in the state where the alleged crime was committed.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Israeli forces have detained more than 750,000 Palestinians since the start of the occupation after the 1967 June war. Almost every single family has had someone arrested and detained by the Israeli security forces.

There are currently 6,300 Palestinian political prisoners, around 500 of them in administrative detention on the orders of military courts, many for years on end, according to the Palestinian prisoners' rights group, Addameer. More than 300 have been in jail since before the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993.

Among the prisoners are 13 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), including a woman, Sameera al-Halayqah, and Fatah leader Barghouti, who is serving five life sentences for offences arising out of the Palestinian uprising that started in September 2000.

Since October 2015, when a wave of political unrest erupted across the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel following attempts by right-wing Israeli Jews to hold prayers in the al-Aqsa mosque compound in the Old City, Israeli security forces have detained 10,000 Palestinians, most of whom were from occupied East Jerusalem. About one third of the current Palestinian detainees are children and teenagers, of whom 300 are

minors.

Writing in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* last Sunday, Barghouti said, “Palestinian prisoners and detainees have suffered from torture, inhumane and degrading treatment and medical negligence... about 200 Palestinian prisoners have died since 1967 because of such actions.”

Barghouti accused Israel of conducting “mass arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment of Palestinian prisoners,” adding that a hunger strike was “the most peaceful form of resistance available.”

Last week, Amnesty International called Israel’s treatment of Palestinian prisoners “unlawful and cruel.” Its latest report on Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories for 2016-17 said, “Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees remained rife and was committed with impunity.”

Regional director Magdalena Mughrabi said, “Israel’s ruthless policy of holding Palestinian prisoners arrested in the occupied Palestinian territories in prisons inside Israel is a flagrant violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention.”

Israel has responded with characteristic brutality. Security Minister Gilad Erdan has refused to negotiate over the strike, calling the prisoners “terrorists and murderers”, and suspended family visits.

The Israel Prison Service (IPS) said Barghouti would be “prosecuted in a discipline court” as punishment for his *New York Times* op-ed. The IPS has transferred Barghouti and several others to another prison, placing them in solitary confinement, confiscating their personal belongings and clothes, and banning them from watching TV, because, it said, calling for a hunger strike was against prison rules.

The IPS has set up a military field hospital in the Ktziot prison especially for hunger strikers and banned the future transfer of hunger strikers with deteriorated health conditions to any civilian hospital.

This follows the refusal of Israeli doctors to implement a law, passed in the wake of a prisoners’ hunger strike in 2015, permitting the force-feeding of prisoners if their life is in danger, which is in breach of Israel’s Patient Rights Act. The Israel Medical Association has called the law “equivalent to torture and every physician has the right to refuse to force-feed a hunger striker against his or her will.”

Rami Hamdallah, the prime minister of the

Palestinian Authority (PA), issued a cynical statement of support for the hunger strikers. The PA has played no small part in Israel’s suppression of the Palestinians, arresting around 400 Palestinians at Israel’s request during 2016 alone. It routinely passes on information to Tel Aviv used for the detention, interrogation and torture of Palestinians.

Conditions for the Palestinians under Israeli occupation are dire. Official figures, a pale reflection of reality, show that unemployment was 18 percent in the West Bank and 42 percent in Gaza, while youth unemployment in Gaza was a massive 58 percent. Such are the poverty levels in Gaza that 80 percent of its residents receive some form of aid.

In the West Bank, the Israeli authorities severely restrict freedom of movement, particularly around the Israeli settlements and the so-called Security Wall. The Palestinians are subject to collective punishment for any retaliation against the almost daily attacks that settlers carry out with impunity. At the same time, the Palestinians face the threat of losing further land should Israel annex Area C, 60 percent of the West Bank and currently under Israeli military control, as ultra-right-wing forces are demanding.

In Gaza, the Palestinians have electricity for only six hours a day, thanks to Israel’s 10 year-long blockade and Gaza’s struggle with the PA over who is to pay the tax on diesel fuel from Israel to the power station upon which the electricity supply depends. With the PA desperately short of donor funds that have all but dried up, it has refused to continue paying the tax, cut pay for PA employees in Gaza by 30 percent and threatened to stop all monetary transfers to Gaza unless Hamas, the political faction that controls the enclave, submits to the PA’s authority.



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