

Israel forced UNRWA employees to falsely admit agency links to Hamas and staff participation in October 7 incursion

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10 March 2024

The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) says Palestinians released into Gaza from Israeli prisons were forced to falsely admit links between the agency and Hamas and that its staff took part in the October 7 incursion.

According to Reuters and the *Times of Israel*, these claims were contained in a report, dated February 2024, detailing mistreatment and abuse suffered by Gazans. The report states, “Agency staff members have been subject to threats and coercion by the Israeli authorities while in detention, and pressured to make false statements against the Agency, including that the Agency has affiliations with Hamas and that UNRWA staff members took part in the 7 October 2023 atrocities.”

The 11-page UNRWA report, yet to be published, said that the Israeli military detained several UNRWA Palestinian employees in Gaza in Israeli jails. Ill-treatment and abuse included severe physical beatings, waterboarding, and threats of harm to family members. As well as describing efforts to extract false confessions, they and other Palestinian detainees reported beatings, humiliation, threats, dog attacks, sexual violence and deaths of detainees denied medical treatment.

Juliette Touma, UNRWA’s communications director, said the agency planned to pass the report to UN and other human rights agencies concerned with potential human rights abuses, saying, “When the war comes to an end there needs to be a series of inquiries to look into all violations of human rights.” She explained that document was based on interviews the agency had conducted with dozens of Palestinians freed from Israeli detention.

Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA’s Commissioner-General, warned of “a deliberate and concerted campaign” seeking to end the agency’s work, citing comments by Israel’s fascist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about destruction of the agency’s infrastructure in Gaza and its replacement by another UN agency. As of the end of January, Israel’s war on Gaza had killed 152 of UNRWA’s Palestinian employees

and hit its facilities 263 times, resulting in 360 civilian deaths.

On Saturday, Lazzarini told Swiss broadcaster RTS, “The agency is at risk of death, it is risking dismantlement. What is at stake is the fate of the Palestinians today in Gaza in the short term who are going through an absolutely unprecedented humanitarian crisis.”

The use of violence and abuse to obtain false confessions is part of a criminal effort to justify closing down UNRWA, set up by the UN in 1949 with responsibility for education, health and relief services to the 5.7 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

It follows a list of shameless and refuted lies by Israeli officials, including that government had no warnings of an impending Hamas attack, claims about the beheading of 40 babies and mass rape on October 7, the supposed vast underground command centre beneath Al-Shifa Hospital, and the claim that the 112 Palestinians killed in the “flour massacre” died as a result of a stampede to get the food aid rather than live fire from Israel’s military forces.

In December, a classified Israeli foreign ministry report was leaked proposing the elimination of UNRWA from Gaza in three steps: alleging cooperation of UNRWA staff members with Hamas; reducing UNRWA services in Gaza; and then transferring its duties to whatever entity was left governing Gaza after the end of the war, thereby giving Israel complete control.

In January, it put its plan into effect, accusing 12 UNRWA staff of taking part in the October 7 attack. It later claimed that 450 of the agency’s 13,000 workers in Gaza are members of Hamas or other militant groups, without providing a shred of evidence.

Foreign Minister Israel Katz declared that his aims included “promoting a policy ensuring that UNRWA will not be a part of the day after” an Israeli victory in Gaza. The agency is targeted because it keeps the Palestinians together

rather than attempting to resettle them, and enshrines the right of Palestinian refugees to return home in accordance with United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194. The US immediately suspended all funding to UNRWA, followed by 15 other states, including Germany, the UK and France, putting the very survival of the agency at risk.

The Reuters' report of Israel's abusive efforts to coerce Gazans into making false confessions follows earlier articles in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and *Ha'aretz*, based on the same UNRWA document. While the newspapers' articles described the horrific conditions of Palestinian detention in Israeli jails, including that detainees were "beaten, stripped, robbed, blindfolded, sexually abused and denied access to lawyers and doctors, often for more than a month," they said nothing about the attempts to force false confessions about supposed links to Hamas.

This silence is in line with the systematic bias in the mainstream media in their reporting of Israel's genocidal war against Gaza, in order to support its continuation and extension to Iran and its allies in the region.

As the *Times* noted, UNRWA's investigation was based on the testimony from more than 100 of the 1,002 civilians later released without charge held at three military sites in Israel. Those detained included males and females aged from as young as 6 to 82, including some with Alzheimer's disease, intellectual disabilities and cancer. Some Gazans died while in detention, including those denied access to medical treatment. Many had been captured from northern Gaza when they were sheltering in hospitals and schools or were fleeing south, while others had their permits to work in Israel revoked after October 7, leaving them stranded and detained in Israel.

The report describes "a range of ill-treatment that Gazans of all ages, abilities and backgrounds have reported facing in makeshift detention facilities in Israel," which it concluded, "was used to extract information or confessions, to intimidate and humiliate, and to punish." An estimated 3,000 Gazans remain in Israeli detention without access to lawyers, a right denied for up to 180 days to detainees captured in Gaza under legislation passed since the start of the war.

Some male detainees reported that they were beaten on their genitals, while women experienced "inappropriate touching during searches and as a form of harassment while blindfolded" and being forced to strip in front of male soldiers during searches.

The report's findings back up those of several Israeli and Palestinian rights groups, as well as separate investigations by two UN special rapporteurs, alleging similar abuses inside Israeli prisons.

On Thursday, *Ha'aretz* reported that 27 Gaza detainees had died in custody in temporary prison camps at Israeli

military centres since the start of the war. In December, *Ha'aretz* revealed that detainees at Sde Teiman were held while handcuffed and blindfolded throughout the day.

According to data that the HaMoked Center for the Defense of the Individual received from Israel's Prison Service, as of March 1, the Prison Service was holding 793 Gaza residents in its jails under the status of "unlawful combatants" in addition to an unknown number of Gazans held in military detention facilities.

In another article last week, *Ha'aretz* reported that police are holding Palestinians, including those stranded after the war when their work permits were revoked, in makeshift cages made of bars, with no walls, beds or toilets, due to a shortage of prison cells, leaving them exposed to the cold, 24 hours a day. Despite Justice Gad Ehrenberg, at a hearing at the Jerusalem Magistrate's Court, describing the conditions at a Border Police base in Atarot, near Jerusalem, as "unsuitable for humans" and demanding the practice be stopped, nothing has changed.

In another case, a Palestinian who had been held there for four days without being allowed to shower and "without proper food or blankets, despite the extreme cold" as his lawyer explained, was released after a court ruled last month that "conditions there grossly violate the law regulating detentions, thereby violating the basic rights of suspects."

Security prisoners and detainees at Gilboa Prison and Megiddo—where two prisoners died in the weeks following the start of the war—in northern Israel have reported that prison guards had assaulted, humiliated and abused them after October 7, including threatening them with violence if they refused to kiss the Israeli flag. The Prison Service has ignored their complaints, under instructions from Jewish Power leader and minister of national security Itamar Ben-Gvir, who long ago declared war on Palestinian prisoners, including giving orders to shut down the bakeries that supply bread to prisoners, which he described as an "indulgence," and drastically limiting water use.



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