

The Already High Number of Palestinian Prisoners Has Doubled During the Last Six Months

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Gaza and West Bank have been recording one of the highest rate of imprisonments and detentions in the world for several years. However this has increased at perhaps the fastest ever pace in recent times, doubling during the last six months or so of the conflict.

On the other hand, Hamas also took many Israeli civilian hostages (including women) at the time of the October 7 attack, saying that they will be able to use them to secure release of Palestinian prisoners. This cannot be supported or justified. The taking of innocent civilians as hostages is wrong under all circumstances. In the eyes of all justice loving people of world, this will harm the Palestinian cause, not help it.

Today there is a very strong case for the Hamas releasing all these hostages and Israel releasing at least 95% of all Palestinian prisoners, may be keeping a few in prison about whom there is very strong evidence of extreme violence. In addition, of course, it is of the highest urgency to declare an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza and halt all cases of attacks by settlers in West Bank.

Let us consider the extreme injustice faced by Palestinians, including children, over the years in the form of imprisonments and detentions. We first examine the situation existing before October 7 2023 and then see how this has deteriorated since then.

A document of 'United Nations Human Rights—Office of the High Commissioner' released on 10 July 2023 tells us regarding the situation a little before the October 7 attack. This document says—

“Frances Albanese, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the

Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, presenting her report on arbitrary deprivation of liberty, said since 1967, Israel has detained approximately one million Palestinians in the occupied territory, including tens of thousands of children. Presently there were 5000 Palestinians in Israeli prisons including 160 children, and 1100 of them were detained without charges or trial.”

This statement must be read in the context of a total population of about five million Palestinians in the two territories so that this amounts to one out of five Palestinians being detained or arrested at one point or the other. This very high percentage of arrested or detained persons would be higher if data for only men is considered; it may then be closer to 2 out of 5.

Further the statement of United Nations Human Rights says—

“The occupying power framed the Palestinians as a collective incarcerable security threat , ultimately de-civilianizing them, namely eroding their status as protected persons...Israel’s unlawful carceral practices were tantamount to international crimes which warranted an urgent investigation by the International Criminal Court. All the more as these offences appeared to be part of a plan of ‘de-Palestinisation’ of the territory. This threatened the existence of people as a national cohesive group.”

Around the same time as this UN report appeared, in July 2023, another leading organization ‘Save the Children’ also released a report on Palestinian children who had been detained or arrested by the Israeli authorities. This study based on 228 former child detainees revealed that 86% of them had been beaten during detention, even though 42% were already injured at the point of arrest, and some had suffered sexual violence too. The period of detention ranged from 1 to 18 months, and left long-lasting scars and adverse impacts. Many child detainees were handcuffed and kept in small cage like structures.

After October 7 2023 the number of arrested and detained persons increased rapidly, reaching around 9000 to 11000 according to various published estimates, thus almost doubling. The increase has been more in the West Bank region. Most of them are in Israeli jails which have rapidly become overcrowded and hence the condition of prisoners has deteriorated. In addition there are those detained in military camps in Gaza for varying lengths of time. Their number may be in hundreds at any given time but at other times it may be less. It is very difficult to estimate. In both kinds of detentions some deaths have been reported, increasing fears of mistreatment and torture.

Clearly the situation of Palestinian prisoners is very serious and urgency of release and relief for them should be highlighted in the form of a strong worldwide campaign. There should also be a campaign for the release of Israeli hostages.

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Featured image: Bound, blindfolded, and stripped Palestinian men sit on the ground after being detained by Israeli forces in the illegally occupied West Bank. (Photo: Breaking the Silence/X)

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