

Video of Sexual Abuse at Israeli Prison Is Just Latest Evidence Sde Teiman Is a Torture Site

Israeli abuse of Palestinians at the military prison has been reported for months. The U.S. is asking the Israeli military to investigate itself.

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Global Research, August 12, 2024

[The Intercept](#) 9 August 2024

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

*As early as the first month of Israel's war on Gaza, Sde Teiman, a secretive Israeli military prison in the Negev desert, had been raising alarm bells for Israeli human rights attorney **Roni Pelli** and other rights advocates.*

Pelli and her colleagues started to hear reports from whistleblowers about poor conditions for Palestinians imprisoned inside Sde Teiman. They heard of instances of violence committed by soldiers against detained Palestinians, and, in one case, a Palestinian who died there.

Since then, media reports about the prison have mounted, quoting formerly detained Palestinians and Israeli whistleblowers, who spoke in more detail of the harrowing conditions inside the prison. A [CNN investigation](#) in May revealed that Palestinian detainees were restrained and blindfolded, forced to sit and sometimes stand throughout the night beneath flood lights; wounded Palestinians were strapped down onto beds, forced to wear diapers, and fed through straws; soldiers beat detainees motivated by revenge for the October 7 attacks; and prisoners' limbs were amputated due to untreated wounds from restraints, and such operations took place without anesthesia.

Later in May, an Intercept investigation found that [hundreds of Palestinian doctors have disappeared into Israeli detention](#), and included the testimony of one surgeon who was beaten and abused at Sde Teiman. A month later, a separate report from Haaretz revealed the Israel Defense Forces were investigating 48 deaths of Palestinians from Gaza who were in Israeli custody, among them [36 who were detained at Sde Teiman](#). Israeli media began to refer to the prison as "Israel's Guantánamo Bay."

Prompted by the CNN report, Pelli, who represents the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, filed a petition to Israel's Supreme Court, on behalf of five human rights organizations, for a government order to close Sde Teiman.

"It was so extreme," Pelli told The Intercept. "We couldn't ignore it."

While rights groups inside Israel moved aggressively to protect the rights of Palestinians detained in both its military camps, as well as prisons within its official government prison system, the United States showed little urgency around the issue.

The U.S. State Department only commented on Sde Teiman when pressed by reporters after

the release of the CNN report. In May, Jonah Valdez, deputy spokesperson for the department, said

“we’re looking into these and other allegations of abuse against Palestinians in detention.” He added that the U.S. had been “clear and consistent with any country, including Israel, that it must treat all detainees humanely, with dignity, in accordance with international law, and it must respect detainees’ human rights.”

He then claimed the U.S. had asked the Israeli government to investigate the claims itself.

After the Haaretz report of dozens of deaths, there was no new comment. Later that same week in June, the New York Times published an investigation into the conditions at Sde Teiman, which contained testimony from former prisoners that their Israeli jailors had tortured them with anal rape by a metal rod, among other abuses. These explosive findings were buried in the final section of the nearly 4,000-word story, after an introduction that only mentioned “beatings and other abuses,” and a headline that described Sde Teiman as “the base where Israel has detained thousands of Gazans.” Again, the U.S. government had no words.

It wasn’t until a [leaked surveillance video from Sde Teiman was broadcast](#) on Tuesday on Israeli news network Channel 12, showing Israeli soldiers allegedly gang-raping a Palestinian man imprisoned there, and subsequent pressure from reporters, that U.S. officials commented again on Sde Teiman.

The State Department responded by calling on the Israeli military to investigate itself.

Ten Israeli soldiers were arrested and face charges stemming from the alleged gang rape. Another soldier was arrested the following day on suspicion of beating detained Palestinians who were blindfolded and handcuffed. The soldier allegedly filmed himself during the incident.

A new report from Israeli human rights group B’Tselem showed that Sde Teiman was not the only Israeli prison where Palestinians have been tortured, building on [years of reports](#) of Palestinians being abused in Israeli prisons.

Released this week, one day before the Channel 12 video leak broadcast, B’Tselem’s report argued that the majority of imprisoned Palestinians have faced abuse and torture within Israeli custody. The report calls on the International Criminal Court to “investigate and promote criminal proceedings against individuals suspected of planning, directing and committing these crimes.” It argued that “Israeli investigative bodies cannot be expected to” hold its government accountable for potential abuses since “all state systems, including the judiciary, have been mobilized in support of these torture camps.”

When asked at a Wednesday press briefing whether the U.S. would call for an independent investigation, referring to the report, State Department spokesperson Matt Miller declined to address the possibility and said, “I would have to look at what the specific independent investigation people are calling for and pass judgment on the merits.” He maintained the Israeli military needs to investigate itself.

The Israeli military and the State Department did not respond to requests for comment by

the time of publication.

Evidence of abuse at Sde Teiman and other prisons are only the latest revelations of abuses by the Israeli military, which includes allegations of war crimes [leveled against its leaders](#) by the International Criminal Court. Despite the evidence, the U.S. has continued to fund Israel's war on Gaza, sending more than \$15 billion since October 7.

Eitay Mack, another Israeli human rights attorney, who has represented Palestinians incarcerated by the Israeli military in the occupied West Bank, said the U.S. should do more in preventing such human rights abuses such as those seen in Sde Teiman.

He pointed to its ability to issue sanctions, which could target specific individual military units. The 10 Israeli soldiers arrested in the alleged gang rape case at Sde Teiman are a part of the Israeli military's Force 100 unit. The U.S. already has leveled sanctions against Israeli settlers who commit violence against Palestinians in the West Bank. Mack also mentioned the Leahy Law, a 1997 law that prohibits U.S. assistance to "any unit of the security forces of a foreign country if the Secretary of State has credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights."

President Joe Biden's administration has shown a resistance to such conditioning of military aid, even in cases where they [admitted to supplying Israel with weapons](#) to commit possible violations of international law.

"The U.S. should apply its rules of military aid — they should pressure Israel through it," Mack said. "I don't think the governments in the world are acting because of morals," he added, "but the U.S. government should just follow the law, the Leahy Law, even if it's just to do the procedure."

Mack acknowledged that punishing individual units active in Sde Teiman abuses would not address the systemwide abuses in Israeli prisons.

Military prisons, such as Sde Teiman, are holding facilities constructed within Israeli military bases, where detainees are often held for interrogations. They exist separate from Israel Prison Service facilities, which are operated by civilian guards and officials. Long before October 7, prison guards in both have been known to abuse incarcerated Palestinians, and Palestinian prisoners taken from the occupied Palestinian territories are subject to military, rather than civil, courts — a fact that has contributed to findings from organizations [like the International Court of Justice](#) that the Israeli legal system is a form of apartheid.

Mack said he has represented a Palestinian man from the occupied West Bank who experienced this abuse while in an IPS prison: An Israeli guard grabbed him by the neck, picked him up, and threw him on the floor of his cell, breaking a bone around his eye.

Even so, IPS facilities historically tended to have better living conditions compared to their military counterparts, such as more adequate beds, food and ability to move, compared to their military counterparts. Since the war in Gaza began, however, Mack and Pelli noted that IPS prisons have shut Palestinians off from the outside world. Detainees have been kept from communicating with their families or attorneys. IPS prisons were placed on lockdowns, restricting movement within the facilities.

Pelli, along with her group, ACRI, filed a [separate petition](#) to the Supreme Court that sought to allow the Red Cross into prisons and military camps to offer medical treatment to

prisoners, which is required under Israeli and international law. The Red Cross has been denied access to all prisons since the start of the war. The petition cited the deaths of at least two detainees in military camps and another six in IPS prisons with two of them showing “signs of severe violence on their bodies.” The court has yet to rule on the issue as the government continues to ask for extensions in the case.

In April, Pelli filed yet another petition, for the Israel Prison Service to end “a policy of starvation towards Palestinian prisoners and detainees,” which it argued was a form of torture and violated international law. Since October 7, the petition said the policy has left prisoners to suffer from constant and extreme hunger and poor quality of food. The petition included testimony from formerly incarcerated Palestinians who lost dozens of pounds, and a diabetic prisoner who was forced to eat toothpaste to raise his blood sugar.

Since October 7, the number of imprisoned Palestinians has nearly doubled, from 5,192 before the war to 9,623 as of early July, exacerbating a preexisting issue of overcrowding, according to human rights group HaMoked, which [tracks Israel's prison population](#) and was among the groups who petitioned to close Sde Teiman. More than 4,000 detained Palestinians are under administrative detention, in which individuals are infinitely held without being charged. Many are released after weeks of detention without any charges.

The B'Tselem report cited Pelli's and her group's petitions, calling the prisons a “normative black hole” where “Palestinians have no rights or protections.”

The report said most of the incarcerated are men and boys, though women and children are among those imprisoned by Israel since October 7.

“Some were jailed simply for expressing sympathy for the suffering of Palestinians,” the report read. “Others were taken into custody during military activity in the Gaza Strip, on the sole grounds that they came under the vague definition of ‘men of fighting age.’ Some were imprisoned over suspicions, substantiated or not, that they were operatives or supporters of armed Palestinian organizations.”

The report highlighted firsthand accounts of 55 Palestinians who were previously detained in Israeli prisons, including 21 Gazans and four Israeli citizens. They shared instances “of frequent acts of severe, arbitrary violence; sexual assault; humiliation and degradation; deliberate starvation; forced unhygienic conditions; sleep deprivation; prohibition on, and punitive measures for, religious worship; confiscation of all communal and personal belongings; and denial of adequate medical treatment.”

One Palestinian who was formerly detained in Sde Tieman told B'Tselem that he and others were led into a warehouse where he was forced to kneel prostrate and naked while soldiers beat them during interrogations. While on the way to another facility, he and other detainees were beaten if they talked or made any noise. During the beatings, he said his left leg was injured. As his leg pain intensified over the next several days, soldiers ignored his complaints and would strike his injured leg. His leg eventually had to be amputated. Even then, the torture continued, the man said, as he was forced to stand on his remaining leg for hours, preventing him from sleeping. He was later released to his family in Gaza with no formal charges against him, the report said.

B'Tselem alleged in the report that the abuses are a part of a systemwide policy meant to torture Palestinians, implemented by Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir, who

oversees the Israel Prison Service, and with the support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli government.

“The main problem is that it’s not only just the military facilities [like Sde Teiman],” Pelli said. “Nowadays, under these conditions and with this minister, everything is terrible.”

Sde Teiman resurfaced in the public eye in late July when a right-wing mob broke into the base after military investigators showed up to question soldiers suspected in the rape of a Palestinian prisoner. The mob also broke into a separate base where the soldiers were brought for questioning. Ben-Gvir [referred](#) to the “spectacle” of police coming to question soldiers, which he called “our best heroes,” as “nothing less than shameful.” The incident highlighted the increased polarization between the prime minister’s far-right government and the country’s military command.

The arrests do not signal any increased accountability within the government, Mack believes, but were political decisions by Maj. Gen. Yifat Tomer-Yerushalmi, the head military prosecutor in both cases. Even before the video leak, the rape victim received medical treatment in a public, civilian hospital where the medical staff found injuries consistent with sexual assault, Mack said, forcing the military’s hand to investigate.

“It shows a total failure,” he said, blaming Tomer-Yerushalmi for what he saw as a soft response to earlier allegations of prisoner abuse throughout the war.

Hearings around the petition to close Sde Teiman continued this week on Wednesday, during which right-wing protesters disrupted the proceedings. Throughout the case, demonstrators have regularly criticized Pelli and her colleagues as being “traitors” or defenders of Hamas militants, Pelli said.

At the hearing, lawyers for the military argued that there are no longer any issues at Sde Teiman as they have reduced the prison’s population from more than 700 to as few as 30 for short-term, temporary holds. The military said the remaining prisoners were not security risks and were no longer bound or blindfolded, unlike previous detainees at the facility.

Pelli argued to the court that their living conditions were still in violation of international law, as prisoners continued to be kept in cages with no beds or proper sanitation and were still being denied access to the Red Cross or attorneys. She also warned the prison population could increase again at any point during the ongoing war.

“You cannot take this snapshot of this day, if it’s extremely dynamic,” Pelli said. “Because if tomorrow, the IDF will enter [a village] in Gaza and detain all men there, take 200 people ... what limits it? The war is not over.”

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Featured image: A screenshot from the video that appears to show sexual assault of a Palestinian prisoner at Sde Teiman prison in Israel, as it aired on Israel’s Channel 12. Screenshot: Channel 12

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