

Palestinian prisoners protest Israeli collective punishment

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Palestinian protesters hold up Palestinian flags and spoons, reportedly the digging tool used by six Palestinian prisoners who broke out of Israel's Gilboa Prison in September 2021, to denounce punitive measures taken by the Israel Prison Service against Palestinian prisoners following the jailbreak [Jack Guez/AFP]

Ramallah, February 14 (RHC)-- Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention have taken a series of actions against recent restrictions imposed on them by authorities, prisoner rights groups said, adding that Israeli measures amounted to collective punishment.

All prisoners are refusing to step out of their cells for their allocated yard time since Israeli prison authorities on February 5 decreased the time and number of prisoners allowed outside at once, in violation of previous agreements between detainees and the jail administration, the Palestinian Prisoners Society (PPS) monitoring group said in a statement on Thursday.

Prisoners have access to an average of five to six hours in the yard, also called as fora, every day, divided into morning and evening shifts. But the duration has been cut down by more than half.

The prisoners movement announced late last week that Friday and Monday would be 'days of rage'. On Friday, detainees refused to return to their rooms following prayers in the yard. The PPS said authorities sent in special forces as reinforcements for any escalations. Prisoners are also threatening to hold a one-day hunger strike on Monday.

Thaer Shreiteh, spokesperson for the PPS, said such "punitive policies impact the lives and spirits of the prisoners." "The prisoners live within a certain daily schedule – they have reading sessions and certain times for exercise for example. So when the administration decreases the fora [yard] time, the goal is to target daily life of the prisoners," Shreiteh told Al Jazeera.

He said that "the prison administration knows any shift in the details of a prisoner's day leads to tension," adding that it "increases the pressure on prisoners who are in rooms with six or seven other detainees."

Shreiteh said prison authorities on Sunday threatened detainees in Hadarim Prison in the country's north with banning family visits and canteen access for a month, but that the measure was not final yet.

Last week, detainees in multiple prisons dissolved their representational system – where prisoners from different political parties are elected to represent the demands of other inmates in negotiations with Israeli prison authorities.

On Wednesday, sections in Ofer Prison near occupied Ramallah were raided by Israeli special forces and detainees physically assaulted, and several of them were put into solitary confinement, according to the PPS. An escape plan written on a piece of paper was allegedly found in the prison, Israeli media reported.

Detainees in Nafha Prison in the southern Naqab desert were also being handcuffed and taken out of their cells by force for cell searches, according to rights groups.

Ihtiram Ghazawneh, documentation and research coordinator at the Ramallah-based Addameer prisoners rights group, told Al Jazeera that detainees were officially notified last week by the prison administration that the yard time will take place in two phases. "An hour and a half in the morning and an hour and a half in the evening, and the prisoners in the same sections will be allowed out in batches, not all together at once," she said.

Ghazawneh said Israeli authorities cited the recent stabbing of a guard by a prisoner in Nafha Prison for the new measures, which apply to all prisons.

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