

Israel arrests nearly as many Palestinians as it has released



Ramallah, November 29 (RHC)-- Israel has persisted with arresting dozens of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem as it conducts a prisoner release with Hamas, the Gaza-based armed group. In the first four days of the ongoing truce between Israel and Hamas, which began on Friday, Israel released 150 Palestinian prisoners – 117 children and 33 women.

Hamas released 69 captives – 51 Israelis and 18 people from other nations. Over the same four days, Israel arrested at least 133 Palestinians from East Jerusalem and the West Bank, according to Palestinian prisoner associations.

“As long as there is occupation, the arrests will not stop. People must understand this because this is a central policy of occupation against Palestinians and to restrict any kind of resistance,” Amany Sarahneh, spokesperson for the Palestinian Prisoners Society, told Al Jazeera. “This is a daily practice – its not just after October 7,” she added. “We actually expected more people to be arrested during these four days.”

The Qatar-mediated truce came after 51 days of relentless Israeli bombardment of the besieged Gaza Strip, which began on October 7, the day Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israeli territory, killing about 1,200 people. Israel has killed more than 15,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip since then, the majority of them women and children.

Under Israel's 56-year military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Israeli forces carry out nightly raids into Palestinian homes, arresting 15 to 20 people on "calm" days.

In the first two weeks after October 7, Israel doubled the number of Palestinians in its custody from 5,200 people to more than 10,000. That number included 4,000 labourers from Gaza who worked in Israel and were detained before later being released back into Gaza.

Palestinian prisoner lawyers and monitoring groups have recorded 3,290 arrests in the West Bank and East Jerusalem since October 7. In mid-November, 35-year-old Eyad Banat was arrested while he was streaming live on TikTok. He was subsequently released.

Since the truce began, the streets of Ramallah have been flooded with people welcoming the freed prisoners. But the worry for Palestinian prisoners does not end after their release. The majority of those freed are usually rearrested by Israeli forces in the days, weeks, months and years after their release.

Dozens of those who were arrested in a 2011 Israel-Hamas prisoner exchange were rearrested and had their sentences reinstated.

Sarahneh said it is not yet clear whether Israel has provided any guarantees that it will not rearrest those who have been released.

"There are no guarantees with the occupation. These people are liable to be rearrested at any point. The occupation always rearrests people who have been released," she said. "The biggest evidence that these people may be rearrested is that the majority of people being detained now are freed prisoners," she added.

Since October 7, the conditions of Palestinians under arrest or in detention have severely declined. Many have complained of severe beatings while six Palestinian prisoners have died in Israeli custody. Many of the women and children released during the truce have testified to the abuse they experienced in Israeli prisons.

Several videos have also emerged in recent weeks of Israeli soldiers beating, stepping on, abusing and humiliating detained Palestinians who have been blindfolded, cuffed and stripped either partially or entirely. Many social media users said the scenes brought back memories of the torture tactics used by United States forces in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison in 2003.

In addition to severe beatings, Israeli prison authorities halted medical attention for Palestinian prisoners for at least the first week after October 7, including for those who had been beaten, according to rights groups. Family visits as well as routine lawyer visits were stopped, the groups said.

Prisoners were previously entitled to three to four hours outside their cells in the yard, but that has now been cut to less than an hour, according to rights groups. Overcrowded cells now often house double the number of detainees they were built for with many sleeping on the floor without mattresses, they said.

Israeli prison authorities have also cut electricity and hot water, conducted cell searches, removed all electrical devices including TVs, radios, cooking slabs and kettles, and shut down the canteen, which prisoners use to buy food and basic supplies such as toothpaste.

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