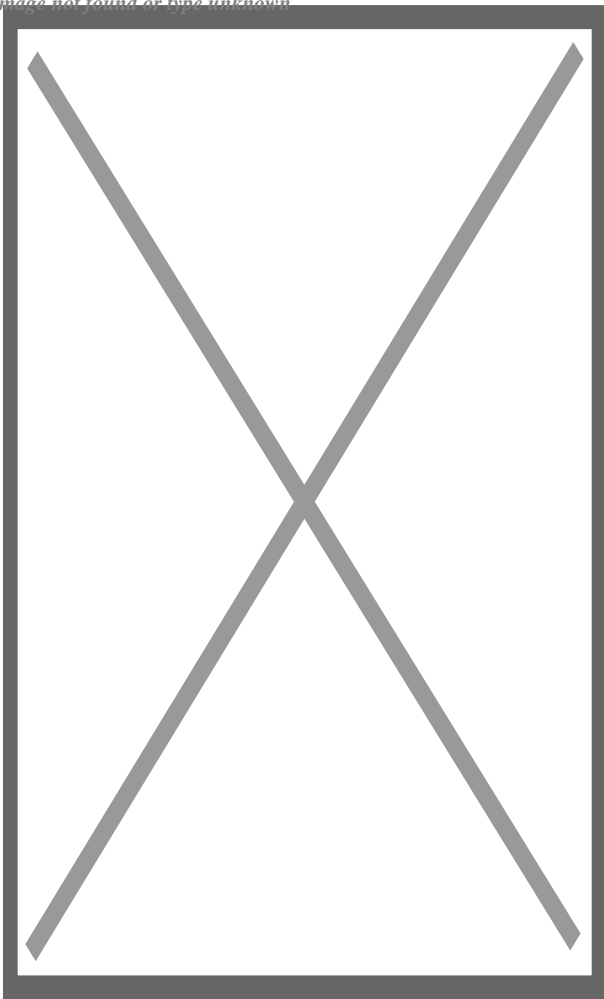


# *Human rights groups charge Israel with torturing Palestinian prisoners*

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Ramallah, March 13 (RHC)-- Israel continues to push back against the accusations of torture levelled at its armed forces in an unpublished report by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The report details the extensive use of torture against Palestinians taken prisoner by the Israeli military in Gaza, including 21 UNRWA staff members and 15 family members of UNRWA staff, an accusation Israel

has denied.

Findings in the report tally with testimonies Al Jazeera has gathered from people detained in Gaza and tortured by Israel since the beginning of its war on the besieged enclave. There have also been well-documented cases in which arbitrarily detained Palestinians were subjected to deeply degrading treatment, a circumstance that was also detailed in the UNRWA report.

According to the February report, UNRWA had documented the release of 1,002 detainees – ranging in age from six to 82 – by Israel at the Karem Abu Salem crossing (called Kerem Shalom by Israel) between December 18 and February 19.

The released detainees included UNRWA staff, women, children, the elderly and vulnerable people living with conditions like Alzheimer's and cancer – all of whom were taken from Gaza and held at various locations within Israel.

To help these individuals, UNRWA set up a reception facility at Karam Abu Salem where they provide food and water to the released persons and help them try to reach their families. "In most instances, the released detainees are extremely disoriented, hungry, physically exhausted and exhibit visible signs of physical and mental trauma, and are wearing dirty clothes, sometimes with visible blood stains.

"They are often unaware that war is continuing, on occasion do not realize they have returned to Gaza, and they do not know the whereabouts or fate of their loved ones," the report stated.

However, UNRWA noted, the releases it documented are only part of the overall number of people being detained and mistreated by Israel in Gaza, as there are many more who are taken, tortured and released within Gaza – it provided an estimate of some 4,000 people overall.

In detention, the people taken were interrogated, with UNRWA staff being of particular interest to Israeli interrogators who reportedly tried to coerce confessions of complicity with Hamas or the October 7 attack on Israel, which killed 1,139 people and the capture of 253 who were taken back to Gaza.

Practices recorded by UNRWA include the use of a nail gun on prisoners' knees, sexual abuse against both men and women and the insertion of what appears to be an electrified metal stick into prisoners' rectums.

"They were beating me with an extendable metal bar. There was blood on my trousers and when they saw it, they beat me there. They used a nail gun on my knee. These nails were kept in my knee for about 24 hours until I was transported to Naqab prison," one 26-year-old male told UNRWA of his 56 days in Israeli custody.

Mahmoud Abd Rabbu, 62, from Jabalia, told Al Jazeera he had been displaced to the Indonesian Hospital and, during the last days of the Israeli siege on the hospital, he was told everyone should move to the south. He headed for a checkpoint that had been determined as "safe" by Israeli forces where he and one other man were picked out of a group of 80 people and detained.

He recounts being held in a group of more than 100 men who all endured days of "beatings, hunger and cold", adding that they were kept blindfolded, not allowed to sleep and were forced to spend most of the day kneeling. "If someone lifted the blindfold off their eyes," he said, "he would be called over by the soldiers and beaten then strung up on the barbed wire fence."

Another detained man told UNRWA: "They made me sit on something like a hot metal stick and it felt like fire – I have burns [in the anus]. The soldiers hit me with their shoes on my chest and used something like a metal stick that had a small nail on the side," he said.

"They asked us to drink from the toilet and made the dogs attack us," he recalled, before describing how he had seen the bodies of "maybe nine" people who had been detained and killed, including one who had died after they had "put the electric stick up his [anus]. He got so sick, we saw worms coming out of his body and then he died," he said.

Khaled el-Nabreis from the Khan Younis refugee camp told Al Jazeera that he and several other men spent three days with no food or water, "only beatings, and when we slept they would cover us with wet blankets in the bitter cold" after they were detained by Israeli forces, taken to a location he did not recognise.

Several of the individuals tortured and then released by Israel told Al Jazeera the soldiers tormenting them were asking the same kinds of questions, including: "Where are the tunnels?", "Where is [Hamis leader] Sinwar?", "Where are the captives?" and "Who do you know who is a Hamas fighter?"

Rami Abu Daqqa from Bani Suhaila in Gaza told Al Jazeera that he and his family had tried to return to their home from Rafah in late January. As they approached the house, he said, Israeli snipers opened fire, shooting him in the leg. His voice breaking, he added that his brother, Hani, was shot and killed in the same barrage.

He went on to describe how Israeli soldiers both administered first aid for the gunshot wound in his leg and beat him to get him to confess to knowing Hamas fighters. Then he was transferred to an Israeli hospital, where a platinum plate was inserted into his leg, all the while he was blindfolded, handcuffed around the clock and interrogated regularly.

The accounts of mistreatment released detainees gave Al Jazeera at the hospital where they were being treated matched those in the UNRWA report. The report went further to say that all of the released detainees needed medical attention and were transferred to hospital immediately from the border crossing wherever possible, given the dire condition of Gaza's health sector after nearly six months of Israeli attacks. In one case that the report detailed, urgent medical transport was arranged for a child who was released at Karam Abu Salem with dog bites visible on his body and a bruised face.

Speaking at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva last week, the body's international expert on torture, Dr Alice Jill Edwards, told Reuters she had asked to visit Israel to investigate widespread reports of torture against both sides within the conflict.

In January, Israel accused several UNRWA employees of participating in the attacks of October 7. In a reported attempt to coerce confessions to support the accusations, Israeli interrogators tortured UNRWA staff they detained in Gaza, some of whom they took as they were carrying out their duties as staff of the international relief agency.

In detention, the UNRWA staff endured "severe physical beatings; waterboarding; exposure to dogs; threats of violence ... rape, and electrocution; verbal and psychological abuse; threats of murder, injury or other harm to their family members; humiliating and degrading treatment; being forced to strip naked and subjected to photographs," according to the report.

A probe was launched by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) into the already highly audited agency to determine the extent of any alleged complicity in the October attack and nine UNRWA employees were dismissed as a result of the allegations.

Nine of the agency's principal funders, including the US and UK, announced the immediate suspension of donations worth \$450m, the equivalent of about half the agency's annual budget.

A Freedom of Information Request to the UK Government, which said it had based the decision to suspend UNRWA contributions on the Israeli report, has yet to be delivered to Al Jazeera English, despite

being promised for March 6th.

However, according to diplomats within the United Nations, an interim report earlier this month into the allegations made by Israel against the agency contained no new information beyond the earlier unsubstantiated claims of UNRWA complicity.

Sweden, the EU and Canada announced that they were resuming donations while other countries, including the US, have said they will wait until investigations into the agency were complete before they review their decision to suspend funds.

Israel has long begrudged the presence of UNRWA within Gaza. It has blamed the agency's reports of its forces targeting civilian infrastructure, including its schools and first responder stations for the criticism during the International Court of Justice's preliminary judgement on 26 January, when South Africa charged Israel with committing genocide during its war on Gaza. This prospect grows more likely as aid is blocked and the besieged population is tilted ever further towards famine.

On Monday, the Times of Israel reported that the country's forces intended to unilaterally dismantle UNRWA within Gaza, with its functions hived off to other agencies of the military's choosing.

While it was not clear which agencies the Israeli military had designated, or if negotiations were under way, the report did note that this move against the agency came as the latest in a longstanding campaign to discredit it, which goes back to UNRWA's 1949 founding, mandating the agency to support displaced Palestinian refugees until they could return home.

As hunger worsens, with 15 children reported to have starved to death in recent days, UNRWA's role in helping prevent what agencies are warning of a "humanitarian crisis" grows increasingly vital. Other agencies, such as the Danish Refugee Council have warned that neither they nor other NGOs still operating in Gaza can replicate UNRWA's role.

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