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Palestinians in Israeli Jails Start Hunger Strike

by Mohammed Assadi

RAMALLAH, West Bank - Thousands of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails began a hunger strike for better conditions Sunday, but Israel's security minister said he didn't care if they starved to death.

The prisoners, seen by Palestinians as symbols of resistance to Israeli occupation, want wardens to stop strip searches, allow more frequent visits from their families, improve sanitary conditions and install public telephones, supporters said.

More than 7,500 Palestinians, including 4,000 jailed over violence against Israelis, are imprisoned in Israel.

"We declare, in the name of God, our national decision to launch an open hunger strike," the Palestinian Prisoners Society said in a statement, accusing Israel of "robbing us of all our rights, treading on our dignity and treating us like animals."

The Israel Prisons Authority and Palestinian spokesmen said striking prisoners declared they would live only on fluids until their demands are met. Internal Security Minister Tzahi Hanegbi, however, said Israel would not bow to pressure.

"As far as I'm concerned they can strike for a day, a month, until death. We will ward off this strike and it will be as if it never happened," he told reporters.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie said in a statement any progress toward peace with Israel was contingent on resolving "this central and sensitive" issue.

NO CIGARETTES

Ofer Lefler, a Prisons Authority spokesman, said privileges such as cigarettes, sweets and television were taken away from the prisoners after they began the strike, which he described as a "disturbance."

He said if a prisoner became too emaciated "an ethical committee" would decide whether to begin force feeding.

Israeli officials said they feared closer contact with the outside world through more visits and phone calls would enable prisoners to help militants at large plan attacks on Israelis.

In the latest violence, a Palestinian stabbed an Israeli border policeman, who then shot and killed him outside Jerusalem's walled Old City, a police spokesman said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility and Israel Radio said it appeared the attacker was mentally ill.

Issa Qaraqe, a prisoners' rights activist in the West Bank city of Bethlehem, said the strike would spread from Israel's main prisons to detention camps in military bases.

Some 200 people in Bethlehem marched in support of the prisoners. A similar demonstration was held by prisoners' children in the Gaza town of Beit Hanoun.

In Lebanon, a support group for the last-remaining Lebanese prisoner in Israel, Samir al-Qantar, began a hunger strike in solidarity and demanded an international investigation into alleged abuses in Israeli jails.

"However hard it is for us, it's even harder for them," Qantar's sister Samira said, sitting in a stifling tent pitched for hunger-strikers outside Beirut's U.N. headquarters.

Qantar was sentenced to 542 years in jail for his role in a 1979 raid in northern Israel that killed a four-year-old girl, her father and a policeman.

Last January, Israel swapped about 400 prisoners, most of them Palestinian, for an Israeli civilian and the bodies of three soldiers who were captured in Lebanon in 2000, under a deal with the Lebanese Hizbollah guerrilla group.

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