

Strikes in Zionist Prisons

The struggle of the 17,000 Palestinians currently imprisoned in Zionist jails escalated markedly in the recent period, protesting in particular the tightened repressive measures imposed during and after the Gulf war. The appeal issued by the prisoners in Asqalan, after they began an open-ended visit strike on May 6th, gives a picture of the deteriorating conditions (see box).

Given that approximately 40,000 Palestinians currently pass through Israeli prisons and detention centers each year, the prisoners' struggle is virtually inseparable from the ongoing intifada. In the wake of the Gulf war, solidarity with the political prisoners has been a main focus of the popular movement's activities with Palestinian lawyers, relatives, women's committees and others organizing numerous sit-ins, press conferences, etc., to press for their demands.

On June 23rd, the 280 political prisoners in Nafha, located in the desert of South Palestine, began a hunger strike protesting ill treatment by the Zionist prison authorities. They were immediately joined by Palestinian prisoners in Asqalan and Ramleh jails, striking for demands similar to those originally put forward in the Asqalan appeal. Conditions are particularly severe in Nafha prison due to the climate. The general increase in illness in many prisons, due to worsening conditions and medical negligence, is aggravated in Nafha where temperatures may exceed 40 degrees. Nafha prisoners, like those in Ansar III, have special difficulties receiving visitors due to the location of the prisons and the occupation authorities' restrictions.

The Nafha strike sparked solidarity strikes of varying durations in Hebron, Ansar III, Nablus Central Prison, Tulkarm, Jenin, Kfar Youna and other prisons. In all, about 15,000 detainees took part in the action.

Only after 16 days of the hunger strike did the prison authorities show signs of readiness to concede to the prisoners' demands. With mediation by Palestinian lawyers and Israeli human rights activists, a meeting was arranged between the prisoners' representatives and the authorities, where the latter agreed to 17 of the prisoners' demands. According to Ali Ghuzlan, head of the Arab Lawyers Committee, the most

important achievement was the prison authorities' promise to appoint a doctor in the prison; the second most important demand fulfilled was the authorities' agreement to move asbestos away from the windows. He explained, «Among the prisoners, 170 wear glasses because of the continuous light in the rooms and the absence of healthy ventilation» (*Al Fajr*, July 15th). The authorities also pledged to return those prisoners who had been isolated back to the main part of the prison. Other demands fulfilled

included: improving food, hygienic conditions and ventilation; providing new clothing for the prisoners; allowing them to receive newspapers and books, to move from cell to cell and to pray. The effect of this was basically restoring the pre-war conditions – demands gained from previous prison struggles. Moreover, visiting time was extended from one half hour to 45 minutes. However, the overall problem of detainees from the 1967 occupied territories receiving family visits in prisons where they are held in the 1948 occupied area, remains unresolved. This being related to overall occupation policy, we can expect future strikes and struggle to resolve this issue. ●

Prisoners' Appeal

Appeal from the prisoners of the Palestinian revolution in Asqalan Prison, May 1991, distributed by Al Quds (Jerusalem) Press Office, May 22nd.

To our heroic people in the occupied territories, to all strugglers against racism, slavery and oppression, we address these words to our people to move the human conscience to support our just and human cause...

The savage Israeli onslaught launched by the general prison administration against the Palestinian prisoners in all prisons and detention centers has intensified. Besides the policy of starvation and slow liquidation due to medical negligence and other oppressive measures, the Israeli authorities have now denied our relatives from the West Bank and Gaza Strip access to Israeli detention centers which are located inside the so-called green line, thereby depriving them of visiting us, in compliance with the Israeli decision which prevents the residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip from entering the 1948 areas and East Jerusalem without special permits.

For the past six months our families have been unable to reach their sons who are held in Asqalan prison, Nafha, Shatta, Ramleh and Telmond. In the light of this policy, we the Palestinian prisoners inside Asqalan prison, decided to start an open-ended visit strike until the inhumane and unethical isolation of prisoners is terminated.

We would like to add that the Israeli authorities have violated the Geneva conventions regarding the treatment of

prisoners, since detainees from the occupied territories are being held in detention centers inside the green line... Thus we beseech all the institutions concerned with human rights and the national institutions in the occupied territories to support us and our just human demands. We call upon you to publicize our protest demands and uncover the inhumane practices against prisoners. We demand that the Red Cross intervene to solve this problem.

Following is a list of the other arbitrary practices by the prison administration against the prisoners: (1) Prisoners are banned from addressing any political issues during the Friday oration. (2) National celebrations are completely banned. (3) [There is] an attempt to cancel the detainees' representation.

The prisoners concluded their appeal by listing means whereby the Israeli prison authorities are enacting their program, including a qualitative and quantitative reduction of food rations; deterioration of health conditions; and reduced supplies of clothing and cleaning agents. In addition, prisoners are strip-searched upon entering or leaving the prison, while the use of punishments such as beating, solitary confinement, repression and psychological pressure has been increased. The authorities have also tried to reschedule relatives' visits so that they fall on days other than Friday, which is the weekly holiday and day-off from work. Male visitors from the West Bank and Gaza Strip are being prevented from visiting relatives in detention centers inside the green line. ●