

500 asylum seekers held in Israel Prison in the desert

Written by Administrator

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Some 500 asylum seekers held in a prison in the desert recently refused food in protest of a new law that enables Israel to keep them in detention indefinitely.

By Sharon Livne

“Don’t tell anyone my name, I’m afraid of what they’ll do to me here if they know I talked.” So began a nighttime telephone call with C., age 23, who has been incarcerated for 11 months in the Saharonim prison in the Negev. According to C., the Eritrean detainees in Saharonim began a hunger strike in protest of their imprisonment for a minimum of three years, in accordance with the new Prevention of Infiltration Law. Around one thousand men, women and children held in sections 8, 4 and 3 refused food for a week, ending the strike on Monday. Several hunger strikers felt unwell and were in need of medical attention.

Hesitantly, he tells me his story: he fled Eritrea from compulsory conscription that he wouldn’t tell me more about, but told me that after he escaped, the authorities imprisoned his mother. She remains jailed. The authorities are demanding a very high sum (equivalent to \$4,000) in exchanged for her release.

C., who refused to identify himself for fear he would be punished by the prison management, told me in English that it was 64 women from the women’s section, where they are held with their children, who instigated the hunger strike. He told me that on Monday, the women were taken from Saharonim to an “unknown prison.” C. was also called for a conversation with the guards on Monday, when they made it clear that if he continued with the hunger strike, he too would be taken to another prison, “far away.” When C. tells me this, his voice is filled with horror. For most Eritreans, to be taken to “another” prison signifies torture and even death. In Eritrea, people frequently disappear into prison basements to an unknown fate. The prison guards perhaps don’t bother to explain to C. and his friends where the women and children have been transferred to, and so they are already imagining the worst possible scenarios.

“They gave them injections,” he tells me, referring to the prisoners who felt unwell and were evacuated; “I don’t know what’s in them.” The fear is palpable in his voice. “Don’t worry, it’s probably an infusion to rehydrate them,” I say. “I’m sure they won’t harm them, and they’ll be alright.” “They don’t care about us,” he tells me. “They told them ‘Inshallah, you’ll die’ when they took them.” He is perhaps misinterpreting things, because of his background and because he’s foreign, I think, but one can’t mistake the deep despair, the degradation, and the very real fear that he feels for his own safety.

C. tells me that in Saharonim, there are a thousand Eritreans, alongside Sudanese and Ethiopians who are held in separate sections. There are sections for men and youths, and sections for women and children. In section 8, one of the larger ones, around 500 Eritrean men and youths are held. The hunger strike, which began in the women’s section, is a result of the

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growing despair felt by those who have already been detained for many months, and to whom it was recently explained that their detention will continue for at least three years. "The judge told us that there's a new law, and that we'll be in prison for three and a half years." We can't be in prison. We fled here because we thought it would be better. We'd prefer it if they returned us to Eritrea and we'll be imprisoned there. It might be an underground facility, and much worse, but there at least it's our country, and maybe we just have to undergo it. We just can't be here three and a half years in prison," he said.

At the end of the conversation, he surprises me, and asks in Hebrew, "Do you speak Hebrew?" and he's excited when I answer him in Hebrew, enjoying his opportunity to practice. He tells me he has a Hebrew-English dictionary and he is studying Hebrew in jail, on his own.

An Israel Prison Service spokeswoman said in response: "In the past week, some of the detainees in the Saharonim facility took measures to protest against their custody – this protest was expressed by a small number of meals being returned, but not a hunger strike. Only 500 took part in total, and none were in need of medical attention. Since Sunday, and following a conversation with the prison command, all of them began eating regularly again. Returning a meal is considered a disciplinary offense, and therefore we employ the use of warnings or transfers to another prison. That said, the women who were transferred were moved to a new and improved section in Saharonim, and therefore there was no punishment, but rather an improvement in conditions.

"The Israel Prison Service is responsible for facilitating meetings with attorneys, as demonstrated by the stream of attorneys and representatives of the various organizations active in the detention facilities. Any information regarding the actual detention orders and rights of appeal against them is the responsibility of the body that issues the order, and the various procedures on infiltrators."

The Ministry of the Interior, the responsible body, has declared that everything that happens in prison is the responsibility of the Israeli Prisons Service.

Elizabeth Tsurkov, an activist with the Hotline for Migrant Workers said, "Extended imprisonment of asylum seekers without trial is unprecedented in the Western world and clearly contravenes Israel's international obligations. I can see why the refugees decided to go on hunger strike when they understood that, though they are innocent of any crime, they will be imprisoned for at least three years. Asylum seekers, families, children and victims of torture do not belong in detention camps in the middle of the desert. Instead of locking up innocent people without a trial, Israel should review the requests for asylum from those who reach the border, and grant them their rights in accordance with the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which Israel has signed and ratified."