

Written by
Monday, 30 June 2014 14:13 -

Over the past week — 115 miles off the radar of the Tel Aviv public — the African asylum seekers imprisoned at [Holot, Israel's "open" desert prison for "illegal infiltrators,"](#) have been pushing back against the rule of the Israeli Population, Immigration and Border Authority (PIBA).

From the morning of June 16 until now, all 2,300 prisoners have refused to show up for their thrice-daily check-ins — a ritual which prevents them from leaving the jail's desolate premises, and ensures they are stuck in lines for hours each day.

("Lines to check in, lines to check out," [refugee leader Ali said in an interview](#) shortly after he arrived to Holot. "Everywhere is lines — lines, lines, lines everywhere. ... It makes you go crazy.")

In concert with the strike against check-ins, prisoners have been staging daily demonstrations. They've been [marching](#) down Holot's dusty roads and [occupying](#) its gaping entrance, chanting "Freedom!" and "Stop Racism!" and "We are not criminals!"

Powerful images of 2,300 resilient Sudanese and Eritrean men, the survivors of unthinkable violence and oppression in their home countries and [torture en route to Israel](#), protesting in the middle of the Negev — with no one to hear them but prison workers — have made the rounds on social media. But they've been partly overshadowed by renewed fury over Israel's grip on the West Bank and Gaza, as soldiers [search for three Jewish teens kidnapped earlier this month](#)

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Then yesterday, the inevitable: PIBA and the Israel Prison Authority began their crackdown on dissenters at Holot.

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According to the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, Israel's premiere refugee rights org, Ali and Anwar Suliman — along with about 20 other protest organizers — were arrested yesterday and, after a short hearing, sent to Saharonim, the closed jail next door to Holot.

From the Hotline's news blast:

During Ali's hearing the Immigration Authority representative in charge accused him of encouraging others to break the facility rules, a claim that Ali denied. Eventually, he was sent to Saharonim for 30 days. "Ali and the others were not arrested because they broke the compound rules, but because the Immigration Authority is trying to suppress the protest," said Adv. Carmel Pomerantz of the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, who represented Ali during the hearing. "This is clearly a selective enforcement and a misuse of authority. The fact that only a handful among thousands were sent to prison demonstrates why in a democratic country the Minister of the Interior must not function as the legislator, the investigator and the judge in the facility."

The activists' absence can be felt all the way from Tel Aviv. "In Saharonim, they don't have cellphones; they can only talk one time per day with a calling card," said Anat Ovadia, a spokeswoman for Hotline.

[The Facebook page that Suliman runs](#) has been silent since his arrest. And [Ali's personal page](#), a top source for information on life inside Holot, is left with his ominous last post:

The PIBA spokesperson's office hasn't yet responded to a Jewish Journal inquiry on the number of Holot prisoners sent to Saharonim in the past week, and the nature of their arrests. (Except to say, back when the check-in strike began, that the strikers would be "treated as the law decided." Aka, sent to Saharonim. But the only ones sent to Saharonim so far appear to be the leaders of the protest movement.)

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"They can arrest four leaders, but it won't be the end," said Darfuri asylum seeker Muhamad Musa of the revolt. "We are 3,000 leaders."

Musa, a close friend of mine who was summoned to Holot in February, took his chances and traveled to Tel Aviv for a few hours yesterday to check on his watch shop in the Central Bus Station.

I walked with him along Neve Sha'anan Street as he greeted old friends from his six-year residence in Tel Aviv, including a table full of wrinkled Russian-Israeli men smoking and playing cards.

But Neve Sha'anan, once the lively main street of South Tel Aviv, was sickly quiet on Monday afternoon. Visitors (and visiting journalists) always used to marvel, whether in delight or horror, over the "Little Africa" they found along this dingy *ramblas* — filled with Eritrean and Sudanese smells, sounds and street signs. These days, Neve Sha'anan is a skeleton of its former self. It has no more flea market; half its shops are shuttered. It has grown chilly with the ghosts of a migrant population past.

Musa explained to me that those African asylum seekers who haven't already [agreed to leave Israel or been imprisoned in the desert](#) are keeping a low profile, because they're afraid of frequent police roundups of "infiltrators" in the area.

Either that, or they're just plain depressed. Journalist David Sheen, who has been documenting the African struggle in Israel from the start, [recently interviewed a young Israeli woman named Mai Liberkaz, the longtime girlfriend of a Sudanese asylum seeker in Israel](#)

. "The atmosphere has changed drastically in the last few years," she said in her video interview.

"Before," she said, "you would walk down the street and see African people full of life. Now, you walk down the street where Africans live and you see disappointment. And that's if you see them at all, if they're not hiding out in their homes."

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Musa spoke of a similar soul drain in his former neighborhood. "Tel Aviv is not like before," he said. "Tel Aviv is like Holot."

My friend decided to head back down to the Negev earlier than expected on Monday, to regroup with his fellow protesters. "We are all leaders," he reiterated before he left, and hinted that Israel's incarcerated asylum seekers would be taking more drastic (still peaceful) measures in the coming days. And really, they don't have too much left to lose.

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A prison in the middle of nowhere with a gate that opens a few hours each day is still a prison

[10:18 PM - 19 Jun 2014](#)