

Israel: Hundreds of Palestinian prisoners go on hunger strike

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Thousands of prisoners expected to join rights protest led by Marwan Barghouti that has significant political backing.

Hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails have gone on hunger strike over conditions of captivity, with more expected to join on Monday, in one of the biggest protests in recent years.

Led by the high-profile Fatah prisoner and leader Marwan Barghouti, seen by some as a potential successor to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, 700 prisoners initially joined the strike, announced on Sunday evening.

The protest includes members of Fatah as well as prisoners from Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

The strike, long planned, is seen as having widespread political support – not least in the year marking the 50th anniversary of the Israel occupation of the Palestinian territories, captured during the six day war in 1967. Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, as well as Hamas leaders in Gaza, have announced their backing.

The Palestinian National Council, the legislative body of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, also expressed its support for the strike on Sunday.

In a statement from Hamas the group said: “We warn the Israel Prison Service against bringing any harm to the hunger strikers. Any delay in answering their just demands will explode the situation inside all prisons. All prisoners will unite in the face of all those who might harm prisoners and their dignity.”

The number of prisoners going on hunger strike was expected to expand to 2,000 of the Palestinian prisoners being held in Israeli jails.

The hunger strike was announced to coincide with Palestinian prisoners’ day which is marked on Monday.

Prisoners’ demands include improved visitation rights from family members and easier access to telephones.

The visitation rights are a case of particular concern. While Israeli Prison Service regulations stipulate that all prisoners are entitled to family visits once every two weeks, in reality Palestinians from the occupied Palestinian territories are required to apply for permits to enter Israel in the first place – permits which are often denied.

The announced strike began at Hadarim prison, where Barghouti is serving a prison sentence handed down by an Israeli court for his conviction for five murders.

Barghouti's key role is seen by both Israelis and some members of his own Fatah party as significant in the midst of efforts by an ageing Abbas to centralise power around himself and a small circle of close associates.

In a comment piece written from prison for the New York Times on Monday, Barghouti said that the hunger strike was "the most peaceful form of resistance available".

"Decades of experience have proved that Israel's inhumane system of colonial and military occupation aims to break the spirit of prisoners and the nation to which they belong, by inflicting suffering on their bodies, separating them from their families and communities, using humiliating measures to compel subjugation," he wrote.

A largescale hunger strike - not least in the year marking the 50th anniversary of the occupation and the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, which is regarded as highly significant by Palestinians - has the potential to raise tensions again. They have only recently subsided after the 2014 Gaza war and a wave of Palestinian attacks that has declined only in recent months.

In a measure of Israeli concern over the strike, the security minister, Gilad Erdan, held meetings with security officials from the prison service, the military and Shin Bet internal security service on Sunday.

In a statement issued by Erdan, the minister accused Barghouti of using the hunger strike for internal Palestinian political aims. "The strike led by Barghouti is motivated by internal Palestinian politics and therefore includes unreasonable demands concerning the conditions in the prisons," he said. "I have instructed the prison service to act in any way to contain the strike within the walls of the prisons and the Israel police to prepare and provide any help needed to the prison service for any scenario that is likely to develop."

Barghouti is serving five life sentences after being convicted in an Israeli court of directing lethal attacks during the Second Intifada, in a trial in which he refused to offer a defence, maintaining the court was illegitimate. He was sentenced to 40 years in prison in 2004.

A report issued by Amnesty last week, containing interviews with prisoners' family members highlighted the difficulties many complain of in seeing imprisoned relatives, with some saying they have been prevented from seeing relatives for many years.

It quoted "Ahmed", a 32-year-old from Hebron held in administrative detention in Ketziot prison in the Negev desert, whose name has been changed to protect his identity. He said he has had only one family visit despite spending five-and-a-half years in an Israeli prison between 2005 and 2017.

He told Amnesty he was joining the hunger strike in the hope it would pressure the authorities to allow his 70-year-old mother, who has been repeatedly denied a permit, to visit him.

He said he had been arrested seven times in total. His administrative detention order is up for renewal on 29 July.

"I have had one family visit while in jail. In 2006, my mother and father were able to visit me because my father was sick. He was 75 then, it was the last time I saw him. He died while I was in prison," he said.

Peter Beaumont in Jerusalem

P.S.

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