Human rights defender Ayman Lubbad speaks of his detention by Israeli occupying forces in Gaza

26 December 2023

The Israeli occupying forces (IOF) have been carrying out mass arrests of Palestinians since the start of their ground invasion of the Gaza Strip. A military chief of the IOF announced that, as of 17 December 2023, they had taken over a thousand Palestinians captive in Gaza. This announcement followed the emergence of photos and videos on social media platforms, exposing the inhuman and degrading treatment of Palestinians in the city of Beit Lahia, in the northern Gaza Strip. The published pictures and videos showed hundreds of detainees—including children—forced to sit on the street, half-naked and stripped of their clothes in harsh weather conditions, before being transferred in packed Israeli military trucks to unknown locations.

Among those arrested was our colleague Ayman Lubbad, a researcher in the Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights Unit at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), who was staying at his family home in the northern city of Beit Lahia. He was detained on 7 December 2023, and was released at the Kerem Shalom crossing south of the Gaza Strip on 14 December 2023. Currently, he finds himself in Rafah city, separated from his wife and three children. For almost a week, no one had any information on Ayman’s whereabouts or well-being.

In a testimony, Ayman recounted the dreadful experience he had to endure, exemplifying the inhumane and degrading treatment that Palestinian detainees in Gaza have been subjected to in different Israeli detention facilities:
“On 7 December 2023, at approximately 10:00 am, we heard the IOF ordering people, through loudspeakers, to leave their houses and ‘surrender’ themselves. Women and elderly were instructed to go to Kamal Adwan Hospital, while men and boys as young as 14 were instructed to strip and kneel in the street.

Israeli soldiers shot our neighbour, Mohammed Al-Kahlout, injuring his hand. They inappropriately photographed us while we were half-naked and forced some of us to dance. They also burned the houses belonging to Al-Muqayd, Mahdi, Al-Kahlout, and Sorour families in front of us.

On the same day at noon, we were taken to the Zikim area by the sea, where we remained until late at night. I learned later that some detainees were released. They took the rest of us to Ofekim military base, handcuffed and blindfolded. As soon as we arrived there, I was given the number 059775 and brought before an interrogator to provide my personal information. Upon learning that I work for a human rights organisation, the interrogator threateningly said: ‘I will teach you your rights very well in prison.’

Later, we were taken to a detention facility designated for Gaza detainees. It was surrounded by barbed wires and had two high places for the emplacement of soldiers. There were 500-700 detainees with one bathroom for each place.

The IOF were abusing us on a daily basis from around 5:00 am until midnight. We were only allowed to sit on our knees. Any attempt to change the position or remove the blindfold was faced with a severe punishment, including standing with hands raised above the head for over three hours. I, along with a group of detainees, was transferred to a similar place about which we had no information. We could hear the drones taking off and landing. During my transfer, I was beaten by Israeli soldiers several times for no reason. They hit me continuously on my rib cage. I could not sleep for two nights from the severity of the pain.

On Monday, 11 December, I was transferred to a new detention facility, it was better than the previous two places. We were held inside the detention facility without being handcuffed or blindfolded, able to move, and sleep without much disturbance from the soldiers. I later learned from some detainees that we were in a place located in Jabal Al Mukaber in Jerusalem.

At noon of the same day, I underwent an interrogation that lasted until 10 pm, a continuous interrogation session. The interrogator took my personal data and began the interrogation by saying that he was mentally ill and off medication. He insisted that his questions were accurate and demanded that I tell him all the information I have about members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. He delved into the nature of my work at PCHR and sought my opinion about what happened on 7 October. He said that they will start to treat the people of Gaza like ‘dogs.’
The interrogator questioned and pressed me on extended relatives and their alleged relationship with Hamas. I tried to explain to him that I do not have answers to his questions due to the weak and limited social interaction I have with these distant family members. **He threatened me, cursed me, and hit me in the face.** As he became angrier he kept on repeating the same questions. He demanded that I try to remember. He kept on coming in and going out of the room. Each time he left the room, he covered my eyes with a blindfold.

The last time he returned, I repeated to him that I do not have any information or details. **At the end of the interrogation, he got up, angrily, blindfolded me, and violently took me out of the building.** I stayed for about an hour in the open air sitting on my knees blindfolded. **I could not bear the extreme cold, several soldiers came and beat me, and told me ‘every dog has its day’.**

I could hear other detainees screaming as they were getting apparently beaten in a way that was worse than the beating I had to endure. **Around an hour later, I was taken back to the detention area.** Most of those detained with me were workers from Gaza who were arrested in Israel after the 7th of October and Palestinians arrested from the so-called ‘humanitarian corridor’ on Salah-Al-Din Street, which Israel opened for civilians moving from the north to the south of Gaza. Most of the detainees have been detained for about 30-40 days.

**Late on Wednesday night, 13 December 2023, they woke us up while sleeping to count the number of detainees. We noticed that they had brought several handcuffs along with other boxes which turned out to be containing the detainees’ belongings. Civilian buses appeared, so we knew that they would release us.** When we got on the bus, the soldiers put cuffs on our hands and legs. Every two detainees were tied together.

**On Thursday, 14 December 2023, at approximately 12:00 am, the buses started moving from the detention facility until we reached the Karem Abu Salem crossing, east of Rafah, at approximately 05:00 am.** They removed the cuffs from our hands and legs. **We got out of the bus and started walking towards the Palestinian side. I had nothing in my possession except my ID card. I contacted my family members who remained in the Beit Lahia area to inform them that I got out and went to look for my displaced relatives in the city of Rafah.”**

Ayman’s case is exemplarily of the inhumane and degrading treatment as well as torture that Palestinian detainees are subjected to. Hundreds of Palestinians from Gaza are believed to be still detained in Israeli detention facilities and their place of detention and fate are unknown. Israeli media has reported the death of six Palestinians in Israeli prisons since the 7th of October with at least two dying in Israeli detention facilities. Our organisations express their deep concern over the detainee’s safety and health.
Our organisation’s lawyers tried to contact the Israeli occupying forces to request information on Palestinian detainees, but the authorities refused to divulge any information about who is being detained and in what conditions, a conduct which amounts to enforced disappearance. As proven from Ayman’s case, there is strong evidence which suggests that they may be subjected to systematic torture.

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, Al Mezan, and Al-Haq reiterate their demand for an end of the enforced disappearance of hundreds of Palestinian detainees, including dozens of women, from Gaza, and that their whereabouts and names are revealed, as well as the immediate halt to the ongoing torture and abuse during arbitrary arrest and detention of people from Gaza, and the Palestinian detainees and prisoners in general.

We reiterate our call on the relevant international organisations and the international community to intervene promptly to protect Palestinian civilians and exert pressure on the Israeli authorities to release all arbitrarily detained Palestinians.