

Tears and hugs greet 90 Palestinian women and children freed from Israeli prisons



Freed Palestinian prisoners inside a Red Cross bus as they arrive in Ramallah, in the occupied West Bank, on January 20, 2025 [Mussa Qawasma/Reuters]

Ramallah, January 20 (RHC)-- Ninety Palestinians have been freed from Israeli prisons and were greeted by large crowds of jubilant relatives, friends and supporters as they returned home to the occupied West Bank in the first prisoner exchange of the Hamas-Israel ceasefire following the release of three Israeli captives in Gaza.

At about 1 a.m. local time on Monday (23:00 GMT), Red Cross buses carrying the 90 Palestinian prisoners arrived in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, where they were greeted by crowds of thousands despite warnings from Israeli forces that celebrations would not be allowed.

The freed Palestinians included 69 women and 21 teenage boys – some as young as 12 – from the occupied West Bank and Jerusalem.

Among them was Khalida Jarrar, 62, a leading member of the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who had been held for six months in solitary confinement under “administrative detention”, which allows Israeli authorities to jail suspects indefinitely without charge or court verdict.

In the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah, crowds lifted many of the returned prisoners up onto their shoulders in an emotional show of support, as others shouted and whistled. Some attending the gathering carried the flags of Fatah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other armed resistance groups.

Bushra al-Tawil, a Palestinian journalist jailed in Israel in March 2024, was also among the prisoners released on Monday. Tawil said she began her journey at 3am on Sunday morning (01:00 GMT), when she was taken from another Israeli prison ahead of release. In the second prison, she was grouped with other Palestinians awaiting release.

“The wait was extremely hard. But thank God, we were certain that at any moment we would be released,” she said.

Tawil said her father, who is also in an Israeli jail, will be released soon, too.

“I was worried about him. He is still a prisoner, but I just received good news that he will be released as part of this deal,” she added.

Amanda Abu Sharkh, 23, from Ramallah, was among the crowd of hundreds who gathered to greet the freed prisoners. “We came here to witness it and feel the emotions, just like the families of the prisoners who are being released today,” Abu Sharkh said.

“All the prisoners being released today feel like family to us. They are part of us, even if they’re not blood relatives,” she told the AFP news agency.

Muhammad, 20, said he had come from Ramallah with his friends as soon as he heard the prisoners would be released. Recently freed from Israel’s Ofer Prison himself, he expressed “great joy” at the thought of families being reunited.

“I know a lot of people in prison, there are innocent people, children and women,” he said.

The prisoner exchange between Hamas and Israel marks the first of its kind since November 2023. The exact number of Palestinians due to be released as part of the ceasefire deal is still unknown, with reported estimates ranging from approximately 1,000 to nearly 2,000.

In the first phase of the deal, Hamas is expected to return a total of 33 Israeli captives over the next 42 days – with the next release due on Saturday. The second phase of ceasefire negotiations is due to begin in two weeks.

More than 46,000 Palestinians have been killed since the war began on October 7, and nearly 90 percent of Gaza’s population has been forcibly displaced by Israeli evacuation orders and attacks.

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