

Israeli leaders defend soldiers accused of rape, saying everything is legitimate

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Protesters wave Israeli national flags in support of soldiers being questioned for detainee abuse, outside of the Sde Teiman military base, on Monday, July 29, 2024 [Tsafirir Abayov/AP]

Tel Aviv, August 10 (RHC)-- Video has emerged of a gang rape of a Palestinian prisoner by guards at the Sde Teiman detention facility in the Negev desert, southern Israel.

The video, which has been verified by Al Jazeera, shows the prisoner being selected from a larger group lying bound on the floor. The victim is then escorted to a wall, where guards, using their shields to hide their identity from the camera, proceed to rape him.

The attack is believed to have been so brutal that, after he was transferred to hospital, Israeli media reported that the victim was unable to walk.

Ten soldiers were ultimately arrested for the rape on July 29, in a case that has rocked Israeli society. The soldiers belong to a unit known as Force 100, which is tasked with guarding the Sde Teiman facility, according to Haaretz.

Military prosecutors released three of the arrested soldiers on August 4, adding to the two previously released by investigators following a military court hearing in Kfar Yona on July 30, at which protesters gathered in support of the soldiers under arrest.

The video has shocked many within Israeli society. Some observers, including a local rights group and two UN agencies, have voiced concerns about the treatment of Palestinian prisoners. However, for some, including the country's far-right finance minister, the outrage has centred on the "crime" of recording the video, rather than the alleged rape itself.

Taking to X, formerly Twitter, on Thursday night, Bezalel Smotrich demanded "an immediate criminal investigation to locate the leakers of the trending video that was intended to harm the reservists and that caused tremendous damage to Israel in the world and to exhaust the full severity of the law against them."

Others, including the hard right and ultranationalist politicians, such as National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, within Israel, have argued that any action – even gang rape – is permissible if it is undertaken for the security of the state.

Defending the indefensible

Following the arrest of the reservists on July 29, far-right mobs, some of which included government ministers, stormed the facility at Sde Teiman in southern Israel later the same day.

Unable to find and free the imprisoned soldiers, they then turned to the base at Beit Lid, 60km away, where the soldiers were being held for questioning, to call for the soldiers' release.

That unrest continued during a high court hearing, convened on Wednesday to hear the petitions of Sde Teiman prisoners who are alleged to have been tortured. The proceedings were interrupted by demonstrators, who included victims of the October 7 Hamas-led attack, who shouted "Disgrace" and "We are the sovereign."

Israeli pressure group Guarding the Soldiers – a new organisation formed in defence of the soldiers accused of rape – was quoted in Israeli media as saying: "The hearing in the high court this morning is absurd and a gift to [Hamas leader Yahya] Sinwar and murderers."

Israeli politicians, including cabinet members, have also defended the accused. Ben-Gvir, who is responsible for the prison service, told Israeli media on the day of the reservists' arrest that it was "shameful" for Israel to arrest "our best heroes". The same day, Smotrich, who had been among the right-wing mob to storm the prison, published a video message, saying that "IDF soldiers deserve respect" and must not be treated as "criminals".

On being asked by Ahmad Tibi, one of the Arab MPs within the Israeli Knesset last week if it was legitimate “to insert a stick into a person’s rectum”, Hanoch Milwidsky, a member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s ruling Likud party, responded: “If he is a Nukhba [Hamas militant], everything is legitimate to do! Everything!”

‘Just the tip of the iceberg’

The video of the alleged gang rape at Sde Teiman is the latest piece in a growing body of evidence of abuse, sexual assault and the systematic withholding of food and medical care that Palestinians endure within the Israeli prison system.

A report titled Welcome to Hell, published this week by the Israeli human rights advocacy group, B’Tselem, includes interviews with 55 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli detention centres since October 7. In firsthand accounts, the prisoners, the majority of whom were later released without charge at locations across the occupied Palestinian territory, Gaza and within Israel, recount being assaulted, insulted and sexually abused by guards.

“The conditions at Sde Teiman aren’t unique. They’re just the tip of the iceberg,” the organisation’s spokesperson, Shai Parnes, told Al Jazeera by phone from Jerusalem.

“We heard similar accounts of sexual abuse, starvation and assault from separate prisoners held in 16 different locations across Israel. It was depressing. As we gathered the testimonies, we realised that every witness account was almost identical, no matter what their age, gender or location was. There’s no doubt. This kind of abuse is systematic,” he said.

‘At odds with international law’

Allegations of the systematic abuse of prisoners within a justice system which critics say is fundamentally at odds with international law have also been detailed in a separate report published on Monday by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), and in an unpublished report – seen by Al Jazeera in March – from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

Responding to warnings of overcrowding within the prison system from the security agency Shin Bet in early July, Ben-Gvir repeated his call for Palestinian prisoners to be executed, tweeting that one of his principal goals since attaining office had been to “worsen the conditions of the terrorists in the prisons, and to reduce their rights to the minimum required by law”.

He said: “Everything published about the abominable conditions” of the Palestinians being held in Israeli prisons “was true.”

Palestinian protest

The United States, Israel’s principal ally, called the allegations of sexual abuse of Palestinian prisoners “horrific”, saying Israel must investigate “swiftly” and “fully.” State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told the media on Wednesday: “There ought to be zero tolerance for sexual abuse, rape of any detainee. Period. That’s a fundamental belief of the United States.”

On Thursday, the European Union also expressed dismay. Peter Stano, a spokesperson for the EU’s diplomatic service, told Politico: “The EU is gravely concerned by the allegations of human rights violations and abuses, including torture and sexual abuse of Palestinian detainees at the Sde Teiman military facility in Israel and elsewhere.”

Nevertheless, many within Israel continue to defend the conditions in which Palestinian prisoners are being held, as well as the rape alleged to have been carried out by the soldiers at Sde Teiman.

“Look, the question really isn’t about rape,” Ori Goldberg, a Tel Aviv-based political analyst, told Al Jazeera. “The question is – can Israel, or Israelis, be reproached for anything they do in defence of the state?”

In the opinion of some, Goldberg explained, no act, no matter how immoral it might appear to the outside world, is off limits, if it is carried out to further the security of Israel. “We even had a journalist on breakfast television criticising not the rape but the ‘disorganised’ way it was carried out,” Goldberg added.

That outlook remains a minority view, he cautioned. Nevertheless, even among the Israeli liberals who argue against that view of their country and its actions, little thought is given to the Palestinian victims. “Oh, it’s got nothing to do with the victims,” Goldberg said. “This is all about Israel.”

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