

Palestinian medics taken from Gaza and tortured while detained in Israel

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Protesters gather outside Israel's Sde Teiman detention facility after Israeli military police arrived as part of an investigation into the sexual abuse of a Palestinian detainee [File: Amir Cohen/Reuters]

New York, August 27 (RHC)-- Palestinian healthcare workers were rounded up from medical facilities in Gaza, sent to detention centers in Israel, and then severely mistreated and some tortured, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW).

An HRW report released on Monday detailed the alleged torture, threats of rape and sexual abuse by Israeli forces, denial of medical care and poor detention conditions that doctors, nurses and paramedics have faced since the war in Gaza began in October.

The detentions are part of the reason for the collapse of Gaza's healthcare system since Israel began the war, which has killed more than 40,000 Palestinians. "The Israeli government's mistreatment of Palestinian healthcare workers has continued in the shadows and needs to immediately stop," said Balkees Jarrah, acting Middle East director at the human rights organisation.

"The torture and other ill-treatment of doctors, nurses, and paramedics should be thoroughly investigated and appropriately punished, including by the International Criminal Court (ICC)," Jarrah said in a statement.

The organisation's interviews with eight released healthcare workers and seven witnesses revealed mistreatment in Israeli custody, including humiliation, beatings, forced stress positions, prolonged cuffing and blindfolding.

One paramedic, Walid Khalili, was blindfolded and taken to Israel's Sde Teiman military detention facility, known for the rape of at least one Palestinian detainee. He told HRW that once his blindfold was removed, he saw dozens of detainees hanging from the ceiling of a large warehouse-like building by chains attached to their handcuffs.

Khalili was chained and hung like the other prisoners, dressed in a garment and headband attached to wires, and shocked with electricity, the report said. "It was so degrading, it was unbelievable," he told HRW. "I was helping people as a paramedic. I never expected something like this."

Another detained paramedic held at al-Naqab prison said he saw a man "bleeding from his bottom." The man revealed to the paramedic that before he was placed in detention, "three soldiers took turns raping him with an M16 [made in the USA assault rifle]. No one else knew, but he told me as a paramedic. He was terrified," the report quoted the paramedic as saying.

The detained healthcare workers were held without charge for seven days to five months, having been taken by the military between November and December, HRW reported. They were pressured to confess to being members of Hamas through various threats of indefinite detention, rape and the killing of their families in Gaza, the rights group said.

None was ever informed of the reason for the detention or charged with an offence, according to the report.

Reports by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees and other rights groups similarly have documented torture and abuses of Palestinians in Israeli detention.

Israeli forces have detained at least 310 Palestinian healthcare workers since October 7, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health. As a result of their prolonged arbitrary detention and mistreatment, the health crisis in Gaza has worsened, HRW said.

Since the start of Israel's war, medical workers have been fighting to keep Gaza's healthcare system going despite destroyed facilities, a lack of supplies and fuel, and continued attacks.

Medics in Gaza risk their lives to help those wounded by Israeli air strikes, and many paramedics themselves have been targeted by Israeli forces as they respond to attacks.

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