

Dying in Hell: The fate of Palestinian medics jailed by Israel

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Soldiers lock a gate from the inside at the Sde Teiman Israeli detention facility near Bir as-Sab' (Beersheba) [Amir Cohen/Reuters]

Ramallah, November 25 (RHC)-- One of Gaza's most prominent doctors may have been raped to death, recent revelations show. He's not the only one.

Dr Adnan Al-Bursh's life sat in stark contrast to the manner of the charismatic 49-year-old's death.

The head of orthopaedics at Gaza's al-Shifa Hospital was working at the al-Awda Hospital in northern Gaza in December when he and other medics were arrested by the Israeli army for, they said, "national security reasons."

Four months later, Ofer Prison guards dragged Al-Bursh and dumped him in the prison yard, naked from the waist down, bleeding and unable to stand, according to a statement provided by Israeli human rights organisation, HaMoked.

Recognising him, some of the other prisoners carried Al-Bursh to a nearby room, and he died moments later.

Dr Al-Bursh had become a fixture in the lives of many through the video diaries he posted before his arrest. His videos showed him with his colleagues, digging mass graves in the al-Shifa yard to bury people because Israel would not let their bodies be taken to a cemetery, operating on the injured and the dying with little or no equipment, and waiting together for the Israeli assault on a hospital where thousands had sought safety.

The assault came in mid-November when, in scenes captured by Dr Al-Bursh, the Israeli army ordered al-Shifa, its patients, staff and approximately 50,000 displaced people sheltering in the compound to vacate.

Dr Al-Bursh made his way to the Indonesian Hospital in northern Gaza where he worked until that too came under fire in November and he moved to Al-Awda Hospital. There he was arrested and entered a prison system that Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem describes as "Hell."

Israel often detains healthcare workers like Dr Al-Bursh, holding them in horrific conditions for "investigation."

"Most of the doctors and nurses [held by Israel who spoke to PHRI] reported that the investigation was 'fishing' for information, but they weren't accused [of] any charges," Naji Abbas, Physicians for Human Rights Israel's prisoners' department director said.

"Our lawyer visited dozens of healthcare workers who [are] still in Israeli detention for long months without charge or having a fair trial, most of them didn't ever see a lawyer," he added.

The Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza reports that Israel has detained at least 310 Palestinian healthcare workers since the war on Gaza began in October 2023.

Many of them have reported abuse and cruel treatment including the use of stress positions, withholding food and water and sexual violence, including rape.

"The healthcare workers we've spoken to have been held for anywhere between seven days and five months," Milena Ansari of Human Rights Watch (HRW) said, whose August report on the arbitrary detention and torture of healthcare workers documented the matter.

"Many aren't even charged, they're just asked general questions, like: 'Who's your Imam?' 'What mosque do you go to?' or even 'Are you a member of Hamas?' but without providing any evidence," she said.

Bad becomes worse, becomes 'Hell'

Accounts of the widespread torture and mistreatment of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons are longstanding.

However, all the analysts Al Jazeera spoke to noted two distinct stages in the dramatic deterioration in conditions and surging abuse: firstly after the appointment of Itamar Ben-Gvir as national security minister in 2022, followed by the explosion of maltreatment of detainees that followed the onset of the Israeli war on Gaza in October 2023.

“They don’t care if you’re from Gaza or Jerusalem, whether you’re a doctor or a labourer – if you’re a Palestinian, you’re the enemy,” Shai Parness of the Israeli human rights organisation B’Tselem said.

“It’s brutal and it’s systematic,” he said of a system that B’Tselem’s August report, Welcome To Hell, characterized as “a network of torture camps”. “It’s not just violence, humiliation and sexual abuse, it’s everything,” Ansari said.

“Accounts of physical and sexual violence were common. Of those who had been abused physically, injuries around the head, shoulders and, in the cases of men, from between the legs and the bottom are fairly common,” Ansari added.

She detailed the case of one paramedic who told HRW of having encountered another detainee, bleeding from his anus, who described how three Israeli guards had taken it in turns to rape him with their M16 rifles.

‘Reduce their rights’

Responding to accusations of overcrowding from the Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security agency in July, Ben-Gvir boasted of the abominable conditions in his prison systems, writing on X: “Since I assumed the position of minister of national security, one of the highest goals I have set for myself is to worsen the conditions of the terrorists in the prisons and to reduce their rights to the minimum required by law.”

Earlier the same week, he released a video saying: “Prisoners should be shot in the head instead of being given more food.”

“It was bad, it’s always been bad,” Abbas told Al Jazeera, “But things became really serious after Ben-Gvir’s appointment. Since October, it’s been like another world. It’s been horrifying.

“Before the war, there were hundreds of Palestinian prisoners with chronic diseases. Now there are thousands more people in detention, which means many more with chronic conditions, who are going untreated.”

In July, following arrests of Israeli soldiers accused of systematic torture and rape at the Sde Teiman detention facility, Israeli protesters – elected politicians among them – stormed Sde Teiman and the nearby Beit Lid base demanding the release of the arrested soldiers.

Writing to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu afterwards, Ben-Gvir decried the soldiers’ arrest for rape and torture as “shameful”, saying of conditions in his prison system: “The summer camps and patience for the terrorists are over.”

According to a statement given to the United Kingdom’s Sky News by the Israeli military, Dr Al-Bursh was taken from Al-Awda to Sde Teiman.

About a quarter of the 100 or so detainees at Sde Teiman were healthcare workers, another inmate, Dr Khalid Hamouda estimated.

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA and NEWS AGENCIES]

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