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Israel/South Lebanon : The game that must be stopped -- Human lives as “bargaining chips”

Amnesty International welcomed the release of 60 Lebanese prisoners today, but regrets Israel's failure to release all the Lebanese nationals it holds as hostages, including 21 held in Israel and other detainees held without charge or trial in Khiam Detention Centre in Israeli-occupied South Lebanon.

“By Israel's own admission, Lebanese detainees are being held as ‘bargaining chips’; they are not detained for their own actions but in exchange for Israeli soldiers missing in action or killed in Lebanon,” Amnesty International said today. “Most have now spent 10 years in secret and isolated detention. Must the hostages wait in detention for another 10 years before they are released? This is a game that must stop.”

The human rights organization condemns the practice of holding hostages and calls for all those held to be immediately and unconditionally released.

The present prisoner exchange, brokered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), comes after months of negotiations following an Israeli raid in Lebanon in September 1997 in which 12 Israeli soldiers were killed. The release of 60 Lebanese prisoners today (10 from Israel and 50 from Khiam) is in exchange for the body of Itamar Ilya, an Israeli soldier who died during the raid. In addition, the bodies of 40 Lebanese men who died in operations fighting against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon have been returned to Lebanon.

Most of the 21 Lebanese nationals still held as hostages in Israel are in Ayalon Prison, Ramleh; two of them, Mustafa al-Dirani and Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karim ‘Ubayd, are held in a secret place without access to the ICRC. Some of these Lebanese prisoners have remained in detention for more than 10 years without charge or trial; others have been held for up to 10 years beyond the expiry of their sentences. In November 1997 the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled that it was permissible to keep them in detention as “bargaining chips”. This judgement was kept secret and only made public in March 1998.

“If an armed group takes people as hostages it is universally condemned,” Amnesty International maintained. “A human being is not a ‘bargaining chip’ and must not be treated as such.”

Amnesty International is calling on the Israeli Government to release all hostages and abide by the international human rights instruments it has ratified, which state that people must not be detained arbitrarily and must be tried within a reasonable time or released.

“In stating that the prisoners released from Khiam were released ‘by the South Lebanon Army’ Israel is attempting to keep up the pretence that it is not responsible for Khiam,” Amnesty

International said. "As the occupying power of its self-styled security zone in South Lebanon which includes Khiam, Israel is directly responsible for Khiam and for all the actions of its proxy militia."

Background

Only one detainee believed to be held as a hostage has been released. He is Husayn Mikdad, a Lebanese national detained in administrative detention since May 1996 when a bomb he was apparently intending to place exploded accidentally in his hotel in East Jerusalem; he lost both legs and was blinded in the explosion. The other Lebanese prisoners released from Israel are believed to be from among about 40 Lebanese nationals taken from Lebanon over the past 20 years who are in Israeli prisons either awaiting trial or after having been sentenced by military courts.

Fifty detainees have been released from Khiam Detention Centre in South Lebanon, a prison administered by Israel's proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army. About 100 other Lebanese prisoners, including women and minors, remain inside. All detainees are held without charge or trial and outside of any legal framework. Torture of detainees is systematic; they have been cut off from the outside world, denied family visits or access to the ICRC between 1987 and 1995 and again since September 1997.

Israeli nationals have also been held or have "disappeared" after capture by Lebanese armed groups. Zachary Baumel, Zvi Feldman and Yehuda Katz, three Israeli servicemen, went missing on 11 June 1982. Their fate has never been clarified. Another Israeli, known to have been captured alive and held as a prisoner, is Ron Arad, an aircraft navigator in the Israeli Air Force who went missing on 16 October 1986. If any of these men are being held as hostages, they should be immediately released.
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