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Israel/Lebanon: Israeli Supreme Court endorses hostage-taking

The Israeli Supreme Court's ruling authorizing the Israeli Government to hold 10 Lebanese detainees as hostages to secure the release of Israeli servicemen missing in action is contemptible and explicitly legitimizes hostage-taking, Amnesty International declared today.

"The decision is intolerable," the organization said. "Those held as hostages include people who were only 16 when they were taken from their village and have now spent up to 11 years in detention, often secret and incommunicado. These are real people, not objects to be used as political pawns."

When armed groups take hostages, it is universally condemned. Yet the Supreme Court of Israel has now characterised human beings, who should have the right to security and freedom from arbitrary detention, as "bargaining chips" which can be exchanged in pursuit of a "vital interest of state".

The Supreme Court ruling, which covers 10 of the 21 Lebanese hostages held by Israeli authorities, was made in November last year, but only made public on Wednesday, reportedly after a long struggle by the lawyer whose original petition was made as far back as 1994.

The Israeli Government has acknowledged that the detainees themselves pose no threat to state security. Their continued detention therefore has no basis in international law.

"They kidnapped us from our villages, from our homes, with bread in our hands, not from battle, with guns in our hands," wrote one detainee to an Amnesty International group.

The families of the detainees are not allowed visits. In March 1996 the mother of Ghassan al-Dirani travelled from Lebanon to the prison hospital where her son, mentally and physically sick, was being held. After two days of pleading, she was still forbidden to see him. *"I was in tears, the Red Cross delegate also,"* she writes. An Israel Defence Forces spokesperson said: *"As long as there is no news of Ron Arad [an Israeli missing in action captured in 1986 by Amal, a Lebanese Shi'a militia], there will be no meetings with [Lebanese] detainees in Israel and no information about the detainees will be released."*

In violation of the Geneva Conventions, ratified by Israel, two of the detainees, Mustafa al-Dirani and Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim 'Ubayd, have never had access to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

At least 150 other Lebanese nationals are detained in Khiam Detention Centre, run by the South Lebanese Army, a militia allied to Israel in the part of South Lebanon occupied by Israel. Some have been there without charge, trial or any legal status since 1986. Since September 1997 they have had no access to the ICRC.

Amnesty International has long expressed its concern to the Israeli authorities over the way

in which these detainees have been held. The organization is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Lebanese hostages held in Israel.
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