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Palestinian hunger striker on verge of death must be admitted to hospital or released

A Palestinian footballer who is at risk of death after more than 90 days on hunger strike in protest against his detention by Israel should immediately be admitted to a civilian hospital or released so that he can receive life-saving medical care, Amnesty International said.

Mahmoud al-Sarsak is from the Gaza Strip and has been detained by Israel since July 2009. He is the only detainee currently held under the Internment of Unlawful Combatants Law, which allows Israel to hold individuals without charge or trial based on secret information.

Under the law, detainees can be held indefinitely unless they can prove they do not threaten Israeli security.

"After almost three years in detention, the Israeli authorities have had ample opportunity to charge al-Sarsak with a recognizable criminal offence and bring him to trial," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director.

"They have failed to do so, and instead repeatedly affirmed his detention order on the basis of secret information withheld from him and his lawyer."

Al-Sarsak has been denied proper access to medical treatment repeatedly during his hunger strike. For someone on the verge of death, this amounts to inhuman and degrading treatment in violation of Israel's international obligations.

"The specialized medical care al-Sarsak urgently needs is only available in a civilian hospital and he must be admitted to one or released so that he can receive it," said Philip Luther.

"Israel should repeal the Internment of Unlawful Combatants Law, which lacks minimal safeguards for detainees' rights."

On Wednesday, Mahmoud al-Sarsak's family in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, who have not seen their son since his arrest or spoken to him since he went on hunger strike, told Amnesty International they fear he will die in detention.

They urged the international community to intervene to save his life.

The same day, al-Sarsak's lawyer told Amnesty International that his client continues to be held at the Israel Prison Service medical centre at Ramleh, which cannot provide the specialized medical care needed for detainees on prolonged hunger strikes.