



# WOMEN FOR PALESTINE

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### Double Jeopardy entraps Palestinians

Already condemned to a life of imprisonment by the Israeli Government for just being a Palestinian in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, every Palestinian lives in fear of being arrested and imprisoned in Israel for wanting to be free. And, international law and conventions are no source of comfort to Palestinians seeking a way out of this double jeopardy. The world has repeatedly shown that it is not prepared to hold Israel to account. Instead, Israel is allowed to continue its illegal occupation and also to blatantly disregard universal legal procedures and rules by allowing the military to introduce its own regulations and enforce them on the Palestinians. Under such conditions, it is no wonder that Palestinians feel entrapped and helpless to change their miserable circumstances.

Since 1967, one-fifth of the Palestinian population (more than 700,000 people) has ended up in Israeli jails for refusing to accept Israel's oppressive military occupation. The vast majority of these Palestinians are not terrorists with "blood on their hands", but ordinary men and women who have been prepared to speak out against the occupying power as would any people subjected to 40 years of human rights abuses. Of course, Israel would regard such dissidence as dangerous to its own stated goal of replacing the indigenous Palestinian population with an imported and exclusively Jewish one. Hence, Palestinians are arbitrarily arrested - often without charges being laid or a trial - subjected to interrogation, torture, and if deemed a security risk, are transported to Israel and placed in administrative detention, or if sentenced, sent to an Israeli jail. That is an extraordinary indictment on a country that professes to be a democratic state living by the rule of law.

No one speaks much about the Palestinian prisoners in Israel where they are taken in breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibiting their transfer. Yet, almost every family has experienced the violence of having one of their own taken away. Children are forced to watch their fathers and brothers being herded out of home at gunpoint in the early hours of the morning, blindfolded, handcuffed and secreted away. Pregnant women and mothers have been taken and children as young as 12 are sent to adult prisons. Babies have been born in prison and are then separated from their mothers who sometimes do not see their children again until years later. Sometimes those taken prisoner disappear altogether. The sheer number of Palestinians in prison (currently some 11,000) has made it an unavoidable issue in negotiations and has led to prisoner swaps with Israel. However, nothing much changes because Israel either re-arrests those released or just arrests other Palestinians. This is why the Palestinian National Council decided to declare 17 April as Prisoners' Day encouraging family and friends to gather throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories and also around the world with photos of their loved ones in the hope of attracting publicity for those in prison and obtaining their release.

The problem is that the plight of Palestinians, whether enduring the worst excesses of occupation, racism inside Israel or the inhuman conditions of Israeli prisons, elicits no outrage from the international community on any score. It is as if the Palestinians are invisible or somehow not deserving of our humanity. The greatest irony of course is, that while Palestinians are reduced to a sub-human existence, the world stops to remember the Jewish Holocaust at this time without a thought for the "victims of the victims" as Edward Said so aptly described the relationship between the Palestinians and Israel's Jews. While it is difficult to comprehend that a people so immersed in remembering the atrocities committed against their own in Europe could resort to the degradation of another people, it is worse that the world remains indifferent or even supports Israel in its crimes.

There is no excuse for not speaking up, no excuse for accepting Israel's fantasy of a "beacon unto the nations". As long as Palestinians are prisoners in the Orwellian world being created around them, as long as their freedom and human rights are denied, as long as their existence is in jeopardy, all the sympathy we murmur to other victims becomes meaningless, just as the noble principles underlying international law and conventions are meaningless. In this dark world of silence, we all become prisoners. - **SK/WFP**