

Palestinian students end hunger strike

by Cindy Reeves

Students at a West Bank university ended a solidarity hunger strike last month after Israeli authorities agreed to meet some demands of striking Palestinian prisoners.

Student Council member Eyad Al-Aloul said in a telephone interview that over 250 students at Ramallah's Birzeit University waged the strike in response to a call to action by Palestinians inside Israeli prisons.

Birzeit students are no stranger to hardship. In the last decade, their university has been closed by military order an estimated 60 per cent of the time. The longest closure, lasting from January 1988 to April 1992, followed the start of the Intifada uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem.

Nader Khateeb, a Birzeit student also interviewed by *Excalibur*, was not surprised that the student council opted to strike.

"Many students used to be pris-

oners and some have relatives in prison — brothers, fathers, cousins," Khateeb said. "All Palestinians are one family. If something is wrong with your brother, you are going to do your best to help him."

Currently, there are 55 Birzeit students and staff in Israeli prisons and detention centres. Students, staff and faculty have also been deported.

Amongst those deported are university president Hanna Nasir and student council president Marwan Barghouti. The university believes Nasir was targeted as a Palestinian community leader and Barghouti for his public activities as a representative of Birzeit students. (Authorities cited lists of speeches given by him at various public occasions as the reason for his deportation.)

Many human rights organizations have documented the torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian detainees held in Israeli prisons and detention camps, including Amnesty International, Israel's B'Tselem, Jerusalem's Mandela Institute for Prisoners, the

Palestine Human Rights Information Centre (PHRIC), a branch of the Arab Studies Society in Jerusalem, and Al Haq, the West Bank affiliate of the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists.

According to PHRIC, at least 120,000 Palestinians have been detained for more than 24 hours since the beginning of the Intifada. Of these, 15,000 were held without charges or trial and 11 died while under interrogation.

The prisoner's 18 day hunger strike was not futile. Gains reported by PHRIC include:

- an increase in family visit time (from 30 minutes every two weeks to 45 minutes) and permission for prisoners to hug and kiss their small children;

- permission to continue education within prison;

- approval of the transfer of prisoners to sites close to their homes (many prisoners from the Occupied Territories have been illegally transferred to prisons in Israel where it is very

difficult for their families to visit them);

- the establishment of a review board to study the status of the isolation prisoners every six months;

- approval for a permanent female physician for the women's prison (Muslim women have complained that male physicians have humiliated them by not respecting cultural restrictions).

Some of the prisoners' demands are still under negotiation such as the granting of the right of prisoners to celebrate national and religious holidays without threat or use of force, a request to release old and ailing prisoners, and the closure of an underground punishment section.

Many requests were refused outright, including an end to the policy of long periods of solitary confinement, the removal of shackles during visits, the provision of dining facilities and permission for prisoners to telephone their families once a week.

It is yet unclear as to whether all prisoners have ended hunger strikes.

Some sources say there still may be hunger strikers in some of the facilities.

According to Khateeb, there may be more strikes in the future.

"If the promises made by the prison's administration are not met than of course the only means to achieve these goals is through a hunger strike. This is the only means of struggle prisoners have. And Birzeit may start another solidarity strike also," he said.

Story of the hunger strike

Sept 27

- Palestinian prisoners' hunger strike begins.

Sept 30

- Israeli police refuse water and salt to strikers brought before Nablus Military Court.
- Authorities in one prison prevent lawyer visits and refuse further legal access to prisoners until Oct 11.

Oct 1

- Prisoners in one prison undergo body searches in which their hands are tied behind their back, they are stripped and cavity searches are performed.
- Family visits are canceled in three prisons.
- In some prisons medical treatment is refused to sick prisoners unless they break their strike.

Oct 2

- Detainees assert that their strike is a humanitarian one aimed at achieving basic human needs, and refute Israeli allegations that the strike is being held for political gain.
- Another prison bans attorneys and yet another bans family visits.

Oct 3

- Israeli defense forces attack those participating in a sit-in at al-Khalil Red Cross office with sound bombs, tear gas and gunfire.
- Defense forces also attack a solidarity march to the Red Cross. Ten women are injured.

Oct 4

- After visiting one prison, lawyers report cases of rapid weight loss.
- It is discovered that detainees in interrogation cells have joined the strike and are demanding they be returned to regular cells and be allowed family visits which they have not had in four months.

Oct 5

- Arab Lawyers Committee is informed that the Israeli Police Minister has threatened to forbid all lawyers from visiting the prisons as he is trying to break the strike by eliminating connections amongst the prisons.

Oct 7

- Birzeit University student council announces open-ended hunger strike in solidarity with striking prisoners.

Oct 8

- Authorities admit that the policy of solitary confinement is used as punishment and imposed randomly.
- Commissioner of Southern Region Prisons announces he will not meet most of the demands even after the deaths of all hunger strikers.

Oct 9

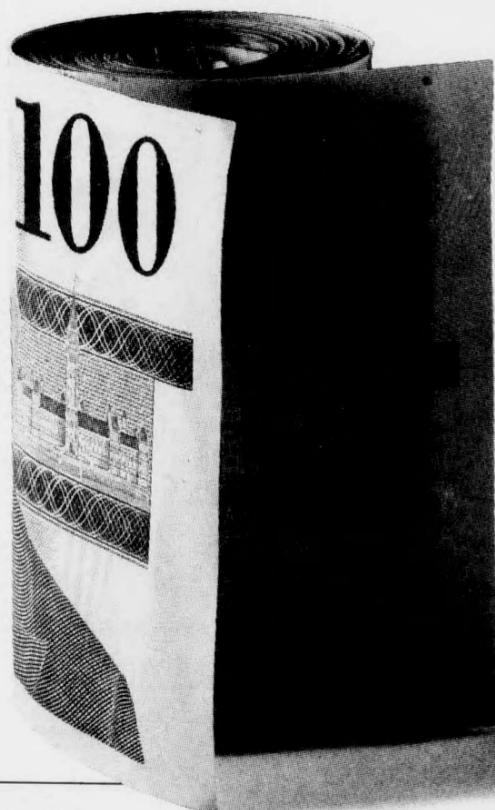
- attorneys attempting to visit one prison are delayed for one and a half hours. An alarm sounds and they are forcibly rushed out of the waiting area. While there, one attorney reports he smells tear gas.

Oct 14

- Hussein Obeidat, a striking prisoner, is reported dead.

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