

Israel frees hospital chief with prisons ‘full’ of Gaza captives

July 1, 2024

Online Desk :

Israel has freed dozens of Palestinians detained during its war in Gaza, including the director of one of the enclave’s main hospitals. Israel released 55 prisoners on Monday to free up space in its jails, unconfirmed reports claimed. Speaking shortly after his return to Gaza, al-Shifa Hospital Director Muhammad Abu Salmiya asserted that Palestinian prisoners in Israel’s prisons were facing daily abuse.

With thousands of Palestinians having been added to those already detained since the war began on October 7, Israel’s prisons are “full,” reported the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation. Abu Salmiya was arrested amid claims by the Israeli military that Hamas was using al-Shifa Hospital as a base. The medical chief said no charge had ever been laid against him.

Freed after more than seven months of custody, he said detainees endured “daily physical and psychological humiliation” in captivity. “Our detainees have been subjected to all kinds of torture behind bars,” he said at a news conference in Gaza. “There was almost daily torture. Cells are broken into and prisoners are beaten.

“Several inmates died in interrogation centres and were deprived of food and medicine,” he added. Recounting the alleged abuse, Abu Salmiya said guards broke his finger and doled out beatings using batons and dogs. Medical staff were responsible for abuse and neglect too, he said, with some detainees’ limbs amputated due to poor medical care.

The captives were also severely underfed while in custody, he added, surviving on nothing more than a loaf of bread per day for two months. All of them lost at least 30kg (66lb), he said. Israeli officials did not immediately comment on the allegations of mistreatment but have previously denied such charges. The Israel Prison Service has denied that Abu Salmiya was released due to lack of space in the country’s jails.

Health campaign

Abu Salmiya was among the detainees arrested in November during an Israeli military raid of al-Shifa Hospital, Gaza’s largest health facility. Israel had claimed the complex, where an estimated 2,300 Palestinians were sheltering, was being used as a Hamas command centre, charges staff denied.

During the raid, Israeli forces wrecked the complex’s medical services and fired at people trying to leave the compound, according to doctors. The bodies of at least 179 people, including seven babies, were buried in a mass grave on the hospital grounds. Al-Shifa is among more than 100 health facilities Israel has raided and attacked during the nine-month war, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

‘Negligence’

Upon their release, most of the released detainees were taken for medical checkups at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis. Others were brought to Al-Aqsa Hospital in Deir el-Balah, where dozens of detainees’ relatives showed up to reunite with them and inquire about the fate of those still behind bars, shows footage verified by Al Jazeera’s Sanad fact-checking agency. Several Israeli political figures slammed the decision to release the detainees. Far-right Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir branded the move as “security negligence”.

Former war cabinet minister Benny Gantz said whoever ordered their release should be dismissed and called on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to “close some government offices to free up space and budget for prisoners”. Since the Gaza war broke out, Israel has rounded up hundreds of Palestinians from the enclave and thousands more from the occupied West Bank, holding many without charge.

At least 40 Palestinians have died in Israeli custody during this time, an official with the Palestinian monitor Addameer told Al Jazeera. Abu Salmiya, speaking after his release, said some had been killed in interrogation cells.