

December 31, 2020

Press Release:

Human rights organizations in urgent High Court petition:

Palestinian “security” prisoners must have phone contact with their families during the Coronavirus pandemic

HaMoked: Center for the Defence of the Individual and seven other human rights organizations petitioned Israel’s High Court of Justice demanding that incarcerated Palestinians defined as “security” prisoners and detainees be allowed to maintain telephone contact with their families. The petition comes in light of the prolonged isolation of thousands of people from their families following the cancellation of all prison visits due to Coronavirus restrictions. The petition is joined by the organizations Addameer, al-Mezan, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Public Committee Against Torture, Adalah and Parents Against Child Detention.

The petition was filed as Israel entered its third lockdown and all prison visits were suspended indefinitely. While criminal prisoners have access to daily phone calls with their families, the majority of Palestinians are defined as “security” prisoners or detainees, and as such are denied phone calls by the Israel Prison Service (IPS).

The petition details how, since the outbreak of the pandemic in late February, the IPS has restricted visits to its facilities, leaving the over 4,000 Palestinian security prisoners and detainees completely cut off from the outside world. Among the cases described is that of a prisoner in Shatta Prison who, without visits or phone calls, learned through radio broadcasts that his sister was pregnant, that one of his grandmother’s had contracted COVID-19 and his other grandmother’s health had deteriorated.

The petition also demands access to phone calls for detainees who have contracted the Coronavirus or need to quarantine due to contact with confirmed patients. This demand is based on testimonies given to the organizations by prisoners who were sick or in quarantine for weeks, but were not allowed to phone their families to tell them of their condition. Families of prisoners and detainees gave similar testimonies, also noting that the IPS did not even inform them of their loved one’s health condition while they were isolated in prison Coronavirus quarantine.

In addition, the petition demands that a system be put in place to grant all detained minors frequent access to phone calls, similarly to the pilot program currently in effect in the Damon prison. This demand comes months after the IPS committed, as part of previous legal proceedings by the organizations, to allow minors to speak with their families once every two weeks throughout the Coronavirus crisis. Yet despite this promise, minors in prisons other than Damon have not had regular phone calls with their parents for the past several months.

Jessica Montell, Executive Director of HaMoked: “Ten months into this pandemic and the Israel Prison Service has failed to ensure regular contact between Palestinian detainees and prisoners and their families. Now, with the third lockdown and the cancellation of all prison visits, thousands of people are completely cut off from the outside world. At this time of heightened uncertainty, where we’re all worried about the spread of the Coronavirus, families of prisoners have no way of knowing their loved one’s condition, and prisoners have no way of knowing how the pandemic is affecting those back home. Keeping prisoners in these circumstances is a violation of their rights to family life and to humane treatment.”