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Ramallah, 19 March 2009 - Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association strongly condemns the arrests of 10 Palestinian political leaders which were carried out by the Israeli Occupying Forces in a West Bank raid in the early hours of Thursday, 19 March 2009. Addameer views these arrests as a form of collective punishment in direct response to the failure of prisoner exchange talks between the Israeli government and Hamas which collapsed in Cairo on 18 March 2009. The kidnapped leaders included 4 Palestinian Legislative Council members, a former education minister and deputy prime minister, in addition to other political leaders, all identified with the Change and Reform bloc, believed to be associated with Hamas.

The Israeli Occupying Forces officially justified the raid by stating that the captured men were involved in "restoring the Hamas administrative branch" in the West Bank. Addameer however, considers that these men were kidnapped to be held as hostages in Israeli detention as a form of exerting further pressure on Hamas to achieve political gains at a time when the outgoing Israeli administration is in desperate need of political success. "The purpose of these arrests is purely political" - said Sahar Francis, Addameer's Director. "It is unthinkable that the Israeli government first engages in a political process and negotiations with Hamas, and then kidnaps 10 political leaders, associated with the movement and uses them as bargaining chips. This is not only a form of collective punishment, which in itself is a violation of international humanitarian law, but also a politically counterproductive move".

The list of arrested leaders includes PLC members Ayman Daraghmeh from Jenin, Azzam Salhab and Nizar Ramadan from Hebron and Khaled Tafish from Bethlehem - all of which are part of the Change and Reform electoral bloc, in addition to Nasser Shaer, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education and Mazen Ar-Rimawi, Head of Change and Reform Deputies' office in Ramallah. The other arrested include Adnan Asfour and Rafat Nasif, both political leaders, affiliated with Hamas. Most of them have experienced Israel's detention since 2006 and have recently been released.

Addameer views these latest arrests as a continuation of Israel's policies of collective punishment of the Palestinian people, in particular Hamas movement, following the capture of Corporal Gilad Shalit on 25 June 2006. Indeed, merely 4 days after Gilad Shalit was captured at the Kerem Shalom Crossing on the Gaza Strip border, the Israeli Occupying Forces seized dozens of leaders and activists associated with Change and Reform in coordinated raids across the West Bank. Since 29 June 2006, as many as 45 PLC members have been arrested, 25 of which are still being held to date.

Addameer is alarmed by a gradually more apparent Israeli policy of using Palestinian prisoners as pawns to achieve political and military gains. On 29 November 2008, Knesset Member Gilad Erdan was publicly suggesting building and transferring Palestinian prisoners – in particular Islamic Jihad and Hamas members – to an unprotected, open air prison located in proximity of Gaza's border which constitutes a landing ground for most Qassam rockets launched from the Strip. MK Erdan argued that these prisoners should serve as human shields and thus prevent future attacks on southern Israel.

Addameer expresses its outrage at such statements and stresses that the use of human shields is prohibited by Article 28 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. In addition, Addameer reminds that it is not the first time that Israel reacts with the abduction of people to achieve its political purposes. Indeed, Israel responded by capturing a Hezbollah member, Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid in 1989 and Mustafa Dirani, Head of Security of the Amal Movement in 1994 with the objective to obtain information regarding Israeli Air Force pilot Ron Arad, whose plane was shot down over Lebanon in 1986. Both Lebanese men were held under administrative detention, reportedly tortured and ill-treated while in interrogation. They were denied ICRC visits until 2001. Finally, they were released in 2004 in a German-brokered prisoners' swap.

The latest wave of arrests comes at a time when the Israeli government is considering implementing sanctions against Hamas and Islamic Jihad prisoners held in Israel as a way to ensure the release of Gilad Shalit. Addameer is deeply concerned by the Israeli government's decision on 17 March 2009 to create a special Ministerial Committee which was tasked with exploring legal ways to impose such sanctions and effectively lower the detention conditions of prisoners identified with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The committee is presided over by Daniel Friedmann, the Israeli Minister of Justice and includes Attorney General Menachem Mazuz. The committee will present its initial recommendations to the Israeli government on Sunday 22 March 2009.

Some of the debated measures include preventing and reducing the number of family visits – which Palestinian detainees from Gaza have been denied since 2007, banning Hamas and Islamic Jihad detainees from visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), denying the right to watching television and listening to the radio, lowering the allowed monthly stipend transferred to Palestinian prisoners by their families and finally preventing them from completing their education – all of which are viewed by the Israeli authorities as privileges, rather than rights. Proposals also include the placement of Hamas and Islamic Jihad prisoners in solitary confinement and isolation. Addameer views the implementation of such measures as a form of collective punishment and reiterates that its use is in contravention to international law. Additionally, Addameer reminds that under international human rights law, all prisoners enjoy certain protections and rights and are entitled to regular contact with the outside world, including family visits, the right to fair trial, humane and adequate detention conditions, as well as the right to education. Most importantly, they enjoy protection from torture, cruel, degrading and inhumane treatment under the Geneva Conventions, the implementation of which is monitored by the ICRC. Banning these prisoners from the right to ICRC visits could present an encouragement to further ill-treatment, to which Palestinian prisoners are already currently exposed.

In light of the risk of the implementation of such illegal measures against Palestinian prisoners, Addameer calls on the international community to pressure Israel to dissolve the special Ministerial Committee and renounce its intention to impose any sanctions which might affect their detention conditions.

Addameer reminds the international community that Israeli detention facilities fall short from meeting international minimum standards. "Any attempt to worsen these conditions is likely to have a hugely

detrimental impact on both the physical and mental health of Palestinian prisoners who already suffer from isolation, medical neglect and inadequate detention conditions” - says Sahar Francis, Addameer’s Director.

Addameer demands that the international community puts pressure on Israel to stop its continuous policy of collective punishment against the Palestinian people. In view of arrests of Palestinian elected political leaders which occurred on 19 March 2009 Addameer calls on Israel to immediately release the 10 kidnapped leaders as well as all PLC members arrested since June 2006 as a punitive measure and detained as bargaining chips.

For further information, please call Addameer’s office in Ramallah on: +972 (0)2 2960 446 / 2970136; Email: info@addameer.ps

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