

'Humiliated': Palestinian victims of Israel sexual abuse testify at UN

AFP- Palestinians who say they suffered brutal beatings and sexual abuse in Israeli detention and at the hands of Israeli settlers testified about their ordeals at the United Nations this week.

"I was humiliated and tortured," said Said Abdel Fattah, a 28-year-old nurse detained in November 2023 near Gaza City's Al Shifa hospital where he worked.

Ahead of the hearings Daniel Meron, Israel's ambassador to the UN in Geneva dismissed them as a waste of time, saying Israel investigated and prosecuted any allegations of wrongdoing by its forces.

Fattah gave his testimony from Gaza via video-link to a public hearing, speaking through an interpreter.

He described being stripped naked in the cold, suffering beatings, threats of rape and other abuse over the next two months as he was shuttled between overcrowded detention facilities.

"I was like a punching bag," he said of one particularly harrowing interrogation he endured in January 2024.

The interrogator, he said, "kept hitting me on my genitals... I was bleeding everywhere, I was bleeding from my penis, I was bleeding from my anus".

"I felt like my soul (left) my body."

– 'Shocking' –

Fattah spoke Tuesday during the latest of a series of public hearings hosted by the UN's independent Commission of Inquiry (COI) on the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

This week's hearings, harshly criticised by Israel, are specifically focused on allegations of "sexual and reproductive violence" committed by Israeli security forces and settlers.

"It's important," COI member Chris Sidoti, who hosted the meeting, told AFP. Victims of such abuse are "entitled to be heard", he said.

Experts and advocates who testified Tuesday spoke of a "systematic" trend of sexual violence against Palestinians in detention, but also at checkpoints and other settings since Hamas's October 7, 2023 attacks inside Israel sparked the war in Gaza.

Meron, for Israel, slammed attempts to equate allegations against individual Israelis with Hamas's "shocking... sexual violence towards Israeli hostages, towards victims on October 7".

Any such comparison was "reprehensible", he told reporters on Monday.

He insisted the hearings were "wasting time", since Israel as "a country with law and order" would investigate and prosecute any wrongdoings.

But Palestinian lawyer Sahar Francis decried a glaring lack of accountability, alleging that abuse had become "a widespread policy".

All those arrested from Gaza were strip-searched, she said, with the soldiers in some cases "pushing the sticks" into the prisoner's anus.

Sexual abuse happened "in a very massive way" especially in

the first months of the war, she said.

“I think you can say that most of those who were arrested in these months were subjected to such practice.”

– ‘Just shoot me’ –

The allegations of abuse are not limited to detention centres.

Mohamed Matar, a West Bank resident, said he suffered hours of torture at the hands of security agents and settlers, even as Israeli police refused to intervene.

Just days after the October 7 attack, he and other Palestinian activists went to help protect a Bedouin community facing settler attacks.

As they were leaving the compound, they were chased and caught by a group of settlers, who he said were joined by members of Israel’s Shabak security agency.

He and two other men were blindfolded, stripped to their underwear and, had their hands tied before being taken into a nearby stable.

The leader stood “on my head and ordered me to eat ... the faeces of the sheep”, said Matar.

With dozens of settlers around, the man urinated on the three, and beat them so badly during the nearly 12 hours of abuse that Matar said he cried: “just shoot me in the head”.

The man, he said, jumped on his back and repeatedly “tried to introduce a stick into my anus”.

Blinking back tears, Matar showed Sidoti a photograph taken by the settlers showing the three blindfolded men lying in the dirt in their underwear.

Other pictures taken after the ordeal showed him with massive bruises all over his body.

Speaking to journalists after his testimony, he said he had spent months "in a state of psychological shock".

"I didn't think there were people on Earth with such a level of ugliness, sadism and cruelty."

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