

Syria female detainees on hunger strike

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BEIRUT: Women political prisoners of the Damascus Central Prison, many held without charge, have begun an indefinite hunger strike to protest the conditions in which they are detained. "We are the detainees of conscience in prison of Adra in Damascus, who are in the waiting period to appear for trial ... officially announce today that we are on hunger strike ... and will continue until our demands [are] met," read a statement from the detainees, released earlier this week. It was disseminated by one released prisoner who asked to remain anonymous.

The prisoners' demands include the right to a fair trial, communication with their families outside and the need for medical attention, as some women's health was deteriorating, the prisoners' statement said.

"There is also very tight security checking and control over the women detainees and their families' visits," in addition to basic needs not being met, it added.

A statement from the Syrian National Coalition - the main opposition body - said that "currently, hundreds of Syrian female political prisoners in Adra Prison, as well as in other prisons, live in terrible and inhumane conditions. Many of them are elderly, sick or pregnant and are in dire need of proper health care, which is often denied."

"Other political prisoners are mothers, students or civil servants who have been denied basic legal rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," it added.

It also said that news leaks from inside the Adra prison have stated that "the Assad regime plans to respond cruelly and viciously to these political prisoners' attempt to protest the inhumane conditions of their detention."

According to a statement released Thursday by the Local Coordination Committees - an activist network - members of Air Force Intelligence in Adra are indeed beating and humiliating the women on hunger strike, and striving to prevent news of the strike, or even the detention of women, from being leaked.

It added, "Our heroines are still steadfast and they emphasize that for them, it is a matter of life or death."

A prison administration source told the LCC that the regime was trying to deny that it was keeping women in detention as its key ally, Russia, has asked the government to refrain from issues of international embarrassment.

The LCC statement reports that the source said, "Concentrate on the issue because it's so embarrassing for the regime, especially in front of the Russians, who asked it not to commit similar mistakes that embarrass them internationally. For this reason, the regime is exerting all efforts to conceal and withhold any piece of information about the presence of women among the opinion prisoners inside its jails let alone cause them any harm."

The source added, "If the strike was not a concern for the regime it would have left the women to

starve to death and it wouldn't have practiced all these forms of violence to end it."

Rumors also abound that some of the women prisoners are being kept in Adra longer than their sentences stipulate, as the regime is planning to use them as bargaining chips in a prisoner exchange with the rebels, who are holding nine Lebanese Shi'ite pilgrims kidnapped last year while returning home from Iran via Syria.

Last month a list of 81 female detainees, held in Damascus, was handed to the captors via Turkish and Qatari interlocutors from Lebanese caretaker Interior Minister Marwan Charbel.

A brother of one of the female detainees told The Daily Star that his sister has been informed she was on this list, and was awaiting a prisoner exchange in Turkey.

A recent report from Human Rights Watch detailed the arbitrary detention of female opposition activists, as well as the female relatives of pro-opposition activists and fighters.

In a number of cases, the report says, women detainees were subject to torture and sexual abuse.

The group believes around 150 women are being held at Adra.

HRW interviewed 10 Syrian women who were detained, eight who identified themselves as activists, "all [eight] of whom said that security forces and shabbiha had abused or tortured them in detention."

"The abuse included electric shock, keeping them in stress positions, and using rods, wires and nightsticks to beat and torture them," the report says.

The activism in which they had participated included attending peaceful rallies, making posters, and providing humanitarian aid and medical care to those affected by the conflict.

Two of the women were raped, one at the Military Intelligence Branch in Tartous, and the other at the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Mezze, Damascus. The other two women interviewed were detained solely for their relation to opposition activists, the report states.

Aside from violation of international legal standards - detainees were not informed of the charges against them and kept in pretrial detention for extended periods of time - the women were also subjected to torture.

Speaking to HRW, Fatmeh, a 35-year-old activist who helped transport Syrian army defectors from Homs to Deraa, said that she was tortured every day during a 15-day stretch at Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus, in March 2012.

"One day it would be by electricity, the next by shabeh [being hung from the ceiling by one's wrists with feet dangling or barely touch the ground]. The torture marks are still present. I would lose consciousness with the electricity ... [T]hey were hitting me on my lower legs below my thighs and on my back. They tortured me until my body started bruising ... Two men took me and carried me to the toilet because I couldn't walk."

Fatmeh - not her real name - was eventually released after 14 months.

Olivia Alabaster, *The Daily Star*

P.S.

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<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Jul-06/222720-syria-female-detainees-on-hunger-strike.ashx#ixzz2YGYxt0iw>