

UN says watching Palestinian prisoner hunger strike closely

Spokesperson calls for both sides to show restraint, says inmates should be treated in humane manner

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UNITED NATIONS, United States — The United Nations on Tuesday said it was following closely a hunger strike by more than 1,000 Palestinian security prisoners in Israeli jails and urged restraint following clashes with the strikers' supporters in the West Bank.

"We are obviously aware of the situation and following the developments closely," said UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric.

The Palestinian detainees, led by jailed terrorist Marwan Barghouti, launched the hunger strike on Monday to press for demands such as better medical services and access to telephones.

Dujarric noted that clashes have taken place in the West Bank in support of the prisoners, adding: "We call on all parties to exercise maximum restraint."

Israeli Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan vowed that authorities would not negotiate with the prisoners and said Barghouti had been placed in solitary confinement in another prison.

Dujarric said that "as a matter of principle, wherever it may be, we always call for prisoners to be treated in a humane way."

The UN Security Council will discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during an open debate on Thursday.

Barghouti is the former leader of the Tanzim armed wing of Fatah and the founder of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a Fatah terror group. He was convicted on five counts of murder and one attempted murder, and was implicated in — and held responsible for — four other terror attacks. He is serving five life terms for the murders, and an additional 40 years for attempted murder.

The Israel Prisons Service spokesman Assaf Librati said Tuesday that hunger strikers would be disciplined. He later added that Barghouti had been transferred from Hadarim Prison to the Kishon Prison, near Haifa.

The punitive move also came after Barghout published an opinion piece in The New York Times to explain the hunger strike.

Librati said that some 1,100 detainees in several prisons had announced they were going on hunger strike.

“The Prisons Service has started taking disciplinary measures against the strikers, and in addition a number of prisoners have been transferred to separate wings,” he said. “It is to be emphasized that the (Prisons Service) does not negotiate with prisoners.”

Barghouti began to call for a strike after talks between prisoners’ representatives and the Israel Prisons Service — on improving prison conditions — reached an impasse. Those talks began more than a year and a half ago.

Barghouti has remained politically active from behind bars, and is often touted as one of a few likely successors to the 82-year-old Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Many Palestinians see Barghouti’s move as chiefly an internal power play in an attempt to send a message specifically to the Fatah leadership and to Abbas, who excluded Barghouti’s loyalists from a recent Central Committee meeting and did not give Barghouti the anticipated position of deputy head of the PA.