

## **Gaza detainees allege Israeli mistreatment**

By Nidal al-Mughrabi

3 February 2009

Reuters

Mahmoud Ghabayen and his younger brother Hassan told the story of their interrogation by an Israeli officer during the Gaza war by re-enacting the scene for reporters.

Mahmoud, 16, tied the hands of his 15-year-old brother behind his back, using wire found in the rubble of their uncle's damaged home in Beit Lahiya, a town in the northern Gaza Strip where militants had fired rockets into Israel.

Ordering Hassan to kneel, Mahmoud stood over him and boomed: "What about the rocket? What about the tunnels?"

"I do not know," Hassan answered.

Kicking Hassan, Mahmoud repeated disdainfully: "I don't know anything."

Seven Israeli human rights groups have complained jointly to Israeli military and civilian judicial authorities about the "harsh, inhuman and degrading conditions in which Palestinian prisoners were held in the initial days of their incarceration."

Soldiers who moved into Beit Lahiya during the 22-day Israeli offensive found the Ghabayen brothers and their neighbors sheltering under a staircase.

Mahmoud and Hassan said they were ordered to stand outside, naked, with their faces against a wall. Israeli forces often order detainees to take off clothes as a precaution against hidden weapons or explosive belts.

"They were beating us as we stood by the wall and they also threw stones at us," Mahmoud said.

In a report last week, the rights groups said they had collected testimony from detainees that showed that many, including minors, "were held for many hours, sometimes for days, in pits dug in the ground, exposed to bitter cold and harsh weather, handcuffed and blindfolded."

The groups demanded an independent investigation.

Asked about the report, the Israeli military said Gaza detainees were suspected of "involvement in the fighting or in terrorist activity."

"These arrests were carried out in accordance with clear procedures that instruct the forces, among other things, to ensure the dignity and health of detainees and that they are

held in the appropriate conditions," a military statement said, promising allegations in the report would be examined.

## MISSING

The Ghabayen brothers said they were held for three days in the Gaza Strip before being moved to facilities in Israel, where they were questioned for five days before being released.

"They have asked me about the resistance and the locations of tunnels, and where fighters hide and where rockets were fired from, and I told them I knew nothing," Hassan said.

Mahmoud said he saw between 80 to 100 Gaza detainees in a holding facility in the southern Israeli city of Beersheba.

Eyad Naser, a spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Gaza said that during the offensive, the ICRC received reports of 115 missing Palestinians.

He said some had since been accounted for, dead or alive, inside the Gaza Strip and that he could not provide a final figure of those detained by Israel or still being held there.

The ICRC, Naser said, has asked Israel for access to any remaining detainees.

It has also asked to see an Israeli soldier captured by Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip in 2006, but that request has been denied.

One former detainee, Khalil al-Attar, 55, said he was taken into custody by soldiers who stormed his house. He said one soldier told him to make a run for it -- and then counted "one, two, three" in Hebrew while taking aim with his rifle.

"I told him I was not going to escape unless his officer told me, so he punched me in the stomach and the back," Attar said.

He said he was held for 15 days along with about 250 other Palestinians in southern Israel before he was allowed home.

Attar recalled what he said were a soldier's parting words to him and others being released at the frontier: "If you look back, you will be shot."

(Editing by Dominic Evans)