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UNITED NATIONS PALESTINE COMMISSION
Communication Received from Jewish
Detainees, Gilgil, Kenya

The following communication, concerning their repatriation to Palestine, has been received from the Camp Supervisor on behalf of the Jewish Detainees at Gilgil, Kenya.

JEWISH POLITICAL DETAINEES IN EXILE
Special Camp, Gilgil, Kenya
Gilgil, 19th March, 1948

The Chairman,
United Nations Palestine Commission,
Lake Success, U.S.A.
Sir,

Subject: REPATRIATION TO PALESTINE OF JEWISH
POLITICAL DETAINEES IN EXILE

We acknowledge with appreciation your letter Ref. No.1302-1-2/RJB, dated the 5th of March 1948, signed by Mr. Ralph J. Bunche, Principal Secretary. Considering the fact that the problem of our repatriation to Palestine is subject of negotiations between you and the British Government, we deem it necessary to put before you a precise description of the detainees of this camp, our strange status and the present situation here in view of the developments in and around Palestine. Being isolated from first sources of information it is very difficult for us to understand the real reasons for the official announcement of the Kenya Government, which says that: "arrangements will be made for all the remaining detainees in the Special Camp at Gilgil, Kenya, to be repatriated to Palestine, to arrive there not later than the end of July 1948" - an announcement which contradicts your announcement broadcast by the B.B.C. on 28 February 1948, declaring that: "the Government of Britain informed the Palestine Implementation Commission that the Jewish political detainees in Kenya will be returned to Palestine before the mandate ends, i.e. the 15th of May".

Bitter experiences in the past bring us to the assumption that this time, as usual, the authorities concerned have tried to divert your attention from our case by describing the inmates of this camp as most dangerous people, who have to be kept as far as possible from Palestine, so that the security position there is not further endangered. We feel it our duty to refute such probable and damaging allegations, by putting before you some relevant facts. Enclosed statistics on the camp detainees.)

2. a) Not a single detainee of this camp has ever been brought before a Court of Justice, neither has anybody been sentenced for any illegal activities. All the detainees of this camp have been detained and deported only because they have been *suspected* of having connections with illegal organizations in Palestine, or because of being suspected sympathisers of those organizations. A great many of the detainees here have never even been interrogated by the police. For cask of brevity we shall not describe the methods of detentions, many of which were causes, e.g., as the result of delicious slandering based on personal hatred and revenge, a common and daily occurrence in a state under emergency law enabling administrative arrests.

b) Among the detainees here there are many who have been detained for seven and eight years, i.e. their arrest took place during one of the short peaceful periods in Palestine.

c) Since the first deportation on the 19th October, 1944, some 130 detainees who were deported as "dangerous to public security", have already been repatriated and released, and are now free citizens of Palestine. This fact proves clearly that even from the Government's point of view these people have never been a threat to security and the suspicions against them were groundless. They had, nevertheless, been detained, deported, and passed many months and years in exile. However, the number of deportees was not reduced, as the procedure of the Government was always to replace the released detainees by newcomers. Even at present there are many detainees here who were officially promised by the Palestine Government, over a year ago, that they would be released in the "very near future", or in other cases "within the coming eight days". The threat of deportation as a means of intimidation was thus kept permanently hanging over the heads of the Jews in Palestine. This system of the Government may justify our presumption that the statue of the deportees of this camp is one of political hostages.

d) We have had information from reliable sources that over 120 of the camp's 260 detainees have been recommended and approved many months also for their full release from detention, or repatriation to Palestine. The recommending body was a governmental official committee in Palestine, called the Advisory Committee, headed by Judge Manning, an English Judge who had been specially appointed for this purpose. This Committee's recommendations were not carried out.

e) There is no difference whatsoever between the exiled political detainees who were unfortunately detained in a month when the Government of Palestine had decided on deportation of a group of people to exile, and all other political detainees who were detained in Latrun Camp, Palestine, and were later transferred to Athlit Camp, in the Jewish sector of Palestine. The charge is in both cases the very same: mere suspicion.

f) As a further proof that our continued detention in exile has not been motivated by anxiety for public security, we would like to stress the fact that political prisoners (not detainees), who were brought to trial for sabotage acts against the regime, and were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, have been transferred, during the last few weeks, from the Jerusalem Central Prison to the s/m Athlit Detention Camp. We, at the same time, are still in exile far away from our land.

g) In Palestine all the military Jewish organizations enjoy at present a semi-legal status. People who are caught with firearms and admit their membership in these organizations are sentenced now to several weeks' imprisonment or to a small fine, while we, the deportees in Kenya, the only charge against whom was mere suspicion, have already spent long years in detention and exile, years of suffering and isolation from our families; and still the day of our freedom is beyond the

immediate future.

3. For further explanation we beg to draw a short survey of the history of this camp since its very first day.

In the middle of the night of the 19th October 1944, without any previous notice, 251 Jewish political detainees in Latrun Camp, Palestine, were handcuffed, taken to a nearby airfield, and flown over to Eritrea. Among the deportees were people whose immediate release had been promised several days earlier. The deportation was arranged even not according to the weight of suspicion but simply according to the number of deportees which was previously fixed. When one of the detainees could not be found by the warders in the camp quick enough, another was immediately taken instead.

In addition to the compulsory isolation from their families (no visits whatsoever and months without letters) the exiles had a perpetual struggle for the achievement of their very elementary needs. It was a struggle for obtaining our religious necessities and basic conditions.

During three and a half years, we were laundering from camp to camp throughout the African continent. After spending three months in the hilly town of Asmara, the camp was shipped to the Sudan desert. This transfer, in conditions of cattle transportation, was very hard and most humiliating. Nine months in the Sudan, in a desert climate of heat, sand storms and lack of water, ended with our return to Eritrea. Three months later, the Sudanese guards of our camp in Asmara opened fire on the detainees killing two and wounding twelve others. This unprovoked murder of the detainees by their guards was committed after permanent incitement investigated by their then commanders in charge. A month later the camp lost a third of its members, who died because of improper treatment in the Military Hospital of Asmara. On the 2nd of March 1947 the camp was again on the move. This time to Kenya. And again we faced a struggle for the most essential human and religious rights. It is difficult to describe the painful feelings of the deportees who were deprived for the last three and a half years of the sacred right to see their families, a right enjoyed even by the chief war criminals, who were sentenced in Nuremberg, Needless to mention the economic destruction caused to most of our families by our detention and deportation.

As political hostages we were compelled, against our will, to agree to the fact that our fate was connected with the solution of the Palestine problem.

4. We were, therefore, convinced, that this camp would be repatriated before the termination of the Palestine mandate and that the Government which had ordered our deportation would order our return to our country before its departure. Your s/m official announcement, broadcast by the B.B.C., concerning our repatriation before May the 15th, was thus received by us as only natural and logical. We were, however, completely shocked when receiving from the Kenya Government it's a/m enclosed declaration.

5. We wish to point out clearly that we have never agreed to our detention and deportation. We have seen in it an arbitrary step violating the most elementary human rights, and this by the Mandatory Power whose task it was to help the Jews of the Diaspora to immigrate into the Jewish National Home, and not to deport Jews from the country in which they had been born. But we could never imagine that even after the termination of the mandate we should be kept in exile. This intended measure is not only illegal and unjust, but bears in it also the possible dangers of exposing us to a statue of detention and exile for an indefinite period.

5. In an interview which took place on the 7th of March 1948, between the representatives of the camp and Mr. Foster Sutton, the Member for Law and Order of the Government of Kenya, the latter announced officially, on behalf of the British Government, that if the Palestine Implementation Commission will object to our arrival after the 15th of May, the British Government will repatriate us before the mandate ends.

7. We again wish to emphasize, that our present demand is the immediate repatriation to our country, even to a detention camp there. In view of the above, we reject most emphatically the ridiculous and unfounded allegation that our return to a detention camp in Palestine may in any way endanger the security or peace. As already stated, it is clear that our deportation was not effected for security reasons, but as a result of political considerations. With our deportation peace was not established, but on the contrary, the position became graver.

We also reject any attempt to connect our return with that of the Cyprus immigrants. Without dwelling here on the holy right of every Jew to enter his Homeland and live there, there cannot be any doubt whatsoever that even according to the laws of the Palestine Authorities it is unlawful to keep Palestine born people and citizens in detention outside the boundaries of Palestine for one Minute after the termination of the mandate.

It is further worthwhile indicating that there is no foundation whatsoever in any attempt to connect delays of our return with shipping difficulties, since the Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Council have officially notified the Palestine Government that they are to supply the necessary transport facilities for our repatriation.

8. After nearly four years of exile and suffering, far from everything dear to us, we deeply appeal to you to arrange for our immediate return to our Homeland. We view with great apprehension and fear the possibility of our detention here after the end of the mandate. The prolongation of our exile will bring about nothing but additional sufferings to our families and ourselves, the continuation of grave injustice and violation of the most fundamental rules of the Laws of Nations.

The prolongation of our detention here after the end of the mandate, bears in it many inherent dangers, starting with our complete isolation from our families owing to the stoppage in mail communication, despatch of money, etc., up to the serious danger that our delayed return may be hampered by the possible serious developments in Palestine, and the probable dangers here.

9. All these have greatly alarmed the detainees and consequently, as a first step in our unrelenting struggle for immediate repatriation, a 24 hours Warning Hunger strike was proclaimed on 15.3.48.

10. All the above - and especially the a/m announcement by the Kenya Government stating that "if the Palestine Commission will object to our arrival after May 15th, the British Government will repatriate us before the mandate ends", prove that the last word as to our repatriation rests with you.

The Jewish Palestinian Political Exiles in Kenya detention, backed by Palestinian and world Jewry, appeal to you in this critical hour to bring an end to this lawless and painful situation and thereby prevent the grave and unavoidable consequences which may arise as a result of the present prevailing tension and bitterness increasing rapidly in the circumstances.

We have the honour to be, Sir,

Very Respectfully Yours,
On behalf of the Detainees,
Shmuel M. Katznelson (signed)
Camp Supervisor

Enclosures

COPY

Telephone No. 2629
Telegrams: "ORDINANCES"
In reply please quote
No. L.....
and date.

ATTORNEY GENERAL'S CHAMBERS
P.O. Box 112, NAIROBI
Kenya Colony

11 March, 1948

The Camp Commandant,
Special Camp
GILGIL

RETURN OF DETAINEES TO PALESTINE

This serves to confirm that arrangements will be made for all the remaining detainees in the Special Camp at Gilgil to be repatriated to Palestine, to arrive there not later than the end of July this year. The precise date of leaving Kenya cannot, however, be announced until final shipping arrangements have been settled.

2. I have no objection to your handing a copy of this letter to the Supervisor of the Camp.

STATISTICAL FACTS ABOUT THE JEWISH DETAINEES

1. Number of Detainees:

Period		Deported	Released	In Detention
October	44	251	-	251
December	44	14	-	265
January	45	14	-	279
February	45	6	29	265
June	45	13	32	246
October	45	24	-	270
December	45	56	26	300
January	46		two killed by guards	298
April	46		one died in hospital	297
May	46	-	25	272
August	46	11	2	281
December	46	-	14	267
May	47	50	26	291
March	48	-	28	263
Escaped and not caught during the period - 3				
PRESENT NUMBER				260

2. Age distribution

Aged less than 20	27
Aged. between 20 and 30	171
Aged over 30	62
Total	260

3. Family status

Married and having children (of those 6 fathers whose children were born after their detention and who have not seen them yet)	21
Other married detainees	11
Single	228
Total	260

4. Nationality:

Palestinians	220
Other nationalities	40
Total	260

5. Residence before detention

Palestine born	95
Domiciled for more than 15 years in Palestine	90
Domiciled from 1-15 years "	64
Domiciled for less than 1 year in Palestine	11

6. Place of arrest:

At home, in the streets, large-scale arrests, from British Army, Air Force or Naval service, while being invited to Police stations. Of the 260 detainees only 5 were brought to trial. Three of them were detained immediately after being acquitted and the two others after completing the terms of imprisonment.

7. Interrogations.

Thirty of the detainees were never interrogated. Most of the detainees were interrogated for a few minutes only after many years of detention.

8. Period of detention:

From 6 to 8 years	33
From 4 to 6 years	73
From 2 to 4 years	122
Less than 2 years	32
Total	260

9. Health conditions:

Fifty-two of the detainees suffer from serious disease, mainly contracted during detention. About 71 suffer from minor chronic ailments. Eight of the detainees injured by the indiscriminate shooting of the guard on 17.1.46 at Asmara are still in detention.

10. Families economic conditions:

One hundred eighty-six of the detainees have been the only supporters of their respective families.

11. Education:

University educated	18
Secondary school educated	137

Primary school educated	105
Total	260

12. Professions:

Lawyers, dentist, architects, newspaper editors, engineers, teachers, accountants, merchants, clerks, technicians, seamen, skilled labourers, university students, and others.

13. Ex-Servicemen:

Air Force	12
Army	10
Navy	4
Total	26

Most of them have been arrested while in the services.

Many of the detainees are detained for the second or third time.

[Document in PDF format](#)