Burned, beaten, starved: Health Ministry compiles hostage testimonies to submit to UN

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The Health Ministry has completed a draft report on the abuse that Israeli hostages suffered while held in the Gaza Strip, cataloging the physical and mental suffering they experienced and the lasting effects it has had on them, some of whom are children. Israel plans to submit the report to the United Nations.

Compiled from the testimonies of hostages who were released in a November 2023 deal and those who were later rescued by Israeli forces, it details how they were burned and beaten, starved and humiliated, as well as how the abuse impacted their mental and physical health, even long after they were freed.

Channel 12 and the Ynet news outlet reported details from the brief on Thursday.

It marks the first formal report by the Health Ministry about the hostages’ experiences. Compiled by the health and welfare ministries, the final report is to be presented to the United Nations committee that deals with cases of torture.

Health Minister Uriel Buso said in a statement it is “a significant report that depicts the atrocities that hostages suffered and reveals to the world the cruelty of the enemies we are dealing with.”

The report says that hostages were kept for days in darkness, with their hands and feet bound, and received little food or water. They were beaten all over their bodies, some had hair pulled out, and in some cases were burned and branded with metal heated over an open flame. Others, including children, were subjected to sexual assaults.

Injured hostages said they were not given painkillers and described agonizing pain during medical treatments that, in some cases, included surgical procedures.

Hostages told of a lack of showers and that they were forced to wait hours or even days before being permitted to use a toilet. Some were forced to soil themselves.

Some female hostages were forced to work as “maids,” Channel 12 reported.

To protect the hostages’ identities, their names, ages, and family statuses were not included.

There were 251 hostages abducted from Israel on October 7, 2023, during the Hamas-led attack on southern Israel that killed 1,200 people.

Ninety-six of them remain in Gaza, including the bodies of at least 34 confirmed dead by the IDF. Hamas released 105 civilians during a weeklong truce in late November, and four hostages were released before that. Eight hostages have been rescued by troops alive, and the bodies of 38 hostages have also been recovered, including three mistakenly killed by the Israeli military as they tried to escape their captors.

Released hostages related to authorities that they were deliberately separated from other family members who were being held. Captives, including children, were forced to watch videos of the October 7 atrocities.

“The testimonies brought here are a wake-up call to the world to put more pressure on Hamas and its supporters to release all of them [the remaining hostages] now,” Buso said.

According to the report, some hostages experienced a dramatic loss in weight due to starvation and lack of nourishment. Adult hostages lost 8 to 15 kilograms (18 to 33 pounds) while among child captives there was an average loss of 10 percent in body weight, though in some cases it was as high as 18%.

The weight loss caused “muscle deterioration and weakening of the immune system,” the report says as cited by Ynet. “Due to the awful hygiene and unclean water, hostages suffered stomachaches and diarrhea during their time in captivity. All of this has serious mental consequences, especially in the case of children.”

The report says that as last year’s ceasefire deal approached, their captors gave the hostages more food and provided them with fresh clothes, apparently an attempt to present their conditions as better than they were.

The practice raised concerns among Israeli authorities as to the health dangers of eating too much food immediately after a period of starvation. In particular, authorities are concerned about the fate of the remaining hostages who have now been held for over 440 days in captivity. Efforts are ongoing for another, mediated ceasefire to release more hostages, and authorities are concerned their captors may also try to overfeed them before a potential release

Even after being released, some adults and children suffered acute anxiety and panic attacks, the brief says.

Some had difficulty leaving their homes or speaking above a whisper, a reflection of the silence that some were ordered to maintain by their captors. Some were unable to return to their regular lives, whether at work or school.

Former hostages have had difficulty sleeping at night, while some, in particular children, suffer sharp pains that have no medical explanation. Some hostages have eating disorders, either eating too little or overeating. Some children secrete food away.

Doctors and psychologists who compiled the report noted that the released hostages said they are unable to fully recover while they know there are others still being held.

A senior Health Ministry official told Ynet the report includes information that the hostages did not share in the first weeks after their return to Israel.

“As time passed, they allowed themselves to share more,” the official said.

“The most important thing is that anyone who can influence, in the committees around the world, should understand that pressure must be applied to Hamas and cause them [the remaining hostages] to be brought back home,” the unnamed official said.