

Israeli Court Extends Gaza Journalist's Detention Without Charges

Monday
2/19/91
By JOEL BRINKLEY
Special to The New York Times

GAZA, Feb. 18 — An Israeli military prosecutor said today that a Gaza journalist who has been held in jail for three weeks without formal charge had violated the law by reporting on the activities of an Islamic fundamentalist group operating in the occupied Gaza Strip.

The prosecutor, Lieut. Oded Savorey, said that Taher Shriteh, a journalist accredited by the Israeli Government, had "given aid to an enemy organization" by reporting details of leaflets from the Islamic group, Hamas, to one of his employers, Reuters.

Mr. Shriteh also works for several other foreign news organizations, including The New York Times. Not until his bail hearing today had legal system officials offered any public statement

about the allegations against him.

In court, Mr. Shriteh and his lawyer said he had been the victim of physical abuse in prison. Mr. Shriteh broke into tears as he described his treatment.

"I am a victim, really, of being a journalist," he said. "I did nothing wrong. I was reporting on the leaflets from all the movements. They tortured me. They held me in solitary confinement for 11 days in a cell" that was 60 inches long and 30 inches wide. "They gave me no food for four days and wouldn't let me go to the bathroom."

Mr. Shriteh is one among dozens of Palestinian reporters who have been arrested without formal charge by the Israelis over the last three years for carrying out work they call journalism and the Israelis call incitement.

Mr. Shriteh reports on Gaza as a contract employee for news organizations,

including The Times, Reuters, the BBC, CBS News and the Voice of America. All his employers have raised questions about his case since his arrest on Jan. 28, prompting the authorities to hold a bail hearing today — an unusual event in Israeli military court.

The request for bail was refused; it is granted in only 1 percent of cases, Palestinian lawyers say. But the hearing offered a rare glimpse into Israel's normally closed and secretive military justice system.

The three-hour hearing was conducted in Hebrew, which Mr. Shriteh, like many other Palestinian defendants, does not understand. The defense lawyer, an Israeli named Dan Assan, had to urge the court stenographer to continue taking notes for the record while he was presenting his case.

Held Two More Weeks

At the hearing's conclusion, the prosecutor explained that he wanted Mr. Shriteh held in prison without charge "because the main interest is continuing the investigation, rather than the freedom of the individual.

"I know he faces very difficult conditions in prison," the lieutenant added. But if he is held longer, perhaps "he will tell us more things."

Mr. Shriteh was ordered held another two weeks. He can be held and, questioned for up to 60 days before formal charges are filed.

Mr. Shriteh found himself in trouble with the authorities once before, a year ago, when security officials confiscated his address book and began calling his confidential news sources to ask them what information they had given him.

The prosecutor argued that bail should be denied so questioning could continue to find out who Mr. Shriteh's "sources and contacts are."

Passing leaflets about the Palestinian uprising to Reuters, The Times and others for use in news articles "is giv-

ing aid to an enemy organization," Lieutenant Savorey said.

Israeli newspapers also routinely report the contents of the leaflets, which instruct the population on how to continue the uprising in the occupied territories. Sometimes the documents urge violence.

"Is he a member of Hamas?" the judge asked. "No," answered the prosecutor, "but his activities are assisting Hamas."

Fax Possession Charge

Lieutenant Savorey also charged Mr. Shriteh with keeping an unregistered fax machine in his home. It belonged to

A reporter calls it his work; Israelis call it incitement.

a childhood friend whom the authorities say is a Hamas organizer. Mr. Shriteh said the man feared that the fax might be confiscated.

The prosecutor said it was illegal to possess a fax, under "Egyptian law No. 32" which gives the authorities the right to regulate "telephone and telegraphic equipment." Gaza was under Egyptian control before the 1967 Middle East war, and Israel still applies selected Egyptian laws.

After hours of argument, the judge ruled that bail could not be granted because "the suspect crossed the line in his work as a journalist. When he supplied information for readers, he became an activist for a terror organization." And the fact that he kept his friend's fax machine for him, the judge added, indicates that "he can't say he did this with an innocent heart."