Ansar Detention Camp 1982–1983: Thousands Held behind the Occupation's Wire in South Lebanon

On the ground of a small airstrip near the town of Ansar in the Nabatieh district of south Lebanon, the Israeli occupation army set up in July 1982 the largest mass detention camp of the invasion: twenty compounds of tents ringed with barbed wire and watchtowers, into which thousands of Palestinians and Lebanese were thrown without charge or trial, after being torn from the camps, villages and towns in pre-dawn raids. [1][2][3]

For more than a year the prisoners of Ansar endured hunger, cold, beatings and humiliation, and some of them were killed. Yet they organised themselves, rose up, dug tunnels and made art out of earth and soap, until some 4,500 of them were freed in an exchange on 24 November 1983 for six occupation soldiers captured by Fatah. This article is part of a series on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 1982 siege of Beirut. [4][5][6]

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The camp at a glance

Item	Details
Location	Near the town of Ansar, Nabatieh district, south Lebanon, on the ground of a small airstrip
Opened	14 July 1982
Layout	20 compounds of about 1,500 square metres each, with barbed wire and watchtowers
Number of detainees	Between 6,000 and 9,000 in mid-July 1982 according to correspondents
Detainees	Mostly Palestinians from the camps, hundreds of Lebanese, and foreign doctors, nurses and volunteers
Legal status	“Administrative detainees” without charge or trial; the occupation refused them prisoner-of-war status
Release	About 4,500 in an exchange on 24 November 1983 for six occupation soldiers

Sources: [1][3][2][6]

The mass arrests

From the first days of the invasion the occupation army staged pre-dawn raids on the camps, villages and towns of the south, arresting every adult Palestinian man and anyone suspected of a link to the PLO, so that a Western diplomat said every young man over fourteen had been taken from the southern camps. In the second week of July alone, 500 to 600 men were arrested among the ruins of Ain al-Hilweh camp. Hooded men in occupation jeeps pointed out whom to arrest. [2]

Doctors and nurses were not spared: most of the doctors, male nurses and ambulance drivers of the Palestine Red Crescent hospital in Sidon were detained, along with foreign volunteers, among them the Canadian surgeon Chris Giannou. No charges were brought, and families were told neither of the arrests nor of

where their men were held, so the women of Sidon came every day asking after their husbands and sons, and went out stoning the soldiers and shouting: “We want our men!” [2]

Before being moved to Ansar, the detainees were held for days in sports grounds and schools. One of them recalls that about a thousand detainees were gathered in the yard of the Sisters’ school in Sidon, hands tied, eyes blindfolded and sacks over their heads, sitting on an asphalt court under a scorching sun, and that at least seven of them died of beatings, hunger and thirst and were buried in Sidon’s Muslim cemetery. They called the interrogators’ white car “the burial car,” because those who came back from it bore the marks of beatings. [3]

Giannou testified before a US congressional committee to “savage and indiscriminate beatings” with sticks, hoses and knotted ropes in a Sidon schoolyard, to a Palestinian doctor hung by his hands from a tree and beaten, and to an Iraqi surgeon beaten and left face-down in the sand. Many detainees were then taken to the Megiddo camp inside occupied Palestine for interrogation before ending up in Ansar. [2]

Building the camp

The camp stood on the ground of a small airstrip built by the PLO, which the occupation turned into a logistics airfield during the invasion and then into a detention camp opened on 14 July 1982. Israeli contractors built it in ten days: a large compound enclosed by a high earth embankment topped with barbed wire, watchtowers with searchlights and armed guards every 75 yards, and rows of tents on packed sand. [1][2]

According to Ansar Emigrant by the Lebanese writer Lamee al-Hurr, the camp consisted of twenty compounds of 1,500 square metres each, with 13 tents apiece, while the journalist Mohammad Safa, in his book 100 Days in Ansar Camp, speaks of three dunums and 20 tents per compound. Earth tracks patrolled by tanks separated the compounds. Correspondents estimated the number of prisoners in mid-July 1982 at between 6,000 and 9,000. [3][2]

Freed detainees reunited with their families in Burj al-Shemali camp near Tyre, 1983. Photograph by Bruno Hubschmid. Source: ICRC Audiovisual Archives, ref. V-P-LB-D-00100-14.

Life behind the wire

The occupation imposed a harsh regime on the prisoners: compulsory sleep from half past five in the evening, during which talking, moving and going to the toilet were forbidden; a ban on religious worship; and sleeping on stones. Prisoners were chained, and hunger and cold were used to pressure them. Released boys spoke of “sardine-like” overcrowding, of a rule that kept them on their blanket at all times, and of a single doctor with no infirmary. [1][2]

The soldiers picked one prisoner as a “sergeant” over his comrades and forced him to punish them; if he showed mercy he was beaten to make him harsher, and at times prisoners were made to beat one another. Mohammad Safa, who kept his diary in code on the paper of empty cigarette packets for fear of discovery, told of child prisoners who died of thirst, sickness or torture, and of sick prisoners dragged into the open, tied up and beaten. Released boys said that on the buses they were forced to sit on the floor with their hands over their heads and to “bark like dogs.” [3][2]

The prisoners were held as “administrative detainees” under emergency regulations, without charge, trial or lawyer, their detention renewable every three months; the occupation rejected the International Commission of Jurists’ call to grant them prisoner-of-war status and called them “terrorists.” Families were barred from visiting from the start. [2][5]

The Red Cross

After a month of requests, the International Committee of the Red Cross began visiting Ansar on 18 July 1982, and that same day 212 boys under sixteen were released into its care. But it suspended its visits on 22 July, an unprecedented step

in its dealings with the Palestinian question, linked to overcrowding or to limits on private interviews with prisoners, and resumed them on 26 July. The ICRC said it was “scarcely satisfied” with the occupation’s attitude, and Amnesty International demanded an account of every prisoner. [2]

On 13 October 1982 the occupation announced the release of 600 prisoners from Ansar, while reports kept coming of beatings in the detention centres, overcrowded cells without toilets, and denial of food. [7]

Resistance behind the wire

The prisoners organised themselves in the Committee to Defend the Rights of Prisoners in Ansar Camp, headed by Salah Tamari, which in March 1983 sent a letter that reached the United Nations. It said three prisoners had been murdered in Compound 20, that many prisoners had disappeared and were believed killed, that hundreds of sick prisoners needed urgent treatment, and that the detainees “have become hostages and are treated as such.” [5]

The prisoners rose up several times, stoning the soldiers and chanting, and the soldiers answered with bullets, leaving men wounded; prisoners’ mothers and sisters demonstrated at the camp and were dispersed with gunfire and tear gas. On 14 June 1983 a prisoner was killed in what the occupation called a mass escape attempt. In August 1983 prisoners escaped through an earth tunnel some 27 metres long and a metre and a half deep, dug in shifts by about twenty prisoners despite lack of air and hard rock, led by Atef al-Danaf (“Thaer”); it was named “the tunnel of freedom.” [1][8][9]

The prisoners turned the camp into a “school.” Out of grass, earth, soap and toothpaste they made prayer beads and figures, carved limestone, and drew with charcoal; the artist Hussein Qassir made a wooden comb with a sharpened blade and painted pictures inspired by “the Compound 20 massacre” and “the tunnel operation.” In May 1983 the prisoners displayed in the camp yard a glider they had built from bed planks, wire, tent pegs and canvas. [4]

On 14 July 1983 Qassir designed the first poster on Ansar camp for the day of solidarity with the detainees; Naji al-Ali drew a prisoner behind the wire reassuring his family; and an exhibition of the prisoners' work in Beirut carried the slogan "Ansar, the school of men." [4][1]

24 November 1983: the exchange

On 24 November 1983 Fatah released six occupation soldiers it had captured in Lebanon, in exchange for the release of some 4,500 Arab prisoners, among them 63 Palestinians serving sentences in the occupation's prisons and 37 Palestinians seized by the occupation navy off Tripoli in late September. Ansar camp was closed; about 3,400 of those freed stayed in Lebanon, and 1,100 were flown to Algeria. [6]

That same day the occupation returned the archives of the Palestine Research Center it had looted from Beirut during the 1982 invasion. The prisoners went home to their camps and villages, and in Burj al-Shemali camp near Tyre those freed were reunited with their families after more than a year away. [6]

After the exchange

The name of Ansar did not end with its closure in 1983: Lebanese sources say the occupation went on using the camp for Lebanese resistance prisoners until 4 April 1985, when it was shut after the resistance forced the occupation army to withdraw from Beirut, Mount Lebanon, Sidon, Zahrani, Tyre and the western Bekaa. Today a park stands on the site. [1]

Differences between the accounts

Prisoner numbers vary by period: correspondents estimated 6,000 to 9,000 in mid-July 1982, October 1982 estimates ranged from 1,000 to 4,500, and the 1983 exchange covered about 4,500. Accounts of the tunnel escape differ: Lebanese sources speak of 30 prisoners escaping on 8 August 1983, while the foreign press on 10 August reported four. The closure date also differs between November 1983

in the Palestine Chronology and April 1985 in Lebanese sources that speak of the camp's continued use. [2][7][6][1][9]

Timeline

Date	Event
June–July 1982	Mass arrests in the camps and towns of the south [2]
14 July 1982	Ansar camp opens [1]
18 July	Red Cross visits begin; 212 boys released [2]
22–26 July	The Red Cross suspends then resumes its visits [2]
13 October 1982	Release of 600 prisoners announced [7]
March 1983	The prisoners' committee letter: three killed in Compound 20 [5]
May 1983	The glider displayed in the camp yard [4]
14 June 1983	A prisoner killed in an escape attempt [8]
8 August 1983	The escape through "the tunnel of freedom" [1]
24 November 1983	The exchange and the camp's closure [6]
4 April 1985	Final closure according to Lebanese sources [1]

Frequently asked questions about Ansar detention camp

Where was Ansar camp?

Near the town of Ansar in the Nabatieh district of south Lebanon, on the ground of a small airstrip. [1]

When did Ansar camp open?

On 14 July 1982, about a month after the invasion began. [1]

How many prisoners were held?

Between 6,000 and 9,000 in mid-July 1982 according to correspondents; about 4,500 were freed in the 1983 exchange. [2][6]

How were the prisoners treated?

They were held without charge, beaten, starved and humiliated; some were killed; and the occupation refused them prisoner-of-war status. [2][3][5]

What was “the tunnel of freedom”?

A tunnel about 27 metres long dug by the prisoners in shifts, through which they escaped in August 1983. [1]

How were the Ansar prisoners freed?

In an exchange on 24 November 1983, in which Fatah released six occupation soldiers for some 4,500 prisoners. [6]

Read also on Palestinuna

- Burj al-Shemali camp
- Ain al-Hilweh camp
- The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon
- Battles archive

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