

Palestinians Trying to Root Out Informers

By [DEBORAH SONTAG](#) JAN. 19, 2001

In a muffled hoarse voice, a Palestinian confessed today on Voice of Palestine Radio to being a paid informer for Israeli security forces who, he said, had used threats of exposure, imprisonment and death to keep him in line.

It was one of a series of such confessions that is being broadcast in a campaign by the Palestinian Authority to root out traitors, an effort that has led "several hundred" Palestinians to turn themselves in this week, officials said.

The campaign began with executions last weekend of two "collaborators" after their convictions in lightning trials for assisting Israel in assassinating Palestinian militants. The executions enjoyed broad support, even from some elite critics of the Palestinian government.

One critic, Daoud Kuttab, wrote in a newspaper today that at first "it seemed to me the Palestinian National Assembly had no choice but to take radical deterrent steps."

Since the executions, however, the Palestinian campaign -- the justice minister gave informers 45 days to surrender -- has fueled a parallel freelance effort. Gunmen have taken it on themselves to eliminate several suspected "collaborators."

As of Wednesday, gunmen apparently extended the extrajudicial slayings to a senior Palestinian official, Hisham Mikki, who was notorious in Gaza for his supposed corruption. In a fax to Reuters today, a Palestinian group that calls itself the Aksa Martyrs Brigade claimed responsibility for the killing, saying it was necessary because Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, had not clamped down on corruption.

The furor has stirred some concern in the West Bank and Gaza that the pursuit of traitors could be unleashing a wave of lawlessness in Palestinian society, deepening internal conflicts and undercutting the struggle against Israel.

Others said they thought that although the potential for chaos was great, the internal tumult was inevitable and could be cathartic.

The Palestinian uprising that began in late September united a deeply riven society and distracted people from their disenchantment with their government's supposed corruption, elitism and failed peace efforts. For months, frustration was directed at Israel. But now some of it seems to be boomeranging, especially as talks with Israel are renewed as violence continues and privation intensifies.

"To witness again, after everything that has taken place, negotiations without results was bound to revitalize the unresolved frustrations," Dr. Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist from Bir Zeit University, said. "It comes as no surprise to see the intifada turning inward, in part. Now we can expect that resistance against the occupation will take place at the same time as an attempt to try to cleanse the Palestinian house internally."

Officials said "several hundred" Palestinians had come forward to acknowledge "relations and collaboration" with the Israelis. Most are being interrogated and imprisoned, including 40 jailed in Hebron. But they are promised "a rapid absorption" back into society, officials said.

"Forty-one days left," a Palestinian radio announcer said on Wednesday, advertising the amnesty program. "Forty-one days, an opportunity that will never come again."

Mr. Mikki, whom many Gazans disdained for flaunting his affluence and proximity to power, was killed in the restaurant of a beachside hotel close to Mr. Arafat's compound in Gaza. Hooded gunmen interrupted his afternoon tea. They used silencer-equipped weapons and fled.

The Palestinian Authority declared Mr. Mikki a "martyr," suggesting that collaborators had killed him, and gave him a muted martyr's funeral today. Mr. Arafat helped carry his flag-draped coffin from a mosque to a military car bound for a cemetery, declaring his killing "a big tragedy."

Given the brazenness of the attack in an elite restaurant close to Mr. Arafat's headquarters, many in Gaza suspected an internal settling of scores. Israeli officials said they believed that Mr. Mikki had been killed by paramilitary operatives connected to the official security forces, because he had been caught embezzling government funds and ignored warnings to stop embezzling.

The Aksa Martyrs statement, which some Palestinian suspected was not authentic, described his death as the "ruling of the people" against someone who, it said, had misappropriated significant sums of money and also sexually harassed his female employees.

"The failure of the authority and its president to punish those filthy people has pushed us to punish them," said the statement from the group, which has previously said it was responsible for attacks on Israeli targets.

Here in Bethlehem today, gunmen fired in the air as they marched to protest the delayed executions of two men convicted last weekend of being informers. The marchers belonged to a branch of Mr. Arafat's Fatah organization.

After the executions over the weekend, the European Union implored Mr. Arafat to defer the Bethlehem executions and put a moratorium on the death penalty. Some Palestinian human rights advocates also spoke out strongly against the rapid trials, which have been held in the security courts that were created to deal with Islamic terror organizations, and the summary executions.

The justice minister, Freih Abu Meddein, scoffed at the criticism, which he said was hypocritical in view of their muted response to assassinations by Israel, and at the local critics, whom he accused of self-interest.

"The tragedy of our human rights organizations," he said on Palestinian radio, "is that they talk in the philosophy of those who fund them, not according to their own convictions."

The reaction to the executions intensified after Channel 2 television in Israel broadcast graphic reports of the one on Saturday in Gaza. The other was in Nablus. The report showed a row of masked Palestinian police officers firing bullets into Majid Mikawi, who wore a hood and died tied to a stake. Outside the camera's frame, a cacophony of cheers rose after the final bullet had been fired.

Palestinian officials were furious that the tape had been made and distributed. They had refused journalists' entry to the scene of the execution, the parade ground of the Gaza police station. A senior official said the action was not something that the international community understood.

On Wednesday, the Palestinians arrested a Gazan camera operator who works for Channel 2 on the suspicion that he had been involved with the tape. He denied involvement, and the Gazan journalists' union protested his arrest.

In his column today in The Jerusalem Post, Mr. Kuttab said that after reflection and debate he had somewhat changed his mind about the executions as necessary "radical deterrent steps" in the context of a "war."

Friends had told him that they saw the executions and the crackdown on informers as the Palestinian Authority's way to insulate itself from accusations of its own collaboration with Israeli security forces, he said.

He began to think, Mr. Kuttab added, that those people who were executed were being scapegoated.

"They are yet one more reason," he wrote, "why this crazy situation should not be allowed to continue and a just peace must prevail."