Dozens arrested as Hamas cracks down on major Gaza protests

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Hamas has arrested dozens of people and left many with serious injuries as its riot police crack down on the largest protests against the group in Gaza in years.

Hundreds of Palestinians took to the streets for four consecutive days to protest the high cost of living and the disastrous economic situation inside Gaza. Demonstrators chanted: “We want to live” and shared the slogan on social media.

Hamas police armed with batons attacked demonstrators in several cities and chased protesters into their homes to arrest them. Several online videos appeared to show officers clubbing unarmed protesters.

Security forces also fired live rounds into the air to scatter the crowds.

Israa al-Buhaisi, a Palestinian journalist, posted photographs showing what she said were members of her family who had beaten by Hamas police.

“These pictures are not from Egypt or Iraq or Syria,” she wrote. “These pictures are from Deir al-Balah camp [one of Gaza’s main refugee camps].”

Several human rights activists and journalists were among those arrested.

“I strongly condemn the campaign of arrests and violence used by Hamas security forces against protesters, including women and children,” said Nickolay Mladenov, the UN envoy for Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.

“I am particularly alarmed by the brutal beating of journalists and staff from the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR) and the raiding of homes.”

Hamas, an Islamist militant group, has ruled over Gaza since 2007 after fighting a brief civil war against Fatah, its secular Palestinian rivals.

Gaza’s economy has collapsed since then beneath a crushing blockade imposed by Israel with the help of Egypt. Unemployment is above 50 per cent, according to the World Bank, and nearly half the population lives in poverty.

Israel says the blockade is necessary to stop Hamas amassing weapons and blames the economic misery in Gaza on Hamas corruption and misrule.

While there is almost universal opposition to Israel inside Gaza, some Palestinians have also channelled their anger against Hamas.

The spark for the protests appears to have been Hamas’ decision to raise taxes on imports as well as cigarettes and other household items. However, economic frustration has been building for years.

In one widely-shared video, a mother taking part in the protests rails against Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, Hamas’ top leaders, about the unemployment situation.

“Our sons and daughters have lost 12 years of their lives. For what? Each son of a Hamas official owns an apartment, a car, a Jeep, a building, while our sons have nothing at all. They keep us busy with earning bread only,” she says.

There have been sporadic protests against Hamas in recent years but this week’s demonstrations are the most sustained unrest since 2007.

Hamas said in a statement on Sunday that it had “prioritised the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people”. It made no specific mention of the protests.

Some Hamas members accused the protesters of being agents of Israel or Fatah. One Hamas member posted a photograph of himself with riot police, saying he was with “the unit to repress the tails of the Jews, the dogs of Fatah in Gaza”.

The Israeli government has seized on the protests to try to discredit Hamas. A spokesman for Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has spent several days posting videos of the demonstrations.

Hamas has helped organise a year of protests at the Gaza border fence, partly in an effort to channel public anger against Israel.

Israeli forces have killed more than 200 Palestinians, the vast majority of them unarmed, since the Great March of Return protests began in March 2018.

Other smaller Palestinian factions in Gaza are treading warily amid the protests and lobbied for the release of several journalists who were arrested during the demonstrations.

However, they declined to directly criticise Hamas and called on Palestinian media respect “the national interest and not heat things up”.