PA frees 14 of its security officers accused of beating Abbas critic to death

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By AFP

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Fourteen Palestinian security force members on trial over the killing of prominent activist Nizar Banat, whose death sparked rare protests against the Palestinian Authority, have been released on bail, multiple sources said Wednesday.

The group formally asked for their release on Tuesday, which was granted by the prosecution on the condition that they attend their court hearings, a top Palestinian security official who requested anonymity told AFP.

The risk of coronavirus spreading in the West Bank prison where they were held was cited as grounds for their release in a letter seen by AFP, written by the prosecutor responsible for oversight of Palestinian security forces, Abdelnasser Jarrar.

Banat’s widow slammed that justification and further charged that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’s administration could not credibly judge her husband’s accused killers.

“The murderer cannot be a judge,” Jihan Banat told AFP, describing the decision to release the suspects on bail as “political.”

“If the Palestinian Authority is worried about the spread of the coronavirus, why doesn’t it release all the other prisoners held on charges?”

Banat died in June last year after security forces stormed his home in the flashpoint city of Hebron and dragged him away.

A post-mortem found he had been beaten on the head, chest, neck, legs and hands, with less than an hour elapsing between his arrest and his death.

The top Palestinian prosecutor has accused the 14 security force members of beating Banat to death. The PA has promised accountability through a military trial in the West Bank.

The Independent Commission for Human Rights, a Palestinian public body, said there were “irregularities throughout the release process.”

“Preventing the spread of coronavirus does not justify departing from the rule of law,” it said.

Majed al-Arouri, a Ramallah-based legal expert and human rights advocate, told AFP that the release of the suspects without a judicial order was “illegal” and pointed to wider concerns about the PA’s handling of the case.

“The last six months have revealed an intentional procrastination in court procedures with regard to the people accused of killing Nizar Banat,” Arouri said.

“There is real concern about the lack of legitimate court procedures in this case,” he added.