Eyewitness: Israeli Captivity

A REPORT BY DR. STEINAR BERGE AND ØYVIND MØLLER FROM NORWAY

The following report and introductory letter from the Norwegian Department of Foreign Affairs are based on an unofficial translation from Norwegian to English, which has been edited only for English fluency by the editors of the Journal.

The enclosed report is made on the basis of the statement by Dr. Steinar Berge and child care worker Øyvind Møller in a meeting in the Department of Foreign Affairs on June 24, 1982, from 4 to 7 am. Both were members of the health team of the Palestine Front of Norway in Sidon.

The team worked in accordance with an agreement between the Norwegian Palestine Front and the Palestine Red Crescent Society. Present from the Department of Foreign Affairs were:

1. Regional Adviser Hans Wilhelm Longva
2. Official Chef du Bureau/Assistant Secretary Bjarne Lindstrøm
3. First consultant Lars. Å. Wensell
4. First consultant Peter N. Ræder
5. Aspirant Steffen Kongstad

The following members of the health team of the [Norwegian] Palestine Front were also present:

1. Marianne Møller
2. Liv Berit Bredby
3. Berit Fiksdal

The purpose of the meeting in the Department of Foreign Affairs on June 24, 1982 was to obtain a thorough account of the circumstances surrounding the arrest of Berge and Møller on June 13, 1982, the treatment of Berge and Møller while in Israeli captivity from June 13 to 20, and their eyewitness account of the treatment of co-prisoners during captivity.

The meeting took place on the initiative of the Department of Foreign Affairs. The meeting was taped, and the tape recording has been the basis
for the compilation of the report by the Department of Foreign Affairs. It has been read and approved by Dr. Berge and childcare worker Møller. They have signed the report and thereby confirmed that it gives a correct description of their experiences.

Department of Foreign Affairs
Hans Wilhelm Longva

July 6, 1982

The Circumstances Under Which Dr. Steinar Berge And Child Care Worker Øyvind Møller Were Arrested

Berge and Møller were arrested at a checkpoint the Israelis had established on the street leading down to the Sidon beach where they had been told to report. Those who passed the checkpoint got a stamp in their passports. Berge and Møller understood the stamp to signify recognition by the Israelis, giving one freedom of movement within a certain area.

Berge and Møller had presented themselves for control on June 12, and had passed. Berge received the necessary stamps in his passport and Red Crescent identity card, while Møller got a stamp on his arm. The next morning Møller's stamp was transferred to his passport and Red Crescent identity card.

Berge and Møller went again to the checkpoint on June 13 to accompany a Canadian and a Palestinian doctor they had been prevented from meeting on June 12. Berge and Møller accompanied them to see if the two doctors would be arrested. The remainder of the Palestinian personnel at the hospital had already been arrested, including the anesthetist—if the surgeon, a Canadian, was also arrested, they would have to close the hospital. When Berge and Møller had passed the control and received the necessary stamps the day before, they felt they were already recognized or approved, and that they had freedom of movement.

At the control checkpoint, one had to pass to another checkpoint on the other side of the street. Between the two checkpoints three cars were parked carrying informants, with masks covering their faces, who pointed out whom to arrest. Berge and Møller do not know the identity of the informants. When they passed between these two checkpoints with the Canadian and Palestinian doctors, Berge and Møller were arrested by personnel they identified as Israeli soldiers. Neither Berge nor Møller was given any opportunity to identify himself or to explain himself at the time of arrest. According to Berge and Møller it was not necessarily clear to the personnel arresting them that they were health workers.

After the arrest Berge and Møller were taken to a school where arrested persons were gathered. Between one and five minutes after their arrival at the school, that is about 15 minutes after the arrest, Berge and Møller were given the
opportunity to identify themselves. They showed their valid Norwegian passports with valid Lebanese entrance visas, valid Lebanese identity cards—which made it clear that they had valid residence and work permits for Lebanon—and identity cards issued by the Palestine Red Crescent Society which made it clear that they were civilian health personnel. These identity cards were white, clearly labelled as Red Cross and Red Crescent, and included a picture of the owner with the PRCS stamp. Møller's identity cards were taken from him during the imprisonment. Berge kept his and showed them during the meeting in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

In addition to the fact that they had identified themselves as health personnel about 15 minutes after their arrest, both Berge and Møller are convinced that they were recognized the same afternoon at the internment center by the highest ranking Israeli official in Sidon, an officer named Arnon Mozer.

On June 12, Berge and Møller had met Colonel Arnon Mozer at the checkpoint. They had complained about the difficult conditions at the hospital following the arrest of 90 percent of the male personnel on June 11, and that they were short of anesthetists for the many operations which should be been undertaken immediately. Following this meeting on June 12, Col. Mozer agreed to meet them again June 13, at 10 am. After waiting for two hours at Mozer's office, Berge and Møller took part in a meeting of civilian health personnel in Sidon to discuss organizing health care in the town. The meeting was led by an Israeli doctor (who described himself as a psychiatrist). The Red Crescent Hospital, just across the street, was not on the list of hospitals enlisted for this cooperation, so subsequently Berge considered their presence at that meeting an error on the part of the Israelis. Berge and Møller were coming directly from this meeting when they were arrested. That afternoon, Mozer saw Berge and Møller, now as prisoners. Mozer was standing about two meters from Møller and they looked at each other.

Neither Berge nor Møller was given any reason for his arrest, either at the time of arrest or during captivity, from any Israeli official. The furthest any Israeli official went in giving an explanation for their arrest was the following answer to Møller: "We are interested to know who you are." On the other hand, soldiers, who Berge and Møller regarded as guards of the prisoners, accused them of belonging to "Baader-Meinhof" and of being "murderers," of having "worked for murderers" and of having "helped hide the PLO."

Marianne Møller, Øyvind Møller's wife, stated that she had been told by Col. Arnon Mozer that the reason for Øyvind Møller's arrest was that he "had helped PLO terrorists escape from the hospital." Arnon Mozer refused to give Mrs. Møller information about Steinar Berge. Øyvind Møller said that during his imprisonment, he had not heard any accusations of the character Mozer made to Mrs. Møller. Both Møller and Mrs. Møller stressed that this accusation was unjustifiable and that it would be impossible to help anybody sought by the
Israelis leave the hospital because of the tight Israeli control.

**The Treatment of Steinar Berge and Øyvind Møller In Israeli Captivity**

Immediately after their arrest June 13, Berge and Møller were taken to a schoolyard in Sidon where they were kept for about 36 hours. On the morning of June 15, they were taken to another camp in the Safa Citrus Corporation, 2-3 km. south of Sidon. The next day, June 16, they were taken to the Magido prison in Israel. On June 20 in the evening they were released and handed over to the Norwegian Embassy in Tel Aviv.

Shortly after his arrest, a red cross and some sort of crescent sign were painted on the back of Møller's shirt. Berge had a number of black Hebrew letters put on the back of his shirt. All prisoners were labelled in the same way. Berge and Møller did not know what these labels meant, and they could not tell if prisoners with different labels were differently treated.

After they reached the school in which they were interned in Sidon, they were first taken into a small schoolyard, and later into a larger open area nearby. In the small schoolyard they had to kneel with their hands tied up on their backs. They could not remember if they had to sit with their heads bowed at this place.

In the small schoolyard they could hear people scream—"screams of pain"—from the larger area nearby. They also heard salvos of shots from the larger area, but they could not tell whether they were fired just to scare or if people were actually shot.

When they were taken into the larger open area themselves, they were forced to kneel, hands tied behind their backs, with their heads bowed. Later their hands were tied in front, and the guards permitted them to "look up" without any reactions in particular. They had to sit like this for about 36 hours continuously without permission to move. During the day they sat in the sun, and they were bothered very much by the heat. At night it was rather cold.

Encircling the area were seven armored cars and personnel carriers, each equipped with a heavy machine-gun pointing at the prisoners.

Although they were touched with batons and other objects a couple of times, they were not subjected to physical violence during imprisonment. Israeli soldiers who were hitting other prisoners gave the impression on several occasions of also wishing to hit Berge and Møller, but this did not happen. Subsequently they were subjected to threatening behavior from the Israelis, but not physical molestation. Israeli soldiers used abusive language. Berge and Møller had the impression that while some soldiers wished to hit them, others prevented them from being physically molested. Marianne Møller said that she was visited by an Israeli soldier who told her that her husband had been taken to Israel two days before. The soldier said: "I saw to it that they got proper
treatment." He did not identify himself and had not been willing to elaborate on what was meant by "proper treatment." Øyvind Møller added that he had asked the soldier examining him to go and tell his wife that he had been taken to Israel, and the person conducting the interrogation had promised to do so.

Berge and Møller got food—water and bread—for the first time the evening after they were arrested. Later they received "special" treatment, getting food and water first and in greater quantities than the other prisoners.

Berge and Møller were treated correctly during interrogation. In the afternoon of June 14, Berge was told to examine a corpse which lay outside. He had the impression that the purpose was to check if he was a doctor. Close to the body Berge examined were five or six other corpses lying in a car (estate-type). The examining magistrate told Berge and Møller that in his view they could be released, but this did not happen.

Berge and Møller were treated correctly in the camp in Safa. In the bus which took them to Israel, Berge and Møller were given preferential treatment. While the other prisoners had to sit in the back of the bus, with their hands tied behind their backs and blindfolded, they sat in the front of the bus without blindfolds and without being tied.

In Magido prison in Israel, Berge and Møller had to lie for about 48 hours on what they describe as "the interrogation ground." During this time they were handcuffed and blindfolded as well. Even here they were given preferential treatment; unlike other prisoners they were able to lie on one mattress each most of the time. They were also permitted to sit upright on the mattress. In this period Berge and Møller could hear other prisoners on the ground being hit. On one occasion, there were stones thrown at Berge and Møller. During the rest of their stay in the prison Berge and Møller were treated fairly well. When they moved around in the prison they were blindfolded with either handcuffs or footcuffs.

**Maltreatment Of Prisoners**

According to both Berge and Møller, extensive violence was used against prisoners in the large open area at the school in Sidon. Berge and Møller estimate the number of prisoners in that area at 500 to 600, and that roughly one-half of these were subjected to physical violence such as strikes or blows.

Thick, solid, broken table legs were used as weapons. Some were round, others square. Also used were long, baton-like sticks with some elasticity, up to one meter in length and about two centimeters thick. Long, stiff plastic tubes like garden hoses and thick ropes, often with big knots in the ends, were also used for striking. On one occasion Møller saw a piece of metal attached to the end of such a rope used for beating. On another occasion he saw a club or table leg with a nail in the end used for striking. The soldiers used five, six or seven
different plastic straps tied together so the bundle of it formed a whip. The prisoners were hit regularly with clenched fists and rifle butts and kicked with military boots. Shots were fired in the air right above the heads of the prisoners.

Although the extent of the violence varied, it went on all day. There was less violence in the morning, and it increased without stopping throughout the day. Violence ended in the evening as the captives were to sleep. During the night violence did not occur.

The pattern of violence was that small groups of prisoners on the outskirts of the area were taken aside, and groups of two, three and up to four soldiers beat the prisoners with the weapons described above. The captives were most often hit in the stomach, the chest, on the shoulders and the head—somewhat more seldom in the groin, depending on the captives' sitting position. The extent to which violence was used against an individual prisoner would vary.

Berge and Møller stressed that the plastic straps used for tying the hands of the captives were flat with sharp edges causing pain to the prisoners. Later during captivity they saw a great number of prisoners with wounds caused by the straps. On a couple of occasions Berge and Møller witnessed well-disposed Israeli soldiers removing such plastic straps with a knife for a prisoner who had complained because of pain. They also saw cases where the straps were tightened on prisoners who complained about the pain.

Berge and Møller considered some of the cases of maltreatment they witnessed at the school in Sidon as severe, and made a special account of these.

The first day in the schoolyard Møller saw a group of prisoners being taken in. He was not sure of the number, but there were at least five. They were tied from behind and blindfolded. When they came into the yard they were placed in a row beside Møller. An Israeli soldier, whom Møller describes as fat with a red armlet, faced the prisoners. The Israeli soldier drove his knee with full strength up the prisoners' groins, one after the other. When the prisoners subsequently bowed forward the soldier hit their necks with his hand and they fell onto the ground. Then the soldier kicked them in the face and in the stomach. The prisoners were then gathered in a heap, where they crouched with pain. They were still conscious.

In another case an old man, whom Berge and Møller estimated at around 60 years old, got up evidently in despair and tried to kick an Israeli soldier. Four or five soldiers at once fell upon the man who was bound but not blindfolded. He was beaten to the ground, and then the four or five Israeli soldiers beat him continuously with wooden sticks and cudgels. He was hit and kicked in all parts of the body: on top of his head, in the face, the stomach, the shoulders, arms and groin. This continued for quite a period of time; Møller would not try to estimate its duration but Berge estimated it to be some 10 minutes. The man remained on the ground, lifeless, and in this condition his wrists were tied to his ankles.
Neither Berge nor Møller saw the man being removed from the area. Later while Møller was waiting to be interrogated he saw the man lying with three others right outside the window of the interrogation office, a maximum of six meters from Møller.

The second day at the Sidon school, Berge and Møller saw a doctor whom they knew from the Red Crescent Hospital where Berge had worked before the Israeli invasion. This doctor, Nabil, was originally from the West Bank and had been educated at the University of Barcelona. Dr. Nabil had been responsible for preventive care at the Red Crescent clinic. When Berge and Møller saw him in the schoolyard, he had a rope around his neck and was being towed around by Israeli soldiers as other soldiers hit him with sticks. The next day Berge and Møller saw him at the camp south of Sidon. He was sitting, staring blankly, big wounds on his neck and big marks on his back.

At both ends of the Sidon schoolyard there were basketball poles and other poles which Berge and Møller thought were handball goals or swings. Prisoners were regularly tied up to these poles and beaten, often left there hanging.

Berge and Møller pointed out that many of the prisoners in the Sidon schoolyard did not get enough water, particularly those in the middle of the schoolyard. When the soldiers came with water, these prisoners became “desperate,” got on their feet and asked for water. The soldiers distributed a little to some of them and threw the rest of the water in their faces. Then they started to beat the prisoners to make them sit down again, and kept beating them after they had sat down. Afterwards, shots were fired above their heads. This was repeated several times. At the camp south of Sidon, Berge talked to a man who was suffering severely and who claimed he had not received any water for three days. Berge also pointed out that there were many prisoners with minor injuries at the Sidon schoolyard who were in need of treatment, but did not receive any.

Berge and Møller had the impression that the maltreatment of prisoners which they witnessed at the schoolyard occurred at the initiative of the soldiers and not on orders from officers. On the other hand it was also their impression that the officers did not care what happened at the schoolyard. The officers were always present, obviously to monitor the situation but did nothing to intervene.

Berge and Møller maintain that there were about 30 to 40 soldiers guarding the schoolyard. The night guards were “nicer” than those during the daytime, and there was no maltreatment of prisoners at night. Berge and Møller also stress that a minority of the soldiers remained passive, and did not participate in the maltreatment of prisoners. They treated the prisoners as well as they could, given the circumstances, but they also appeared to remain aloof from what happened.

A majority of the soldiers took part in the maltreatment, to a greater or lesser extent. One, who was especially bad, told Berge and Møller that he had
many friends in Oslo, and that he came from a kibbutz in Israel where a Katyusha missile had killed an Austrian girl. He was among those who had taken part in the maltreatment of the old man who Berge and Møller believe died as a consequence (see above).

This soldier had curly hair and a mother-of-pearl necklace. Both Berge and Møller state that they would be able to identify him and other soldiers who took part in the maltreatment of prisoners.

According to Berge and Møller there was less violence in the Safa camp south of Sidon than in the schoolyard. In the former, there were instances of violence against prisoners, but no systematic violence. In this camp, two Israeli doctors arrived to give some of the prisoners medical treatment. The prisoners were still bound and had to sit quietly on the ground. The soldiers carried out their tasks with common batons, and Berge and Møller did not see at this camp any of the weapons used for beating at the Sidon schoolyard.

However, as mentioned earlier, Berge and Møller did witness individual instances of violence at this camp as well. They saw captives standing with their arms in the air who were beaten when they lowered their arms. They also saw a bound and blindfolded prisoner put on the ground and hit with wooden clubs in his stomach, in the groin and in the posterior. This lasted for three or four minutes and the man howled for quite a while afterwards. In another instance Berge and Møller saw a prisoner being beaten for a long time, until one of the other Lebanese captives who knew him said that the person being beaten was insane.

Prior to the bus trip from the camp south of Sidon to Israel, all the prisoners were beaten with big sticks. This happened at all the bus departures Berge and Møller witnessed.

Abord the bus to Israel all the prisoners except Berge, Møller and the Canadian surgeon Chris Giannou were bound and blindfolded. Berge, Møller and Giannou sat in the front of the bus without being tied or blindfolded. In addition to the driver there were two soldiers on the bus carrying submachine guns and clubs. The bus had one escort car in front and one behind. The soldiers on the bus regularly hit the prisoners on the head and body. On a couple of occasions one soldier also used an umbrella for beating. En route the bus stopped at places that Berge and Møller guessed were kibbutzim. On a couple of such occasions soldiers and persons in civilian clothes came on board the bus to “look at the prisoners,” and on a couple of occasions they hit the prisoners.

Upon arrival at Magido prison in Israel, both Berge and Møller were blindfolded, but just before, Berge was able to see seven or eight soldiers with clubs. Berge and Møller did not leave the bus at the same place as the other prisoners. When the remaining prisoners left the bus, Berge and Møller, who then were blindfolded, heard them being beaten—that is, heard the blows and the howling and moaning afterwards. The prisoners then went alongside the
bus, outside it, not more than one meter away.

During interrogation in Magido prison, where Berge and Møller were kept for 48 hours, they heard several voices shouting to a prisoner and the prisoner being beaten. Both Berge and Møller saw clubs in the interrogation room, and Møller clearly heard blows and howling from pain from the neighboring room during his second interrogation.

Other Questions

As to the effect of the violence on the prisoners, Berge and Møller stated that all the captives seemed exposed. They bled after being hit in their faces, and had cuts (lesions) on their faces. Several of the captives in the prison showed bruises. Most of the prisoners wore shirts and long trousers so marks from violence on their bodies were not visible. One exception was Dr. Nabil whose injuries are described above.

As a medical doctor, Berge could not say for certain the cause of death of the dead persons he had seen during imprisonment. He considered it most likely to be a combination of blows and varying degrees of heat-shock and dehydration. Some could have died as a consequence of injuries inflicted before captivity, for which they had received no medical treatment.

To a question about possible errors in their account, Berge and Møller answered that they may not have registered what happened around them well enough, and that their account may therefore be incomplete and lack details, particularly regarding the injuries caused by violence. On the other hand, both Berge and Møller are convinced that their account gives a correct, factual representation of the course of events.

Neither Berge nor Møller mentioned to Israeli officers violence they had witnessed during captivity. They stated they were afraid of the consequences that might follow for themselves if the Israelis concluded they had seen too much.

Berge and Møller mentioned the use of violence for the first time to the Norwegian ambassador in Tel Aviv, immediately after their release on June 20. During their stay in the Norwegian Embassy in Tel Aviv from June 20 in the evening to June 21 in the morning, Berge and Møller also mentioned the use of violence to the President of the Norwegian Red Cross, Mr. Bjørn Egge.

Signed:
Steinar Berge, Øyvind Møller, Marianne Helle Møller