

International

Thousands of Palestinians demonstrate to mark Nakba



A Palestinian demonstrator holds an anti-US placard during a rally marking the 71st anniversary of the Nakba in Ramallah.



Palestinians hold up paper cutouts of keys as they take part in a rally marking the 71st anniversary of the 'Nakba', or Catastrophe, yesterday in Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. — AFP photos

GAZA CITY: Palestinians protested yesterday for the annual commemoration of what they call the Nakba, or catastrophe, when hundreds of thousands were expelled or fled during the 1948 war surrounding the creation of Israel. Thousands gathered at various locations along the volatile border fence between Israel and the Gaza Strip, while crowds also demonstrated in the occupied West Bank. Clashes erupted along parts of the border fence, with the health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza reporting 47 people wounded, but the protests were smaller and calmer than anticipated, an AFP journalist said.

The AFP journalist on the border saw a number of kites being floated across the bor-

der and a fire breaking out inside Israeli territory. Palestinians in Gaza have regularly used kites with firebombs attached to them to set fires on the Israeli side of the fence. Israel's military said around 10,000 "rioters and demonstrators" were along the Gaza fence. "The rioters are setting tyres on fire and hurling rocks," it said in a statement. "A number of explosive devices have been hurled within the Gaza Strip as well, and a number of attempts have been made to approach the security fence." It said "troops are responding with riot dispersal means." In the West Bank city of Ramallah, protesters held up giant paper keys to symbolize their will to return to the lands and homes they were expelled from or were

forced to abandon, now located inside Israel.

Palestinians commemorate the Nakba every year. More than 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their land during the 1948 war surrounding the creation of Israel. Separately, there have also been regular protests and clashes along the Gaza border for more than a year. At least 293 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in Gaza since the protests began in March 2018. The majority died during the often-violent weekly protests, though others were killed in Israeli airstrikes or by tank fire in response to violence from Gaza. Six Israelis have been killed in Gaza-related violence over the same time period. — AFP



A wounded Palestinian demonstrator is carried away from the border fence during clashes with Israeli forces east of Gaza City in the Gaza Strip yesterday, following a protest marking the 71st anniversary of Nakba.

In Israel, Arab minority embraces Palestinian identity

KHUBBAYZA, Israel: Loudspeakers blared nationalist Arabic music across hillsides in northern Israel last Thursday as children ran across a field waving Palestinian flags. The scene was a rally for members of Israel's 21 percent Arab minority. The Israeli term for them is Israeli-Arabs, but many now reject that label, identifying instead as "Palestinian with Israeli citizenship," or simply "Palestinian". Each year they hold a gathering to mark the "Nakba" - or "Catastrophe" - when Palestinians lament the loss of their homeland in the 1948-49 war that surrounded the creation of the modern Jewish state.

The event is a celebration of Palestinian identity that Arab politicians and academics say, reflects a change in thinking over the decades. On Thursday, coachloads arrived at a roped-off field near the Khubbayza, a ruined Palestinian village that lay 30 km south of Haifa and was destroyed in the fighting between Arab and Jewish forces in 1948. It and hundreds of others are now marked on paper and digital maps by groups such as "Palestine Remembered".

The Nakba rally is timed each year to coincide with the day that Israelis in the rest of the country celebrate Independence Day. On



Palestinian demonstrators gather east of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday during a protest marking the Nakba. — AFP

Thursday, Palestinian flags flew in the roped-off field where Israeli authorities gave permission for the gathering. Across a country lane, Israeli banners were draped across the hillside from which Israeli police watched, a drone hovering nearby.

Shouting over the music, Rula Nasr-Mazzawi, 42, a psychologist, said many of the first two generations of Arabs in post-1948

Israel were too scared to discuss matters of identity openly. "But now we are seeing the younger generation, the third generation, more and more identifying very frankly and very loudly as Palestinians," she said.

In an interview earlier this year Ahmad Tibi, an Arab member of Israel's parliament, said: "The term Israeli-Arabs is mistaken, it's not accurate. We are Palestinians by national-

ty, and we are Israeli citizens." He added: "They are saying Arab-Israeli or Israeli-Arabs in order to say that we are not Palestinians. We bypassed that. We are part of the Palestinian people, and we are struggling in order to be equal citizens."

Identity and citizenship

Israel's population recently passed the 9 million mark, according to the country's Central Bureau of Statistics. This includes 1.89 million Arab citizens - mostly Muslim, Druze and Christians - living alongside the 6.68 million Jews who make up the 74.2 percent majority. Professor As'ad Ghanem, 53, a Haifa University political scientist and co-author of the book "Palestinians in Israel" drew a distinction with Druze and Bedouin Arabs, many of whom serve in the Israeli military, taken by many as an indicator of integration. In contrast, most Muslims and Christian Arabs do not serve.

He said Israel's Arabs had undergone a slow transformation from their initial status as marginalized within both Israel, and the Arab world. A new generation of intellectuals and politicians were "much more strong than those in the 50s and 60s", and voiced their community's complaints about discrimination in the job market, and lack of services, he said. "The majority think that they want to be identified as Palestinian," he said. Nonetheless, he said most Israeli Arabs still valued their Israeli citizenship and would oppose attempts to transfer them to Gaza or the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority exercises limited self-rule, because "they see all the troubles on the other side".

'Best conditions'

Recently, Arabs were angered after Israel's parliament last year passed the nation-state law, which declared that only Jews have the right of self-determination in the country. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reasserted that principle just before his victory in the election a month ago, saying on Instagram: "Israel is not a state of all its citizens. According to the basic nationality law we passed, Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people - and only it."

He sought to placate non-Jewish citizens (and critics at home and abroad) by adding "there is no problem with the Arab citizens of Israel. They have equal rights like all of us and the Likud government has invested more in the Arab sector than any other government." Some of the Arab minority disagree with the sentiments expressed at Thursday's rally, saying Israel protects them from threats in the Middle East. "I am very proud to be an Israeli-Arab," said Yoseph Haddad, 33, a Greek Catholic speaking in the mixed Jewish and Arab city of Haifa. "The fact is that if you take a look around all or most of the Arab nations, the Israeli-Arabs here in Israel are in the best conditions."

But Eyad Barghuthy, 39, a novelist and former head of the Arab Cultural Association, said there had been an evolution in identity. His generation had to struggle to find their roots within a country that emphasized the majority's narrative, he said, while a younger generation took their Palestinian-ness for granted. — Reuters

Gaza fisherman clings to dream of return to Jaffa

GAZA: Looking out across the Mediterranean, the elderly Gaza fisherman sits on a bench adorned with just one word - Jaffa. Mahmoud Al-Assi comes often to this blue bench. It is one of more than 120 such brightly-colored concrete seats that line the Gaza seafront, each marked with the name of a town or village in Palestine, before Israel's creation in 1948. They bear the Arabic names for Beersheba (Bir as-Saba'), Acre (Akka), and Tel Aviv (Tal ar-Rabeaa') - all towns that now lie in Israel.

Like many of Gaza's 1.3 million refugees, Assi, 73, visits the coastal benches regularly, as an emotional link to the towns their families left behind or were forced to leave. He comes espe-

cially around May 15, when Palestinians lament what they call the "Nakba" or "Catastrophe" - their defeat in the war of 1948-1949 that surrounded the birth of the modern state of Israel. It is traditionally marked the day after Israel declared independence in 1948. Although Assi left Jaffa nearly seven decades ago as a child, he still regards it as "home".

Like many Palestinian refugees, he seeks the right of return to his former homeland. But successive Israeli governments have rejected any such right, fearing the country would lose its Jewish majority. "I have never lost hope, and never will, even when I am dead and buried," he told Reuters as he looked out on the waters that bore him to safety when his father, a citrus merchant and fisherman, put him and his seven siblings on a boat to sail south from Jaffa to Gaza in 1950.

In his new life as a refugee in Gaza, those same waters provided a livelihood for him as he brought up his 18 children. Two of Assi's brothers fled to Lebanon, where they lived and died as refugees. In Jaffa, another fisherman and an Arab citizen of Israel, Atta Assi, 86, recalled how Israeli forces had

taken control of the town in 1948, imposing a curfew and a year-long "open detention" by erecting a fence around his neighborhood.

"I remember in 1948, when people were displaced, my father told my uncles: 'Don't leave here'", said Assi, who belongs to the same clan as Mahmoud Al-Assi in Gaza. "He told them not to leave because the best place to stay is here. But they didn't listen and left to Lebanon," said Assi, who began his life as a fisherman on the day the fence came down.

In the early 1970s, when times were more peaceful and Gaza wasn't sealed off from Israel by checkpoints, blast walls and razor wire, Gaza fisherman Assi was able to travel the 60 km up the Mediterranean coast to visit Jaffa and see his birthplace. He saw his family's unfinished home had since been completed, and was inhabited, but couldn't bring himself to knock at the door and see who was living there.

"Our house in Jaffa was just by the sea, nothing and no building separated us from the sea ... I remember the small mosque and I remember the seaport," Assi said. — Reuters



A Palestinian demonstrator attends a rally marking the Nakba in Ramallah.



An Israeli border guard keeps watch as Palestinian demonstrators shout slogans during a rally marking the 'Nakba' yesterday in Bethlehem in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

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