

Israel Deports a Bethlehem U. Student Because She Is From Gaza

By Matthew Kalman
Jerusalem

A student in her final year of work at Bethlehem University was deported last night to her home in Gaza by Israeli authorities, despite appeals by the university and human-rights groups after she was arrested on Wednesday at a military checkpoint near Bethlehem, in the West Bank.

Berlanty Azzam, who is 21 and has been studying business administration and translation at Bethlehem since 2005, was stopped at a roadside checkpoint in the West Bank and detained because she is a resident of Gaza.

The Israeli military has banned Palestinian residents of Gaza from studying at Palestinian universities in the West Bank. Two years ago, it began arresting Palestinians with Gaza identity cards and sending them back to the embattled coastal strip.

Ms. Azzam told *The Chronicle* that she was handcuffed, blindfolded, and driven to an unknown destination by Israeli security forces. It wasn't until they removed her blindfold that she discovered she was being dumped across the border into Gaza at midnight, with no warning and no means of finding her way home in the dark. She said she was "terrified."

Israeli officials said she had "cynically used permission given to her in 2005 to stay for four years illegally in Bethlehem."

But human-rights lawyers said the Israeli army had broken an understanding not to deport her before her case could be brought before a judge. Noting that another Gaza resident arrested at the same time at the same checkpoint was not deported, they accused the Israeli army of "a naked attempt to evade judicial review."

Bethlehem University administrators urged supporters on Wednesday to contact the Israeli military authorities to protest the arrest. "Let them know that you demand that they release Berlanty Azzam immediately so that she can resume and complete her last year of studies," the university said in its message.

Ms. Azzam, who is due to complete her bachelor's degree in December, began her studies in Bethlehem in 2005 after the Israeli authorities granted her a permit to travel across Israel from Gaza to the West Bank. The travel permit has not been renewed, so she has stayed in Bethlehem since then to finish her degree and has been unable to see her family for four years.

In August 2007, Israel's Supreme Court upheld Israeli military policy denying Gaza residents the right to stay in the West Bank but asked the army to consider exceptions. Trying to take advantage of that ruling, Bethlehem University created a scholarship program for 16 students from the Gaza Strip, but in the current academic year, all 16 candidates were refused entry by Israel.

Enforcement of the deportation policy had seemed to halt after protests from human-rights groups, but it has intensified again in the past few weeks, according to Gisha, an Israeli human-rights organization that campaigns for freedom of movement for Palestinians.

"I spoke to her today for about 10 minutes until the army took away her cellphone," Sari Bashi, executive director of Gisha, told *The Chronicle*. "She's terrified. She's 21. She has never been in detention and doesn't know what's happening to her."

In the past, when human-rights groups have interceded before detainees have been deported, Israel's Supreme Court has ruled against the army and allowed Gaza residents to remain in the West Bank. In most cases, however, Palestinians are deported before anyone hears about their arrest, and it has proved almost impossible to get them out of Gaza once they have been returned there.

According to Ms. Bashi, Ms. Azzam's case is the sixth in less than two weeks involving Gazans arrested at the same checkpoint, the only passage permitted to Palestinians between the southern and northern sections of the West Bank.

This policy of deporting people to Gaza because of their identity cards is pending before the Supreme Court, said Ms. Bashi. "We have asked the military to stop doing this at least until the court rules. Instead we end up playing cat and mouse with the military."