

Student expelled to Gaza Strip by force

Palestinian's involuntary return is the sixth in 10 days, says human rights group

By Ben Lynfield in Jerusalem

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Berlanty Azzam, 21, was handcuffed and blindfolded

A Palestinian student has been handcuffed, blindfolded and forcibly expelled to the Gaza Strip by Israeli troops just two months before she was due to graduate from university.

Berlanty Azzam, 21, who was studying for a business degree at Bethlehem University, said she was coming home in a shared taxi from a job interview in Ramallah on Wednesday when soldiers at the "Container" checkpoint took her identity card and that of another passenger with a Gaza address.

After six hours of waiting, soldiers told her she would be taken to a detention centre in the southern West Bank, and she was handcuffed and blindfolded, she said.

"The driving took longer than it should have and I started to think something was wrong. I started to wonder, what are they doing to me?" After the car stopped and the blindfold was lifted, Ms Azzam saw she was at the Erez crossing to Gaza.

It was the sixth known forced return to Gaza of Palestinians stopped at the "Container" checkpoint – which is between Bethlehem and Abu Dis – in 10 days, according to the Israeli human rights group Gisha. Israel has also been preventing family reunifications in the West Bank for Palestinians with relatives living in Gaza, in effect forcing people to relocate to the Strip.

The steps are part of an Israeli policy of treating Gaza and the West Bank as two separate entities, thereby undermining the coherence of Palestinian claims for a state encompassing both territories. The 1993 Oslo agreement stipulates that the West Bank and Gaza Strip are to be treated as one territorial unit.

Major Guy Inbar, an Israeli defense ministry official, said the reason for Ms Azzam's deportation was that she was "staying illegally" in the West Bank.

"We are talking about a Gaza citizen who requested permission to study in the area of Judea and Samaria and received a negative answer," he said.

"In 2005, she was given a permit to visit Jerusalem for four days and she remained afterwards [in the West Bank] without any permit. Her entire period as a student was based on deceit and was against the law."

Sari Bashi, head of the Israeli Gisha human rights group, who tried to intervene on Ms Azzam's behalf, said she was assured by military lawyers on Wednesday that the student would not be deported to Gaza and that the rights group could seek a judicial review in the morning.

"The military misled us," Ms Bashi said. "There is a violation here of the right to access education, the right to freedom of movement and the right to choose one's place of residence within one's own territory."

The army did not respond to a request for comment.

Brother Jack Curran, vice president for development of Bethlehem University, termed the expulsion "a disgrace". "This is not about politics. It's about a young person finishing her degree. Since 2005 she has been studying as a good student. No one is a winner from this."