

Bethlehem student deported to Gaza

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Bethlehem - Ma'an - Israeli forces forcibly "deported" Berlanty Azzam, a Bethlehem University student, to Gaza overnight after detaining her at a military checkpoint on Wednesday.

"I pray that no one else goes through the same experience," she said over the phone from Gaza, recounting her last hours in the West Bank.

Born in Gaza, Azzam, 21, was sponsored by the university for study in the West Bank and had been living in Bethlehem since 2005, the university confirmed. She received a travel permit from the Israeli military to cross from Gaza to the West Bank in 2005.

On Wednesday, however, she was heading home to Bethlehem from a job interview in Ramallah, and arrived at the "container" checkpoint at 1pm. Israeli forces checked her ID and held her until 7pm without explanation. Then they blindfolded and handcuffed her, put her in a jeep and told her they were taking her to "Etzion Israeli coordinating office," she said.

She described the journey as silent. Most of the trip no one spoke to her or told her where they were taking her, she said.

They stopped somewhere along the way, and she remembers being in a place that looked like a cafeteria. She asked to use the restroom, and the soldiers kept her blindfolded all the way to the restroom door. They were there for what Berlanty estimates was about 15 minutes. Then she was put back in the army jeep, and the journey continued.

Hours after the journey began, the jeep came to a stop. Soldiers took her out, removed the blindfold and handcuffs and told her, "You are in Gaza."

"I haven't been to Gaza for four years," she replied. "I didn't know the way, and it was dark. It was an empty area."

"Give me directions," she told the soldiers, "I don't know where to go." They just gestured for her to continue, following behind, so she kept walking until she came to a gate. That gate opened, she went through it, then through another one, to ultimately find de facto government police and her parents waiting for her on the other side.

Asked how the family was doing, her father said, "Well you know how things are here."

Education officials appealed to concerned supporters and asked them to "demand that they [Israel] release Berlanty Azzam immediately so that she can resume and complete her last year of studies at the Vatican-sponsored Bethlehem University."

"The Israeli military has banned Palestinian residents of Gaza from studying at Palestinian universities in the West Bank," according to Bethlehem University Vice President Brother Jack Curran, in a statement issued just before the deportation.

He added, "Military authorities are holding this 4th year Christian student in the Sharon Detention Center near Netanya in Israel and are threatening to 'deport her' to Gaza 'for trying to complete her studies at Bethlehem University.'"

Matthew Kalman, a writer for the Chronicle for Higher Education, spoke to Sari Bashi, Berlanty's lawyer and executive director of the human rights group Gisha. "I spoke to her today for about 10 minutes until the army took away her cellphone. She's terrified. She's 21. She has never been in detention and doesn't know what's happening to her."

The lawyer continued, explaining, "We asked the army to let her go... [but] they said no. They did agree to wait until after our lawyer visits in the morning. They won't deport her pending an opportunity for our lawyer to file a court petition."

She was nevertheless deported overnight, without ever speaking to her lawyer.

With disappointment, Azzam adds, "When I reach the point that I will graduate, now I'm being held back again." A fourth-year business administration student, she only had three credits left to go.

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