

Catholic on line International News

Bethlehem University Student Deported to Gaza in Handcuffs and Blindfold
By Deal W. Hudson, Ph.D.
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(Pictured: Berlanty (Betty) Azzam) 'For Israel to allow Azzam to return to Bethlehem to receive her degree would be both humanitarian and compassionate, as Brother Curran urged. But it would also be good politics. Israel should go even further and make it possible for the 19 students from Gaza to study at Bethlehem University'. (Deal Hudson)

WASHINGTON, D.C. (Inside Catholic) - Berlanty (Betty) Azzam was two months away from receiving her business degree at Bethlehem University. Anticipating life beyond college, she made the two-hour trip to Ramallah for a job interview, but on the way back she was asked for her papers at the "container" checkpoint.

Azzam was detained by the Israeli military for five hours, sent to the Sharon Detention Center in Netanya, and eventually blindfolded, handcuffed, put into a military vehicle, and deported to Gaza where her family resides. Lawyers from the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem, which encompasses both the West bank and Israel, tried to intervene with the military, but with no success.

Though born in Kuwait, Azzam grew up in Gaza. Her father, Jiries Azzam, works for the YMCA; her mother, Evette, teaches for the UN Relief and Works Agency, and both her brothers live in the United Arab Emirates.

In August 2005, Azzam left Gaza with a temporary travel permit allowing her to visit the West Bank. She did not return to Gaza until the Israeli military returned her forcibly on October 28. Azzam had taken the risk of not returning to Gaza knowing it was her only way to attend Bethlehem University, the only Catholic university on the West Bank.

Writing to me from Gaza, Azzam was still quite shaken by her treatment at the checkpoint: "They didn't tell me anything and treated me like a criminal. They had no reason to blindfold and handcuff me." The fact that she was carrying a university ID verifying her status at Bethlehem University made no difference.

Br. Jack Curran, F.S.C., vice president of development at Bethlehem University, told me that a petition against Azzam's deportation has been filed in Israeli courts. Attorneys for Israel have been ordered by the courts to submit a preliminary written reply to the petition by November 3.

Brother Curran has written to the Israeli government asking that Azzam be allowed to return to Bethlehem University "on compassionate and humanitarian grounds.... She has not been accused of being a security threat and has committed no crime."

His letter also cited the "Agreement on Movement and Access" negotiated between the Palestinian Authority and Israel in 2005 that was facilitated by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. "I believe permitting her to return to Bethlehem to complete her degree also would be in the spirit of the agreement."

Azzam's desire to study at Bethlehem University is shared by many others. One Palestinian Liberation Organization source I spoke with told me there are 19 students already admitted to the university still waiting in Gaza to get a permit to come study on the West Bank. The man -- whose family is from Beit Jala, the town adjacent to Bethlehem -- is very familiar with the struggle of students at the university. "Before 2000, almost 10 percent of the students at Bethlehem University were from Gaza. Today there are just two students, both young women, left."

For Israel to allow Azzam to return to Bethlehem to receive her degree would be both humanitarian and compassionate, as Brother Curran urged. But it would also be good politics. Israel should go even further and make it possible for the 19 students from Gaza to study at Bethlehem University. This institution, founded by the Christian Brothers in 1973, is one of the keys to the future of peace in the region, if peace is ever to come.

Letting Azzam return to Bethlehem is a move Israel can afford to make, and it would be a gesture of good will at a time when good news is in short supply on the West Bank.

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Brother Curran encourages all those who are concerned about Betty Azzam's future to go to the State Department Web site and fill out this form, urging them to request Israel that Azzam be allowed to return to Bethlehem University and finish her degree.

Deal W. Hudson is the director of InsideCatholic.com and the author of *Onward, Christian Soldiers: The Growing Political Power of Catholics and Evangelicals in the United States* (Simon and Schuster).

http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=34754