

## Trapped in Gaza, Bethlehem student in legal limbo

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Berlanty Azzam, 21

Gaza – Ma'an – "I just want to go back to Bethlehem," said deported Palestinian student Berlanty Azzam, in a telephone interview on Saturday. "I'm so anxious because I don't know what the future holds."

Azzam, a fourth-year business student at Bethlehem University three credits shy of graduation, was seized from a minibus on her way back from a job interview in Ramallah on 29 October. Soldiers kept her at an Israeli military checkpoint inside the West Bank for five hours, then blindfolded and transported her to the Gaza Strip, where her family lives.

"I want to finish my college education and I'm appealing to anyone who can help me... I want to return to my books and everything at my home in Beit Sahour [near Bethlehem], she said, revealing that her university, a Catholic school affiliated with the Vatican, has filed suit in an Israeli court to overturn her deportation.

Asked about the conditions in Gaza, which she had not visited since the blockade began in 2006, Azzam said the place was "not the same as I remembered it," and that she was "having trouble coping."

In an early-evening court appearance on Tuesday, Israeli prosecutors delivered a statement declaring that the 21-year-old student an illegal resident of the West Bank. Lawyers from the Israeli human rights group Gisha were denied permission to visit her before she was forcibly transferred into Gaza.

According to a spokeswoman at Bethlehem University, an Israeli court set a hearing date for 12 November, which she called "good news" since a slow process would make it unlikely for Berlanty to be able to travel back to Bethlehem to finish her degree. The spokeswoman said Israeli lawyers had indicated their intent to defend Berlanty's deportation as legal, since she did have a permit to live in the West Bank.

Gisha, the firm defending the young woman, said it would argue that she left Gaza legally, with a permit to visit Jerusalem in 2005, and returned to an area under supposedly under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority. They will argue that Israel has no jurisdiction to determine where certain Palestinians live inside autonomous areas. Moreover, Berlanty did not need a permit to remain in the West Bank after entering, being a Palestinian citizen, and there was no such permit in 2005 she could have requested, the firm noted.