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Deported BU student tells Israeli prosecutors she was in WB legally

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Bethlehem - Ma'an - Deported Bethlehem University Student Berlanty Azzam was interviewed by prosecutors from the Israeli military on Tuesday, pursuant to a 22 November court date which will determine whether or not the 21-year-old was illegally seized and removed from the West Bank.

The interview took place at the Israeli-controlled Erez crossing, where Berlanty was thrown back into Gaza after spending three and a half years in Bethlehem



studying Business Administration and Translation in the West Bank. It was the first time Berlanty was permitted to meet her lawyer in person, and a chance for the young student to explain her story.

When travelling back to Bethlehem from a Ramallah job interview with the Palestinian telecom company Jawwal on 28 October, Berlanty was pulled from the mini-bus she was riding in after soldiers demanded to inspect her identity card, which indicates she a resident of Gaza. She was then detained for several hours at the Container checkpoint, an internal military point in the West Bank that restricts the movement of Palestinians from one PA area to another. As evening approached, Berlanty was blindfolded and transported to Gaza. She was only informed of the decision that she was going to be deported when the blindfold was removed and she was already at the Erez crossing.

Describing the interview, Berlanty told BU staff, that military prosecutors "didn't say anything about the way they deported me...they just asked me about my permission [permit to leave Gaza] and what I wanted to do. I said I came to the West Bank legally, stayed for more than three and a half years, didn't do anyone any harm, and want to go back to finish my studies at Bethlehem University."

Berlanty's lawyer, Yadin Elam with the Israeli rights group Gisha, was at the interview despite attempts by Israeli prosecutors at the 12 November hearing of the Israeli High Court, to prevent him from being present.

On or before 22 November lawyers for both sides will present reports to the Israeli High Court, which will determine if there is a need for a hearing or if Berlanty should be returned to Bethlehem or some other outcome, according to a statement from BU.

"While we await the ruling of the High Court, we are all painfully aware that every day of her being held in Gaza against her will, Berlanty is suffering a missed academic day in her pursuit of completing her bachelors degree at Bethlehem University," university officials noted.

BU mobilizing international support

The public relations department at Bethlehem University has mobilized a large-scale international support campaign for Berlanty, aimed at securing not only the young woman's return to Bethlehem, but the safety of their other Gazan students who are now at risk of similar treatment by Israeli forces if a court precedent does not declare illegal the soldiers' actions. There are, additionally, 12 students in Gaza who have been accepted for study at the university, but who have been prevented from leaving the Strip for study.

In the UK, supporters set-up an on-line petition for the UK Prime Minister's Office which gained 922 signatures before it was submitted to the office of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The petition asks "the Prime Minister to request the Israeli government to allow Ms Berlanty Azzam to return to Bethlehem to complete her studies," and was submitted on Tuesday.

In addition, the presidents of Lewis and Fontbonne Universities in the US, US Congressman James Moran (Democrat, Virginia), the Palestinian Representative to the UK, Cardinal Meisner from Germany and representatives for the Churches for Middle East Peace, Warren Clark, Jim Fine, and Philip Wilcox, sent letters to their governments as well as Israeli authorities demanding action on Berlanty's case.

For her part, Berlanty told BU officials, "I'm just waiting to come back to Bethlehem. I'm really praying for a positive answer, really I am... God bless you and all of the people who are working so hard to help me, and others like me here in Gaza. Thank you so much!"

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