

Israel bars Gaza woman from West Bank university

10 Dec 2009 16:43:19 GMT

Source: Reuters

- * Student kept from finishing degree weeks before graduation
- * Israeli court backs military despite no security charges
- * Case highlights Gaza's continued isolation

By Nidal al-Mughrabi

GAZA, Dec 10 (Reuters) - A chance arrest at an Israeli checkpoint has dashed the hopes of Gaza woman of graduating along with the rest of her class this month from a Palestinian university in the occupied West Bank. Israel deported Berlanty Azzam, 22, to blockaded coastal Gaza in late October, after blindfolding and handcuffing her following her arrest at a checkpoint in the West Bank, territory where Israel says she was residing illegally. Her case has spotlighted the plight of many of Gaza's 1.5 million Palestinians, largely prevented from leaving the barbed-wire enclosed Hamas-ruled territory except for a medical emergency or through a rarely open crossing with Egypt.

An Israeli high court ruling on Wednesday upheld the military's decision, confirming Berlanty could not leave Gaza, not even for the three weeks left before her planned graduation from a Vatican-sponsored university in the West Bank.

"It's the worst feeling of injustice I've ever felt," Berlanty told Reuters in an interview. "Is it a crime that young people from Gaza want an education?"

Israel has not charged her of involvement in militancy, or of posing any particular security risk to the Jewish state, she added. Berlanty's Israeli lawyers said she has never been accused of any security offences.

A member of a minority Christian population in Gaza, Berlanty enrolled in Bethlehem University in 2005 for an undergraduate degree in business administration.

Israel stopped her in a car in October at a checkpoint in the West Bank, when she said she was on her way back to the Bethlehem campus from a job interview nearby.

Soldiers dropped her off at the Erez crossing to Gaza late the next night. "It was so embarrassing. All I had were my clothes on my back, and no degree," Berlanty said.

An Israeli military statement said that Berlanty had been sent back to Gaza because a check of her documents showed she was "residing in the West Bank illegally".

It did not accuse Berlanty of involvement with militants, but said "students from Gaza residing in the West Bank illegally have on more than one occasion engaged in terrorism, thus constituting a significant security threat."

In its ruling, the Israeli court upheld the military's view that a permit Berlanty had to visit the West Bank four years ago had expired, and that Israel does not at this time permit Palestinians from Gaza to attend universities in the West Bank.

Israel adopted the policy in 2000 when an uprising, in which hundreds of Israelis were killed in suicide bombings and shootings, erupted over failed peace talks.

Thousands of Palestinians were also killed in the uprising in a series of Israeli military raids against militants.

Israel further tightened restrictions on travel from Gaza after Hamas seized control in 2007, an Islamist group that refuses to recognise or negotiate peace with the Jewish state.

Universities in the West Bank, where Western-backed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah movement holds sway, offer a greater variety of courses, and the territory has better job opportunities than impoverished Gaza.

Sari Bashi, director of Gisha, an Israeli rights group that represented Berlanty in court, argued Israel should judge Gazans seeking entry permits particularly for academic study, on an individual rather than a collective basis.

"If you have security concerns, then run a security check. If there are no claims, then let him or her travel," Bashi said.

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/GEE5B21IA.htm>