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## **Bethlehem University Confers Degree For Gaza Student Deported from West Bank**

Bethlehem/Gaza - Ma'an - "I never imagined that my graduation ceremony would be held in a Church in Gaza with no one from my classmates attending," said fresh BU graduate Berlanty Azzam on Sunday.

Bethlehem University officials traveled to Gaza to confer Berlanty's degree at the Holy Family Church in Gaza. Berlanty completed her degree online after she was pulled from a car at a Bethlehem checkpoint by Israeli soldiers, was blindfolded, handcuffed and deported to Gaza on 28 October 2009.

BU Vice Chancellor Brother Peter Bray, Papal Nuncio H E Archbishop Antonio Franco, Chancellor Brother Joe, Vice Chancellor Emeritus, and Trappist Abbott Thomas traveled to Gaza for the 10am Mass at the Holy Family Church where they met Berlanty, her family and friends as well as some other BU students awaiting permission from the Israeli military authorities to come to Bethlehem to pursue their education at the Vatican-sponsored Bethlehem University.

"But I am so happy and grateful to my teachers and all of the friends of Bethlehem University who came forward to help me. I really worked hard and prayed for this moment and will do my best to help others who seek to study at my university!"

Berlanty was forced to finish classes over the phone and e-mail after the Israeli High Court issued a ruling on 9 December declaring that she could not return to Bethlehem to complete her studies. A court battle saw Israeli rights group Gisha defend the young woman. The appeal was rejected despite the Israeli army's admission that Berlanty posed no security threat to Israel, that she had no record to speak of, that she was targeted only because her ID card indicated she was a Gaza resident and that she was removed from the West Bank without having the opportunity to consult a lawyer.

The military rationale for her forcible deportation was that as a Gaza resident, family and friends in the Strip could use their influence over her for the purpose of attacks against Israel.

Arriving in Gaza to present Berlanty with her certificate, Vice-Chancellor of the Bethlehem University Brother Peter Bray said "the University has a commitment to help Berlanty – and all our students in good academic standing – to graduate and succeed in life."

HE Archbishop Antonio Franco, Papal Nuncio and the highest ranking representative of the Pope to Israeli and occupied Palestinian territories, also traveled to Gaza to award Berlanty her degree in Business Administration and to celebrate Mass at Holy Family Church in Gaza.

Brother Joe, Vice-Chancellor Emeritus and Trappist Abbott Thomas Davis accompanied Brother Peter to Gaza for meetings with some of the more than 400 graduates of BU from Gaza as well as some of the current students who continue to await for permission from the Israeli military to study at the university.

"I really wanted to be among my colleagues on such a day ... I still don't know why I was taken from Bethlehem and moved to Gaza while being handcuffed and blindfolded," she said.

"I am sad because I was not able to graduate with my colleagues in Bethlehem, but I was able to challenge the occupation and today I am graduating from Bethlehem University."

### **Gaza students accepted to the BU**

Though upon the conference of her degree all appeals to get Berlanty back to Bethlehem for the completion of her studies will be dropped, an additional 12 Palestinians living in Gaza, who were accepted to BU in the fall, are stuck in the Strip awaiting permits to travel to Bethlehem for study.

BU spokesman Brother Jack Curran said the fight over the issue of freedom of education for Palestinians would not end with the conference of the degree.

Six of Gazan residents admitted to BU have since accepted offers at other institutions, but the remaining half dozen are working with Gisha to reapply for permits to leave Gaza for the purpose of study.

"There are BU Alumni in Gaza helping to rally the students," Curran said, noting the university was working closely with Gisha to ensure the students had all necessary documentation for an application.

Israeli officials had not granted permits to Palestinians in Gaza seeking to study in the West Bank since 2007.

"We have to be hopeful ... other reports said they were reviewing applications on a case-by-case basis, so there is still a chance," Curran said.

Curran said the letter-writing campaign from BU supporters activated during Berlanty's trial would be continued, with university staff encouraging donors, visitors and international figures to register their objection to the Israeli policy and help get the students admitted to the university permission to leave Gaza.

"We are trying to keep the positive momentum going," Curran said, "we want to help realize students' right to freedom of education."

"Bethlehem University expressed gratitude to Gisha and to thousands of local and international friends who joined in the efforts to seek justice for Berlanty ... [and] continues to seek support for other Palestinian students from Gaza to enroll in and attend courses at the Vatican-sponsored Bethlehem University – as well as at all other Palestinian universities in the West Bank or Gaza," the statement issued by the university concluded.