

EXPELLED FROM THE WEST BANK



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Berlanty Azzam, a young Palestinian woman from Gaza, travelled to the West Bank to begin a university degree in business administration and translation at Bethlehem University.

In October 2009, just two months away from finishing her degree, Berlanty was forcibly transferred to Gaza by the Israeli military.

Berlanty Azzam spoke to Amnesty International in Gaza on 2 November 2009, just a few days after her expulsion from the West Bank:

"It was last Wednesday, 28 October, and I was on my way back from Ramallah to Bethlehem. I had been for a job interview in Ramallah. On the way between Bethlehem and Abu Dis was I stopped at the 'Container' Checkpoint [a checkpoint on the road between Ramallah and Bethlehem which restricts Palestinian movement between the south of the West Bank and the north]... I was asked if I was from Gaza [by the Israeli soldiers]... they saw my ID card but they didn't tell me anything, they just told me to wait for the secret police. It was 1pm when I was stopped. I stayed there waiting until 7pm... It was so cold at the 'Container'; I was handcuffed and couldn't move my hands properly. There was one Arab soldier; I asked him what reason they had to hold me at the 'Container'. I refused to sign the paper they gave me because it was in Hebrew. I said, I'm not going to sign it, I don't understand Hebrew. In the end I signed because they pressured me. I don't know what it said."

Berlanty had her mobile phone with her and used it to call Sari Bashi, a lawyer who works with the Israeli human rights organization Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement.

She told Amnesty International that when the Israeli soldiers spoke with the lawyer they told him that they were not taking her to Gaza and that he could meet with Berlanty in a West Bank detention centre the following morning.

As the soldier put her into a jeep to transport her from the "Container", Berlanty initially thought that the soldiers might take her to Etzion, an Israeli prison near Bethlehem:

"I was scared. They had blindfolded me with my own scarf so I was cold as well. We travelled in the jeep for a long time. The journey from Bethlehem to Etzion is only about 10 minutes, and after a while I knew it was too far. The journey lasted about one and a half hours. At about 9.30pm, the jeep stopped and I asked them if I could go to the bathroom. I asked in English but they spoke with me in Hebrew and I said that I didn't speak Hebrew. There were female soldiers there and they let me go to the bathroom. I asked one of the women 'Where are we?' and I was told that we were in Etzion.

"Then they took me back to the jeep. There were two officers but they didn't speak to me. They spoke

among themselves and on the phone. I didn't know where I was. The handcuffs were very tight on my hands and they hurt. I knocked on the window between me and the soldier in the jeep and said in English 'It hurts me'. I tried to do this many times but there was no answer. Eventually they took me out and there was Erez [a crossing point between northern Gaza and Israel].

"In [the] Oslo [Peace Accords of 1993] they said that the West Bank and Gaza are one [territorial unit]. We shouldn't need a permit to go to Ramallah or Bethlehem: I'm legal... I was in Bethlehem for four years, I don't know Erez, I didn't see my family in all this time and it was a shock for me. My mother said she knew I was scared from my voice. I was meant to be finishing [my studies] in December. The lawyer is working on a petition to take to the [Israeli High] Court. I hope that it will be OK, and I can return to Bethlehem. I went for four years and missed my family and [if I am not allowed to return] it will have been for nothing... I really wish I could return to Bethlehem. The situation in Gaza is so hard. I want to return to complete my studies. But I'm scared that if I get refused then I'll never get a permit. I want to finish university and graduate. My final exam is on 31 December, I don't have my books to study with, and I only had my handbag with me. All my notes, everything is in my home in Bethlehem."

Update on Berlanty Azzam's case

On 29 October 2009, the day after Berlanty Azzam's forcible removal to Gaza, Gisha filed a petition to the Israeli High Court protesting her expulsion from the West Bank.

On 9 December 2009, after two hearings, the High Court upheld the position of the Israeli state and ruled not to allow Berlanty to return to Bethlehem University to complete her studies. In the course of the High Court hearings, the state made no security allegations against Berlanty but simply said her presence in the West Bank was "illegal".

After being refused permission to return to Bethlehem, Berlanty continued to study with her former university teachers via email and telephone calls. She completed her studies long-distance and received her bachelor's degree from Bethlehem University in Gaza's Church of the Holy Family on 10 January 2010.