

'Education is Freedom'

By Helen Murray*

Tala, a 3rd year English student at Birzeit University in the West Bank, recently wrote an essay about the experience of studying and learning under a military occupation which directs attacks against educational institutions as part of its long-standing offensive against civilian infrastructure and national development. She entitled her essay: 'Education is Freedom.'

When the Israeli military authorities closed down Birzeit University for nearly five years between 1988 and 1992, along with all other Palestinian educational institutions, including schools and kindergartens, the University community refused to accept the criminalization of education and continued to hold classes 'underground' in homes, offices, churches, mosques and community centers. These classes were frequently raided by the Israeli Army and any students and teachers found in attendance were arrested. In defiance of military rule, the very act of pursuing an education became a way of directly challenging the occupation.

Since the second Intifada began in September 2000, Palestinian schools and universities have come under attack once again, both directly as military targets and indirectly as a result of Israel's policies of collective punishment and prison-like restrictions on movement, which have prevented thousands of students and teachers from reaching their educational institutions.

Over the last five years, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education, some 300 schools and eight universities have been shelled, shot at or raided by the Israeli Army. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights records that in the Gaza Strip alone, 73 educational institutions have been partially or totally destroyed, including a teacher-training college which was completely demolished in March 2004. During the invasions of the Gaza Strip last year, four children were shot inside UNRWA school classrooms, including schoolgirls Raghda Adnan al-Assar and Ghadeer Jaber Mukhaymar, aged ten and nine respectively, who were shot dead while sitting at their desks.

"Schools are supposed to be havens of safety," declared Peter Hansen, then Commissioner-General of UNRWA. "On countless occasions I have called upon the Israeli authorities to respect their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and under International Humanitarian Law in general, and to stop firing on schools, fearing that innocent schoolchildren would inevitably be killed. Now it has happened."

Reminiscent of the first Intifada, Hebron University and the Palestine Polytechnic University were closed down by military order for most of 2003, affecting more than 6,000 students. The closures were carried out, according to an Israeli Army spokesman, because the Army "has a duty to prevent education that incites murder of Israelis." The students of Hebron and Palestine Polytechnic Universities eventually broke down the gates to their universities, in defiance of the Israeli Army, to reconvene classes and demand their right to education.

That same year, Al-Quds University was issued with a military order explaining that an eight meter-high concrete wall would soon cut through the campus, confiscating one-third of its grounds. After an international campaign, the path of the wall was eventually moved to just outside the entrance of Al-Quds University in Abu Dis, cutting it off from Jerusalem and 36% of its students.

* Coordinator of the Right to Education Campaign at Birzeit University.

The ongoing separation, isolation and ghettoization of Palestinian areas created by the construction of the illegal wall inside the West Bank, the existence of over 700 checkpoints and roadblocks throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the frequent closure of cities and prolonged curfews have all had a catastrophic impact on all aspects of Palestinian life, including access to education. A cursory glance at the changing national student intake of Birzeit University over the last five years provides just one example:

- In 2000, some 400 students from the Gaza Strip were enrolled at Birzeit University. Today there are only 13.
- Last academic year (2003-2004), the number of new students registering at Birzeit University from the north West Bank town of Jenin declined from an average 120 students per year to zero.

In November 2004, four of the last remaining Gazan students at Birzeit University were arrested in the middle of the night by Israeli soldiers and illegally deported to the Gaza Strip. No charges were made against Walid Muhanna, Bashar Abu Salim, Mohammad Matar and Bashar Abu Shahala - all final year students of Civil and Mechanical Engineering at Birzeit University. Nonetheless, all four were prevented from returning to Birzeit to continue their studies.

The systematic obstruction of Palestinian education by the Israeli military occupation not only violates the human rights of individuals, but is also an attack on the development of Palestinian society as a whole.

In the same sense in which Tala was moved to describe education as freedom, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), ratified by Israel in 1991, also underlines the fact that "education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights".[†]

The Right to Education Campaign was set up by Birzeit University in 2002, in response to an Army roadblock on the road from Ramallah to Birzeit, which virtually sealed off Birzeit University for three years. 'Surda Roadblock' was finally dismantled in December 2003, although the road to Birzeit remains subject to frequent 'flying checkpoints,' which continue to harass and block students and teachers on their way to the University.

Though triggered by the current crisis, the Right to Education Campaign has grown out of a much longer history of human rights work at Birzeit University, which has campaigned on issues such as the rights of student prisoners and military closure of educational institutions since the 1970s.

Reaching out to universities, social and political movements, human rights organizations and concerned individuals around the world, the Right to Education Campaign maintains that freedom, justice, education and development are prerequisites of peace. It is the responsibility of governments, civil society organizations and ordinary people to defend the universal right to education and to demand its realization.

The Right to Education Campaign at Birzeit University is an international campaign with an informative website <http://right2edu.birzeit.edu>. You can affiliate your organization to the campaign or subscribe to the regular campaign bulletin by emailing right2edu@birzeit.edu.

[†] CESCR, General Comment No. 13 – Right to Education, para. 1, <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/comments.htm>