

CLANDESTINE HIGHER EDUCATION NETWORK

FOR NEWS - 7/16/88

Palestinian varsities defy Israel

By GAIL FITZER in Ramallah (West Bank)

IN HOMES, mosques, churches, high schools and offices, thousands of Palestinian students are secretly continuing their university studies in defiance of Israeli authorities.

Frustrated by Israel's closure of all five universities in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, Palestinian educators have set up a clandestine network for higher education.

"We're not making any gains. We're simply trying to minimize the brutality of this collective punishment," said Mr Albert Aghazarian, spokesman for Bir Zeit University near Ramallah.

"We are trying to maintain universities with structure so that they won't wither away."

Israel closed four universities in the West Bank, one in the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem's technical colleges on January 8 1988, a month after the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation, now in its 16th month. The Government said they were centres of anti-Israeli violence.

The closure left 18,000 students with an incomplete education.

Police said this month they had uncovered underground classes in East Jerusalem run by three Palestinian universities and warned high school principals to stop the university classes held in their schools.

"I don't think we have to yield and stop teaching our students ... we consider the closing of the universities and schools a massacre of education," said Mr Musa Dar-

wish, spokesman for Bethlehem University.

Prof Sa'eb Erakat, a political science professor at An-Najah University in Nablus, said several teachers and students were arrested earlier this year while taking part in classes at a building owned by the Friends of An-Najah University.

"It's a very difficult task to go about education in such a manner. Israel is the first nation ever to use education as a means of punishment," he said.

Bir Zeit expanded its underground education network this month to include 200 professors and more than 1,000 students, up from 400 its normal student body is 2,500.

"Right now for the first time, we are trying to teach students who are not close to graduation," said Mr Nabeel Kassis, vice-president for academic affairs.

He was interviewed off campus

in Bir Zeit's Board of Trustees building in Ramallah, the only university building not closed down by the army.

Some 150 students have graduated since the university was officially closed. About 250 students graduated each year when it was open.

Lecturers insist they are not violating Israeli orders by teaching outside the university campuses.

Checkpoints

Mr Kassis said lecturers are not contravening any direct orders. "We're only doing regular teaching in unusually difficult circumstances.

"What we are doing is regular teaching with strict controls. We do not control how they meet, but we control the outcome," Mr Kassis said.

In the underground education

network, students have more personal contact with teachers, classes are smaller and the mode of instruction is closer to a tutorial. Students have a greater burden of responsibility since classes meet less often.

But teachers and students say problems abound.

Universities do not have the staff, money or facilities to teach their whole student body or to take in new students.

Faculty members are often unable to reach students in distant villages. Military curfews and checkpoints prevent students from reaching their classes and professors are frequently hard pressed to find places where they can teach.

Students are deprived of modern facilities as they may not use on-campus university laboratories or libraries.

University officials said most students had not paid tuition fees

during the uprising and universities had not paid faculty salaries, which were provided instead by the Association of Arab Universities via Jordan.

Professors and students say defying the Israeli closure increases their motivation.

"I think the academic level has been better during the Intifada (uprising) because students are more motivated," said Mr Majed Abdel Fattah, 24, head of Bir Zeit's student council.

"Now the teachers are doing more. They think it's a kind of struggle against a policy of spreading ignorance."

The army appears to have turned a blind eye to clandestine university classes in the West Bank.

"I think they know that we are teaching and they say they are sort of overlooking that," said Mr Gahi Baranki, vice-president of Bir Zeit. Reuter