

To: Consuls-General, Jerusalem

Fr: Council of Higher Education, Occupied Territories

Re: URGENCY OF INTERNATIONAL ACTION TO RE-OPEN UNIVERSITIES & SCHOOLS

April 19, 1989  
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The Council of Higher Education, representing all universities and institutions of higher learning in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza,\* wishes to address the representatives of the international community in Jerusalem on the urgent matter of international intervention to re-open the six universities and numerous institutions of higher learning in the Occupied Territories. Under the latest military order closing all educational institutions in the West Bank (except kindergartens), universities and schools were closed until April 19. No further written closure order has been received. It is highly opportune for the international community to take a strong stand in the next weeks against the continued closure of our institutions.

To our knowledge, contemporary history offers no parallel examples of any power or authority closing universities and schools for such an extended period -- all universities have been closed for over fifteen months - thus denying to a whole population their right to education and seriously endangering the future of the society. Certainly, no similar action has been taken by a state in good standing in the international community. Thus, we would expect the international community to take effective action to halt a practice which offers a dangerous precedent of the withdrawal of basic services as a means of collective punishment of a people.

To date such effective action has been lacking. The Council is aware that the international community is overwhelming in favor of advancing the peace process in our region and we therefore point to the following:

1. The denial of university education to the 18,000 students in Palestinian universities for over fifteen months and of schooling to the 300,000 pupils in West Bank schools for most of that period is creating a serious "educational gap" in precisely that part of the population on which the future of peace must rely.

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\* Universities represented by the Council are: Bethlehem University, Birzeit University, Hebron University, Islamic University of Gaza, Al Najah National University and Al Quds University.

2. Israel's policy of denying education as a means to punish and pressure the population is unacceptable by any humanitarian or legal standard. The army's harassment of home teaching and off-campus compensation seminars given by universities shows that the target is indeed education, rather than security. Most recently, in an order issued March 30, the authorities disrupted and then banned Birzeit University faculty and students from using the facilities of St. Georges' College in Jerusalem, where the University had been holding afternoon seminars for its students.

3. The universities are independent Palestinian institutions which in general have served as important forums for the democratic exchange of ideas. They are being undermined precisely when their role in furthering peace is sorely needed.

As for the role of the international community:

1. The illegality under international law of the collective closure of schools and universities is clear under Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "everyone has a right to education," as well of the international law of belligerent occupation embodied in the Hague and Geneva Conventions. The international community, under its duties as defined by the Fourth Geneva Convention (Article 1) has an obligation to intervene to ensure the protection of the population of the Occupied Territories against this continued and systematic violation.

2. The international community has, on occasion, called for various measures to reduce the level of Israeli repression against the Palestinian people and its institutions. The Council emphasizes that any measures to this effect must be genuine and lasting. In this regard, the Council asks the international community to carefully monitor any future re-opening of schools to ensure that all levels of schools re-open and stay open and that all universities and institutions of higher learning are re-opened.

3. It appears to us that a dimarche on the part of all the Consuls General in Jerusalem before the Israeli government might be in order to impress upon the government the unanimity of views regarding the fundamental questions of right, law and civilization bound up with the educational process and the unacceptability of the interruption of that process. Such an approach would surely leave a powerful and positive impact on local, Israeli and international opinion.

The Council of Higher Education would be pleased to discuss these issues further and members of the Council are available for briefings on the closure of universities and the problems of Palestinian higher education.