

5 June 2002

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon
3 Kaplan Street
Kiryat Ben Gurion
Jerusalem, ISRAEL

*By Facsimile: 972 2 651 2631
972 2 566 4838
972 3 691 7915*

Dear Prime Minister Sharon,

The Committee on Academic Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (CAF MENA), of the Middle East Studies Association, is writing to express its grave concern over Israel's recent and ongoing actions that threaten academic freedom and the right to education more broadly in the West Bank.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) comprises 2700 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa, and is the preeminent professional association in the field. The association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, and is committed to ensuring respect for the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression in the region and in connection with the study of the Middle East and North Africa.

Israel's Operation Defensive Shield, launched in March 2002, and Israel's subsequent actions in the West Bank, have caused great and unwarranted harm to Palestinian educational institutions and educational opportunities. The harm falls under three categories: the physical destruction of educational property by soldiers in the Israel Defense Force (IDF), including vandalism; the theft of educational property, particularly hard drives from many computers and the loss of data bases; and the extension and intensification of checkpoints, roadblocks, and other physical impediments which prevent students and faculty from reaching their schools.

We join with all who condemn the savage attacks that have killed and maimed hundreds of civilians inside Israel. These outrages, however, cannot justify the violations of basic rights that your government has imposed on virtually the entire Palestinian Arab population of the occupied territories. These policies have had grave humanitarian consequences, including dire consequences for the right to education.

The destruction and theft of Palestinian educational property and material by IDF personnel during Operation Defensive Shield occurred at numerous Palestinian educational institutions, including at the Ministry of Education, the Palestinian Academy for Science and Technology, various educational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and numerous Palestinian universities, colleges, and K-12 schools. Property damage can be replaced over time, but valuable information on computer hard disks and paper files cannot be replaced. These must be returned to their rightful owners without delay.

Israel has instituted a multitude of physical impediments to limit and restrict internal travel within the West Bank, thereby making transportation to and from universities and schools frequently difficult and sometimes impossible; Operation Defensive Shield effectively closed most Palestinian educational institutions for its duration. Since this Operation ceased, reports that we have received from numerous sources indicate that internal travel is considerably more difficult today than it was prior to March 2002. Israel's policies are effectively preventing many students from attending university and many faculty from reaching their university classrooms and laboratories.

We therefore respectfully request that all computer hard drives and other material confiscated from Palestinian educational facilities be returned promptly, and that property damage done by IDF personnel to Palestinian educational facilities be repaired or compensated for in a timely manner. We also urge that any Israeli restrictions on freedom of movement be strictly limited to imperative and specific reasons of security, and that the government ensure that these restrictions are not excessive in impact or duration. This is essential in order to facilitate the access to educational institutions that is vital to thousands of students, faculty and administrators on the West Bank today.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Respectfully,

Anne H. Betteridge
Executive Director