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Israeli army forces women to strip at Bethlehem checkpoint

 Thursday June 28, 2007 16:36  by Maisa Abu Ghazalah - IMEMC News  g Hassanab at imemc dot org 

"It seems that there are plans to topple the honor of Palestinian girls in the clutches of the Israeli intelligence through blackmail at checkpoints and military crossings, and I don't doubt that inside the inspection rooms there are cameras video taping girls undressing."



These were the words of Manal, a young Palestinian lady from Bethlehem, in the southern part of the West Bank. She is describing what happened to her last weekend at the Israeli military crossing known as 300 located at the entrance of Bethlehem. This checkpoint cuts Bethlehem from its sister city, Jerusalem.

Manal witnessed a new episode of racist Israeli methods, and this will not be the last time. She said, "I arrived with one of my friends to the Bethlehem checkpoint, and after crossing several inspection points, we waited a little while, and while we were waiting, a group of female university students came out from one of the side rooms in tears. When we asked them why they were crying, they replied that they had been forced to strip naked during inspection."

Manal continued: "I can not describe what happened to the students! They were forced to strip naked collectively in one of the rooms after women soldiers intimidated them." She added, "The female soldier asked me and my friend to enter the room for inspection, but we refused. She said that we can enter separately to be strip searched, and when we refused again she screamed at us and called us all kind of swear words. Then we got detained inside one of the room at the checkpoint, and after a number of phone calls to human rights organizations my friend and I were allowed to leave the checkpoint."

Manal added that "On this particular day men were not inspected, but only women. This confirms that the Israeli authorities had serious intentions to humiliating us". The young Palestinian lady also noted that, "if there were security reasons for this inspection, why not search all the people? Anyhow, don't the Israeli authorities refuse to grant permission for Palestinians who have security records to cross at this checkpoint? Apart from this we had already entered a number of checkpoints unscathed before this strip search; all these factors raise suspicions".

Manal also stressed that stopping people at the Bethlehem checkpoint and only letting them go through after passing inspection procedures is normal, but forcing women to strip search is a new phenomenon in Bethlehem. This causes real fears among women that this procedure will become normal in the future.

Jamal Zahalka, an Arab member of the Israeli parliament received complaints about this matter. He responded by filing an investigation letter to the Israeli Security Minister Ehud Barak. Zahalka commented on the Israeli soldiers' demeaning act by saying, "There is no end to the moral degradation of the occupation, he who forces women to strip has sunk to the lowest morals level. He is a lowlife. We must stop this shameful action immediately."

Translated by Ghassan Bannoura – IMEMC News

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