

Gaza students learn harsh lesson amid wider conflict

Vita Bekker

Time is running out for Azhar al Boraey.

Ms Boraey, a 24-year-old from the Gaza Strip, last year lost her scholarship for a master's degree in architecture at a Chinese university because of travel restrictions imposed by Israel and Egypt on the coastal enclave. After being accepted by Germany's Martin Luther University for this academic year, Ms Boraey packed two suitcases, obtained a visa and hoped Gaza's gates would open by her programme's September 30 deadline.

Last weekend, she had her big - and possibly, last -chance to leave. When Egypt opened its border with Gaza for the first time since May, Ms Boraey and thousands of other Gazans rushed to a football stadium from where they were transported to the crossing. Fifteen hours later, four of which she was stuck on a crowded bus with no air-conditioning, she reached the Egyptian side with an exit stamp on her passport.

But when Egypt refused to let Ms Boraey and 20 other students desperate to get to their universities abroad through, they sat on the ground in protest. The group finally agreed to return to Gaza after baton-wielding officials tossed their bags back on the bus, shouted at them and threatened to use force.

"It was the worst day of my life," said Ms Boraey. Speaking of herself and the other students, she adds: "We are physically tired and spiritually broken."

Ms Boraey and hundreds of other students in Gaza who have been accepted by foreign universities are pawns in a larger conflict between Israel and the Islamist group Hamas, which violently seized the territory of 1.5m residents in June 2007.

In spite of a ceasefire with Hamas three months ago, Israel still mostly bans Gazans from leaving through its crossings except for urgent medical care.

Until mid-2006, most of the more than 1,000 Gazans studying abroad left unrestricted through Rafah. But the closure in the past two years has meant that for the second consecutive summer -the period during which the students usually travel to their universities - many were trapped.

Their ability to advance their studies at home is limited. None of the territory's universities offers doctoral degrees and they lack master's programmes in many areas, including computer science, various types of engineering, dentistry, physiotherapy and languages.

Egypt's rare opening of Rafah last weekend allowed several dozen students to escape just in time for the start of their academic studies. However, for those like Ms Boraey, it may be too late. "If these, students are not allowed to leave within the next few weeks, many of them will lose their places," said Sari Bashi, director of Gisha, an Israeli group advocating Palestinian freedom of movement.

Ms Boraey's cases remain packed and she is still studying German.

"Everything is ready for any signs that the border is opening," she said.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, September 6 e 7 2008, Primeiro Caderno, p. 5.