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Palestinian activist jailed for West Bank protest must be freed

A Palestinian activist jailed for protesting against Israeli settlements in the West Bank must be released, Amnesty International has urged.

An Israeli military court yesterday sentenced Bassem Tamimi to four months in prison and fined him 5,000 Israeli shekels (about US\$1,280) for his part in a demonstration against Israeli settlements on 24 October.

As part of a plea bargain, the military judge also imposed a three-month suspended sentence that will remain active for three years.

“This unjust jail sentence is the latest example of Israel’s harassment of Bassem Tamimi, who has been persecuted solely for peacefully protesting against Israel’s illegal settlements,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Director.

“Bassem Tamimi has a long record of peaceful protest, and this court hearing showed that even the military prosecution has acknowledged he did not use or advocate violence at the demonstration. He is a prisoner of conscience who must be released immediately and unconditionally.”

Bassem Tamimi was charged by Ofer Military Court with “interference with the work of a police officer” and “participation in an unlicensed demonstration”.

The former charge was downgraded from “assaulting a police officer” based on video evidence showing that Bassem had non-violently tried to prevent the arrest of his wife, Nariman, who was also participating in the demonstration.

A charge of "activity against the public order" was dropped, although he still faces a 17-month suspended sentence on this charge from a trial that concluded in May 2012.

Israeli military law imposed in the occupied West Bank places sweeping and arbitrary restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, making any unauthorized peaceful protest by Palestinians a criminal offence.

‘Military Order 101’ requires permission from an Israeli military commander for all gatherings of 10 or more people “for a political purpose or a matter that could be interpreted as political” and carries a maximum 10-year sentence.

“Bassem Tamimi was forced into making a plea bargain because, through the mere act of non-violent protest, he was breaking this unjust law and would therefore have faced a lengthy period of house arrest or detention awaiting trial,” said Philip Luther.

“Instead of criminalizing peaceful protest, the Israeli authorities need to ensure that Palestinians’ rights to

peaceful expression and assembly are respected.”

On the same day that Tamimi was sentenced for protesting against settlements, Israel announced new tenders for the construction of 1,213 homes in settlements in occupied East Jerusalem.

All Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are illegal under international law, and Israel’s policy of settling its civilians on occupied land is considered a war crime according to the statute of the International Criminal Court.

Bassem Tamimi’s 16-year-old son, Wa’ed, was released on bail on Sunday following his arrest last week during the regular anti-settlements protest in the West Bank village of al-Nabi Saleh.