

## **PRESS RELEASE FROM THE BIRMINGHAM RAMALLAH TWINNING COMMITTEE**

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### **Israel Deports Brum Women's Humanitarian Mission to Holy Land**

#### **PRESS CONFERENCE 11.0 a.m Carr's Lane Church Centre Upper Reading Room**

A group of seven women from Birmingham were barred from entering Israel and deported back to Birmingham from Tel Aviv airport last Sunday, 8 May, after being threatened with imprisonment. They were going to deliver money raised at an ecumenical fundraising meal and money collected by the local Catholic Community for projects working with malnourished children. At the airport they were told that it is illegal to visit the Palestinian Occupied Territories.

As well as visiting holy sites such as the Church of the Nativity, the Holy Sepulchre and Al Aqsa Mosque the women were hoping to visit refugee camps, women's projects and Israeli citizens working towards peace. The women were going on a tour of the Holy Land organised by the Birmingham Ramallah Twinning Committee, which would have provided opportunities for exploring the development of links with Women's Groups in Palestine.

Yvonne Washbourne, President of the Birmingham Trades Council and spokesperson for the group said *"We very excited about the visit as for most of us this was the first trip to the Holy land. We were shocked when members of the group were interrogated at Tel Aviv airport and the whole group was detained for many hours. We were treated like criminals, all but strip searched and one of our members was denied access to her luggage, which contained necessary medication. We were very frightened and disorientated when we were moved to a nearby detention centre.*

*We were told that unless we agreed to be put on the first flight back, we could be incarcerated for a week. Israeli security officials would not respond to enquiries from the British Consulate. Our passports were stamped with 'entry denied', which will make it difficult for us to return. However, we are determined to visit the Holy land in the near future and will be visiting the Israeli Embassy to obtain assurances that we will be allowed entry when we do. We will also be seeking legal advice about our treatment."*

Kamel Hawwash, Chair of the Birmingham Ramallah Twinning Committee comments, *"Israel's disgraceful decision to deport the Group, is aimed at hampering our efforts to develop links between Brummees and Palestinians. Israel can do this because it continues to illegally occupy the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. This means that the outside world has no direct access to the occupied Palestinian areas. We are determined to continue with our peaceful efforts to develop these links. We call on our government to make the strongest possible protest to the Israeli authorities about the treatment of these women and call on Israel to reverse its decision to ban them from entering Israel in the future."*

#### **Background**

The idea for the twinning has been developing since it was first suggested during a visit by a group of trade unionists in January 2003. It aims to twin the two cities but also to develop grass route links between organisations including those working in health, education and culture in Birmingham and Ramallah. The Committee is jointly sponsored by the Birmingham Trade Unions Council (BTUC) and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign.

There is a very significant level of support for the twinning initiative. The Committee have been in discussions with the City Council about ideas for developing further links between the two cities.

About one third of Palestinian children are severely malnourished, as Israel tries to stop support and aid from reaching Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza

Four of the women were being sponsored by their Trade Union branches and the others had funded the visit themselves.