

Pro-Palestinian student protesters in Canada say lawsuits and crackdowns won't deter them



Protesters display banners and signs at the University of Waterloo's pro-Palestine encampment [Courtesy of Sarah Ahmed]

Toronto, August 5 (RHC)-- When University of Waterloo student Nicholas Sarweh received an email from the school informing him he was being sued for 1.5 million Canadian dollars (\$1.09 million), he was certain it was a mistake. "I thought it said \$1,500 and that they had made a typo. But after a while, I just absorbed that it was \$1.5 million," Sarweh, who is in his early 20s, told Al Jazeera.

Sarweh had been among the students on campus leading a months-long protest against Israel's war on Gaza, erecting tents, fences and protest signs on a grassy part of campus called Grad House green. But by the end of June, much of the public attention surrounding the protest had died down. Many students had returned home for the summer.

That's when the email arrived, Sarweh said, accusing him and six other students of property damage, trespass and intimidation. He considers it an act of bullying and intimidation on the part of university administrators.

"I thought to myself, 'What a disgusting abuse of power.' We're not here partying. We're not here for some abstract reason. We're here because there's the most documented genocide in history happening right before our very eyes."

As the war nears the end of its 10th month, student activists like Sarweh say their experiences at the university encampments have left them feeling alienated from the institutions they turned to for an education.

But some experts believe the protests — and the international movement they inspired — will endure as testaments to the power of student activism, both on and off campus.

"I would imagine that, given the numbers of encampments that we've seen all over the world, at least a good number of students are going to look at that to see the kind of collective power that they do have," said Anna Drake, a political science professor at the University of Waterloo who observed the protests firsthand.

Sarah Ahmed was among the leaders at the University of Waterloo protest in Ontario, Canada. First established on May 13, the encampment was designed to pressure the university to cut all financial and academic connections with Israel and companies tied to its war effort.

But when she saw her name printed on the lawsuit, Ahmed said she was overcome by a "feeling of shame" towards the university. The lawsuit is believed to be the first of its kind: Never before had a Canadian university launched a seven-figure complaint against its own students for protesting a war.

Ahmed, who is in her early 20s, said she had already felt "continuously disappointed" in the university's actions since the war in Gaza began. The school, in her opinion, was slow to react to the protesters' demands.

But the lawsuit, she said, was the "final nail in the coffin." She feels the relationship between the university and its students has been "permanently transformed," especially after the realisation that "the university was willing to hold this unprecedented move, suing us in damages over grass."

"It's coming at a time when there is a housing crisis in Waterloo. Students cannot pay their rent, they cannot pay their tuition. Many students cannot even pay for their own groceries," she said. "It's all very, very cruel."

The encampment at the University of Waterloo was part of a surge in pro-Palestine demonstrations that erupted in mid-April. Universities across the United States and Canada — as well as around the globe — saw tents pop up on their campuses to protest the war in Gaza, which has elicited fears of genocide.

Already, the Israeli military offensive has killed more than 39,400 people. At least 91,000 more have been wounded, as the Palestinian territory grapples with persistent bombings and shortages of food and medicine.

Ahmed believes colleges like the University of Waterloo have a duty to ensure none of their investments are linked to that war effort — and to sever ties with Israeli institutions that support the occupation of Palestinian territories.

“It seems the university just wants to deny that they are complicit in the genocide, no matter how much we try to explain our stories to them,” Ahmed said.

Across the country, student protesters like Ahmed have said they faced pressure to bring their protests to a close.

At the University of Waterloo, demonstrators denounced the million-dollar lawsuit as an intimidation tactic. Nevertheless, on July 7, the students ended their encampment after the university agreed to withdraw the lawsuit.

The University of Waterloo in an e-mail told Al Jazeera the goal of the lawsuit was to “end the encampment.” “Its primary objective was not about damages or punishing those on Grad House green,” the email said, adding the university had recently published details about its investments on its website.

Other campus protests claimed victories before folding up their camps. At Ontario Tech University, students negotiated a settlement that included a commitment that the university would disclose its investments and fund scholarships for Palestinians displaced by the war.

While some encampments ended amicably, others were forced to shut down after universities took aggressive action — including threats of expulsion, trespass notices and calling police to arrest protesters.

Many schools faced pressure to address what critics called anti-Semitism in the protest movement, though student leaders have dismissed such allegations as an effort to misrepresent their goals and tactics.

At the University of Toronto, master’s student Sara Rasikh expressed frustration with how her campus administrators pressured her and other student protesters to disband their encampment. “We had put out demand lists as far back as October,” Rasikh said. But the university, she explained, did not act in “good faith”.

On May 23, the university proposed creating a working group to improve its investment transparency, but only if the encampment ended. The protesters rejected the proposal. “It was basically an ultimatum,” Rasikh said. “They gave us 24 hours to accept it. It was no real deal.”

The next day, the University of Toronto also served the encampment with a trespass notice, giving protesters 72 hours to clear the site. But the students refused to relent.

By May 27, the university had filed an injunction with the Ontario Superior Court of Justice, seeking permission to remove the protesters. It alleged violence, discriminatory speech and other harmful behaviour at the encampment.

“They were extremely racist in it,” Rasikh said of the injunction request. “They were trying to portray unsubstantiated instances of hate speech and anti-Semitism as if they were sanctioned by the encampment, or by Palestinian and pro-Palestinian protesters.”

In June, the court granted the injunction. However, it found no evidence of violence or anti-Semitic behaviour. Faced with forced removal, the students decided to end the encampment, stating in a news conference that they were leaving “on their own terms” and would not allow the police “to brutalise” them.

In a statement to Al Jazeera, the University of Toronto said it had “pursued parallel paths of dialogue and legal action to secure a peaceful end to the encampment”. It also alleged that the student protest leaders “declined” to use existing processes for divestment requests.

Drake, the political science professor at the University of Waterloo, said the legacy of these student protests will be a mixed bag. On one hand, she believes the heavy-handed tactics used by universities set a “very bad example.”

She told Al Jazeera that their actions against the protesters ran “contrary” to their efforts to promote diversity, equity and inclusion on campus. That, in turn, leads to “distrust” and a feeling of unease.

“They are threatening — at least [with] implicit threat, if it’s not an explicit one — that they will call the police on students and predominantly on racialised students who we know are subjected to systemic racism and violence,” Drake said.

Looking back, Ahmed — the student leader at the University of Waterloo — described “every moment in the encampment” as an opportunity for education and mobilisation. “Political consciousness has been raised in a way that it never has before,” she said. She added that the University of Waterloo’s lawsuit has given her more motivation to take action against the war in Gaza.

“We will continue to use whatever we think is most strategic to specifically target the university because now we know that we have gotten under their skin. You don’t get a lawsuit for \$1.5m unless you have been doing something right.”

Sarweh, a fellow protester at the University of Waterloo, said he was now “more determined than ever” to continue his pro-Palestine advocacy, adding that now is the time for the movement to “restrategise and reconsolidate”.

“From the beginning of the encampment, we started nationally coordinating with other encampments and liberation organizations. Now we’re at the stage of international coordination,” he said.

Sarweh said the university should not feel “emboldened and arrogant”, simply because the encampment ended. He expressed confidence that the students’ pro-Palestine activism would continue, even after the lawsuit was withdrawn.

“I’m not scared of them. I think none of us are.”

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