

Columbia University cancels main commencement ceremony after Gaza protests

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Police stand guard at Columbia University, where a building had been occupied and protest encampment set up in support of Palestinians [Caitlin Ochs/Reuters]

New York, May 6 (RHC)-- Columbia University in New York City has cancelled its university-wide commencement ceremony after it cracked down on student protests in support of Palestinians, a campus movement that spurred a wave of similar demonstrations around the world.

In a statement on Monday morning, Columbia said it would prioritise "Class Days and school-level ceremonies, where students are honored individually alongside their peers, rather than the University-wide ceremony that is scheduled for May 15."

"Our students emphasized that these smaller-scale, school-based celebrations are most meaningful to them and their families," it said.

The decision comes just days after the Columbia administration called New York City police onto campus to disperse students who had occupied a school building and erected a protest encampment to show solidarity with Palestinians.

The students have demanded an end to Israel's war on the Gaza Strip and urged Columbia to divest from any companies that are complicit in Israeli abuses against Palestinians.

The Columbia protest encampment and subsequent crackdown by police — during which hundreds of people were arrested — inspired similar initiatives at universities across the United States, as well as in Canada, France and the United Kingdom.

University administrators have accused pro-Palestinian demonstrators of using anti-Semitic language and creating an unsafe environment on campus. U.S. President Joe Biden made similar claims during a speech last week addressing the protest movement.

But the demonstrators have rejected those allegations, saying the decision to send police officers to break up the Gaza encampments and arrest participants is what put students in harm's way.

Al Jazeera's Patty Culhane, reporting on Monday from a Gaza encampment at George Washington University in Washington, DC, said the protest there has "definitely grown" in recent days.

"There's tent after tent of water or food, and signs saying, 'Everything is free just like Palestine will be one day,'" Culhane said.

Mariam, a Jewish student demonstrator who spoke to Al Jazeera using only her first name, said anti-Semitism allegations are intended to divert attention from Gaza. "It's meant to take the focus away from the genocide in Gaza, and it is meant to take the focus away from our demands," she said.

Those demands include protecting pro-Palestinian speech on campus, divesting from the Israeli state and ending academic partnerships with Israeli institutions. "We are going to stay here," Mariam added. "It doesn't matter what the police do, what the university administration does. We are going to keep fighting until our demands are met."

Monday's announcement at Columbia also came as the Israeli military ordered Palestinians in eastern Rafah, part of the southern Gaza Strip, to leave the area before an expected ground assault.

Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), said in a statement that a Rafah offensive "could lead to the deadliest phase of this conflict, inflicting horrific suffering on approximately 1.4 million displaced civilians in the area".

Nearly 35,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli attacks in Gaza since the war began in early October. Residents of the besieged coastal territory face a dire humanitarian crisis and a lack of food, water and medical supplies.

“Rafah had become the last refuge for hundreds of thousands of families, deprived of any semblance of safety. With nowhere else to go, they are facing the threat of prolonged displacement and death,” Egeland said.

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