

# Students in action

**Al Ahram Weekly**  
**6-12 December 2007**

[Reem Leila](#) reports on last week's protests by Cairo and Helwan University students

---

Cairo and Helwan University students staged demonstrations last week. At Cairo University the unrest was sparked by a decision to bar more than 150 students from university hostel accommodation. Some of those refused rooms had been residents in previous years while others were newcomers.

The protest in response to the ban began on 29 November outside the university hostel when students gathered and began chanting slogans demanding they be readmitted. More than 100 overran the university hostel before the protests moved to the main entrance of Cairo University and later in the day turned into sit-in involving more than 500 students who threatened to go on a hunger strike if their colleagues continued to be refused access to the hostel.

The protest ended the following day after Cairo University President Ali Abdel-Rahman agreed to meet a delegation of students. He pledged to resolve their problems within a week and gradually re-accommodate students in the hostel.

Security forces made no attempts to disperse the students or end their control over the hostel's main gateway, instead supervising access in and out of the hostel from an adjacent door. Striking students used the main entrance to hang up their clothes to symbolise their homelessness, while residents of the hostel provided them with blankets in an expression of sympathy.

Abdel-Rahman says the majority of students expelled from the hostel failed to secure high enough grades to guarantee their readmittance, while others had committed violations of university regulations. Despite agreeing to receive a delegation of students the meeting has been rescheduled several times, and Abdel-Rahman has now placed the resolution of the stand-off in the hands of the university's campus security. Ahmed Mustafa, 20, a student at the Faculty of Commerce, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*, "the head of security told us to end the strike since matters would be in the hands of security as soon as the university president left his office".

Abdel-Rahman subsequently issued a press statement saying the banned students were guilty of violating university regulations, adding that "the protests issued by some of the disqualified students at the hostel and on campus are an incitement to their colleagues and transgress university norms."

Mohamed Mahmoud Youssef, Cairo University vice-president for students affairs, says four of the discharged students have been already returned to the hostel after it was established they had secured the necessary grades last year. "The cases of the remaining students will be examined individually to assess who deserves to return to the hostel and who does not."

"We have nowhere else to live. Most of us are staying at friends' houses which is very inconvenient. We all know the university administration does not want to see an increase in the number of Muslim Brotherhood students at the hostel, though there are only 18 of them present," one student told the *Weekly* on Monday.

Ahmed Othman, 19, a student in the Faculty of Law, argues that the university has backtracked on an earlier promise not to penalise students for their political affiliations. "Twenty-four of the 150 who have been sent away belong to the Muslim Brotherhood," he says.

"We are against the university administration imposing their will on us, either by dismissing students from the hostel or attempting to gag the expression of opinions. We want to exercise our rights without being threatened or exempted from the hostel," says engineering student Walid Abdel-Qader, head of Cairo University Students Union. "We believe everyone has the right to express their opinions freely. They want to ban that."

Protests at Helwan University on 28 November followed an incident during which students were detained when members of the Official Students Union (OSU) and of the Unofficial Political Union (UPU) clashed during a lecture delivered by the head of the National Post Authority. UPU students object to increases in tuition fees and the price of text books that came into force at the start of the academic year. More than 300 students gathered amid tight security to demonstrate in front of the Helwan University gate.

The students distributed a statement -- Help us Help our Parents -- arguing that the increases "violate the principle of free education and transform education into a commercial process". Students say they have collected 850 signatures in support of filing a lawsuit against the president of Helwan University and the minister of higher education.

Eight students, four from the OSU and four from the UPU, were arrested by university campus police and referred to Helwan police station.

Helwan University President Abdallah Barakat has promised to help secure the students' release "to preserve their academic future".