

Gaza Fulbright grants reinstated

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The state department has reinstated Fulbright grants for seven Palestinians in Gaza to study in the US

This reverses a decision to withdraw the scholarships because Israel has not provided exit permits to the students. Israel tightened its blockade of Gaza after Hamas seized power there a year ago, largely cutting off the territory from the outside world.

The US consulate in Jerusalem has told the students that it is working to get them out of the territory.

"We are working very closely with the government of Israel in order to secure its co-operation in this matter," an e-mail message to the students read.

Dozens of Palestinian students from Gaza have been told they will not be able to take up university courses abroad because of the Israeli blockade.

Human right groups and some Israeli politicians have described the policy of not letting the students out as "collective punishment".

Israel says that as long as Palestinian militants fire rockets from Gaza at Israeli towns, nobody - apart from the most urgent of medical cases - can leave.

On Sunday, an Israeli foreign ministry spokesman said Israel would try to assist Palestinian students following a US request that the issue be looked into.

The prestigious Fulbright scholarships are run by the US state department.

On Friday US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has promised to investigate the withdrawal of the scholarships.

"If you cannot engage young people and give complete horizon to their expectations and to their dreams, then I don't know that there would be any future for Palestine or, frankly, since I believe the two-state solution is so important to Israelis and Palestinians, to the people of that region who want to have decent lives," Ms Rice said.

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