



By Kiran Moodley
Reporter
at Channel 4 News

PERSPECTIVE

Last Wednesday, the president of Columbia University in New York was preparing to testify in front of Congress about allegations of antisemitism on campus. Minouche Shafik had been set to appear in December but — fortunately for her — had a scheduling conflict. On that occasion, the presidents of the Universities of Pennsylvania and Harvard were asked whether “calling for the genocide of Jews” was “against their code of conduct” and said it depended on context. One swiftly resigned, the other weathered the storm before leaving following plagiarism allegations. Last week, Ms Shafik and three others from Columbia were asked the same question. All replied: “Yes.” Ms Shafik’s students were also prepared. At 4 am on the morning of her testimony, pro-Palestinian groups set up a “Gaza Solidarity Encampment” on the south lawn of Columbia’s Morningside Heights campus in Manhattan. They were knowingly violating rules recently established by the university: protests could only take place between 12 pm and 6 pm on weekdays, with permission at least two days in advance.



Inside the Israel-Palestine campus protests tearing US universities apart



Students and other protesters are in a tent camp on the campus of Columbia University in New York on April 24, 2024.
● TED SHAFFREY/AP



Columbia University President Minouche Shafik (front) testifies before US Congress on April 17, 2024.
● HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE



The encampment was not just about the Gaza war. Students called for Columbia to divest from Israel and end its dual degree programme with Tel Aviv. They were also standing up against an institution they felt had been persecuting them for months. Last November, two groups, Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace, were suspended. Last Thursday, protesters were threatened with suspension and told to leave the encampment. When they did not move, Ms Shafik authorised police to move in, citing campus safety concerns. More than 100 students were arrested and their tents torn down. But the encampment has returned. Calling in police fuelled protests that spread to other universities. On Monday, Columbia faculty walked out onto the steps of Low Library holding signs that read “hands off our students” and “end student suspensions now”. Police made more than 100 further arrests at a solidarity demo at New York University on Monday. The focus has again become on antisemitism at US universities. In the past week, videos have emerged of protesters, many seemingly non-students protesting off-campus (only those with university ID are allowed inside Columbia grounds), where people have shouted “we are Hamas”, “burn Tel Aviv to the ground”, and

“gobacktoPoland”. One masked individual even chanted “the seventh of October is about to be every day”. Allegations of antisemitic incidents on campus have also emerged, reported university newspaper The Columbia Spectator. One video shows a protester holding a sign near pro-Israeli demonstrators that reads “al-Qassam’s next targets”, referring to the armed wing of Hamas which took part in the 7 October attacks on Israel. The New York Police Department said they had received reports of students having Israeli flags snatched from them, and hateful comments. This has drawn concern from both sides of the political divide. The Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson is visiting Columbia’s campus to meet Jewish students and has called for Ms Shafik to resign. The White House’s deputy press secretary, Andrew Bates, wrote that students had a right to protest but condemned “calls for violence and physical intimidation targeting Jewish students”. On Monday, Ms Shafik suspended in-person classes in an attempt to “de-escalate the rancour and give us all a chance to consider next steps”. A rabbi affiliated with the university called on Jewish students to stay at home. Jonathan Ben-Menachem is a Jewish student and member of Student Workers of Columbia, one

of the organisations that is part of the Columbia University Apartheid Divest (CUAD) coalition behind the encampment, which he said was peaceful. “There was a Passover Seder at the camp,” he said. “It is a bunch of nerds reading, praying, and crying when they get arrested.” He did not deny there had been troubling incidents but emphasised the difference between what was happening “inside the gates and outside the gates” of Columbia. Another group in the CUAD coalition condemned hate and bigotry and criticised non-students disrupting events, saying they were “frustrated” that the media focused on “inflammatory individuals who do not represent us”. And the Columbia and Barnard [College, part of Columbia] chapters of the American Association of University Professors condemned Ms Shafik for accepting the “partisan charges that anti-war demonstrators are violent and antisemitic”. Mr Ben-Menachem’s view of the encampment contrasts with that of Columbia pupil Jacob Schmeltz, part of a group called “Jewish on Campus”, which helps students combat antisemitism. “It has been incredibly difficult to be a Jewish student,” he told me. “We have got to the point where we do not feel safe and we have to leave campus to guarantee our physical and emotional safety.” Mr Schmeltz

left campus for Passover and is at home in New Jersey. He says it is unclear when he will return. Asked whether he agreed that the intimidation had come mainly from outside campus, Mr Schmeltz said it was “really unclear who is a non-Columbia affiliate and who is a Columbia affiliate”. And while he agrees that there are pro-Palestine Jewish students who are participating in the encampment, he says most Jewish students do not feel safe. I spent 10 days on campus earlier this year for Channel 4’s foreign affairs documentary series, Unreported World, speaking to students and professors. While I did not expect the recent turn of events, the points of debate are the same. First, this is an issue of free speech; what Columbia should allow to be said. This was seen in an exchange last Wednesday in Congress over pro-Palestinian chants and the Arabic term “intifada”, used to describe two Palestinian uprisings against Israeli rule. Republican Lisa McClain asked Ms Shafik whether the chants “from the river to the sea” and “intifada” were antisemitic. “When I hear those terms, I find them very upsetting,” she said. Ms McClain interrupted and asked for a yes or no. “I hear them as such, some people don’t,” the university president replied. Mr Schmeltz mentioned “glo-