

Rhonda L. Lenton, PhD  
President & Vice-Chancellor  
York University  
1050 Kaneff Tower, 4700 Keele Street  
Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3

By email: [president@yorku.ca](mailto:president@yorku.ca)

December 8, 2019

Dear Dr. Lenton,

Amnesty International is writing this Open Letter to request that you convene an independent review into all concerns associated with the *“Reservists on Duty: Hear from former Israeli Defence Force soldiers”* event, organized by the Herut Zionism Club at York University on November 20, 2019.

As you know, this controversial event was met with protests which descended into violent confrontations outside the venue. It was clearly foreseeable that there would be controversy and protest, given the history of human rights violations committed by Israeli Defence Force soldiers amidst the illegal occupation of the Palestinian Territories. That was exacerbated by the fact that members of the Jewish Defense League, a far-right group classified as a terrorist organization in the U.S. and with a record of violence and assaults at protests, were allowed on campus.

Amnesty International has an active and dynamic student group at York University that works on a range of campaigns, including our serious concerns about widespread and longstanding human rights violations associated with Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian Territories. The group brings a positive voice for human rights to York, in keeping with the university’s encouragement of student agency and leadership. They actively defend and promote universal human rights protection for all people, including the freedoms of speech, expression and assembly and the obligation to condemn war crimes occurring anywhere in the world.

While Amnesty International at York had no official presence at the protest, a number of our members chose to participate in an individual capacity, as is clearly their right. We are very troubled to learn that some members were physically assaulted during the confrontations that occurred and have been receiving threatening messages on their cell phones. They are now fearful when they are on campus and have taken to limiting their movements, staying in groups, and ensuring that there are safe spaces to study in security.

---

**National Office:**

312 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9  
Tel: (613) 744-7667 Fax: (613) 746-2411  
info@amnesty.ca

**Toronto Office:**

1992 Yonge Street, 3rd floor, Toronto ON M4S 1Z7  
Tel: (416) 363-9933 Fax: (416) 363-3103  
toronto@amnesty.ca

**Vancouver Office:**

Suite 430, 319 West Pender, Vancouver, BC V6B 1T3  
Tel: (604) 294-5160 Fax: (604) 294-5130  
vancouver@amnesty.ca

It is evident that the considerable confusion, tension and fear associated with the November 20<sup>th</sup> event and its aftermath lingers. That is clear from the number and nature of statements and resolutions that have been issued by various student groups on campus. We have noted from your [statement](#) on November 21st that you have taken two steps in response, namely: (1) tasking the Vice President of Equity, People and Culture and your Division of Students to take the lead in developing a strategy for “fostering a more productive dialogue around these issues”; and (2) the launch of an upcoming Freedom of Speech Working Group to “make specific recommendations on how to create a more respectful climate on campus for the discussion of difficult topics.”

Given conflicting views about what happened that evening, the worrying ongoing impact on students at York and the important human rights considerations that are at stake, **Amnesty International urges York University to go further and convene an independent review** of all circumstances associated with the Herut Zionism Club event and its aftermath, with a mandate that includes examination of:

- considerations that were taken into account in approving the event, including the fact that the speakers were former members of a military with a clear record of responsibility for war crimes and other serious human rights violations;
- decisions made with respect to the presence of members of the Jewish Defense League on campus;
- measures put in place to uphold the freedoms of expression and assembly while ensuring public safety and the security of all protesters;
- decisions and actions of security personnel and university officials as the protest proceeded and confrontations occurred;
- the role of Toronto Police Service officers;
- allegations of violence and other criminality perpetrated during the demonstration; and
- measures taken to respond to ongoing concerns about threats and intimidation in the aftermath of the event.

The independent review should also make any appropriate recommendations with respect to accountability, redress and reform. Amnesty International urges the administration at York University to pursue this review with the attention and seriousness it deserves, and to engage professionals and experts to assist with this.

Amnesty International firmly supports and, in fact, encourages peaceful debate on the Israeli / Palestinian conflict. It is our hope that this review will provide insights into ensuring that such debate can and will happen at York in a manner that respects and upholds the crucial human rights concerns at stake and will be consistent with the university’s commitment to inclusion and diversity.

We look forward to hearing from you Dr. Lenton with respect to the steps you take to establish an independent review. I can be reached directly via my Executive Assistant Jina Rodas-Wright at [jrodas-wright@amnesty.ca](mailto:jrodas-wright@amnesty.ca) or by telephone at 613 744 7667 extension 263.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex Neve". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alex Neve  
Secretary General