

HOPE AS PALESTINIANS USE NON-VIOLENCE IN THEIR STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND FREEDOM

(Journey to Gaza: 28th October – 1st November, 2008)

On 28th October, 2008, the Free Gaza Movement set sail in SS Dignity from Larnaca, Cyprus for Gaza. On board were 27 internationals from 13 countries, including Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, five physicians, human rights lawyers, etc. I felt deeply privileged to be part of this group going to Gaza.

On this second boat journey into Gaza, the siege-breakers brought with them six cubic meters of medicine and the hope that, by going to Gaza across the sea (only the second boat to do so in over 41 years), they would give hope to the people of Gaza, and the outside world would break its silence to the tragedy of Gaza's suffering and act to get the siege lifted.

It's hard to imagine that in the 21st century a country can be so cut off from the outside world. Sixteen months ago, when Gazans voted Hamas in their free and fair elections, the reaction of Israel was not to open up dialogue with the elected representatives, as they eventually must do, but to put in place a policy of collective punishment on the entire population, which has led to a humanitarian catastrophe. Israel said it was ending the occupation of Gaza but, in truth, maintained it by closing all border entrances and isolating the Gazans from the entire world. Gaza is like an open air prison with Israel holding the keys but worse; at least in prison the inmates are fed and taken care of. The people of Gaza are drinking polluted water and do not have enough food, or medicines, or materials for existence. In the words of one Gazan, "We are slowly choking to death with this siege."

Before we set sail, the Israeli government warned we would not be allowed to sail into Gaza; however, we were determined to do so. Just 20 miles off the coast of Gaza, we held our breaths as two Israeli navy gunboats stalked us but eventually took no action. Common sense had prevailed – hopefully a sign for the future that in the final analysis, those in power in Israel will realize that dialogue, not gunboats and F-16's, is the only way to solve this too long and painful Palestinian occupation.

We arrived in Gaza, exhausted and sea-sick. We were met by dozens of heavily armed Palestinian police. And though I had requested, before leaving for Gaza, not to be so guarded, we were informed that the Hamas government wanted to ensure our safety. So throughout the entire four-day visit, we were escorted by armed Palestinian police.

Our reception by the people of Gaza was deeply moving. Their gratitude to the Free Gaza Movement was shown by their great warmth and hospitality. They were particularly grateful that Dr. Barghouti had come from West Bank and that Gideon Spiro, an Israeli from Tel Aviv, had arrived with the boat. (Unfortunately, on his way home through the Erez crossing, he was arrested by Israeli Authorities, held overnight, and charged with illegally entering Gaza.)

The following four days was filled with events ranging from pure joy, such as the concert with children singing and one of our own group members, an Italian opera

singer, holding everyone in awe by the magic of his voice, to events of deep sadness, such as our visit to Shifa Hospital. Here the doctors explained they had a shortage of basic medicines and no parts for machines, as they are blocked by Israel. We met patients dying from cancer and preventable diseases – if only the medicines and equipment were available. This new, half-built hospital stood slowly disintegrating. Cement, and wood, and basic materials have not been allowed into the Gaza strip for over 16 months now, and everything is slowing falling apart.

We visited the airport the next day, which had been bombed from the air and from land by Israeli tanks over two years ago. We visited the electricity plant and saw the huge generators that were bombed by Israel still not repaired due to shortage of parts and a legal debate as to who is responsible for repairs. This Israeli air-bombing of the electricity plant meant it is down to only 50% capacity, so each day, the electricity goes off for seven to eight hours at a time, including in hospitals.

The sewerage plant, too, has been damaged, and Israel will not allow new pipes in to replace those destroyed. So, raw sewerage is pumped into the sea every day, causing an environmental disaster, waiting to explode.

In Jabalia, there have been heavy rains, which washed away the road, exposing broken sewerage pipes. A pool of raw sewerage filled the street, and the children played, oblivious to the danger of disease. We visited homes flooded by rain and sewerage, whose owners had to flee and are now living with relatives in already overcrowded, poverty-stricken homes. There is dreadful poverty in this area. The people have nothing. Many are hungry and face malnutrition. Still, the international community remains silent as the Israeli government collectively punishes 1.5 million people, many of which are under 21 years of age.

Some of our human rights colleagues went out on the boats with the Gazan fishermen. They were attacked by Israeli navy boats, who bombarded the boats with water canons and fired live ammunition over the bow of the fishing boats. Many fishermen have been shot dead by Israeli navy simply trying to catch fish six miles from shore to feed their families.

In the following days, we were received by Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyah who announced we would be given Palestinian passports, and presented the Free Gaza Movement with a gift. There is a real desire here for peace. People have suffered enough, but they want a just peace, an end to occupation, and a right to determine the future for their children.

On the next day, the Prime Minister announced the release of Fatah prisoners and the promise that there would be no more political arrests. (They awaited response from President Abbas regarding the Hamas prisoners they were holding.) Later that evening, in the School of the Holy Family, we had the privilege of witnessing over 100 politicians, representing all political parties (including Fatah and Hamas), pledging to work for Palestinian national unity and promising to send their leaders to attend the National Unity Conference in Cairo early November. Dr. Barghouti, a true man of peace, addressed his political colleagues, whom he had not met for two and a half years due to the closure and separation of Gaza Strip from West Bank (an apartheid policy of Israel that divides the Palestinian people into Bantustans and

makes the possibility of a viable Palestinian state very difficult). This meeting took place under the watchful gaze of a huge wall picture of President Arafat. I was invited to address the political parties, and I supported their non-violent campaign for an end to occupation and a free Palestine. I also encouraged the National Unity of Palestinians, reminding them that “in Palestinian unity, there is strength; divided you will be conquered”. I also appealed to them to “keep your struggle non-violent, and the world will support you”.

The next day we visited the Palestinian Parliament. The Speaker of the Parliament thanked the Free Gaza Movement. He spoke of the suffering of the Palestinians under siege and occupation, and he also paid tribute to the suffering of the Palestinian political prisoners. (Over 40 elected Hamas politicians are now in Israeli jails.) I addressed the Parliament, speaking of the need for the release of political prisoners, and made an appeal for the release of Colonel Gilad Shalit, an Israeli captive in Gaza for almost two years now. (There are a total of 11,500 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, including parliamentarians, the sick, the disabled, and women and children. Before leaving Gaza, I appealed for the release of Palestinian political prisoners and the immediate release of children, women, the sick, those under administrative detention, and elected parliamentarians.) I stressed the need to keep the struggle non-violent and spoke of the need for a dialogue of forgiveness and reconciliation and the lessons learned in our own peace process in Northern Ireland.

We visited also the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which remains closed, cutting Gazans off from their families and friends just down the road. One of the Palestinian women, who had flown from Jerusalem to Cyprus and come on the boat because she had no other way to get to Gaza, banged on the Egyptian gate crying, “Open up I want to get to my family.” Egypt, too, plays its part in cutting off the people of Gaza completely from the world, not only from their loved ones (and not to be able to touch those you love is the cruellest form of torture – not even letters or newspapers get into Gaza). Basics, such as medicine, food, and materials needed to rebuild their infrastructure, are purposely bombed by Israeli jets, which are paid for by American taxpayers’ money. In a desperate attempt to feed their families and escape this open air prison, the Palestinians are digging dozens of underground tunnels from Gaza to Egypt. But on the day we left, three men were killed, and others were still missing as the soft sand collapsed on them. Thousands of Palestinian women are cut off from their husbands in the West Bank, and 700 students who have university places in outside countries are not allowed out of Gaza to continue their education.

The greatest tragedy to all this is that international governments, and Western media in particular, remain silent to this slow destruction of the Palestinian people under Israel’s policies, which break the Geneva Convention and Apartheid Convention in its apartheid and racism policies.

Yet, in leaving Gaza I felt great hope – hope at the tremendous resilience of the Palestinian people. One of our great Irish poets W.B. Yeats once wrote: “Too long a sacrifice makes a stone of the heart, but then a prayer of the Irish also says, ‘Take away our hearts of stone, and give us hearts of love.’” In my journeys to Israel, and to Palestine, and to Gaza, I have found many hearts of love. One Palestinian man asked me to carry his message to the world, and it is: “We love our Israeli brothers;

we have lived with them – we want to. But we do not believe the Israeli government wants peace, as their policies are destroying the Palestinian people.”

Another request from a Palestinian father to some of our group will remain with us: “If I give you some money, will you bring in on the next boat some milk for my children? We have none.”

I believe there is great hope for peace in the Middle East, as this is a political problem with a political solution, and with real political will, the Israeli government and the USA can solve this historical conflict, whose roots are in the occupation. We recognize the State of Israel and its need for security. We recognize there is a deep fear of ethnic annihilation amongst many Israeli. But we as the human family must all learn to deal with our fears non-violently, and realize our best hope for human security is not in occupation and siege, but in reaching out to make justice and our enemy our friend.

Salaam Palestine, Shalom Israel.

Mairead Maguire
Nobel Peace Laureate
November 2008
www.peacepeople.com