

Why I Didn't Get To Gaza: A Cairo Saga Ron Witton

In mid December 2009 I wrote about why I was going to Gaza. I was planning to join some 1300 citizens from 43 countries to take part in a Gaza Freedom March (GFM) on 31 December, the first anniversary of Israel's invasion of that besieged territory. Israel's military action, which resulted in at least 1100 civilian deaths, has been condemned by Justice Goldstone in his United Nations Fact Finding Mission Report as having involved war crimes. We were going to remind the world of what happened and to bring humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza. We also planned to connect with people working in non-government organizations that have been helping the people of Gaza to deal with profound shortages of food, medical aid and resources - shortages that have severely hindered their ability to rebuild demolished homes and shattered lives.

Soon after arriving in Cairo on the weekend of 26-27 December, the GFM organizers were informed by the Egyptian government that it had decided to again close the Rafah crossing into Gaza and that the GFM participants would not be allowed to enter as planned on Tuesday 29 December. This action by the Egyptian government was part of its continuing cooperation with Israel, and the USA, to blockade Gaza. Indeed, we were left in no doubt as to Egypt's continuing cooperation with Israel, since on Tuesday 29 December Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, arrived in Cairo to take part in cordial talks with Egypt's President Mubarak.

There resulted a series of hurried, though coordinated, meetings in three different Cairo hotels attended by representatives of the 1300 GFM participants. It was decided that there was a need to publicise to the world Egypt's role in assisting Israel, the US and indeed the West generally, in blockading Gaza and causing severe hardship to a whole civilian population.

We began a series of rolling daily demonstrations in different locations throughout Cairo which aimed to focus the attention of the world's media on the collective punishment of the Palestinian people in contravention of all norms of international humanitarianism. In achieving this aim, we were assisted by the Egyptian government as their police and security forces became more and more repressive in trying to stop us from demonstrating, and their often brutal actions were caught on film by the world's press.

Despite some rough handling that resulted in injuries to a number of GFM participants, large scale demonstrations were held throughout the

week. Locations included the banks of the Nile, outside the French embassy (led by a very committed group of French participants), in front of the Israeli diplomatic mission, as well as at demonstrations organized by very brave Egyptian citizens, such as that held outside the Egyptian Journalists' Association building. The Egyptian citizens who took part in demonstrations were treated by the security forces in a much more repressive manner than were we international participants.

GFM participants also visited the embassies of their countries and we, the Australian participants, met with the Australian ambassador to deliver a letter to Prime Minister Rudd deploring Australia's lack of active intervention in lifting the siege of Gaza. While we were heartened by the Ambassador's description of the situation in Gaza as "utterly tragic", we left the embassy feeling that Australia was in effect unwilling to stand up to Israel and the US in criticising the siege that is causing the continued human misery that the Ambassador deplored.

The largest demonstration was held outside Cairo's National Museum, the city's foremost tourist location, on 31 December (the actual anniversary of the Israeli invasion), and was one of many such commemorative demonstrations held throughout the world to coincide with the main march in Gaza¹.

It was apparent to us at our demonstrations that many ordinary Egyptians were supportive of our actions and very critical of the role of their government in blockading the people of Gaza. They showed this through such actions as flashing us "V" signs from bus and car windows and by taxi drivers honking their horns in time to our chants. Indeed, some taxi drivers, when they found we were in Cairo for the Gaza Freedom March, refused to accept fares and transported us for free to our destinations.

In an apparent attempt to split the solidarity of the international participants, the Egyptian government eventually allowed some 100 participants to travel briefly to Gaza where they made contact with non-government organisations and delivered much needed aid brought from all over the world.

Perhaps the most significant result of our enforced stay in Cairo was a series of meetings coordinated by the South African delegation to plan a global campaign of boycotts, disinvestment and sanctions (BDS) against the Israeli government as a protest against their treatment of both Palestinian citizens within Israel and of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. These meetings resulted in the adoption of a

¹ <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article10989.shtml>

Charter of Action² entitled “End Israeli Apartheid”, which includes an analysis of the profound similarities between apartheid as it was practiced in South Africa and the way Israel treats the Palestinian people. These similarities, which have been discussed in detail by Nelson Mandela for many years, include: the second-class citizenship of Palestinian Israeli citizens; the dispossession of Palestinian land and the creation of non-viable “homelands”; the collective punishment of civilian populations; and the development of racist ideology. This racist ideology is now institutionalized among an entire younger generation of Israelis, all of whom serve in the Israeli Defence Forces. It is actively expressed through the brutal daily treatment of Palestinians at the vast number of checkpoints through which Palestinians are forced to pass everyday, through the gratuitous destruction of Palestinian homes and olive groves, and in racist graffiti (“Kill all Arabs”, “Arabs to the crematoria”, “One down, 999,99 to go”³) left behind after their military incursions into Palestinian territories.

The GFM participants also heard directly from those who made it to Gaza of the hardship faced daily by Gaza’s civilian population. The reported on their visits to children’s trauma centres where children draw horrendous images of people with bleeding and blasted bodies, images drawn from their actual experience and often reflecting the fate of immediate family members. GFM participants saw for themselves that the Israeli navy has moved in so close to the Gaza shore that it has effectively prevented any fishing by Gaza’s fishing fleet. Fish has been a traditional part of Gaza’s diet. The effect of blockading Gaza’s fishing grounds has been to significantly reduce a key source of vitamin D provided through fish. Health workers are seeing increasing vitamin D deficiency-related diseases including an increased prevalence of osteoporosis, rickets and bone fragility. Many Gazans expressed their fear of starvation. They told how most of the food currently available in Gaza comes through tunnels that have been built under the Egyptian border. Egypt’s current plans, in collaboration with Israel and the US, to build a steel wall reaching some 30 meters underground, to block these tunnels, will result in increased widespread malnutrition and perhaps even starvation.

GFM participants expressed concern that the actions by Israel, Egypt and the West, which aimed to weaken the popularly-elected Hamas government, have ironically weakened the links of Gaza’s non-governmental organisations to organisations abroad, and that this has in fact strengthened Hamas’ grip over the Gaza population. GFM participants who managed to get to Gaza were disturbed by the patriarchal nature of Hamas’ Islamist ideology, and that, again

² <http://www.gazafreedommarch.org/article.php?id=5269>

³ <http://azvsas.blogspot.com/2009/02/make-war-not-peace-delightful-israeli.html>

ironically, the international blockade of Gaza has led to the marginalization and weakening of Gaza's women's organisations which had been developing strong links to non-governmental organisations throughout the world. Indeed, the GFM participants who succeeded in reaching Gaza stated that members of Gaza's women's organisations expressed profound gratitude in being able to link up with people abroad, and stated that such opportunities are becoming increasingly rare.

In summary, the Egyptian government through its own actions, ironically succeeded in providing some 1300 committed activists from some 43 countries with an opportunity to plan international actions that will, over the next year and beyond, be of more practical use to the people of Gaza, and the Palestinian people in general, than would have been the case had we merely participated in the largely symbolic march on 31 December in Gaza.

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