

In Gaza as the storm clouds gathered

Just 2 weeks before Israel's onslaught on Gaza in the dead news period after Christmas, we were both in Gaza. There was an uneasy calm. Everyone knew that an Israeli assault was imminent – no one knew when it would occur or exactly what pretext would be used. The circumstances we found there were dire – and that was before hundreds more were killed and the remaining infrastructure pulverised.

How did we come to be there? The short answer is that between Monday December 8th and Friday December 12th the two of us travelled to Gaza on the Free Gaza ship Dignity. The Free Gaza Movement had sent out an urgent request for academics to travel on the boat. Our journey was storm-tossed; but a later trip has faced far greater dangers.

On Dec 29th, as the Israeli bombardment continued, Dignity attempted to take medical supplies and 3 surgeons to help Gaza's hard pressed health system deal with the human consequences of Israel's bombardment. It was rammed 3 times by Israeli warships, and prevented from getting through. Free Gaza is a wonderful organisation and will need funds to repair Dignity or buy a replacement. You can donate at <http://www.freegaza.org/index.php?language=EN&module=donations>

By December 29th the need was for surgeons. But 2 weeks earlier the call was for academics. We were needed as some kind of guarantors that the boat would be able to get both in and out, past the Israeli navy. Why academics? Because there are many hundreds of students trapped in Gaza, unable to get to the university places they have been offered round the world. The main function of this, the 4th blockade-running Free Gaza voyage, was to bring out as many of these trapped students as possible. When Dignity left Gaza we had eleven of them with us, who will now study in Britain, Canada, Greece, Kazakhstan, Germany and the Netherlands. But so many more were left behind.

Given the situation of these trapped students, the fuss that the Israeli state and its friends in the UK always make about the possible infringement of academic freedom by an academic boycott of Israel is deeply ironic. The boycott, at the request of PACBI, is institutional rather than individual – so it hits Israeli universities only in their pride and their wallets. But the blockade by Israel has devastated the academic plans and prospects of countless Gaza students. Their places and funding to study abroad are waiting for them and they cannot go. Nothing abstract about that.

Consider Zohair, who now had a place on offer on a masters course at Imperial College. Originally he had a Fulbright Scholarship to study in the US, but the blockade meant that he lost it. Years are being lost from the academic lives of hundreds of students.

For the boat to get from Larnaca to Gaza we had to run the gauntlet not only of the Israeli navy but also of a Force 9 gale. The boat had few passengers: an Al Jazeera 2-man crew, an ISM volunteer, a British medic who had been refused entry from Israel to continue her reconstructive surgery sessions in Gaza, a Gaza man who had been unable to return and had not seen his family for four years, and members of the Free Gaza team. The rest of the space was taken up with medical supplies donated (without

publicity) by quite surprising agencies, and by baby formula supplied by Friends of Yibna in Britain. The space vacated by these supplies would be utilised by students on the way back.

The arrival of Dignity at the port was greeted with enthusiasm, as were we everywhere we went. Not too many visitors have arrived in Gaza during the month after month of the Israeli siege. We had a ceremonial audience with Ismail Haniyeh, and the Minister of Education spent half a day with us as we toured educational establishments in North Gaza which had been damaged by previous Israeli military action. We also visited the Islamic University. Throughout our 2 days in Gaza we were filmed by a variety of TV crews, and gave impromptu and scheduled interviews - in TV studios, at a hospital, on the dockside...

Since our visit the University, Ismail Haniyeh's house, the Ministry of Education and the port have all been bombed, as has the Agricultural College we visited in Beit Hanoun, while the Dignity has been rammed.*

Our days in Gaza had a packed programme, and we can pick out only some incidents and events:

- Our hospital visit was at Rafah in the south, providing care to nearly 200,000 people. The doctor in charge made no attempt to exaggerate the problems they laboured under. They were getting on with treating patients as best they could. But the supply of medicines was visibly small (we visited the pharmacy). All cancer drugs and many more were unavailable anywhere in Gaza; the UN tally was 105 missing drugs - and that was before the Israeli attack. The hospital's ultrasound was not working - its transducer had broken under the strain of frequent power outages. The Israeli blockade prevented them getting a replacement part. Electricity cuts badly affected dialysis patients; kidney transplants were only possible in Egypt or Israel. You might as well say they could be carried out on the moon.
- At the southern tip of Gaza, near the (closed) Rafah crossing into Egypt we visited Gaza International Airport. Costing \$86 million, with funding from countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe, its opening in 1998 was attended by both Yasser Arafat and Bill Clinton. The 4000 square metre 2-story terminal building is of Islamic design and copious decorative Moroccan tiles. Correction - we visited what used to be the Gaza International Airport. The radar station and control tower were destroyed by the IDF in 2001. Israeli bulldozers cut up the runway in 2002. Now the obviously once graceful terminal building is a shambles - an empty shell looking as if a bomb has hit it. But actually the damage was done from within. Previously the terminal had included a VIP lounge, 2 restaurants etc. The vindictiveness of the spree of wanton destruction speaks volumes for the mindset of the Israeli soldiers who inflicted it.
- In Rafah we visited the spot where Rachel Corrie had been murdered by Israelis demolishing a house she was trying to protect. Nearby we visited the blockade busting tunnels: the vital lifelines bringing essential food, medicines and fuels. They had been built under the wide swathe of houses, Philadelphia Road, demolished some years ago by the Israelis to prevent tunnelling. The tunnels just got longer. Since our visit these tunnels too have been bombed.

* UPDATE since we wrote this both the media centre where we went for TV interviews and the UNRWA compound where we met John Ging have been shelled or bombed
FURTHER UPDATE we have just heard that the offices of the University Teachers' Union have been bombed as well

- On the way back to Gaza city our little bus stopped so we could sample some of the luscious strawberries on sale cheaply at the roadside. They were quite delicious. Of course they had been grown for the international market. Now those which could not find some local sale would rot.
- Further down the road we passed a half built residential development, funded by the UN and the Saudi government, intended to house some of those whose homes had been demolished near the Rafah crossing. The development is half built because the blockade means no building materials can enter Gaza, no cement, timber or structural steel. This was already a major problem, now making even temporary repairs to bombed buildings and infrastructure is impossible.
- We then drove along the coast road, past beautiful sand-dune beaches. These have only recently been open to Gazans as until recently they were part of Israeli settlements that occupied 40% of Gaza – 10,000 settlers in 40%, one and half million Gazans in the remaining (and less fertile) 60%. These beaches could be part of a flourishing tourist industry in a free Gaza. While there were many people on the beach there was no-one in the sea, we discovered why soon after. Just south of Gaza City we crossed the river that is the outflow from Gaza's sewage works. The smell was appalling. The sewage works because of a lack of fuel and spare parts is unable to operate regularly. The raw sewage is poisoning the beaches and the sea, if fishermen try to sail beyond the poison to catch food fit to eat they are fired on by the Israeli navy and many have died. In a poignant irony the sewage is drifting up the coast and is threatening Tel Aviv's tourism as well.
- We met with Dr John Ging, director of UNRWA's Gaza operation. He was forthright in his condemnation of the slow strangulation of Gaza, and the interference with UNRWA's food convoys on which the majority of Gaza's inhabitants depend. Things were getting so much worse. In 2007 the Israelis had merely destroyed the local economy and agriculture. Now...
- We had two well-attended meetings with the University Teachers Society of Palestine, the Gaza university trade union, totalling around 3 hours. Since our return UK members of Engage have asked us about Hamas oppression of this union. Strangely enough, in a very free and forthright discussion we heard nothing about this. What they all wanted to talk about was the Israeli siege, and its disastrous effects. Indeed they had some creative ideas about how academics in countries such as Britain could play a constructive part in increasing the pressure to end it.
- Another key meeting was with representatives of a range of civil society organisations at the offices of the Al-Dameera Association for Human Rights. The meeting was chaired by the undisputed leader of Gaza civil society Dr Eyad Saraj of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme. (since then the Programme's buildings have been wrecked by bombing), and the End the Siege Campaign. The discussion ranged from sexism within the Palestinian organisations combating the occupation and siege; through the undermining effects of disunity between Hamas and Fatah, the West Bank and Gaza; to the increase in renal failure, heart disease and cancer as a result of siege-induced privations.

At each meeting the people we talked with were encouraged by our actual physical presence that the world had not forgotten Gaza. We were met by a clear and consistent demand: end Israeli impunity. And repeatedly we were told what we could do about it: engage civil society worldwide in a campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel.

We now know that most of the public buildings we visited in Gaza have been wrecked by bombing and shelling. What we don't know is whether the homes of the people we met are still standing, or if they or their families are still alive and uninjured.

For now all our efforts are directed to the campaign to get this criminal assault halted. In the longer term the contacts we made, and the ideas we gathered, will help in the much longer campaign to achieve an end to the occupation and self-determination for the Palestinian people.

You can see photos from our visit at

<http://picasaweb.google.com/PalestinePhotos/GazaPhotos#>

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