

GAZA FREEDOM MARCH AND ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITIES IN EGYPT, ISRAEL/PALESTINE: **REPORT**

December 24, 2009 – January 11, 2010
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I. Background

The Gaza Freedom March, conceived and organized by Code Pink as an effort on the part of international peace activists to challenge the two and one-half year siege of Gaza on the first anniversary of Israel's "Cast Lead" military bombardment and invasion of the Strip, was an inspired idea. Code Pink organizers and many others in the international peace community recognize the need for a magnified international focus on the suffering of the people of Gaza, as do we. Code Pink organized five small delegations of activists bearing material needs in the early months following the Israeli offensive and succeeded in gaining entry for these groups into Gaza through careful and extensive negotiations with Egyptian authorities who control the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and Gaza. From the beginning, Code Pink's publicity on the Freedom March and all their registration materials made it clear that there was no guarantee that a large body of internationals would get permission to enter Gaza. However, they based their efforts on their past history with Egyptian authorities and began careful planning and relationship-building inside Egypt at least four months before the March was scheduled to take place on December 31, 2009.

When we saw the announcement of the March and the call to join, forwarded to us by Friends of Sabeel of North America (FOSNA), Colorado Chapter, we both experienced an instant and profound sense of spiritual leading to take part, even though we had earlier determined that our work on the ground in Palestine was probably at an end due to our ages and the intense difficulty of such work. We registered, raised funds, made presentations about our calling, made flight reservations and secured a hotel (recommended by Code Pink's organizers there) in Cairo. During this preparation time we were strongly supported and encouraged by family, friends, and the various peace and justice and Quaker organizations to which we belong. We received immediate and generous financial support from 54 supporters.

II. The Experience and Events

We landed in Cairo early on the morning of December 26 and finally made it to our hotel at close to 6:00 AM. We slept till noon, had lunch and prepared to begin the preliminary work of the Marchers. The first thing on our schedule was to be a mass orientation meeting at 7:00 PM on the 27th at the Holy Family School, a long established Jesuit institution in Cairo. But we soon learned that Egyptian authorities had withdrawn permission for the school to host our group of nearly 1500 internationals from 42 countries. Organizers then planned a demonstration to take place on the Nile that afternoon. A fleet of *falukhas* was reserved and paid for and the plan was for all the marchers to go out onto the river in these boats and float candles – one for each person killed in Gaza in last year's assault. Egyptian authorities pulled the permit for the *falukhas* and returned Code Pink's money. We then gathered at the Cornice Garden (a park) on the Nile for a rally and candle lighting demonstration. About 700 of us had arrived by the time police denied entry to the park and we were confined to the sidewalk to demonstrate. Police surrounded the demonstration and blocked our ability to move out of the area for several hours. We were prohibited from displaying banners and signs as well. In spite of the obstacles, spirits were high and the demonstration, strictly nonviolent, inspired us with chants and songs in many different languages and the common call to FREE GAZA. That evening there was another gathering of affinity groups in an outdoor square several blocks away during which time we made our first contact with the Interfaith Satyagraha Affinity Group of which we were a part.

The following day, December 28, strategy meetings were scheduled in three separate locations to forestall further interference by police. These meetings placed the emphasis on strong media work internationally so that the story of Egyptian policy (clearly driven by U.S. and Israeli pressure) would be widely told. There was also a meeting of our Interfaith Affinity group after the strategy meetings. A mass demonstration was held at the U.N. that day resulting in some arrests, and various national groups demonstrated at their embassies. In the meantime, small groups of Marchers began filtering out to Al Arish on their own. Almost immediately reports came back that although 100 people had made it to Al Arish on Saturday they were under detention in their hotel and 32 were arrested for trying a nonviolent action. Continuing small group movements to Al Arish were not discouraged but the risks were made clear. We decided to try to go feeling that being under arrest in Al Arish would be as good a witness as any for us to make for Gaza freedom. However, when we learned that roadblocks were being set up between Cairo and Al Arish and passports confiscated from any internationals attempting the trip, we decided against proceeding.

The leaders of the Interfaith Satyagraha Affinity group, Dr. Mark Johnson, Executive Director of Fellowship of Reconciliation U.S., and Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, were staying in our same hotel. So on Monday evening, having dinner with them, we gained clarity that our best move would be to leave Cairo, travel overland to Israel, go up to Jerusalem and try to make contact with the Israeli peace movement folks planning to march on the Erez crossing from inside Israel at the same time that the internationals would have been marching from inside Gaza. Mark and Lynn endorsed our decision and confirmed our clarity. So we made hasty arrangements and by 9:30 on Tuesday the 29th we were on an Egyptian bus bound for Taba in the Sinai (a 7-hour trip). Meanwhile the main delegation in Cairo was making plans to try to symbolically walk out of Cairo in the direction of Al Arish and Gaza, knowing they would not get far.

From Taba, we crossed into Elat, Israel and with the help of a friendly taxi driver found a room in an Israeli private home. (We were aware from our experiences back in the 80's that Elat citizens routinely rent rooms in their homes to tourists in this seaside resort town for extremely cheap rates). Intending to continue by bus to Jerusalem on Wednesday the 30th, we went to the bus station well ahead of the 10:00 AM departure time only to discover that the bus was full and we could not get tickets for Jerusalem until the 2:15 bus, which would have gotten us there much too late to find a room and contact the Israeli marchers. While sitting disconsolately in the station, trying to decide what to do, we overheard a couple talking in American English who seemed to be in the same fix. We introduced ourselves and suggested we work together to solve the problem. It was quickly determined that the four of us, pooling our resources, could afford to hire a taxi to take us to Jerusalem. The couple were Laurie Sartorio and Sean McNabb. Laurie is an international lawyer working as a war crimes prosecutor at the ICJ in The Hague. Her husband is the retired assistant head coach of the University of Utah football team! They turned out to be fascinating and fun and we had a wonderful time with them, including dinner together that night in Jerusalem. We are in continuing contact with them since Laurie has expressed a strong interest in our human rights work.

Finding a room in Jerusalem was another story. We began making the rounds of the hostels and guest houses in the Christian Quarter of the Old City with which we have long familiarity and found one after the other completely full (Christmas – after all). At about the fourth or fifth place we tried – the Casa Nova, a Franciscan guesthouse – Genie told the man at the registration desk (a Palestinian Christian named Mike) our whole story – Gaza peace marchers, denied entry, coming to Jerusalem to try to work with the activists in Israel and the West Bank – no room at the inn(s), etc. Everything changed. Mike got on the phone and within minutes turned up a room for us at the Greek Catholic Hostel down the street (which, when we left next morning refused to charge us for the room!). We checked in there and began

trying to make contact with Sabeel and various members of Peace Now and the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (groups we knew were involved in the march on the Israeli side). We failed to reach anyone at Sabeel (they were on vacation over the holidays) but got the names of several Peace Now folks and were told to call them in the morning. But when morning came and we reached them we found it was too late to connect with their buses to the border. We learned, however, that there was to be a major solidarity rally and demonstration in Bethlehem that evening (New Year's Eve) and that some of the Peace Now folks would try to be there and set up media interviews for us.

So we proceeded to Bethlehem – not easy these days. Getting into Bethlehem from Jerusalem is like entering a maximum security prison. We made contact with Mazin Qumsiyeh, a professor at Bethlehem University, who was organizing the rally. We were able to help set up in Manger Square and pass out leaflets as the crowd gathered. It was a wonderful demonstration, with speeches by Palestinian leaders and a moving dance/theater performance by children from the Aida Refugee Camp. The rally ended with the hanging of small tags, each with the name of a child killed in Gaza, on the trees around Manger Square. The dance group from Aida were part of the Alrowwad Theater and Cultural Arts Center at Aida, which was founded and is run by Abedfatah Abu Srour, who offered us a place to stay in his home for as long as we were in the Bethlehem area. So after dinner with the organizers in a local restaurant we went with “Dr. Abed,” as he is widely known, to his home in the village of Doha and met his wife, Nahil and five beautiful children.

The following day (January 1) was spent at the Aida Camp, touring the camp, talking with staff at the Alrowwad center and making phone calls to Jerusalem to try to work out contacts with the Israeli peace movement people. We were able to distribute the gifts we had brought for people in Gaza at the Refugee Camp. On the subject of gifts, we heard that the thousands of dollars worth of school supplies gathered for Gaza, to which some of you specifically donated, succeeded in getting into Gaza, but the \$500 we had collected and earmarked for the AFSC project did not, of course. While at Aida we met Dr. Alice Rothschild and her daughter Emily (also guests at Abedfatah's house). Alice is a member of American Jews for a Just Peace in the Middle East and was preparing to lead a delegation of medical personnel throughout the territories starting on the 3rd.

On January 2nd we went back to Jerusalem and again were lucky with respect to accommodations. We managed to find a small apartment in the Old City, cheaper than a hotel and with a kitchen so that we could cook in instead of eating all our meals in restaurants. Our host was Naim Rizkallah, a very hospitable Christian Palestinian, who gave us a cut-rate price on the apartment. (“You help our people, we help you.”) By this time we had succeeded in reaching the AFSC person in Jerusalem and were ready to set up meetings to follow-up on a “replacement” for what would have been our AFSC service in Gaza.

The next three days were extremely busy. Monday was U.N. day during which we visited the offices of ICHA (the U.N. Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) in East Jerusalem and collected lots of maps and materials for education and advocacy. Then we went to the UNWRA complex in East Jerusalem and talked with the Public Information Officer. She arranged to send us Fact Sheets on all the areas in which they work. While we were visiting the OCHA offices, we met, by happenstance, an Israeli activist, Yvette Nahmia-Messinas, who lives in the “pluralistic and environmentally oriented” Kibbutz Kramim in the Negev. She is a reiki master and has formed women's circles for healing Israeli-Palestinian relations. She gave us a copy of her book of poetry.

On Tuesday, after going to the central bus station to get our return tickets to Elat, we had a very productive meeting with Dr. Patricia Sellick, the new AFSC Regional Director for the Middle East and Tom Jackson, a Quaker film-maker who had just come out of Gaza after spending nearly a month there

working with the AFSC youth project teaching photography and film-making. Both of these people were invaluable sources of information and experience and assured us that we could stay in contact with them as we formulate our work back in the states. In particular, Tom promised to make some of his pictures from inside Gaza available to us. He witnessed and filmed the Freedom March events that took place inside. He said the numbers were disappointing and that after the speeches most people left. Without international accompaniment, people were too afraid to approach the border crossing,

On Wednesday we went early to Ramallah to meet with the AFSC staff there. There are four staff people in Ramallah and their office, in combination with Amal Sabawi's office in Gaza administer the AFSC Palestine Youth Programs. Each of the staff, Thuqan Qishawi, Director and Regional Coordinator and Niveen, Enham and Fares described their work in detail. We asked them to speak about how their faith as Muslims shapes and informs their work with AFSC. They were most eloquent on this subject and each affirmed that Quaker values resonate with Islamic values. Thuqan said the most valuable thing American Quakers can do is to arrange to bring young people from their program to the U.S. for speaking tours and experience living with American Quaker families.

After our time with the AFSC, we hoped to visit the Friends School and the Meeting House, but both were closed for the holidays. We then went to downtown Ramallah to visit Al Haq, the Palestinian Affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists – Geneva, a Palestinian human rights legal advocacy group. There, again, we met interested and interesting people and gathered valuable resources and information. We have been in contact with them since their founding by our friend Jonathan Kuttab in the early 1980s. The person we talked with indicated their interest in developing relationships in North America with human rights legal organizations and that inspired us to re-organize The Center on Law and Human Rights, founded in Colorado in 2003, for immigration, anti-war, and conscientious objection and military courts martial cases (a process we are now undertaking).

Walking through downtown Ramallah we joined in a huge Fatah demonstration, with bands, speakers, banners and lots of hoopla. Finally took the bus back to Jerusalem and experienced the Qalandia checkpoint as much more entrenched and institutionalized than it was last time we went through in 2004.

On Thursday we retraced our trip by bus from Jerusalem to Elat, overnight with the same host as before, and then across the border to Taba on Friday morning only to learn that on Fridays (Muslim holy day) the busses don't run. So we found a taxi to take us as far as Suez and from there, a bus to Cairo. The rest of Friday and most of Saturday were a day of rest. We took time to do a little walking through Cairo and along the Nile, symbolically and silently remembering our attempt to float candles for the dead of Gaza. Then to the airport at 1:00 AM to begin our trek home, Cairo to Amsterdam to New York to Denver.

Our disappointment over being prevented from entering Gaza is vast. Yet, we have come home with an equally profound sense that we did what we were sent there to do. We felt constantly the presence of God guiding us as we felt our way through alternatives, and we were confirmed in our sense that there is a great value to the Ministry of Presence, that is, being there witnessing the reality of those under occupation and oppression and knowing we are called to bring home their story and respond to their needs as well as we can through advocacy, education and humanitarian aid provided by the Center on Law and Human Rights.