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Medical Aid Convoy Breaks Gaza Blockade

by Andrew Pollack / August 2009

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On July 4 over 80 supporters of Palestinian liberation left JFK Airport in New York to join what would end up being a delegation of over 200 in the Viva Palestina-United States (VPUS) convoy to Gaza. Arabs, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Latin@s, Blacks, Asians, Native Americans, and whites embarked on a trip to bring medical aid as part of the broader goal of breaking Israel's genocidal siege.

The first Viva Palestina convoy left from London in March and drove across Europe and North Africa to Gaza. It was initiated by Respect Member of the British Parliament George Galloway.

This second convoy carried wheelchairs, walkers, medicine, and other health-care supplies. The material is needed both because of the barbaric attacks by Israel on Gaza at the beginning of the year, destroying hospitals and clinics and leaving tens of thousands wounded, and because of the siege which has starved the area of such supplies.

What's more, the siege has left two-thirds of Gaza's population, of which half are children, "food insecure," and UNICEF has said over 10% of Gaza's children have stunted growth due to malnutrition, all of which creates an even direr need for medical aid.

Convoy delegates flew first to Cairo to pick up supplies previously purchased and to buy more. Those who had never been to Egypt were stunned by the devastating poverty, the unpaved filthy streets, open sewage, and adults and children sleeping in the streets. One delegate wrote in a blog that perhaps a convoy was needed to aid Cairo.

Of course, the poverty suffered by Egypt's workers and peasants are the product of its government's subservience to the U.S. and Israel, including helping Israel enforce the siege. In return, it has been allowed entry into the "free market" of neoliberal globalization, allowing its ruling class to prosper while previously won gains of its workers and poor peasants have been eliminated.

Soon delegates would see even worse conditions in Gaza. But first they had to overcome a succession of bureaucratic obstacles thrown up by the governments of Egypt and the United States.

The initial plan was to spend about a week in Cairo gathering supplies and four days in Gaza distributing them and talking to people. But in the end Egypt threw up one barrier after another until only one day was left to spend in Gaza before

most delegates had to return home—and Egypt threatened those staying more than one day with being stuck in Gaza for weeks or even months until the next general border crossing, which would occur at the whim of the regime.

Before arriving in Cairo, VP organizers had obtained travel permits and provided Egyptian and U.S. government officials with every single document requested, detailing who was on the convoy and what they would be bringing into Gaza. Egypt repeatedly claimed not to have received these documents, and then demanded even more.

In the end, the convoy was barred from taking into Gaza 47 trucks, vans, and cars purchased at the request of hospitals and social service organizations in Gaza, and only two ambulances and the medical aid were allowed in—still a big victory.

Standoff at Salaam Bridge

The first contingent of the convoy attempted to cross the Salaam (Peace) Bridge to the Sinai peninsula on July 11, but were stopped by Egyptian security. Among those at the bridge were Dahlia and Dima Abi Saab of Al-Awda-NY (the Palestine Right to Return Coalition), a group whose organizing was key to the convoy's success. They described in a blog entry how the four buses were ordered to the side of the road and passengers ordered to write their names and passport numbers down, despite Cairo already having this information.

Two hours later they were ordered back to Cairo, but delegates refused. While waiting they did debka (a traditional Palestinian dance) and played soccer, "to show the cops that our spirits would not be broken."

Then trickery was attempted, with a security official telling everyone to get on the bus because they were being allowed to cross the bridge. But a VPer who overheard security officials telling drivers to pretend they were heading toward the border but then return to Cairo alerted delegates. The buses were emptied, and delegates held hands as they ringed the buses to prevent their departure. Delegates didn't even flinch when security ordered the drivers to run them over.

Twelve hours later, the contingent decided to return to Cairo to fill out the newly-demanded paperwork. This included an affidavit to be filled out at the U.S. embassy, never required of any other aid trips to Gaza, which absolved Washington of any responsibility for the safety of its own citizens while they were in Gaza and relinquishing all rights to call on U.S. consular services for aid. The Abi Saab sisters noted that the U.S. government "will, however, provide the state of Israel billions of dollars annually and weapons to be dropped on the children of the Gaza Strip."

In the name of the delegation as a whole, New York City

Councilperson Charles Barron and former U.S. Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney called on Obama to force Egypt to end the delays, citing Obama's own rhetoric in his speech in Cairo about a "humanitarian crisis" in Gaza and his saying the siege should be eased. Of course, Obama ignored their plea. (McKinney had joined the convoy after being released from an Israeli prison, where she had been taken after being abducted in an act of piracy in international waters, along with 21 other passengers on a Free Gaza Movement boat.)

To protest the harassment and delays, VPUS supporters back in the States organized emergency demonstrations at Egyptian consulates in the U.S., and flooded Washington with e-mails, calls, and faxes. In the midst of all these delays, Egypt allowed Zionist warships to travel through the Suez Canal as part of maneuvers for a possible attack on Iran.

24 Hours in Gaza

Once in Gaza, delegates were shocked at the destruction and physical and psychological damage they observed, even though their mission was motivated by awareness of the impact of Israel's barbarism. Said one doctor, "We have so many children suffering from psychological pains. Whenever they hear a loud noise, they cry out, 'A bomb! A bomb!' and start crying."

Delegates heard stories of cold-blooded murders of civilians by Zionist soldiers. But they were equally impressed by the determination of Gazans to continue resisting. As New York delegate Bill Doares stated in a report-back forum, the sign on the border should read "Welcome to Gaza, Land of Dignity and Resistance." Delegates were inspired, said Bill, "to see no Israeli soldiers, no settlers from Long Island, no checkpoints, and weapons only in Palestinian hands."

With Israel having destroyed Gaza's power plants, lighting depends on fuel-fed generators. But delegates saw graffiti with a painting of a hand, holding a heart with the colors of the Palestinian flag, with wires and lightning bolts issuing from it, and underneath the words, "Gaza runs on the electricity in the hearts of all Palestinians."

Graffiti expressing such resilience could be found on almost every building, including "Steadfast, We Will Not Give Up Despite the Siege," "Jerusalem Will Always be the Capital of Palestine," and "Resistance and Struggle is the Way to Victory."

Convoy participants included Palestinians living in the U.S. who had been prevented from entering Gaza for years, despite having family members there. One delegate was a doctor who had hoped to bring out his three young children, who had been trapped there despite having U.S. passports for five years. His efforts were blocked by Egypt.

Delegates noted that the "inmates" of the world's largest

open-air prison did everything in their power to accommodate them and to boost their spirits, to encourage them not to cry but to continue to support those resisting.

After seeing Al Quds Hospital, once one of Gaza City's foremost medical facilities, but whose floors were blown out by mortar fire (and can't be reconstructed due to the siege), the convoy went to Al Shifa Hospital to deliver the bulk of the aid. At a press conference there, Barron announced, "After much duress, we've broken the siege. Mission accomplished!"

At the Ministry of Detainees, delegates wept as they heard stories of families of detainees and the slain. Said one, "This is land that is for all prisoners, for all free people, for every single human being. All of Israel is said to suffer so much from one prisoner [Gilad Shalit, an armed soldier riding on a tank, in contrast to the 11,000 Palestinians jailed for alleged participation in civilian political activities]. What about us? This child whose hand I'm holding has never seen his father, but we are people of peace."

Three little girls spoke about losing 29 immediate family members. Said a 10-year-old: "What is my fault? They killed my parents, but what did I do to them? My life was beautiful and peaceful. But after what they did, I will never ever feel that passion again, to just seek a hug from my parents. And I will never forgive them, because they took the most precious thing in my life."

Gazans welcomed the convoy not primarily for the aid brought, important as that was, but for the political statement of solidarity made by the attempt. As VPUS delegate Soozy Duncan reported in *The Independent*, "Bringing medical aid was only one of VP's stated purposes. The convoy also sought to learn and share the stories of the Gazans who have lived under 61 years of occupation and the severe assault from December to January."

Despite verbal squabbles over settlement expansion, Washington is clearly backing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to continue the siege, the land thefts, and the denial of the right to return—using as a cover an IMF-style "development" of the economy of the West Bank, integrating isolated segments of it further, *a la* Egypt, into the world capitalist order, at the expense of Palestinian workers, peasants, and refugees.

Resistance to these plans was evident not only in Gaza, but also among the people of Egypt, in contrast to the regime imposed on them. Wrote the Abi Saabs, "The people of Egypt remain a breath of fresh air with their support and positive attitude towards our mission and convoy to Gaza.

"Walking down the streets of Giza, with our Al-Awda 'Falasteen' shirts, we are constantly being stopped by pedestrians who want to greet us and tell us how much they love Palestine. People began screaming 'We Love Palestine!'

One man stopped us and said every time he prays, the first thing he prays for is Palestine. Most of the people we have come across don't support the actions of the Egyptian government, and are so appreciative and grateful for our mission."

Ironically, this support of working-class Egyptians for the convoy was being expressed at the very same time at an event of potentially historic proportions occurring in Cairo, an event displaying the strength of the social force that could re-galvanize the masses of Palestine and the rest of the Arab world in their efforts to break imperialism and Zionism's hold on the region.

Hundreds of workers on strike for 41 days against the Tanta Flax and Oil Company met in Cairo on July 10. They demanded the nationalization of their factory, privatized four years ago, threatening to take it over if the government didn't intervene on behalf of the strikers. Some speakers went even further and demanded an end to the government's entire policy of privatization.

Said one: "If we succeed in Tanta Flax, this will be the end of privatization in Egypt. All companies will follow suit and strike. Our fight is for the workers of all Egypt"—and, we would add, given Egypt's key role in supporting Israel, by extension for the Arab people as a whole.

Galloway has announced that he intends to lead caravans this year from Venezuela (with the participation of Hugo Chavez), France, and Moscow, as well as a joint U.K.-U.S. convoy in December to commemorate the first anniversary of Israel's attack. These convoys can be part of a broader effort to expand the growing movement in solidarity with Palestine.

This movement in turn can provide support for a growing resistance by Palestinians themselves. As stated at the report-back forum mentioned above, that resistance will be built on the principles, in the words of Lamis Deek, a leader of Al-Awda-NY and the U.S. Palestinian Community Network, that "Jerusalem must be the capital of Palestine; rejection of Zionism as racist colonialism; and return of all refugees to their original homes and lands."

Dos, Tres, Muchos Convoys! Viva Palestina!

Human Needs, Not Profits!