

Activists on 'Rachel Corrie' Undeterred by Israeli Action

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IRISH SHIP: THE DELAYED Free Gaza Movement's cargo ship Rachel Corrie yesterday assumed a holding position in the eastern Mediterranean, poised to make a fresh attempt to reach Israeli-blockaded Gaza.

Organiser Greta Berlin said the ship was waiting for *Challenger II*, a small passenger boat which suffered failure of its steering gear while preparing for the passage.

The two vessels, their crews and passengers are undeterred by the Israeli commando operation against the flotilla which cost the lives of nine passengers and climaxed in the detention of the other 679 on board.

The *Rachel Corrie*, which began its voyage in Ireland, was named after a young US woman killed by an Israeli bulldozer demolishing Palestinian homes in Gaza.

Among those on board are Nobel Prize laureate Mairead Maguire and former UN assistant secretary general Denis Halliday.

Ms Berlin said the ships would be picking up other human rights activists and journalists before attempting the passage which Israel has vowed to stop.

"Israel can haul the *Rachel Corrie* into Ashdod as it did the other boats or show goodwill to the world by allowing her to proceed to Gaza," she stated.

While preparations were being made for the second attempt, released flotilla passengers began to speak of the Israeli raid.

Former US diplomat Edward Peck said all boats were boarded simultaneously at 4.30am. Armed commandos simply stepped from their inflatables on to the decks of the smaller boats. On the Greek boat, where he was, there were scuffles when the troops pushed aside passengers trying to protect the wheelhouse.

Issam Zaatar, a cameraman for al-Jazeera, said the Israelis used sound grenades and gas as well as tasers to subdue resisting passengers. His camera was smashed deliberately.

Passengers on the Turkish cruise ship said the operation was heralded by live fire as the troops abseiled on to the deck.

"The ship turned into a lake of blood," said Nilufer Cetin, a Turkish activist who hid with her

infant in her cabin. An Israeli legislator of Palestinian origin, Hanit Zoabi from Nazareth, said the operation lasted an hour and she saw five bodies.

“It was clear from the size of the force that boarded the ship that the purpose was not to halt the voyage but to cause the largest number of fatalities to prevent future initiatives.”

Mr Peck said that they were held incommunicado at Ashdod.

Leah Tsemel, an Israeli lawyer representing Donegal peace activist Fiachre Ó Luain, said she met him yesterday and found him well.

She said: “I advise them all to sign the document stating that they leave the country of their own free will. They cannot win if they contest legally. They want to say they sign under protest because they were kidnapped.”

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