

The Spirit of Rachel Corrie Mission to Gaza: Breaking the Illegal Siege

The Blockade Runners Part II

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Global Research Editor's Note

The following text recounts how the Gaza siege was almost broken by a lone humanitarian ship.

What the Spirit of Rachel Corrie achieved, its crew and passengers, constitutes an outstanding act of courage and determination, taking the Israeli Navy totally by surprise.

Global Research's Julie Lévesque participated in this mission to Gaza organized by the Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF). This is her vivid account of the Spirit of Rachel Corrie mission, pertaining to the day by day life on the ship, recounting in detail the actions of those who, acting in solidarity with Palestine, put their life in danger with a view to breaking the illegal Israeli siege of Gaza.

On May 16, 2011, when the Spirit of Rachel Corrie entered Palestinian waters undetected and was attacked by patrol boats of the Israeli Navy, the Western media in chorus decided not to cover this pathbreaking event...

Michel Chossudovsky, August 7, 2011

"The Navy has prevented and will continue to prevent the arrival of **the 'hate flotilla'** whose **only goals are to clash with IDF soldiers, create media provocation** and to **delegitimize the State of Israel**," -Israel Navy commander Adm. Eliezer Marom warning to the Gaza flotilla organizers (Anshel Pfeffer, [Israel Navy commander: 'Hate flotilla' to Gaza must be stopped](#), Haaretz.com June 19, 2011)

"The Simon Wiesenthal Centre has published a list of people who are classified as **anti-Semitic** in 2010. I am listed among the top 10. I suppose what I had said in 2010 is regarded by the Jewish [Wiesenthal] Centre as slurs but I was merely exercising my right to free speech to speak up against what I considered as injustice. **I condemned Israel for breaking international laws**, carrying out an **illegal siege** of Gaza, attacking and **seizing the Mavi Marmara and the Rachel Corrie in international waters, killing nine Turkish aid workers**, and continuing to **deprive the suffering people of Gaza of medical supplies, construction material and food**." (Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, [The Anti-Semitic](#), Former Prime minister of Malaysia, December 24, 2010)

Click here for the first part of this article: [The Blockade Runners Part I](#)

The idea of sending flotillas to Gaza originally came from former Malaysian Prime Minister and Perdana Global Peace Foundation's (PGPF) founder Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. For decades now he has been a very outspoken advocate of the rights of the Palestinians. Like most people who take a firm stand against the illegal actions of the state of Israel, he was labelled "anti-Semitic". This type of ad hominem attack is the only stratagem left for those who wish to defend an illegal and immoral occupation.

PGPF's goal is to make war a crime. "We can not allow people to kill and glorify killing. We need to change the mindset and reject war as a means of settling disputes. This is the beginning of a very long saga which will take many years," explained Tun Mahathir.

Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's keynote address at the War Crimes Conference and Exhibition in October 2009

In 2010, PGPF joined the Freedom Flotilla with the "Rachel Corrie". This year it decided to act alone and send its ship, the "Spirit of Rachel Corrie" (SRC), ahead of the Freedom Flotilla II. The mission's ultimate goal was to "bring liberty in Gaza" and "prove to the world that Israel has no right to impose this illegal siege", Mahathir told the participants of the mission about to set sail on the SRC.

In the light of the recent failed attempt of the Freedom Flotilla II, the SRC mission can be considered a success: it is the only ship this year to have entered Palestinian waters. Its modus operandi should serve as an example for future attempts to break the illegal siege of Gaza.

Humanitarian "False Flag Operation"

May 11, 2011, a ship registered as the MV Finch flying the Moldovan flag left the Greek port of Piraeus unnoticed. It was the Spirit of Rachel Corrie Mission (SRC). On board were 12 crew members and passengers: 7 Malaysians, 2 Indians, 2 Irish and 1 Canadian.

Fearing that they would be prevented to sail to their destination, the organizers of the mission opted for a low profile rather than a big media campaign. They neither disclosed where they were leaving from, nor where they were going to.

It turned out to be a good idea. Unlike the Freedom Flotilla II which was supposed to sail to Gaza, they were able to leave the Greek port of Piraeus without any form of encroachment and sail towards Palestine.

It should be noted that in December 2010, the Jerusalem Post reported that a "[m]ulti-million deal [was] in the works to sell weapons system for Hellenic Air Force's F-16 fleet", and that given Greece's poor economy, "officials said they were seeking **creative ways for Greece to pay for the systems**". (Yaakov Katz, [Israeli defense industries in talks with Greek army](#), The Jerusalem Post, December 12, 2010. Emphasis added)

The report further stated that the ties between Greece and Israel have improved "since May's navy raid on a Turkish flotilla" following which, "Turkey cut off all military and political ties with Israel". (*Ibid.*)

Had the Greek authorities known of the Spirit of Rachel Corrie's (SRC) ultimate destination,

they would have prevented it from leaving Greek waters, as they did with this year's "Freedom Flotilla".

May 16, 6am. Sailing out of Egyptian waters five days later, the SRC entered Palestinian waters undetected, to the great surprise of Palestinian fishermen, dazed at the view of foreign passengers on a ship waving and smiling at them.

Boats try to break the siege regularly. Not ships.

"Palestine! Palestine!", they yelled with astonishment pointing at the water, probably thinking the captain was lost.

"We're going to Gaza!" one of the passengers yelled back. Gaza? And they started pointing in that direction, nodding, smiling and yelling "Gaza! Gaza!"

They could not believe it.

Since everyone was soon expecting an encounter with the Israeli Navy, that moment lightened the atmosphere on the ship. But not for long. The ship continued its course until the passengers and crew saw two speed boats from the Israeli Navy coming towards the ship.

"They're coming", said Jenny Graham, the Irish activist. She started making a call with a satellite phone when the first machine gun shots were fired.

Half of the passengers ran for cover in an enclosed area on the deck. Other passengers and crew members went inside on the bridge.

The Israeli navy contacted the captain, Abd Jalil bin Mansor, who explained the ship was delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza and that there were no weapons on board. He was asked to turn around. He refused.

"I've been instructed to go to Gaza."



Captain Jalil Mansor explaining the route chosen to penetrate Palestinian waters.

Meanwhile, three rounds of shots were fired. “Welcome to my world”, said Jenny, stoic, to the people lying down beside her on the deck.

From there, no one could see where the “warning shots” were going or where they were coming from. Every once in a while we could get a glimpse of the boats circling the ship.

One of the passengers was praying, the other one had his hands up to show he had no weapons, although we were the only ones who could see him.

Derek Graham had been through this before. He was outside smoking a cigarette, looking straight at the man behind the machine gun with his arms wide open, inviting him to shoot.

Seeing him, Alang Bendahara, reporter for the News Straits Time stood up on the deck to get some footage of the boats shooting.

Then we heard the Israeli navy screaming to the captain, “Turn around! Turn around now or we’ll shoot you!”

The captain obeyed. The ship changed its course.

Another round of shots was fired even though the captain had followed the navy’s orders.

Then the Egyptian navy, which never noticed the ship entering and leaving their waters, responded to repeated calls from the Israeli navy and asked them to stop shooting. They did.

As the ship was escorted back in Egyptian waters, the Israelis thanked the Egyptians for their cooperation on the siege and went on firing at the tiny and vulnerable fishing boats.

As they usually do, as Jenny explained outraged. "Our ship being shot at is going to make the news. Not the shooting of the little fishermen boats. The sad thing is, this is their daily life!"

The SRC was kept in the waiting area of El-Arish Port in Egypt for seven weeks. The ship tried to head back to Gaza through Egyptian waters a week after its first attempt. As it was escorted out of Egyptian waters by the Egyptian Navy, which had ordered the captain to head to international waters, the ship experienced technical difficulties and was escorted back in the waiting area in El-Arish.



During the first few days in the waiting area at the port of El-Arish, Egyptian fishermen were prohibited from approaching the ship. Since the food was running low, Derek and Satya, one of the Indian crew members, launched the zodiac to go buy some fish but came back empty handed.



A few days later, fishermen were allowed to come near the MV Finch and sell fresh fish.

Apart from the two Irish activists and Matthias Chang, no one else on the ship had engaged in such an adventure before. Chief engineer Zainuddin Mohamed's reason for accepting to go on this mission was simple: "I wanted to see for my own eyes what is going on there." Captain Jalil Mansor acknowledged: "I have come to a point in my career where I needed a challenge." Since he had military training in the past, the captain was not intimidated by the Israeli navy's gunfire and rather "enjoyed" his confrontation with them.

"Honestly, I wish we had been taken by the Israelis", admitted one of the Malaysians who wished to remain anonymous. "Malaysia has no diplomatic relations with Israel so it is the only way I can enter the country, if they arrest me and take me there. I'm a little disappointed."



Malaysian journalists Alang Bendahara from the [News Straits Time](#) and Mohd Faizal Hassan from [Bernama](#).

Although they were not taken to jail, people on board the Finch were, in a sense, imprisoned on the ship. They were not told why they were being prevented from leaving the ship and were promised countless times that they would be allowed to dock the next day. The Canadian embassy in Egypt confirmed that the matter was in the hands of military intelligence and that the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was not the one handling the issue.

The people on board showed tremendous solidarity for several days by refusing to leave in small groups: it was all or nothing.



From the first day in El-Arish, the Egyptian port authorities promised that the ship would be allowed to dock and that the passengers would be allowed to disembark the next day. Leader Matthias Chang and Chief engineer Zainuddin Mohamed after one of many broken promises, almost two weeks after entering Palestinian waters.



Since the ship was not allowed to dock in El-Arish, the only way to get fresh water was to have it delivered by tug boat in the wating area. The heavy containers had to be carried and emptied one by one by the people on board. All the seafarers on board said they had never experienced that before.



The original crew members and passengers were finally all allowed to leave the ship on June 3, 18 days after they entered Palsetinian waters. Three of the Malaysians had decided to leave on May 31. The new crew was kept in Egyptian waters for another month. On July 6, the cargo was unloaded and delivered to Gaza shortly after, on July 12. The cargo, however, was not delivered to Gaza through the Rafah crossing. The cargo was brought through Karem Shalom, into Israel.

Egyptian Promises

Since May 28, the Rafah crossing was supposed to have been opened for people and humanitarian aid, according to statements of the Egyptian government.

This did not happen. The Egyptian authorities refused to let the PGPF's humanitarian cargo go through Rafah, even though it was humanitarian aid: UPVC pipes to restore the sewage system in Gaza, where a water crisis is raging and which affects not only Gazans, but neighbouring countries including Israel and Egypt.

The destruction of the sewage system in Gaza by the Israeli army has led to 50 to 80 million liters of raw sewage being released in the Mediterranean daily.

The SRC cargo was instead delivered through Karem Shalom, in Israel. The cargo was considered as reconstruction material, which Israel requires to be delivered through its illegal checkpoints. While they were on the ship, the original 12 passengers and crew members were given that option and had refused categorically that the cargo be transferred through Karem Shalom, or any other Israeli checkpoint.



All crew members and passengers with a makeshift banner rejecting any compromise to their goal: breaking the siege. From left to right: Alang Bendahara, Satya Prakash, Chandan Sharma, Faizal Hassan, Jenny Graham, Matthias Chang, Julie Lévesque, Jafri Arifin, Zainuddin Mohamed, Jalil Mansor, Derek Graham, Radzillah Abdulla.

The refusal of the Egyptian authorities to allow for the shipment of the humanitarian cargo through Rafah suggests that the interim military government is taking its orders from Tel Aviv and Washington. While the SRC was stranded in Egyptian waters, the crew and passengers on board were told that the ship would not be allowed to dock for “security reasons”. The matter was in the hands of Military Intelligence.

Military Intelligence is attached to the Ministry of Defense headed by Mohamed Hussein Tantawi Soliman who is the commander-in-chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces and de facto head of State.

In turn, Hussein Tantawi is a permanent liaison with his counterpart in Tel Aviv, Ehud Barak, as well as with Defense Secretary Robert Gates in Washington. (Michel Chossudovsky, [BREAKING NEWS: Humanitarian Ship to Gaza is a Floating Prison: Cairo is Obeying Orders from Tel Aviv](#), May 5, 2011)

In March 2011, shortly after Mubarak was ousted from office, a political analyst for the Egyptian Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies stated:

“Egypt will [...] take a stronger stance against Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and will

play a more positive role supporting the Palestinian cause". (Heba Fahmy, [No drastic, immediate change in Egypt's foreign relations, say analysts](#), Daily News Egypt, March 29, 2011)

The outcome of the SRC mission indicates that the post-Mubarak Egyptian government, rather than taking a "strong stance against Israel", is still working hand in glove with Israel and the US. The Egyptian people however, from navy personnel to fishermen, have demonstrated strong support for the Malaysian mission to Gaza.

In recent developments, however, Egypt allowed a British aid convoy called [Miles of Smiles 4](#) reach Gaza through the Rafah crossing in late July. Meanwhile, the UN Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices in the Occupied Territories was allowed to enter Gaza for the first time in July, 43 years after its creation. (IPS, [End blockade now, says UN group in rare Gaza visit](#), August 1, 2011)

The committee condemned "the horrible living conditions in the West Bank and Gaza and the devastating impact of the Israeli economic blockade", as well as the "continuing disregard of its obligations under international law". "The economic, educational, psychological, health and social conditions are affected by the blockade," stated the Sri Lankan ambassador to the UN, adding that "Israel's continuing blockade of Gaza contravened the human rights of the people of Gaza and international humanitarian law and standards". (*Ibid*)

Once again, a UN committee denounces Israel's illegal actions. Over the years though, these accusations have proven to be useless because only the Security Council can impose sanctions on Israel and it never has. In fact quite the opposite: Israel's illegal actions have been protected on numerous occasions by a US veto on UN Security Council Resolutions critical of Israel.

Even though they are labelled by Western governments and the UN as "useless", humanitarian aid convoys, flotillas and lone attempts to break the siege have had a tangible impact on the lives of Gazans.

The sewage pipes brought by the Spirit of Rachel Corrie are now in Gaza, which is facing a major water crisis.

Physicians for Human Rights Israel issued a report in 2010 entitled: "[Humanitarian Minimum: Israel's Role in Creating Food and Water Insecurity in Gaza](#)". It addresses the impact of the Israeli blockade on public health in the Gaza Strip.

It states that "watery diarrhea and acute bloody diarrhea [...] are the major causes of morbidity among the population", and that those disease, "according to the World Health Organization (WHO), are caused by an unsafe water supply, inadequate sanitation, and poor hygiene" (Physicians for Human Rights Israel, [Humanitarian Minimum: Israel's Role in Creating Food and Water Insecurity in Gaza](#), December 2010, p.69)



PGPF employees Farlina Said and Maizatul Akmar Mohd Naim in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



Radzillah Abdulla from [FELDA](#) (Federal Land Development Authority), a Malaysian governmental organization, and Jenny Graham shortly after leaving Greece.

Lessons from a “Humanitarian False Flag Operation”

So far this year, the lone ship Spirit of Rachel Corrie was the only ship to enter Palestinian waters and “put a hole” in the blockade. Although it did not break the siege, it should be considered as a small victory against the illegal occupant, and its strategy should be taken into account by those who wish to break the siege in the future.

1- Favor a media blackout: To avoid being foiled, any attempt to break the siege should be concealed. The media should be alerted only when the goal has been reached or when the vessel has been prevented from reaching it. Big media campaigns may have the advantage of shedding the light on the illegal siege, they also reveal information which hampers the endeavor and serves the illegal occupant. The ultimate goal of such undertakings should remain to break the siege, not publicize it.

2- Conceal the departure location: The country of departure should be disclosed only to those who need to know for logistic purposes.

3- Conceal the destination: The authorities of the country of departure should be given an alternative destination.

4- Use deception: The Malaysian SRC mission, or MV Finch, was flying the Moldovan flag. The Israelis must have been aware that PGPF was sending a ship to Gaza since it was announced by the Malaysian organization a few weeks before the mission was launched. Only the dates were kept secret. The Israelis were probably expecting a vessel flying the

Malaysian flag.

5- Get a fast boat or ship: The MV Finch could not go faster than 6 nautical miles an hour. Had it been faster, it could have reached the port of Gaza.



Satya Prakash and Chandan Sharma, the two Indian crew members.



June 3, 2011 The last “ship prisoners” are released and join the land team in El-Arish.

External links:

[Perdana Global Peace Foundation](#)

Derek and Jenny Graham’s blog: [Irish in Gaza](#)

[Rachel Corrie Foundation for Peace and Justice](#)

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Julie Lévesque is a journalist and researcher with the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal. She was among the first independent journalists to

visit Haiti in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake. In 2011, she was on board "The Spirit of Rachel Corrie", the only humanitarian vessel which penetrated Gaza territorial waters before being shot at by the Israeli Navy.

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