

Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign

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An end to impunity: The Gaza flotilla and the siege of Gaza

Ireland-Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC) Briefing Document for the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs - 02/06/2010

There will be fresh aid convoys to Gaza, and the only credible way to avert future crises is to offer proper diplomatic support to these convoys and to take robust action to ensure that the siege of Gaza is lifted.

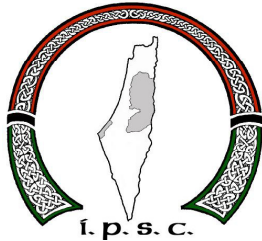
In the wake of the killings of international aid activists by Israel, this briefing document will give background information on the aid convoy to Gaza and attacks on it by Israeli forces. It will describe the necessity of bringing aid to Gaza, and finish by offering a solution to this crisis. There will be fresh aid convoys to Gaza, and the only credible way to avert future crises is to offer proper diplomatic support to these convoys and to take robust action to ensure that the siege of Gaza is lifted.

We are aware that Israel does not react to international condemnation, however they have and they will react to international action, to sanctions and the threat of sanctions. Our government needs to take credible action to ensure that the siege is lifted, not simply to avert future political crises and the ongoing humanitarian crises, but also as a necessary precondition for peace in Israel/Palestine

Overview of the present crisis

Between 3.00 and 4.00 AM this 31st May, the elite Israeli naval unit Flotilla 13 stormed the Mavi Marmara, the Turkish flagship of an international flotilla bringing humanitarian aid to the besieged people of Gaza. The attack took place in international waters, some 80 nautical miles from the coast of the Gaza Strip. The attack killed between 9 and 19 pro-Palestinian civilian activists, most of whom appear to have been of Turkish nationality, and left several dozen injured, some of them seriously. As well as attacking this main flagship, reports are emerging that Israeli forces were shooting at the other ships as well as beating their prisoners, both aboard the ships and subsequently in an Israeli detention centre.

Accompanying the Mavi Marmara was the MV Challenger I with three Irish activists among its passengers: Dr Fintan Lane, Fiachra O Luain and Shane Dillon. All passengers were taken by the Israelis to the port of Ashdod. At time of writing, Shane Dillon has flown back from Tel Aviv and has spoken of Israeli brutality aboard the MV Challenger I, while the other two are on their way back to Ireland along with three other Irish passport-holders on board the Mavi Marmara. Israel has released all their prisoners in response to robust action by the international community and in particular by the Irish government.



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The MV Rachel Corrie, purchased by Perdana Global Foundation, is following in the wake of the Mavi Marmara and Challenger I, and is still intent on bringing its humanitarian cargo to Gaza. On board are five Irish passengers: Nobel Peace Prizewinner Mairead Maguire, former UN Assistant Secretary-General Denis Halliday, Derek and Jenny Graham, peace activists from County Mayo, and Fiona Thompson, a film maker from Dundalk. This ship is expected to reach Gaza by Saturday morning. Israel has vowed to stop it.

"Forty-two passengers boarded in Istanbul and 504 passengers got on the ship here. We spotted no weapons and there is no such record in our logs. We did not notice anything suspicious about the Mavi Marmara. Had our officers had any suspicions they would have reported it"
(Turkish customs official in Antalya)

The attack on the Mavi Marmara

The Israeli Foreign Ministry has claimed that violence against their soldiers was "premeditated", citing statements by Bulent Yildirim of the IHH (the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedom and Humanitarian Relief, a UN-linked charitable organisation that was one of the sponsors of the flotilla) that Israeli soldiers boarding the ship would meet resistance. However, Mr Yildirim said nothing about armed resistance, and Israel has produced no evidence that any of the peace activists on board the ship bore arms.

Indeed had there been arms aboard they would have been found by Turkish customs officials who subjected the ship and its passengers to a stringent search prior to embarkation.

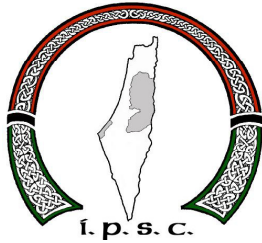
According to a Turkish customs official in Antalya: "Forty-two passengers boarded in Istanbul and 504 passengers got on the ship here. We spotted no weapons and there is no such record in our logs. We did not notice anything suspicious about the Mavi Marmara. Had our officers had any suspicions they would have reported it".

Israel has sought to present a narrative of its soldiers boarding the Mavi Marmara with the sole intention of taking charge of the ship, but being met by a violent surprise assault from armed activists to which they responded in self-defence. This overlooks the fact that the descent of heavily-armed Israeli elite commandos in the middle of the night from a number of helicopters onto the deck of a ship in international waters, in violation of international law and maritime law, is itself a criminal act of some considerable violence.

Israeli deputy foreign minister Danny Ayalon has mischievously claimed that there were Al-Qaeda operatives aboard the ship, referring to the members of IHH. However, IHH has impeccable credentials as a consultative member of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. Down the years Israel has consistently sought to demonise the organisation because of its Islamic nature, and because it has provided relief to the victims of Israeli violence in Palestine and Lebanon. IHH spokesman Serkan Nerkis has significantly commented that "for Israel, regardless of your religion or your nationality, if you help the people of Gaza you will be declared a terrorist." It is clear that the presence of IHH personnel was used by Israel as a pretext to justify its assault on the Mavi

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Marmara, and that the true motivation for the assault was the brutal deterrence of any future attempts to breach Israel's unilateral and illegal blockade of Gaza.

The Free Gaza Movement, one of the organisers of the flotilla and the one with most Irish involvement, defines its aims as follows: "We want to break the siege of Gaza. We want to raise international awareness about the prison-like closure of the Gaza Strip and pressure the international community to review its sanctions policy [against Hamas, which rules Gaza] and end its support for continued Israeli occupation. We want to uphold Palestine's right to welcome internationals as visitors, human rights observers, humanitarian aid workers, journalists, or otherwise. We have not and will not ask for Israel's permission. It is our intent to overcome this brutal siege through civil resistance and non-violent direct action, and establish a permanent sea lane between Gaza and the rest of the world."

Goods forbidden into Gaza include "building materials..., electric appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines, ...fabrics, threads, needles, light bulbs, candles, matches, books, musical instruments, crayons, clothing, shoes, mattresses, sheets, blankets, cutlery, crockery, cups, glasses and animals." (Israeli journalist, Amira Haas)

Note the emphasis on "civil resistance and non-violent direct action". The organisation has further stressed that its members "agree to adhere to the principles of nonviolence and nonviolent resistance in word and deed at all times."

The necessity of aid

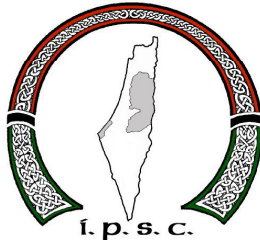
Israel has maintained that the flotilla is unnecessary, since Israel already allows humanitarian goods into Gaza, and that it is merely a publicity stunt and a provocation. This is incorrect.

Participants in the flotilla saw and see their actions as both humanitarian and political in nature. In common with other pro-Palestinian activists, they are concerned that the "international community" has engaged in ignoring and at times facilitating the criminality of Israel's policies towards the Palestinian people, whether in the Occupied Territories or within sovereign Israel. Of late the population of Gaza has suffered most from this criminality, as documented most eloquently by the Report of the UN's Goldstone Commission after Israel's war against Gaza in December 2008/2009.

John Ging, Head of United Nation's Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in the Gaza Strip, has asked the international community to "bring us the supplies we need to rebuild schools and run them, bring us the equipment we need to hospitals and health centers. Everybody knows how desperate the situation is in the Gaza Strip after almost three years of blockade. We need action now." According to the most recent report of the United Nations Development Programme, more than 16 months after the latter onslaught 75% of damaged buildings and infrastructure in the coastal strip remain unrepaired as a result of Israel's embargo.

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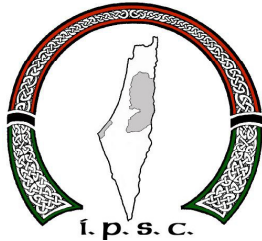
According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the goods permitted by Israel suffice for only one quarter of the people's needs.

According to Israeli journalist Amira Hass, goods forbidden include "building materials..., electric appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines, ...fabrics, threads, needles, light bulbs, candles, matches, books, musical instruments, crayons, clothing, shoes, mattresses, sheets, blankets, cutlery, crockery, cups, glasses and animals." Clearly most of these items are arbitrarily chosen, the ultimate aim - and Israeli spokespersons have conceded this - being to render existence for Gazans so appalling that they will reject Hamas. This is a clear case of collective punishment, and violates the 4th Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

In the past, goods seized both by the Israeli government and the Egyptian government from previous aid convoys have not gone to Gaza since they do not meet Israel's arbitrary definition of 'humanitarian aid'. Israel has offered no reason to believe that it will behave any differently on this occasion. Therefore, while the 10,000 tons of goods that the Gaza Freedom Flotilla were and are seeking to bring to Gaza are vital necessities for the people of the besieged coastal strip, the act of defying the illegal Israeli blockade is meant as a wake-up call to the international community, indeed as a "provocation" to western governments in particular to live up to their responsibilities and support the human and political rights of the people of Gaza.

The IPSC welcomes the statement by Minister for Foreign Affairs Micheál Martin that Israel's recent actions "constitute a totally unacceptable response by the Israeli military to what was a humanitarian mission attempting to deliver much needed supplies to the people of Gaza." However, we believe that the European Union and hence the Irish government cannot be absolved of some responsibility for Israel's evident conviction that it is above the law. We have in the past heard stern condemnations of Israel's actions by Irish politicians followed by steps to upgrade the considerable trading privileges that Israel enjoys under the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement; most recently we have seen Ireland express its "reservations" about Israel's accession to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) before voting in favour of that accession.

Repeated calls for the suspension of the Association Agreement based on its "human rights clause" (Article 2), including a call from the European Parliament itself in April 2002, have fallen on deaf ears. This failure to take all available action was one of the factors that led to the EU's condemnation at the opening session of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine in Barcelona last March. Given the repeated assertion by successive Irish governments that they reject sanctions of any kind against Israel, is it any wonder that that state, intent on completing its project of seizing as much land as possible inhabited by as few Palestinians as possible, considers itself to be above the law and the Palestinians (and indeed everyone else) to be beneath the law?



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Suggestions for future actions

In view of this most recent atrocity on the high seas, it has become clear that the Irish government's failure to advocate robust EU sanctions against Israel may have consequences for Irish passport-holders who find themselves at the receiving end of Israel's rough justice. If it is the first duty of a state to protect its citizens, then such protection is incompatible with turning a blind eye to the crimes of a rogue state that believes – not without reason - it has impunity whatever it does. The January 2010 affair of the murder of a Hamas official in Dubai by Israeli agents using forged Irish passports is further testimony to this attitude.

The first item is to ensure the Irish ship bound for Gaza reaches there safely. The MV Rachel Corrie is still on its way towards Gaza, and has already been the object of threats from the Israeli state. The IPSC has been in contact with the Department of Foreign Affairs urging them to take all measures necessary to ensure that Israel does not attack this ship and that it lets them bring their independently checked humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza.

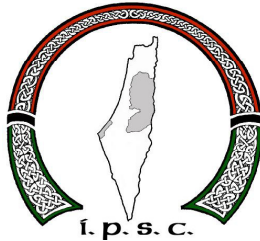
We welcome the cross-party resolution on Tuesday June 1, demanding that the MV Rachel Corrie be allowed reach Gaza. This resolution needs to be backed by action if it is not to be ignored. The Irish government must insist to its Israeli colleagues that the ship be allowed reach its destination unharmed, and that should any harm befall it or any of its passengers there will be negative consequences for Israel's relationship with the European Union.

More long-term: Palestinian solidarity activists will begin anew to organise a fresh convoy to relieve the siege of Gaza. Israelis have vowed not to let these ships through, with one senior naval commander quoted in the Jerusalem Post as saying that the lesson they learned was to use even more force against any aid ships in the future. The Irish government has the options of belatedly reacting to a fresh crisis and perhaps fresh tragedy, or of acting now to avert it.

The only way to avert this and to stop the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is to lift the siege of Gaza. Thus, the IPSC strongly encourages the Irish government to work with its EU colleagues to end Israel's illegal siege of Gaza, and hence make it unnecessary in the future for civil society activists to risk their lives fulfilling responsibilities that governments are failing to fulfil.

The ongoing tragedy of Gaza can be ended, but only if the international community takes robust action. There is now a window of opportunity to take that action.

The IPSC believes that Israel should be subject to immediate sanctions for its recent actions and indeed for the ongoing blockade of Gaza. If Israel is not sanctioned for its behaviour it will continue to act as it has. Strong words are not enough. They need to be backed up with actions.



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We propose the following steps for the Irish government to take. We urge this committee to recommend these actions.

- (1) End its arms trade with Israel, e.g. the purchase of helmets and bullets from Israeli firms***
- (2) Support the suspension of the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement until Israel complies with international law***
- (3) Ensure that the 'silent upgrade' of EU-Israeli relations is halted until Israel complies with international law***
- (4) Work to reverse Israel's premature accession to the OECD***
- (5) Withdraw its ambassador from Tel Aviv as other countries have done, and expel the Israeli ambassador to Ireland.***
- (6) Exercise pressure on Irish multinational CRH to divest from its Israeli subsidiary that is engaged in building the Separation Wall deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice in 2005***

We also would request that the committee invites the Irish activists from the Gaza Freedom Flotilla to address the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs as soon as they have all returned safely to Ireland. We believe that the ongoing tragedy of Gaza can be ended, but only if the international community takes robust action. There is now a window of opportunity to take that action. We urge members of this committee to seize it.

Ireland-Palestine Solidarity Campaign

2nd June 2010
