

Steadfastness and solidarity at the Rafah border

Paki Wieland: June 6 -15, 2009 Updates

Please circulate widely, thanks, paki

On June 4, 2009

Protest for Obama in Cairo

In response to US President Barrack Obama's visit to Cairo, Egypt on June 4, seven "international community activists" from the International Movement to Open the Rafah Border, and US anti-war groups Code Pink and Raging Grannies began a day-long protest to end the Siege of Gaza. The group began their protest at 9 am at the US embassy in Cairo. They unfurled a banner in front of the embassy with the message, "End the Siege of Gaza." Code Pink co-founder, Medea Benjamin carried a letter from the Palestinian government, Hamas, to deliver to the embassy and to President Obama. The letter had been issued to Medea the day before coming from Gaza. The correspondence from Hamas stated their desire to negotiate with Israel and the US with no preconditions. "It was a very dignified letter," said French demonstrator, Christian. The group was also asking President Obama to visit Gaza, Palestine on his Middle East tour. "If the president could see Gaza for himself, he would see the result of US tax dollars, that support the Israeli war crimes in Gaza," shouted the demonstrators. "Obama, go to Gaza!" they continued.

The international community activists (ICA) were diverted from delivering their message to the embassy, being directed from one entrance to another. They were also told that cameras would be confiscated if any pictures were taken. The group was joined by members of two student delegations that had been to Gaza. The students had scribed a letter to the president, protesting the Israeli siege and war crimes in Gaza. Tigue from Code Pink had a contact within the embassy, whom he called to find out who was in control at the embassy that day. He was told that embassy security had the final say. Embassy security tried to contain the ICA in a barricade, which they crawled under, and escaped.

The demonstration was pure improvisation. After leaving the embassy the ICA had planned to display their banners from various bridges or buildings. Instead they decided to see how close they could get to the Cairo University, where the president would deliver his Middle East address.

Being separated from the students, the seven travelled in two taxis,

arriving 1 km from the university. The police stopped all traffic including their taxis. Exiting from the taxis, the demonstrators began walking freely, through the heavily secured area. Christian said it was like the American movie, "Little Big Man," when Dustin Hoffman escorted the blind native chief through a raging massacre. The demonstrators walked for one minute towards a monument thirty meters from the university and the security checkpoint. The plaza was crowded with spectators, security officers, and police dogs.

In front of the monument the demonstrators unfurled the bright pink banners in English and Arabic. All the spectators had to pass by the demonstrators on their way to the presidential address. While some of the ICA remained with one banner in front of the monument, the others wandered among the crowd addressing the spectators by microphone, openly displaying the letter from Hamas. People took interest and took pictures of the letter and the demonstration.

The demonstrators saw about 1000 security officers; Egyptian officers in white and black, and many plain-clothes police from the US and Egypt. Security officers noticed the protestors and communicated on walkie-talkies apparently trying to figure out how to handle the demonstrators. The demonstration went on for nearly 1/2 hour before security finally approached them. Actually there were 30,000 security officers on duty, as was later revealed. Security told the ICA to leave but they said, "we are Americans. We are protesting. This is our right of free speech." The only Egyptian protestor was told to leave, but others joined the demonstration, which now included, one Chinese and three American students, two Frenchmen, and four others from the US...the Italian who tried to join them was searched and sent away because security discovered a video camera in his back pack.

Three of the ICA took a banner to another gate where the president was supposed to pass by. They were told to leave this area. As they went to rejoin the larger group, security tried to drive them with some physical force, to no avail. Medea told them, "President Obama wouldn't like you do that."

Finally, a full line of security officers faced the demonstrators. The ICA knew something was about to happen. Suddenly sirens blarred. The Obama motorcade was approaching. President Obama passed, as fast as possible, by the demonstration in full view of the banners' messages "End the Gaza Siege," "Stop Funding Israeli War Crimes."

When Obama had entered the university, the situation was calmer and Egyptian security warmed up to the protestors, serving them juice and cookies.

When the president's speech was over, suddenly a huge crowd of diplomats, journalists, and Egyptian VIPS all left at the same time.

In the hot sun an intensity resurged. The ICA met the masses with increased vigor. and they were actually greeted by some of the crowd. Some of the demonstrators were engaged in interviews by the journalists.

The group decided it was a good time to exit when they noticed that most of the public had dissipated and that other security forces were slowly enclosing the area around the monument. The International Community Activists quickly packed their banners and slipped through an opening in the security barrier, even while the police were following and trying to grab them.

The banners were later hung from a hotel on Independence Plaza. Upon later reflection of the intense deployment of security, Raging Grannie Paki, said, "what kind of a world is this that we have to have this much security?"

Christian answered, " it is an occupied world."

June 6, 2009

Dear ones,

I am writing at the end of our first day of protest at the Rafah, Egypt border with Gaza.

With assistance from our friends here, we departed our house at 7 a.m. taking a route which avoided every checkpoint between al Arish and the border (about 25 miles), arriving at the border before _ and catching all the authorities off guard. We subsequently lived our first day supporting the myriad Palestinians who so desperately wanted to enter Gaza. There was Sami, a young pharmacist who éé days ago accompanied his sister-in-law into Egypt. He has come to the border for the past 21 days at the border, trying but unable to cross,A mother and her three daughters who are now Swedish citizens, waited patiently, but in the end were, as we all, turned away. Everyone was called at about 1:30 p.m. to turn in our passports. This was something new and hopes were raised that we would be allowed to enter Gaza. Earlier in the day we encountered a Palestinian American family who live near Dallas Texas. The couple went to the University in Texas, deciding to settle in the U.S. years ago in part because of the violence escellating inGaza at the time. This family of parents, and four children have generations of history in Gaza. They were prompted, the father explained to me, to return this summer at considerable expense because 2 young nephews had been accidently killed during the recent war. He went on to say that this trip was to visit family whom they deeply love and want to see before more violence takes more

lives. At about 3 p.m. we were called back to the border where rather than being allowed to cross, we were told, "No one will cross today, come back tomorrow." Everyone was shocked, Dismay gave way to the palpable pain in the faces of the Palestinians. I looked for the family from Texas. The father had taken a taxi to pick up the family's belongings encouraged by the taking of the passports. He had rushed hoping to get back before his family crossed the border. After calling to tell him of the changes his wife in tears said to me, "This is so humiliating."

It has gotten very late. We returned to al Arish committed to return to continue our work, to support, to witness, to speak out for justice.

My thought for the day, quotation:

" We are here to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable."

Love to each and all, Paki

9/10/09

Hi all, After a good night sleep and my a.m. coffee I spoke with our embassy in Cairo re. the plight of U.S. citizens and others who have been kept from crossing the border.

By the third person, it was confirmed that the embassy is impotent (my word with which he agreed) to influence the border police, etc. He would not give his name but said; "I know you and appreciate your work for peace."

He suggested upon my return to Cairo that I file a complaint through the embassy. I believe I shall!

I reminded him that every other govt; office lists "days/hours" it is open and closed but NOT THE BORDER! He and I each listened patiently...More to follow...

Want to follow up?

Please call or email the White House, 202- 456- 1111, Congress, 202-224-3121, U.S. State dept, 202-647-4000, and the U.S. embassy in Cairo, 20227973300, to demand the opening of the border, the first step is to list publically the days and times it will be open!!!

Tomorrow, our work at the border continues with your support. Love to all, Paki

June 15, 2009

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Steadfastness and solidarity at the Rafah border

Under pressure from the Egyptian army and the police, the International Movement to Open the Rafah Border (IMORB), is maintaining their camp

at the Rafah Border. The group is growing; now 26 people from France, USA, Germany, Egypt, Belgium, and Sweden.

Yesterday, our Italian friend left us for his job in Italy, but a German woman, Alona, married to a Palestinian from Rafah, joined us with her six children, aged 2 to 12. She wants to return to live with her husband and other three children in Gaza. After Egyptian authorities denied her entrance, she said, "I am coming from Germany and I don't wish to go back to sleep in El Arish. I come here and I only want one thing: to go to Gaza." By phone, her husband asked his family to join the IMORB camp.

This morning we were joined by a Palestinian refugee, Mohammad, a PFLP (Palestinian Front for Liberation of Palestine) activist who spent 24 years in Israeli prison and has been living in Belgium. Mohammad's daughter, a diabetic student in Gaza, is now in need of insulin. "Since June 8, the Egyptian authority has denied my exodus from Egypt. I heard about your camp and I decided to come and stay with you. The rumor says the border will be open Wednesday [6/17] so I will stay and wait."

Nine Swedish Palestinians, including four children, have also joined the border camp.

Since we set up camp two days ago (6/13) Egyptian police and intelligence agents have been visiting us periodically. Each night Colonel Mohammad speaks to us, but allows us to stay, after first threatening to expel us by force.

When he came to us last night he showed more tolerance and ordered the toilets, adjoining the cafeteria, opened, which had been closed by General Khalil Harb to pressure us to leave.

This morning policemen came and asked us to put down the tents. We explained that we need the tents for the children to take their naps later. They pressured us no more on this issue.

After yesterday morning's visit, General Harb, came after midnight and said, "this is a closed military zone, and your presence here is unacceptable. We will use any means necessary to remove you."

In spite of all this pressure, the IMORB persists. They stated, "we will leave only when the border will be opened."

Our presence is reinforced by support from the Egyptian population, some of whom have brought us blankets, mattresses and other supplies. This morning an unknown man brought us fresh bread. Then a child brought some fooul, a traditional breakfast meal, that was most delicious.

Yesterday evening a policeman came to us wearing a Palestinian kifeyeh around his neck and offered us some chai.

All these demonstrations of support help us to persist in spite of the precarious situation, what Alona calls a "five star hotel."