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The Urgent Cry of the Gaza Freedom March: End the Siege of Gaza!

by Heike Schotten (Advocate), Dec-21-09 **Op-ed**

At this time last year, the bombs had just begun to rain down on the Gaza Strip. In a devastating war that seems all but forgotten here in the United States, Israel brutally massacred more than a thousand people in Gaza in the short space of three weeks. A significant portion of those murdered were children; most were ordinary people hiding in their homes or UN buildings, terrified families and workers hoping to escape what they quickly discovered to be the inescapable carnage of the Israeli military. By the end of this audacious and catastrophic attack, over 1400 Palestinians were dead, over 500 were injured, and the major hubs of human life and community in Gaza – homes, schools, hospitals, roads, and mosques – had been disastrously destroyed.

This war was an outrage and a crime. Sometimes ignored are the factors that made it even worse than these, factors such as the following: Gaza itself is effectively an open-air prison. Its borders are controlled by the Israeli military, and rarely is anyone allowed to pass in or out. During Operation Cast Lead, wherein nobody was let out and no foreign journalists were allowed in, the obvious effect of this imprisonment was to render the 2008-09 war the military equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel and the political equivalent of disappearing criminal evidence. Another factor to consider: the Gaza Strip is among the most densely populated places on earth. The barrel, in other words, was thick with fish who were quite simply impossible to miss (presuming Israel wanted to miss of course, which, as has been thoroughly and meticulously documented, it didn't).

Perhaps the most important overlooked factor is that Gaza has been a prison for longer than we might care to remember. Indeed, it was not solely for the temporary purpose of mass murder that the people of Gaza were incarcerated, since Gaza has been subject to Israeli blockade for close to three years now. Not simply has Palestinians' freedom of movement been curtailed, but Israel has also forbidden basic necessities like food, medicine, and building equipment from being transported inside. The justification for this grueling blockade is the same as it was for the 2008-09 massacre: Israeli security. Its result, however, has been the slow starvation of a people that, if left unchecked, will be tantamount to genocide. Hospitals in Gaza – those that have not already been destroyed, that is – are dependent on back-up generators that require fuel which Israel will not allow inside. Hundreds of sick people have died because of this difficulty alone. Meanwhile, soap and lentils have been banned from importation into Gaza because Israel has deemed them "luxury items." Those who defended Israel's war last year with the outraged cry, "But what about the rockets?" would do well to consider the important context of this blockade, a collective punishment that had begun eighteen months prior to the war's start, if they wish to understand ostensibly mystifying Palestinian behavior.

This blockade of both freedom of movement and the transportation of goods into Gaza is what humanitarian organizations and international legal experts refer to as the "siege" of Gaza. It is particularly devastating now, in light of the fallout from last year's brutal military assault. Babies, for example, are turning blue from drinking water contaminated by Gaza's destroyed sewage system. Unlike the war, however, which happened with the U.S.'s tacit approval (timed as it was to coincide with the Christmas Congressional recess and the transfer of presidential power), this year people from the U.S. and around the world are refusing to stand silently by as Gaza suffers. Unlike President Obama, who renounced responsibility by declaring that "there is only one president at a time," this year people of conscience from all over the world are joining together to demand that the siege of Gaza be ended. On New Year's Eve, they will be joining the Gaza Freedom March.

The Gaza Freedom March aims to end the siege of Gaza by attempting to break Israel's illegal and inhumane blockade. Over 1200 participants from 42 countries – including 14 delegates from Massachusetts – will gather in Cairo and, hopefully with Egyptian cooperation, cross into Gaza through Rafah Crossing. Marchers include an 85-year-old American Holocaust survivor, Hedy Epstein, the acclaimed writer Alice Walker, Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, civil rights movement veterans, Ronnie Kasrils, a leader of the South African liberation struggle, and a substantial delegation from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). In Gaza they will join thousands of Palestinians and march in solidarity together to Erez Crossing, where they will attempt to break the siege of Gaza and end the Israeli blockade of people and goods. If they succeed, they will be met by Israeli solidarity marchers on the other side. They will also have brought much-needed attention to the plight of the people of Gaza, and much-needed relief for their seemingly endless suffering.

Simultaneously, around the globe there will be "End the Siege" actions demanding that the prison doors be opened. In Boston, actions include a First Night Vigil at 4 p.m. in Copley Square, and a contingent in the First Night Parade at 6 p.m. All are welcome. The lives of the people of Gaza hang in the balance.

To find out more, go to <http://www.GazaFreedomMarch.org/>.

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