

## CAIRO DIARY – DECEMBER 31, 2009

1,400 of us came to Cairo from around 40 different countries on or around December 27<sup>th</sup> to get on a convoy of buses, early on the 28<sup>th</sup>, to take a seven hour trip to the Gaza border. Trouble was: Egypt authorities decided not to let anyone leave Cairo! Various small groups and pairs tried to on public buses, etc. They were hauled off the buses and detained where it happened. Meanwhile, about a thousand of us were left looking for somewhere to stay in Cairo – we had only booked for one night!

The French story is particularly vivid: yesterday, they staged a major action at the Pyramids; to be deliberately in the eyes of international tourists and media: some of them had fainting fits with others crying and shouting to distract at the base of a pyramid while a small athletic group climbed half way up and placed a giant Palestinian flag 30 stones high! So, three hundred of these French had booked up, each paying 800 euros, with their own hired aeroplane and collective one night accommodation on the edge of Cairo. When they were also stopped, with nowhere to go, they set up camp on the road and later the pavement outside the French Embassy. As of writing, they have held this camp for four days and nights; a startling example of organised, collective resistance. I was at the camp, the majority of them in their 50/60's; indeed veterans of the 1968 Paris student and workers action.

So this whole last four days has been an experience of improvised street activism on a pretty massive scale; many actions happening simultaneously; with pretty desperate attempts at planning and coordination from very experienced players of several countries. All this up against clever Egyptian security forces; paddy wagons full of riot police who surround every action and the scary part: legions of “undercover plain clothes”; there are apparently 600,000 secret police (not very secret over the last few days) in Egypt. You don't mess with them! But an interesting example of job creation – an option, I suppose, only really available to a dictatorship.

We all came here as a mere stop over on the way to Gaza, then all of a sudden we are stuck here. Vigorous lobbying was done to get the buses; eventually, after a mission by American women to the President's wife, two buses were permitted yesterday to carry up to 100 people. Massive arguments broke out: “It's all of us or nothing! By accepting, we are playing into their hands!”. Egyptian media start reporting that the hundred serious peace makers have gone to Gaza, and the one thousand who remain in Cairo (like me and the whole gentle UK contingent) are dangerous individuals bent on destroying the Egyptian state! Many came off the two buses at the last moment when word came through from Gaza that it should be all of you or none!!

So, I am writing this in the last few hours of 2009 in a Cairo café. As I write, about 250 activists are detained in a crushed circle of riot police outside the Egyptian museum. It started as a non violent December 31<sup>st</sup> march to commemorate the Israeli incursion into Gaza twelve months ago. I was almost hauled into the circle by a vicious looking plain clothes man but managed to get away as I am going back to Somerset tonight. I came here to go to Gaza, not to get stuck in Cairo, let alone fight with the Egyptian riot police! It's a fight you most certainly would not win!

There were so many personal stories of this “Gaza Journey” being sabotaged. A young Palestinian Canadian student from Ontario: “My father is in there. He can't get out. I haven't seen him for years. I expect people to be human. I am

disgusted! We're a peace group. What possible threat are we? And George Galloway's medicines are rotting in the sun (this refers to the Viva Palestina convoy of 400 vehicles stuck in Aqaba also refused further access by the Egyptian authorities)... the convoy can't take them in to the starving Palestinians".

As to why we were not allowed to leave Cairo; why they just didn't let us go to Gaza and save themselves a heap of trouble...there is much conjecture. Egypt is clearly paid off by USA and Israel; in this instance, paid to keep any "International peace march" out of Gaza and out of the limelight. Egyptians, with US money, are building an underground wall right across their border to prevent anything from entering. The policy is clearly to isolate Gaza and Gazans from the rest of the world and then to convince Gazans to rise up against the ruling Hamas Government. No one leaves Gaza and hardly anybody enters!

So, in conclusion, I have had a four day experience of full on International activism in the capital of a police state. Whether or not these actions have positive resonances and outcomes...time will tell. I am left with a powerful sense of admiration for many kindred spirits who will stop at nothing to work for justice and the human race of others. Of course, there are a very few whose motives are suspect but the vast majority are brave souls who think and act way beyond there own personal wishes and needs! This is what I call integrity!

Tom Clark  
1 January 2010

PRESS RELEASE – Sent Monday 4<sup>th</sup> January 2010

## **Bristol-Gaza convoy within hours of destination but success still hangs in the balance!**

**Bristolians carrying desperately needed aid to the people of Gaza in Palestine, are just hours away from reaching Gaza. However serious obstacles remain in their way.**

The Viva Palestina convoy, totalling some two hundred vehicles, were loaded on to a ferry in the Syrian port of Latakia on Saturday (2<sup>nd</sup> January). This turned out to be a perilously trip as the boat was shadowed by two Israeli warships. However the ferry has now docked safely (Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> January) and has been clearing customs at the Egyptian Mediterranean port of El Arish. In a parallel operation, the personnel of the convoy are being transported by plane from Syria to the small airport at El Arish. The aim is to reunite the personnel with their vehicles and drive the last few miles to the Rafah Crossing into Gaza. They will be accompanied by five Turkish MPs. Egypt opened the Rafah border crossing with Gaza on Sunday, but for just four days until Wednesday of this week.

However, recent reports have revealed a number of serious problems:-

- 1) PressTV report that Egypt are refusing entry to a large number of vehicles (maybe sixty)
- 2) Egypt is demanding enormous post fees of some £27,000 which the convoy can not pay
- 3) The small plane from Syria has to make four round trips to transport the entire personal of the convoy. However during the second trip on Monday one of the engines of the plane developed problems and it had to return to Damascus and make an emergency landing. Passengers are now returning to their camp in Syria. Only replacement flights currently via Cyprus.
- 4) The first group of personal (some 120 people) who have arrived in Al-Arish airport have had their passports removed against their will and are staging a protest.

This is a rapidly changing situation and the latest news reports can be found at:-

<http://readingpsc.org.uk/convoy/>

**Hasina Khan**, secretary of the Bristol-Gaza-Link Association says *“It’s been a rollercoaster of emotions for us in Bristol watching helplessly as these endlessly unpredictable events have unfolded. Goodness knows how our volunteers must be feeling. No matter what happens, they are all heroes for trying to help those in needs in Gaza”*.

**Ed Hill**, says *“This is a real nail-biting time for everyone. If they’re delayed for too long Egypt may close the Rafah Crossing again and they could be stuck there for weeks or even months. I really don’t know what will happen then.”*

Comprehensive and up-to-date convoy reports at <http://readingpsc.org.uk/convoy/>

For Viva Palestina see [www.vivapalestina.org/home.htm](http://www.vivapalestina.org/home.htm)

Bristol news available at [www.BristolGazaLink.org](http://www.BristolGazaLink.org) and by joining <http://bglink.ning.com>

Good coverage with pictures at :-

[http://www.worldbulletin.net/news\\_detail.php?id=52180](http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_detail.php?id=52180)

[http://www.worldbulletin.net/news\\_detail.php?id=52136](http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_detail.php?id=52136)

[http://www.worldbulletin.net/news\\_detail.php?id=52064](http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_detail.php?id=52064)

## BACKGROUND

The Bristol contingent left on Friday 4<sup>th</sup> December. MPs and Councillors, including leader of the City Council Barbara Janke, gathered for a rally on the Centre for the send-off. Messages of support were received from all political parties in the City. The contingent included the now-famous 44-ton truck painted with Banksy-style murals of Bristol and Gaza on one side, and Wallace & Gromit on the other. The group also included four vans and mini-buses and a team of nine specialists. They joined the main UK Viva Palestina convoy in London on Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> December and set off on their 4,000 mile trip across Europe and the Middle East to Gaza. For the first week the Bristol group were camping in sub-zero temperatures in parking lots and lorry parks as they travelled through Germany, Austria, and through the mountainous Brenner Pass and into Italy. They were given a warm welcome in Greece and a tumultuous welcome all the way across Turkey, Syria and Jordan. However the convoy was refused entry by Egypt across the Straits of Aqaba from Jordan, in response some Bristol people staged hunger-strikes and protests. The entire convoy had to retrace its route over four hundred miles to Syria where it has had to travel down to the Mediterranean port of El Arish on the Egyptian coast. .

## MAIN CONTACTS

### **Bristol-Gaza-Link Association**

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### **Media support**

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### **Convoy team**

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ENDS