



Press Conference

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

PRESS CONFERENCE ON HUMANITARIAN MATTERS IN GAZA STRIP

More than 1,300 people from around the world would join 50,000 Palestinians in a march on 31 December to mark the one-year anniversary of Israel's military incursion into the Gaza Strip, and appeal for the lifting of its blockade, which prevented food, medicine and reconstruction supplies from reaching those in desperate need, the event's lead organizers said today.

Speaking at a Headquarters press conference sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Nicaragua to the United Nations, Medea Benjamin, co-founder of CODEPINK, the lead organizer, said participants in the "Gaza Freedom March" planned to convene in Cairo, Egypt, cross into the Gaza Strip and march alongside Palestinians to the Erez border crossing in a non-violent demonstration.

Accompanied on the podium by Michael Ratner, President of the Center for Constitutional Rights, and Abdeen Jabara, an attorney active in human rights issues, Ms. Benjamin said those taking part would include Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker, former European Parliament Vice President Luisa Morgantini and 85-year-old Holocaust survivor Hedy Epstein. Others participants, many of Jewish descent, would include two judges from South Africa; Members of Parliament from France, the Philippines and Indonesia; several groups of doctors and lawyers; and 100 students from various countries.

"We are doing this in the spirit of Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela – of non-violent resistance worldwide," Ms. Benjamin said, adding that all participants had signed a code of conduct and were committed to non-violence. Organizing the march from inside Gaza was a coalition of students, university professors, business people, members of refugee communities, women's organizations and journalists. "They feel like the world has turned its back on Gaza," she said, noting that nothing had been done to hold Israel accountable.

Mr. Ratner said that since Israel's incursion, there had been a shift in world understanding and opinion of what was happening in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly among United States-based Jews. People had come to recognize life before Operation Cast Lead – as the offensive was known – and life afterwards.

There was now recognition that Israel could no longer consider itself to be above international law, continue to impose collective punishment on Gazans or attack civilians, he said. Israel had violated the most basic tenets of international law, a fact verified by the report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, also known as the Goldstone Report after its lead investigator, South African Justice Richard Goldstone.

Mr. Jabara described the assault on Gaza as a defining moment, similar to the British Army's 1919 massacre of demonstrators at Amritsar, India; the 1960 Sharpeville massacre of anti-pass law protestors by South African police; or the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. "In December 2008, Gaza was Amritsar, Sharpeville and Wounded Knee writ large," he added.

He said it had taken a year for the events in Gaza to reach the consciousness of humankind, but they had, thanks to the Goldstone Report. Perhaps unwittingly, President Barack Obama of the United States had encouraged such efforts during his June speech in Cairo, when, calling on Palestinians to abandon violence, he had noted that it had not been violence that had won full and equal rights in the United States, but rather the "peaceful and determined insistence" upon the ideals at the centre of the country's founding. Hopefully today's moment would resonate in Washington, D.C., and other world capitals.

Asked what was causing Israeli intransigence and preventing the world from taking action, Mr. Jabara said Israel had the backing of the United States, which "ran interference" for it in various places, including the United Nations and the media. The United States had also tried to quash reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah.

Israel's siege was in violation of international law and must end, he continued, emphasizing that all parties to the conflict, including the United States, must respect international law. The United States was also funding efforts to close off tunnel building between Egypt and Gaza, he said, adding that the Gaza Freedom March was an international cry to say, "This is enough".

Asked about the march, Ms. Benjamin said it had been advertised on the "Gaza Freedom March" website and Facebook, and word-of-mouth interest had snowballed from there. The website set 30 November as the deadline for applications. Delegations had formed within countries, notably South Africa, where the Gaza situation had been called a "present-day apartheid equivalent". A member of that country's Government had formed a delegation, and similar groups had been formed in Spain, Germany, France, Australia and India.

Of the 1,350 applications accepted, 400 were from United States, she continued. The next largest numbers had been reached in Europe (France having the largest number in that group, followed by Italy, Belgium and the United Kingdom) and Canada, with about 12 to 15 people from South Africa, Greece, Turkey and Indonesia. Significant numbers of applicants in the United States and Europe were of Arab descent, but the Government of Egypt had prohibited Egyptians or people with Palestinian Authority passports from taking part.

Asked about the criteria for rejecting applicants, Ms. Benjamin said some had been rejected because they did not fit the criteria for a non-violent code of conduct. Organizers were awaiting word from the Egyptian Government as to whether it would reject applicants submitted by the organizers. In some cases, people had been interviewed and rejected, possibly for having a history of anti-Semitism.

In response to a question about whether the organizers would bring supplies into Gaza, Ms. Benjamin said they were focusing on children and youth, and working with the United Nations to understand what goods were needed most. The organizers would bring medicine, school supplies and winter jackets, all for children. They were collecting tens of thousands of dollars worth of material aid.

Responding to a question about the complex situation at the borders and communications with the various Governments involved, she said the organizers had asked all delegates to contact their elected officials, as well as the Egyptian and Israeli embassies. Meetings had been held with the Egyptian Embassy. Through various channels, the organizers had sent messages to the Government of Israel explaining the non-violent nature of the march and requesting its cooperation. Word had reached the highest levels of both Governments.

Asked about the European Union's response, she said Ms. Morgantini had contacted the European Union to discuss the march and she hoped the regional bloc would ease travel for participants.

Replying to a question about the wall that Egypt was building to block supplies, Ms. Benjamin said that, while Cairo had not consented to the march going through the crossing, "we are in constant contact with the Government". An advance team held daily meetings with the Foreign Ministry to work out details. In the past, CODEPINK had not received permission until participants had reached the border, she said, adding that, due to the large numbers of people involved in the upcoming event, organizers were working to obtain permission in advance.

In answer to a question about what the march hoped to change, Mr. Jabara said participants would return home as changed people who would build the movement in their respective countries. Hopefully media coverage would help people understand what had happened in Gaza. "We want Palestinians to know that they are not standing alone," he stressed.

Asked the extent to which such efforts were the result of disappointment over the failure of the Goldstone Report to achieve justice, Mr. Ratner said many people had been appalled by Israel's land, sea and air assault. "We watched it unfold while the world did nothing." The events had brought home just how out of touch Israel was with international law and the requirements of the Palestinian people.

He went on to say that upon reading the Goldstone Report, he had been shocked by the level of the assault and the deliberate targeting of civilians. The events in Gaza had been terrible, not just for Palestinians but for anyone who believed that the Geneva Conventions had meaning.

Justice Goldstone was an impeccable source, he continued, describing the judge as possibly the world's most respected international jurist. His report had placed Israel's blockade of Gaza in the context of the overall assault, arguing that it must be seen as a form of continued collective punishment.

Ms. Benjamin added that, as a Jewish American, she had been horrified at the United States Government's lack of response and the rejection of the Goldstone Report by Susan Rice, its Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

Asked why the United States was such a strong supporter of Israel, Mr. Jabara pointed to the effectiveness of the Israeli lobby and the strategic relationship between the two countries in terms of arms development.

Ms. Benjamin added that there was not enough pressure on the other side to achieve a balanced policy.

As for whether the United Nations had done enough on the issue, she said the Organization never did enough when there was conflict. The Secretary-General had put out some good statements and it was a positive sign that the General Assembly had taken up the issue. However, the Goldstone Report must go to the Security Council, an effort so far blocked by the United States.

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