

Committee to End the Illegal Siege of Gaza -- Notes of July 13, 2009 meeting in New York City

About 65 people attended. These notes reflect questions raised, discussion, and some responses from the organizers of the meeting.

Next meeting will be Tuesday, August 4, 7 pm at Brecht Forum

Finkelstein and Benjamin – Found enthusiasm in Gaza for a demonstration at the Erez border. Demonstration planned for last week of 2009. Idea would be international forces coming into Gaza through Egypt would join people in Gaza in Mile-Long March to the Erez border crossing, drawing inspiration from Gandhi, civil rights movement, tradition of Palestinian non-violent resistance. Also would want to coordinate with Israeli peace demonstrators to have them meet us on the Israeli side. Idea would be to have enough people to breach the buffer zone and walk to the border itself.

When CodePink did its demonstration at Erez from the Israel side in June, people in Gaza said they wanted to do a demonstration in tandem. In 24 hours, they organized hundreds of people in Gaza who came as close as possible to the Erez crossing in solidarity with the demonstration inside Israel. It helped create a vision of what a massive demo could accomplish.

Another Viva Palestina convoy is planned for December 27. This will be a joint US-UK convoy scheduled to enter Gaza on January 1. We will work in conjunction with this effort and George Galloway has endorsed the our Mile Long March.

Several questions were asked:

How are we going to get the Egyptians to let us in? This is a matter of political pressure, contacts with the Egyptian Embassy, Congressional support. And size--it seems that the larger the group, the better. We have to work hard to get Congressional support, and leave no stone unturned.

What is the position of Hamas government? They are aware of the plan, want to see how it develops. The plan is to work with the civil society groups in Gaza, but we will need permission from the government.

How do we counter a vicious reaction from Israel to people of Gaza post-demonstration? People could stay behind in support. Important that people who are not going to Gaza are mobilized to do work on the outside.

What about working with Egyptian activists? This would practically guarantee that we would not get into Gaza. This is a hot button for the Egyptian government. Better to keep a narrow focus of getting into Gaza and protesting the siege.

Which civil society groups in Gaza are involved? Coalition of civil society groups – PNGO -- that coordinates activity of non-governmental organizations. Working with the ships of Free Gaza, Galloway, etc. Will be reporting to them tomorrow about this meeting.

Any thought of going to Erez from the Israeli side? Thought is to get people from the Israeli peace movement to support the demonstration from the Israeli side. They could bring goods to be brought in to Gaza. Could try to get Congressmen or members of Parliament to come in at the same time—but from the Israel side.

Contacts with Israeli Palestinian groups? Yes, we will reach out to them.

We need to learn from the historical experience: About six months after the siege began, a demonstration of school children – 7-10 years old – went to Erez. 7 children were shot. Need to have people of importance at the head of the march and have the media present to prevent Israel from responding with violence.

Some people who have already signed the draft statement include – Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Alice Walker, John Duggard, Avi Schlaim, one of Gandhi's grandchildren, John Berger, Mustafa Barghouti, Diana Buttu, etc. Would like to try to sign up Nelson Mandela, Jimmy Carter, Bishop Tutu – at least as honorary grand marshals.

As to the specific tactics, people in Gaza have more experience. We have the willingness to be there, to march against the illegal siege, to be nonviolent. Gazans have the ability to decide the specific tactics.

Issues raised:

The draft statement that called for this meeting does not reflect the Gazan efforts to end the siege or current Palestinian resistance. [We will add that to an introductory paragraph to the Call.]

PNGO (the umbrella group for a number of Palestinian NGOs) would like more coordination because logistical issues need to be worked out. [We will create a liaison committee to work with groups inside Gaza right away.]

Egypt has stepped up its enforcement of stringent measures at the borders over the last week or so, and some say Rafah is more important to the daily life of Palestinians. Perhaps we should also protest at the Rafah border.

Worries that if Israel conceded to allow our demonstration to cross the border, it would simply lead to the re-establishment of the Paris agreement where Israel controlled every person and thing that got in to Gaza.

People of Gaza are not interested in just more delegations. They want action. We have to make this action large, with some well-known figures, and get lots of media attention.

Idea is to make this a short trip – possibly three days in Gaza. Try to avoid overwhelming Palestinians and make it more affordable. Some people can stay on longer.

We should propose a committee to coordinate with people in Gaza to come back to us with proposals which we can debate here. Also CODEPINK is sending another delegation in September which will permit further discussion.

To what extent does this work dovetail with other work – like BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions), etc.? The outreach committee to social justice groups should find ways to be supportive of these efforts.

Organizational structure

How will decision-making happen? We will set up a decision-making committee that will include people/groups who commit to doing significant work on this. Right now we have about 10 people

from the US and Europe who have worked on the statement, vision, etc. This needs to be broadened, e.g. to Canadians, who have made a significant commitment. Open to adding people to the group within reason.

We will create committees with specific tasks:

Outreach

- student: we want to do a lot of outreach to universities
- Palestine solidarity groups and peace and justice committees
- interfaith community
- celebrities
- elected officials,
- international community.

Committee to work with people in Gaza.

Logistics both inside and outside Gaza.

Budgeting and fundraising group.

Publicity and media group. Also getting journalists to come on the trip

Electronic outreach and support.

Need group to work on getting political support

Volunteers signed up for committees. Each volunteer will be emailed the names of the others they are working with to get the process started.