

Activists say Israeli pressure delayed Freedom Flotilla's departure for Gaza



Ankara, April 27 (RHC)-- A flotilla of ships set to depart for the Gaza Strip on Friday to bring aid to Palestinians has been stranded in Turkey due to administrative roadblocks, as organisers say Israel has been exerting political pressure to impede the voyage.

The Freedom Flotilla Coalition said Israel was pressuring the Republic of Guinea Bissau to withdraw its flag from its lead ship, the Akdeniz, which triggered a request for an additional inspection by the flag state.

Ann Wright, a retired U.S. Army colonel and State Department official and one of the organizers of the Flotilla, said the ship had passed all inspections in Turkey and was ready to set sail. The further checks demanded by Guinea Bissau were “a political play on the part of Israel” to stall the departure of the three-ship convoy carrying 5,000 tonnes of aid and more than 500 participants from 40 countries on board.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has twice ordered unhindered access for aid to Gaza as part of provisional measures to prevent the crime of genocide – of which Israel stands accused in a case brought by South Africa.

Yet, an Israeli blockade limits the entrance of UN-coordinated food convoys to the war-torn enclave as famine looms.

Should Guinea Bissau deny permission, Wright said Israel and its ally, the United States, would attempt to pressure whichever country they would attempt to register the ship under. While the humanitarian importance of the Flotilla cannot be overstated, organisers say its main aim is to “break the siege” of Gaza by defying a blockade set in place in 2007 and tightened since Hamas’ October 7 attack.

The mission comes with a great deal of personal risk for the participants – activists, veterans, media representatives and people from all walks of life who volunteered to join the grassroots initiative.

Palestinian-American activist and international lawyer Huwaida Arraf has left her nine-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son behind to board the Freedom Flotilla, headed for the Gaza Strip on a mission to bring aid to Palestinians and break through an Israeli blockade on humanitarian access to the war-torn enclave.

In May 2010, the six-vessel Freedom Flotilla I was intercepted by the Israeli navy, with Israeli commandos who boarded the Turkish lead ship the Mavi Marmara, opening fire and killing nine activists.

But the volunteers on board today are determined nonetheless. “My husband told me the other day that my daughter asked him: ‘What happens if Mama dies? Would it be ok if this was going to help people?’” Arraf says.

“It’s sad that she has to think about that, but that’s the world we live in and that’s definitely not the world I want to pass on to them.”

Arraf, who was on previous flotillas to Gaza and co-founded the non-violent International Solidarity Movement (ISM), says that the Flotilla’s primary aim is to “challenge the political realities that leave Palestinians in need of aid” by breaking through the blockade that started in 2007 and has tightened since October 7th.

She argues that breaking an illegal blockade cannot be unlawful. “We won’t be getting close to Israel’s territorial waters, therefore they don’t have a right to intercept us [or harm us],” the lawyer says.

“We’re trying to get all eyes on the Flotilla to make sure the world knows and Israel knows we’re coming so that they can’t fire a missile on us and say it was unintentional.”

Israel has said the naval blockade is necessary to prevent weapons from reaching Hamas and other fighters in Gaza. It is currently pounding the Strip in a relentless war in retaliation for a Hamas-led attack on southern Israel on October 7th.

Only weeks ago, seven World Central Kitchen aid workers were killed in Israeli attacks, in one of the starkest examples of the dangers of delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza. The Israeli military said the several attacks that killed the WCK staff on April 1 had been a “mistake.”

Since October 2023, more than 200 humanitarian workers have been killed in Gaza, making it the most dangerous place in the world to be an aid worker.

Another mother on board is Wynd Kaufmyn, a retired Jewish-American university lecturer in engineering who is taking the mission “very seriously” but expects to “come back in one piece.” Her daughter, Kaufmyn tells Al Jazeera, lost her father four years ago and she did not want her to be bereaved again.

“But I think of the people in Gaza who lost all their families. They’re hungry, they’re suffering and I’m doing what I consider the best to help stop this genocide,” the 66-year-old says.

“We know that there is the possibility that [the Israeli military] will board us and take control of the ship to deport us, and we don’t expect them to treat us gently in the process,” she continues. “It’s a little scary, but I know this is where I need to be.”

Participants were required to undertake non-violent training before departure to equip them to respond peacefully to any scenario.

Kaufmyn’s pro-Palestinian activism has already come at great personal cost. She was brought up in Detroit, Michigan’s Jewish community where support for Israel is staunch. In 2002, following the second Intifada, Kaufmyn decided to stop skirting the subject of Palestine and travelled to the region. “I saw with my own eyes what was going on there and I could not turn away,” she says.

She embarked on the path of activism that turned her into a “proud anti-Zionist Jew”, but her choice opened a rift with her now-deceased parents and her favourite uncle, as well as her two sisters. “I called my twin sister two nights ago because I was going on this journey,” Kaufmyn says, referring to her decision to join the Freedom Flotilla.

“She said she doesn’t understand why I want to annihilate Israel.” Her sister’s rebuke was painful, a stark reminder of the polarising narrative around the war in Gaza that is dividing the US.

“I’m going to try and stop a genocide and bring food to starving people, it has nothing to do with annihilating anyone,” Kaufmyn argues. “I come from a Jewish background and when we say: ‘Never again,’ it’s ‘Never again’ for anybody.”

Diplomatic efforts on the part of Western governments to prevent the flotilla’s departure, originally scheduled for mid-April, have included attempts to pressure Turkey into denying permission to leave port, organizers say.

The U.S. Department of State coordinator for counterterrorism, Ambassador Elizabeth Richard, was in Ankara this week. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier also travelled to the Turkish capital on a three-day visit.

Wright, who resigned from her State Department position in opposition to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, tells Al Jazeera that the governments of the U.S., UK and Germany had pressured Turkey to block the departure.

“These governments for some reason think they have to protect Israel,” she says. “There’s long-term guilt from 75 years ago and, for the U.S., there’s an ongoing campaign by Zionists and other supporters of the State of Israel” to maintain US government support.

During a meeting with Steinmeier on Wednesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeated his accusation that the West is turning a blind eye to the suffering of civilians in Gaza. “We do not intend to harm any Israeli, we just intend to highlight the fact that Israel is still committing genocide and that the U.S. is cooperating,” Wright says.

<https://www.radiohc.cu/en/noticias/internacionales/353281-activists-say-israeli-pressure-delayed-freedom-flotillas-departure-for-gaza>



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