

Gaza Freedom March Issues a Call to the World

One year ago, Israel's Operation Cast Lead massacre of Gaza resulted in the deaths of 1,400 Palestinians (13 Israelis died, some by "friendly fire"). The massacre was followed by a blockade that, today, is literally starving the people of Gaza. Over the holiday week, over 1,300 people from around the world went to Cairo, Egypt, which was to be the start of the journey to Gaza for the Gaza Freedom March (GFM). The Call for the March stated: "The conscience of humankind is shocked. Yet, the siege of Gaza continues. It is time for us to take action! On December 31, we will end the year by marching alongside the Palestinian people of Gaza in a non-violent demonstration that breaches the illegal blockade. Our purpose in this March is lifting the siege on Gaza. We demand that Israel end the blockade. We also call upon Egypt to open Gaza's Rafah border. Palestinians must have freedom to travel for study, work, and much-needed medical treatment and to receive visitors from abroad."

Egypt blocked the Gaza Freedom March from getting near the Gaza border. Buses and taxis were stopped; the drivers and bus companies were threatened by Egyptian security forces. Several dozen individuals who eluded security checkpoints and made it to the resort town of Al Arish, near the border with Gaza, were placed under virtual house arrest. In Cairo, marchers were prohibited from congregating in groups of more than six, and harassed, followed, and detained constantly when they protested. In the face of very repressive and challenging conditions, all kinds of creative ways to meet, get organized, protest and reach out to Egyptians emerged. Three hundred people camped out for several days in front of the French Embassy. Palestinian flags were flown from high up on Egypt's famous pyramids. A delegation from the U.S. went to the U.S. embassy, where over 40 people were detained by Egyptian authorities at the direction of U.S. embassy personnel. There were protests at the Israeli consulate. Egyptian people—who are routinely subject to disappearance and torture for any kind of public protest—staged inspiring protests against the blockade of Gaza, and Egypt's planned wall to seal tunnels that provide the only commercial connection between Gaza and the world. For days, the Gaza Freedom March was the main news story in Egypt and made front pages of newspapers across the Middle East.

After days of protest, Egypt offered to allow 100 of the marchers entry into Gaza to deliver humanitarian aid, while denouncing the bulk of the marchers as "hooligans," and vowing to leave them "in the streets." In the course of passionate discussion and great debates within the delegations of different countries, this offer was overwhelmingly rejected by GFM participants, who reaffirmed and strengthened their collective commitment to go to Gaza to march enmasse, to break the blockade.

On December 31, the scheduled Gaza Freedom March took place, though not in Gaza as planned. From what appeared to be a bunch of tourists with suitcases (full of protest signs), a march emerged in the middle of one of Cairo's busiest thoroughfares. The security forces were taken by surprise, and began madly punching, kicking, pushing, and shoving the protesters to get them out of the street. Encircled by police in the middle of downtown Cairo for seven hours, the march became a living call to the people of Egypt and the world: Break the Blockade of Gaza! Free Palestine!

The challenges faced by the Palestinian people are complex and daunting. Israel is a powerful, U.S.-sponsored attack dog in a region that is a focal point in the clash between imperialism and all of its horrors, and Islamic fundamentalism, which does not offer a path to any kind of liberation. But the inspiring example and impact of the GFM gives a glimpse of the potential to mobilize the people of the world to stand with the people of Palestine in their struggle for liberation.

Revolution correspondent Alan Goodman was part of the Gaza Freedom March. He kept a blog at alanxgoodman.blogspot.com. In coming issues of *Revolution*, he will tell the stories of the people and the impact of the Gaza Freedom March—the motivation and experiences of people who made great sacrifices and took great risks to leave their homes and families to march for freedom for Gaza. He'll share experiences with Egyptian activists, and conversations with people in the streets. And his articles will paint a picture of life in Gaza and the West Bank through interviews with activists who have been there recently. □



Palestinian girl visits her home, November 2009, destroyed by Israeli air strikes in January 2009.



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Background photo: Wreckage of the American International School in Gaza City, destroyed by Israel. Photo: Linda Todd, used with permission