

Attack on the Gaza Flotilla: An Eyewitness Account

IARA LEE*

ABSTRACT

Palestinians in Gaza have suffered under an illegal siege—first imposed by Israel in 2005 and strictly enforced since early 2009—which Amnesty International has called “a flagrant violation of international law.” Hundreds of civilians, the representatives from dozens of countries, attempted to deliver much-needed material to the Gazan people by the Gaza flotilla. The passengers on board—including elected officials, diplomats, media professionals, and other human rights workers—joined the flotilla as an act of civil disobedience and because they believe there is no decent justification for preventing shipments of humanitarian aid from reaching people in crisis. Israeli military launched a nighttime assault with heavily armed soldiers who shot and killed nine civilians and seriously injured dozens more. What happened to the flotilla is happening to the people of Gaza on a daily basis. It will not stop until international law is applied to all countries, Israel included.

In the pre-dawn hours of May 31, I was aboard the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara*, part of a convoy of humanitarian vessels aiming to deliver aid to the besieged civilians in Gaza, when we were attacked in international waters by a unit of Israeli commandos. Our ship had been inspected by customs agents in Turkey, a NATO member, who confirmed that there were no guns or any such weapons aboard. Indeed, the Israeli government has produced no such arms. What was aboard the ship were hundreds of civilian passengers, representatives from dozens of countries, who had planned to deliver the flotilla’s much-needed material to the Gazan people.

I am a dual US-Brazilian citizen of Korean descent. I am a filmmaker and a human rights activist. The passengers on our ship—including elected officials, diplomats, media professionals, and other human rights workers—joined the flotilla as an act of civil disobedience and

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Gazans had been violently harassed by Israeli forces. On December 30, 2008, the vessel *Dignity* was carrying volunteer surgeons and three tons of medical supplies when it was attacked without warning by an Israeli naval ship, which rammed the boat three times in international waters roughly 90 miles from Gaza’s coast. Passengers and crew feared for their lives as their boat quickly took on water and Israeli troops threatened to open fire.

I joined the flotilla effort nonetheless because I believed resolutely that non-violent actions which call attention to the blockade are vital in educating the public about what is taking place. These Palestinians have suffered under an illegal siege—first imposed by Israel in 2005 and strictly enforced since early 2009—which Amnesty International has called “a flagrant violation of international law.” I had been to Gaza a few months before, saw firsthand the devastation there and heard the pleas of ordinary people to have the blockade lifted.

When the zodiacs came and surrounded us, and the helicopters began sending commandos down, it was chaos. The women were told to go downstairs and to stay quiet and calm. I feared for the lives of my fellow passengers as I kept hearing shots being fired on deck. In particular, I was very concerned about my cameraman and friends, and so I went up to see what was happening. By the time I went up, I already saw that many people had been injured and that there were many dead bodies. I had expected soldiers to shoot in the air or aim at people’s legs, but instead I saw the bodies of people who appeared to have been shot multiple times in the head or chest.

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Only because organizers came prepared with a back-up satellite link were international viewers able to see even limited footage from the passengers’ perspective. But this transmission was also jammed



Photo: A.A. Murat Paksoy

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soon after, precluding broadcast of eyewitness testimony about how the commandos opened fire on civilians.

When it was over, the Israeli soldiers commandeered our ships, illegally kidnapped us from international waters, towed us to the port of Ashdod, and arrested all of us on board. The Israeli military proceeded to “confiscate” any cameras, phones, and hard drives that contained footage of the raid. All individuals aboard the flotilla, including journalists, were thrown in jail, kept in isolation as the IDF trumpeted its version of the attack non-stop. Once in the port, they started interrogating us. They kept saying, “You’re going to be deported because you are illegally in Israel.” We said, “We didn’t want to be here in Israel. We wanted to go to Gaza. You kidnapped us and brought us here.” Only days later were we evacuated to Istanbul through Turkish Airline planes sent by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan.

I expected our ships to be deterred from delivering aid to Gaza, but I did not expect murder. Israel’s powerful navy could have easily approached our boat and boarded it in broad daylight or pursued nonviolent options for disabling our vessel. Instead, the Israeli military launched a nighttime assault with heavily armed soldiers. Under attack, some passengers using broomsticks and other items at

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hand skirmished with the boarding soldiers. The commandos and navy soldiers shot and killed nine civilians and seriously injured dozens more.

As surprised as I was by the brutality of the Israeli assault, I have been perhaps even more astonished by the aggressively dishonest media campaign waged by the Israeli government after the assault. As a documentary filmmaker I am attuned to how words and images can be shaped into a narrative to convey the central truth of an event. However, watching the IDF spokespeople spread innuendo about our flotilla and create confusion about the siege of Gaza itself was a lesson for me in how media can be used in the service of disinformation.

Early on, IDF spokespeople made the inflammatory assertion that passengers had been armed with guns and opened fire on the commandos. While these falsehoods disappeared from subsequent IDF statements, the damage was done; furthermore, the statements were never properly disavowed or retracted. The impact of such accusations were compounded by the sensationalistic claim that activists tried to “lynch” boarding soldiers and by the suggestion of police sources close to the IDF that military personnel had responded with an “unbelievable demonstration of restraint.”

The notion of “restraint” was starkly called into question by later autopsies showing that nine passengers who were killed had received 30 bullet wounds between them—one, a US citizen Furkan Dogan, was found to have four bullets in his head alone. Yet the Israeli government’s refusal to release the bodies in the crucial early days, and its move to detain journalists who had witnessed the wanton violence, allowed their narrative to circulate unchecked in the press.

Despite the fact that most of my footage was stolen, my crew was able to retain much of the footage of how passengers responded to the Israeli raid. When I arranged for a screening at the UN of the raw footage showing the scene leading up to the attack and the demeanor of passengers on board the ship, Israeli officials protested and harassed the United Nations Correspondents Association organiz-

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ers and claimed that they were not permitted to show their version of the event together with ours. In fact, I had agreed that their version could be shown, and it was the Israelis themselves, most likely

out of shame of their doctored material, who decided to cancel their showing at the last minute.

Under these circumstances there is a clear need for a full impartial international inquiry into the attack on our flotilla. On Sunday, June 6, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon proposed such an inquiry. But that same day the Israeli ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, rejected the proposition, saying instead that “Israel has the right, the duty, as a democracy” to hold its own investigation. On June 13, the Israeli government announced that it is forming an internal committee to conduct a probe; it includes only token international representation with two committee members that have no voting rights. While the White House has blessed this formulation, it hardly meets the demand from the rest of the world for a complete, unbiased and truly independent investigation.

Nine of my fellow passengers were killed by the Israeli military for attempting to defy the ban on delivering aid. Far more Palestinian civilians have died as a result of the siege itself. What happened to our flotilla is happening to the people of Gaza on a daily basis. It will not stop until international law is applied to all countries, Israel included.

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