

Physicians for Human Rights-Israel 16.1.09

Report on the Protest, Solidarity and Aid Convoy to the Residents of Gaza

- **Half of the participants were turned back by large police forces before reaching the southern region of Israel. The other half were stopped in a separate location.**
- **Improvised protests were held by participants in Tel Aviv and in Yad Mordechai near Gaza**
- **Two supplies trucks entered Gaza**

This morning, over 300 members and supporters of Physicians for Human Rights-Israel (PHR-Israel), Jews and Arabs, set out to accompany an emergency dispatch of medical supplies to the Gaza Strip, as a sign of solidarity and protest at the current military attack staged by the Israeli government in the Gaza Strip.

PHR-Israel believes that not only for Palestinian civilians but also for Israeli civilians, and especially those living under the threat of rocket attacks in the south of Israel, the only path to safety and protection is an immediate ceasefire and a political solution to end the occupation and the violence.

Since the beginning of the current military invasion, PHR-Israel has sent four dispatches of much-needed aid to the hospitals of the Gaza Strip, purchased from the donations of hundreds of individuals and organizations, both locally and worldwide, from Moslems, Jews and Christians.

For the fifth dispatch, in the shadow of ever-escalating violence, **PHR-Israel decided to speak out against the extreme and disproportionate force exerted by the Israeli government against the population of Gaza, against the targeting of civilians, medical personnel and medical facilities, and against the prevention of access of the sick and wounded to timely and appropriate medical care.**

PHR-Israel called on its supporters to accompany the fifth dispatch of emergency medical supplies to the transfer at Kerem Shalom Crossing, and to hold a demonstration there calling upon the government of Israel to cease fire, to stop the killing of civilians, to stop the targeting of medical teams and aid convoys, and to stop preventing the evacuation of the wounded.

Unprecedented numbers of people responded to our calls and decided to join our convoy despite the necessity of drawing near the areas of hostilities in the south of Israel and Gaza.

Three full buses left Tel Aviv, and additional buses left Jerusalem, Taybeh, and Beersheba. In addition, dozens of residents of the villages of the south of Israel – those very areas under rocket attacks – expressed their support for our message and came to the event in their cars. The very fact of this participation has shown us that although the voice of dissent is silenced in Israel – it does exist, and many feel the pain we do at the immoral acts of our government.

Unfortunately, the Israeli authorities decided to prevent our convoy at any cost. At 10am the Chief of Police of Sderot in the south of Israel telephoned the organizers, telling them that there was a military order against any demonstration in that area. We explained that we had no intention of disturbing the peace, or of congregating in a way dangerous to the participants or others – but only to reach Kerem Shalom crossing area in order to accompany the medical supplies before the transfer, and to hold a quiet protest rally there. The police commander told us that this was not authorized and said the police and army were "preparing to meet us".

Before we could reach the area of the Gaza border, some 20 kilometers to the north of Erez Crossing, at Askelon Junction, large police forces stopped the first three buses from Tel Aviv, took the drivers off the buses, locked the bus doors, confiscated the driving licenses and identifying papers of all three drivers, and ordered them to turn around. After they did so, one or two police escorts were sent to accompany each bus, and the drivers' papers were not returned to them until they had reached Tel Aviv. About 10 people managed to get out of the buses before they were turned back. A fourth bus from Jerusalem was stopped and returned in the same way a little later. Any attempt by the participants to parley with the police was met by shouts and threats of violence.

Only the buses from Taybeh and from the South of Israel succeeded in getting further south, to the Yad Mordechai Junction (just north of the Gaza Strip), where police met them yet again and confiscated the drivers' papers, but allowed them to remain in the parking lot at the junction. Several private cars from the southern area of Israel arrived at Ashkelon junction, and drove the 10 Tel Aviv demonstrators down to Yad Mordechai.

The group, now split into two, decided to hold two improvised demonstrations simultaneously – one outside the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv and the other at Yad Mordechai Junction.

At the Ministry of Defence, the 200 Tel Aviv and Jerusalem participants held a protest rally, and were joined by some passers-by.

At Yad Mordechai, the police and armed border guards made clear that the two buses, including participants more than half of whom were from the south of Israel, would be prevented from continuing southwards to meet the supplies truck. The participants – over 100 people – held an improvised demonstration there, calling for a ceasefire, and against the use of brute force against civilians in the Gaza Strip. Several Israeli passers-by shouted slogans against the demonstrators.

The police informed the demonstrators that they were holding an illegal congregation and threatened to use force if they did not disperse. After about an hour, the demonstrators left, and were "escorted" by police vehicles all the way back to Tel Aviv and Beersheba.

As regards the **supplies convoy**, about an hour after the demonstrations had begun, two trucks, bearing ICU beds, ICU equipment and supplies, medical equipment for operating

rooms, and consumables, were allowed to unload at Kerem Shalom Crossing and all the supplies, to a value of about 500,000 US dollars, were sent to Gaza hospitals.

The Israeli government, in preventing a quiet and well-organised civil action and the free expression of civilians, has taken a step further away from democratic principles. As chanted by the demonstrators today – the transfer of humanitarian supplies alone cannot atone for the crimes committed against the civilians of the Gaza Strip.

Despite the sorrow and disappointment felt by all participants at the prevention of the action, PHR-Israel believes that the very fact that so many people, many of whom usually do not attend demonstrations, were willing to take part is encouraging.

The simple act of sitting together in the bus with a common message in mind has also strengthened those people in Israel, who feel alone in their positions of criticism towards government policies.

Today has shown that there are people here who still support peace and justice – even if their power to make political change is small.

We thank all those who supported us in words, in deeds and in financial aid, locally and worldwide. We call once again for an immediate ceasefire and for a political solution that will end the occupation and the violence.

Physicians for Human Rights-Israel

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