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'Peace Team' faces minor setbacks in trip to Gaza

Scott Schaeffer-Duffy | May. 10, 2009

Rafah, Egypt border crossing

Editor's note: The following is a first person account of a trip by a Catholic Worker "Peace Team" to the Gaza Strip where it hopes to distribute toys, letters and medical supplies.

Scott Schaeffer-Duffy

We prepared last night to get an early start this morning. Our Catholic Worker Peace team ? Scott Schaeffer-Duffy, Brenna Cussen, Mark Coleville, Colin Gilbert, Beth Brockman, and Jenny Thomas ? had a common goal of proceeding to the Rafah border, crossing into Gaza, traveling to the Rachel Corrie Center to give out toys and letters brought with us from American children, and delivering six large suitcases of medical supplies to the al Shifa Hospital in Gaza City.

Before we slept, we met with our Egyptian contact, who had arranged drivers and logistics for us, and who told us of the difficulties we may encounter in our attempt to cross the border.

Our driver and translator arrived promptly at 7 AM to load the supplies into the van and take us to the American Embassy to get our necessary paperwork. We arrived at the Embassy before its scheduled opening at 8 AM and were first in line. At the Embassy, after temporarily relinquishing our passports, the sub-Consul had each member of the team sign an affidavit stating that we understood that the U.S. Embassy ?does not recommend?travel to the Gaza Strip,? and that the Embassy ?cannot provide?consular services in the Gaza Strip.?

After purchasing water, bread, cheese, and dates for sustenance on our journey, we headed north toward Arish, crossed the Nile, and took the Mediterranean route toward Rafah. Together, we rehearsed the hurdles we would encounter: three checkpoints, at any of which we could be denied passage. At the first checkpoint, we passed freely, barely slowing the van to be waved on.

The landscape grew less urban; we saw groves of date trees, then smaller dwellings more sparsely situated on the desert plains. There, the dwellings appeared less frequently, and the ones we did see were also more simply built; made of brick and stone, and occasionally from a type of thatch. Many houses were unfinished, some with

partial walls, and some with room for another storey to be built.

The poverty of the occupants this far north was obvious to several team members. Colin Gilbert, a twenty-three year-old religion teacher who has traveled extensively throughout Latin America, commented, ?It made me wonder what it would be like to see life through the eyes of these people in their poverty.? Still, the landscape was full of lush plantings in small gardens and drip-irrigation hoses lined and transversed the garden paths. The arid desert was broken with green plots and rows of trees separating properties, evidence of hard and determined efforts to make the ?desert blossom as a rose.?

The second checkpoint, as anticipated, was a taller hurdle. Egyptian security stopped our van at the side of the road and asked us where we intended to travel after leaving Arish. Not wanting to arouse suspicion by saying ?Gaza,? one of our group told them we were eventually heading to Israel. This response, unfortunately, seemed to raise a red flag.

As our group was detained, Scott appealed to the guards at the checkpoint, explained our mission, and showed our letters of invitation from inside Gaza. The guards expressed support for our effort, and offered their services.

After about forty minutes of phone calls, told us they would give us a police escort all the way to the border crossing at Rafah. Unfortunately, by the time our van and escort arrived in Arish, the police informed us that the border crossing was closed for the day. They facilitated a driver to take the team to the Rafah Crossing by 6 AM Monday morning.

The Peace Team spent the late afternoon walking to the nearby shores of the Mediterranean. We made our way around Arish, enjoying local food and meeting a variety of people. Colin and Jenny were invited to a family?s house for tea and supper. Each family member greeted them warmly and were eager for conversation. All of us returned to the hotel to compare stories, eat fresh fruit, and get an early start for what proves to be an exciting day as we head for Rafah and try to enter Gaza.

Each team member expressed some level of frustration for not having made it into Rafah tonight. ?It is completely unjust that it is so difficult for journalists and aid workers carrying medical and other supplies to travel in and out of Gaza, let alone the injustice of the absolute restriction on travel for Gazans themselves,? stated Brenna Cussen.

Still, all in the group expressed hope that we could cross tomorrow, and many remarked that the results of our trip are ultimately in God?s hands. As Beth Brockman commented, ?Being in the moment takes away apprehension.?

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