NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Gaza-bound activists intercepted, describe 'violent' abduction

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Nov. 8, 2011 NCR Today

Israeli commandos intercepted a two-boat flotilla in international waters Friday afternoon as the vessels attempted to challenge the blockade of the Gaza Strip [1].

Using warships and water canons, Israeli forces seized the Canadian-owned *Tahrir* and the Irish *MV Saoirse* approximately 45 miles from the Gazan coastline, then hauled the vessels' 27 passengers, including Irish parliamentarians, journalists and human rights activists, to Israel.

Seven were deported Saturday. Twenty remained imprisoned in Israel over the weekend, among them Americans Kit Kittredge, a peace activist from Quilcene, Wash., and Jihan Hafiz, a correspondent for the radio/TV news program *Democracy Now!*

Released Monday night, Hafiz arrived in New York early this morning and was interviewed on *Democracy Now!* [2]

In a one-minute phone call from Givon Prison on Sunday, Fintan Lane, an Irish historian and writer traveling on the *MV Saoirse* described the abduction of the Irish vessel as "violent and dangerous."

Lane said the takeover, which lasted three hours, began with Israeli forces hosing the boats with high-pressure hoses and pointing guns at the passengers through the windows. He said windows were smashed and the boat's bridge nearly caught fire. He said Israeli ships corralled the *Tahrir* and *MV Saoirse* to such an extent that the two boats collided with each other and were damaged.

"The boats nearly sank. The method used was dangerous to human life," Lane said.

According to Lane, Israeli forces initially wanted to abandon the two vessels, but the abductees demanded they not be left at sea.

Lawyers for the activists say several passengers aboard the *Tahrir* were beaten and roughed up when they refused to voluntarily disembark from their boat into Israel. Canadian David Heap says he was also stunned with a Taser. Additionally, the internationals report being shackled, having their property taken and initially being denied access to attorneys and their families upon their arrest.

All the Israeli commandos were "heavily armed," said Hafiz, speaking on *Democracy Now!* "They did not look like they were taking two much smaller boats, filled with unarmed people, with activists and civilians. They looked like they were taking on an army of a foreign country."

According to flotilla organizers, the internationals still detained in Israel are refusing to sign a statement saying they entered Israeli territory illegally and will not attempt another effort to break the blockade of Gaza. A signature also waives one's right to appear before a judge and forbids returning to the Palestinian territories via Israel for 10 years.

The U.S. consulate reportedly advised the Americans to sign the waiver, despite its untruth. Today, the activists anticipate being brought before an immigration judge, who will probably rubber stamp their deportation.

The *Tahrir* and the *MV Saoirse* left Turkey on Nov. 2, carrying a symbolic amount of humanitarian aid -- $30,000 in medical supplies -- and passengers eager to express solidarity with 1.8 million Gazans who have been under a crippling blockade for the past six years.

Israeli control of Gaza's borders, which dates back to 2002, was significantly tightened after Hamas' electoral victory in 2006. The tightening was in response to rocket attacks launched from the Palestinian territory into southern Israel.

But more than an arms embargo is in place here. The blockade restricts Gazans' ability to import food, fuel and essential materials; export their products; travel freely; farm their lands; fish their waters; build their own homes and factories; or receive friendly visitors who attempt to come to them via international waters.

As a result of these strictures, the Gazan economy, hardly robust to begin with, has collapsed. Most of the Strip's industrial plants have been forced to close, further contributing to the region's already high unemployment. Malnourishment among small children is high.

Typically mute on policy, the International Committee of the Red Cross has called the blockade a violation of international law because it is a form of "collective punishment."

Because political leaders refuse to act, lifting the blockade on Gaza has become the mission of civil society, writes Robert Naiman, director of just foreign policy, and Medea Benjamin, founder of Global Exchange and CODEPINK, in an op-ed published yesterday [3].

More than a year ago, President Barack Obama called the blockade unsustainable.

"It seems to us that there should be ways of focusing narrowly on arms shipments, rather than focusing in a blanket way on stopping everything and then, in a piecemeal way, allowing things into Gaza," he said. "That hasn't happened. Why not? Why shouldn't it happen now? What do blocking Palestinian exports from Gaza to Europe or keeping people from getting medical treatment abroad have to do with arms shipments?"

Shortly before seizing the *Tahrir*, the Israeli Navy asked the passengers for their destination.

"The conscience of humanity," replied Canadian activist Ehab Lotayef.

When the question was repeated, Lotayef, who is a poet, answered, "For the betterment of humankind."

Although Israeli forces stopped two small ships last week, more will come. They will keep coming and coming until the blockade is lifted.

For updates on those still detained, check the websites of the Tahrir [4] and the Saoirse [5]. Information can also be found here [6].

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-25 02:54*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/gaza-bound-activists-intercepted-describe-violent-abduction

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/activists-boats-challenge-israeli-blockade

[2] http://www.democracynow.org/
[3] http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011116103041396137.html
[4] http://www.tahrir.ca/
[5] http://irishshiptogaza.org/
[6] http://ustogaza.org/