

# Breaking the Siege

by Anne Montgomery, RSCJ



Photo: AFP Photos / Stefanos Kourazis / Newscom

International peace activists make preparations on the boat dubbed *SS Liberty* after docking with its partner *SS Free Gaza* at the southern Cypriot port of Larnaca on their way to the Gaza Strip on August 20, 2008.

In August I accepted an invitation to join forty-three other internationals in an effort to break the siege of Gaza by sailing two small boats into its harbor, closed for forty-one years. Most of us had served in Palestine as human rights activists; some had been deported or refused entry by land or air; a few were Israeli or Palestinian, one was previously blocked from reuniting with his family in Gaza.

Gaza represents the worst of what we had experienced under the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank: the demolition of homes and the destruction of orchards and ancient olive trees near settlements or close to the by-pass roads and the “separation” wall isolating Palestinian towns from one another and keeping farmers from their harvest. These problems are magnified and condensed in the overpopulated

isolation of Gaza, its points of entry rarely open for whatever reason: commerce, medical treatment, family reunification, or the necessary educational opportunities and communication with the outside world that would decrease the frustration and despair that can spark violence.

In that larger world, we need to go beyond the politicians and controlled media to hear the stories of the ordinary people, anxious for real security for their families and for solidarity in their struggles for rights and dignity that keep people human and will enable them to rebuild their own country. These stories encapsulate many I have heard, not only in Palestine, but in Iraq during the years of war, embargo, war again, and probably too, those of other “expendable” people throughout the world.

On our first day in Gaza, we joined women demonstrating for the release of relatives held in Israeli prisons. They firmly yet gently pulled me into their ranks to hold up pictures of sons and husbands for media attention. Later, on another street, farmers spoke out for their devastated fields, their produce often rotting at the borders.

Several of our group accompanied the fishing boats, regularly attacked by Israeli gunboats if they ventured more than a few miles from the polluted coast. On those days, the nets filled—a catch reminiscent of the gospel story. We walked through the ruins of a bombed electrical wire factory, meant to provide a living for other families. To work, to provide, to protect means more than just food and fuel; children need dignity and authority they can trust and respect in a chaotic world.

Most moving were the visits to hospitals. One specialized in victims of bullet wounds to head or spine. In another, children waited with papers for sophisticated treatments offered abroad, their only obstacle, the refusal of Israeli authorities to

approve. In the past two years, 240 Gazans have died for this reason, over sixty of them children, some at the checkpoints—since women under thirty-five are considered potential “terrorists.”

The stereotyping of an entire people was also evident in the destroyed homes of Beit Hanoun, a city on the northeast edge of the Gaza strip that was mercilessly bombed in retaliation for the rocket killing of an Israeli woman in a nearby settlement. The Palestinian patriarch of one family of nineteen broke down in his effort to express his loss.

All these images are framed by the checkpoints and walls, instruments of domination blocking over 1,000 people waiting at the Rafa border to Egypt as well as daily attempts to cross at Eretz to the north, the corridor to the West Bank.

In a closely packed young population, what will be the result? In a school where youngsters danced scenes of traditional village life, and in the waters where boys triumphantly swam to greet us, another way seemed possible. They will either be able to build a new Palestine true to its ancient culture, or take up arms, to be crushed into degrading submission once more.

Their stories reflect those of many victims of war and repression worldwide. But, as Palestinian lawyer and Israeli citizen Huwaida Araf noted: “We recognize that we’re two humble boats, but what we’ve accomplished is to show that average people around the world can mobilize to create great change. We do not have to stay silent in the face of injustice. In Gaza today, there is such a sense of hope, and hope is what mobilizes people everywhere.”

Gandhi is one model of the hope that energizes the force of truth and love, active non-violence. On Gandhi’s birthday and the Second International Day of Nonviolence, the President of the U.N. General Assembly, said: “From the



Photo: Flickr / FreeGaza.org

Anne Montgomery, RSCJ, bottom row, second from left with sixteen of the internationals aboard the *SS Liberty*.

groundbreaking work of Gandhi and King to the ongoing example of the Free Gaza Movement, we can discern the transforming power of nonviolence at a crossroads in our history. Having developed the means of our own extinction by war, we are called by Truth, at the very center of our being, to turn to a nonviolent way of transformation toward a just and peaceful future.”

I am grateful and humbled that, after others had done all the hard work of preparation, I was invited to sail to Gaza on the *Liberty* just because I could represent the Church in a very diverse group. The experience confirmed my conviction that simple presence, bringing with it the experience of prayer and community life, has much to offer in a time of transition—not only in world history, but also in that of religious life. ✚



*For three decades, Anne Montgomery, RSCJ, has made peace her life’s work. Today, as a member of Christian Peacemakers, she spends part of every year in Hebron and other hotspots in the Middle East.*