

## Why I stepped off the bus to Gaza today ...

Dear friends,

I'm writing with a heavy heart after a difficult morning for many of us in Cairo today. With few hours of sleep I along with many others arrived at 7am to 33 Ramses Street near the Egyptian Museum, intending to finally hop on buses to Gaza, designated for the 100-person subgroup from the Gaza Freedom March (GFM).

Some details on the last-minute Egyptian proposal brokered through President Mubarak's wife:  
[http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gKc9Qmw6xY4YDWIVeTl0ZN\\_kS0TA](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gKc9Qmw6xY4YDWIVeTl0ZN_kS0TA)

Upon arrival with a large group of people amassed there we all boarded two buses, but in the ensuing discussions together it became clear that many of us were deeply torn about the conditions under which we were being provided limited entry into Gaza by the Egyptian govt., for a 3-day trip leaving behind over 1300 GFM members, many still besieged at the French Embassy (camping there with riot police over the past 3 days).

Subsequent press releases by the Egyptian Foreign Ministry also cast their decision in very problematic terms for our ongoing work (saying that they chose only the peaceful humanitarian delegates for this trip). This was noted by many Palestinian groups and put the GFM organizers under a very difficult situation, making it more of a token gesture and highly divisive for all the groups working in solidarity over the past few months and the recent days of protests and hunger-strikes in Cairo.

While the discussions last night led us to feel it was an important opening by the Egyptian govt. through our concerted actions (though done under very tight timelines and conditions), many including myself now felt that going into Gaza as a limited "humanitarian group", with no change in the political situation for the Palestinians and a significant easing of the blockade, would be unproductive for our long-term goals as an effective force for political change.

We also heard from some Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, who felt we should not play into the hands of the Egyptian tactics but strive for continued pressure to end the blockade of Gaza, having all GFM delegates admitted to go there, and negotiate under better political terms.

So after much discussion and reflection, it was a painful and emotional decision to step off the bus finally as Egyptian riot police began surrounding both buses and all GFM members on the ground. Some people (roughly half) decided to stay on-board and proceed on to Gaza on their own accord, including Palestinians being reunited with their families and others seeking to deliver aid or take video footage while there.

In the heated chaos, I proposed to many GFM organizers and delegates a possible way to recast the trip on our terms as a "human rights and media advocacy" mission only, and having the humanitarian aid delivered separately by Red Crescent (undercutting the Egyptian tactics); however while many found that a good approach it was simply infeasible to gain consensus on a joint position quickly at that moment, with buses scheduled to leave within the hour.

By 9:45am GFM organizers released a statement (see below) indicating they would no longer support the deal, but left it upto the individuals to decide to go onto Gaza in the buses if they wished. All this was picked up in a great article by Al-Jazeera moments ago:  
<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/12/2009123061947605152.html>

I personally decided to come here in solidarity with the larger GFM group and to help establish a youth media program in Gaza with psychosocial assessment conducted with local partners like UNRWA and UNICEF over time. I realized this would simply not have been realistic in the current situation under which we were being asked to enter Gaza.

I'm back at my hotel in Cairo and plan to work here over the coming days to pressure my own Indian Embassy to advocate for my entry into Gaza next week; the Ambassador happens to be away in India so it's a long-shot, but feels like a more politically appropriate strategy for me to undertake.

I also hope we will continue our solidarity work with local Egyptians against their own govt.'s repressive policies and keep the larger GFM group unified in building on much we've already accomplished in the streets of Cairo.

Critical articles in the Egyptian press and in the New York Times testify to the effect of this work on local and mainstream media already:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/30/world/middleeast/30egypt.html>

Stay tuned and hope to see you all in the New Year.

<http://www.gazafreedommarch.org>

Feel free to forward this note to anyone interested.

Nitin Shawney