

To Gaza with Twitter
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On Dec 6, 2009, this writer and colleague Ram Karthigasu, represented the Perdana Global Peace Organisation (PGPO) in the 'Viva Palestina' humanitarian aid convoy to Gaza. The journey kicked-off from London and took about a month to complete. The convoy started with 76 vehicles and grew to 220 vehicles strong by the time it reached Gaza. All vehicles were donated to the people of Gaza, including tonnes of medical aid.

We drove across Europe to West Asia and entered Palestine through Egypt on the African continent. It was an overwhelming experience, both driving the long distance in winter and travelling with an international group of strangers united in their support for the Palestinian people. There was much to share with people back home, and we couldn't have done it without Twitter.

From London to Gaza we Tweeted about the vehicle we drove, the route we took, the people we met, the challenges we confronted and the help we needed. In Gaza, Twitter allowed us to report from ground zero and through the eyes of young Malaysians.

To its credit, one Malaysian media assigned journalists to follow our journey on Twitter and published daily reports based on our Tweets. Up until a TV crew joined us for the last leg of our journey in Damascus, Syria, this media remained the only Malaysian press that reported about our journey from the flag-off in London until we arrived back in Malaysia.

And if it weren't for statements issued by the prime minister's wife Rosmah Mansor about an independent Malaysian student on the convoy who got arrested in Egypt, the Malaysian media would probably have continued to ignore our journey and the Israeli siege on Gaza. In fact, the news reports focused on Rosmah's personal efforts in trying to help the student and not the more pressing issue that is Egypt's complicity in the Palestinian crisis. It is this kind of selective reporting that has contributed to the dumbing down of the Malaysian public.

Nevertheless, we feel privileged to have been able to provide live updates on Twitter while we were there — to those who were interested that is, which included CNN International and a host of other foreign media. Also, Wisma Putra as well as a number of pro-Palestine non- governmental organisations and activists from around the world.

In Egypt, Twitter enabled us to report blow-by-blow the treatment we received from the Egyptian authorities from the detention in Al-Arish and the violence that ensued there, to the quarantine and deportation from Cairo. Malaysians following our Tweets were outraged by what they read, for like us, they too were previously unaware of Egypt's position in the Palestinian crisis.

Through Twitter and various social media platforms, activists and concerned citizens from around the world including Malaysia organised themselves and held protests at their local Egyptian embassy in support of our mission. Such is the power of social media.

In Gaza, we used Twitter to send images of homes and government buildings destroyed by Israeli bombs. We also gave live reports when Israeli jets flew over Gaza City and bombed neighbourhoods nearby.

But what touched this writer most was to be able to connect Palestinians abroad with their homeland. 'Thank you for letting me see my country again' was one response received to an image posting of Gaza beach.

And then there were those whose family members were on the convoy but were not contactable by phone. Among them were the parents of the Malaysian student who was arrested in Egypt and worried spouses of convoy members based in England.

Alhamdulillah, we were all alright and have returned to our home countries safely. We successfully completed our mission to send aid to the people of Gaza and helped create some awareness of the crisis there. Sadly, Gaza still remains under siege today.

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