

DATE: 17/1/2010

I would love to go again

QUESTION: What was your routine there?

Ram's answer: We would wake up at about 7 or 8 am. drive for about 10 to 12 hours then stop at a meeting place — most of the time it was a car park or camping ground — to rest for the night. And the next day, we did it all again.

Q: How did you spend your time while waiting for the convoy to proceed at various checkpoints?

A: A good thing about being in a 500-member convoy is that you would find people with all kinds of personalities to pass the time. Well, it was that and sleep.

Q: What was your first impression of Gaza?

A: Driving through Gaza was like driving through any of the old towns in Malaysia, only incredibly clean. If you didn't know that it was under siege, you might think it is a small, happy town with a nice Mediterranean beach.

Q: Would you do it all again?

A: Oh, yeah. I would love to go to Gaza again but if there's another convoy, I'd like it to take a different route, maybe via Northern Africa.

Q: If you did do it all again, what would you do differently?

A: I'd bring a radio because the one in our ambulance didn't work so we ended up travelling 6,400km without any music and had to talk to each other the whole way to keep our spirits up.

Q: What was your main diet?

Perdana Global Peace Organisation members Juana Jaafar and Ram Karthigasu were among some 500 volunteers involved in the third Viva Palestina International Humanitarian Convoy to deliver supplies into war-torn Gaza over the festive season in December. They tell SUZIEANA UDA NAGU and NURJEHAN MOHAMED their experience

A: The locals in the Middle Eastern countries were very kind to us and fed us a lot. It was basically bread, salads, hummus and lamb. I know my hummus now and can differentiate them by colour!

Q: What did you miss most from Malaysia?

A: The comforts of home and the fact that you are in control of your schedule for the day as opposed to being in a convoy where you're not. And when we were in Gaza, the freedom of movement that we take for granted.

Q: What would you most want to forget from the trip?

A: The politics — a humanitarian convoy was subjected to so much of it. From the Egyptian authorities trying to hamper the mission to some people in the convoy; everybody had their own agenda in a way. I was approached by about 10 guys who couldn't fathom why I — not being white or Muslim — was in

the convoy and who tried to convert me to Islam.

Q: What would you most want to remember from the trip?

A: The 30-odd hours we had in Gaza and the interaction with the people on the street who stood in the cold waiting for the convoy at 4am so that they could give us food.

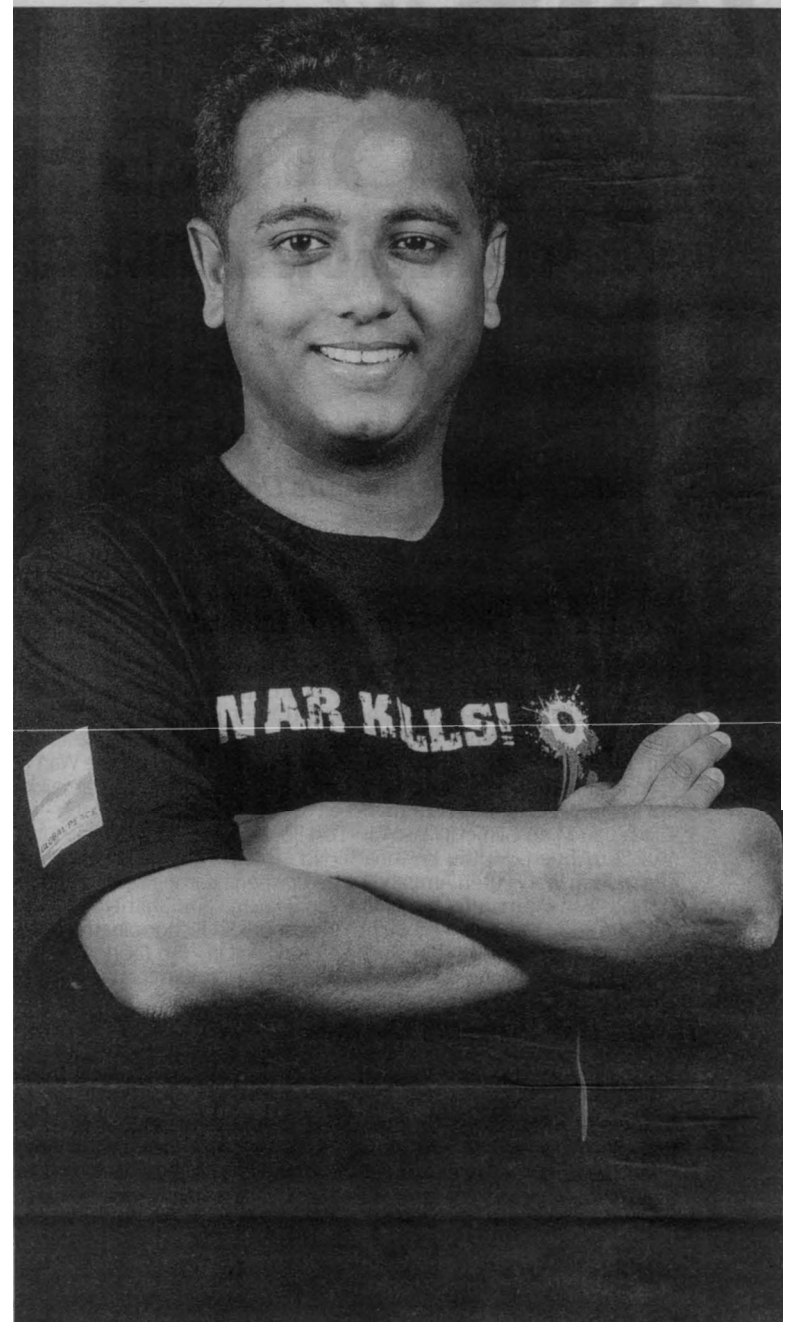
Q: What was the first thing you did when you arrived home?

A: Had a nice shower and a good meal of ikan keli curry that my mum made specially for me.

Q: How has your experience changed your outlook on life?

A: I have travelled quite a bit even before I joined the convoy because of my work! I always tell my friends here that, after seeing the troubles elsewhere, sometimes you just have to live and let live.

And after Gaza, it affirms what I believe to be true. It's just a matter of how you make do with what you have.



Reconsider the role of social media

QUESTION: What was your routine there?

Juana's answer: I wake up in the morning and get cleaned up. Then we gather in our designated groups for the morning briefing on our next destination. We drive there until nightfall, rest and repeat the process the next day.

Q: How did you spend your time while waiting for the convoy to proceed at various checkpoints?

A: We get on the Internet to contact our families and blog or tweet to create pressure on the Egyptian government to allow us through the border.

Q: What was your first impression of Gaza?

A: We arrived at 2am so we couldn't see much of the city. But our hearts soared when we saw the Welcome to Palestine sign. It was proof to us that this disputed territory — despite the Israeli government not recognising it — exists.

We were blown away when we woke up the next morning at our hotel and saw the magnificent blue sea from the window.

Q: If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?

A: My experience has made me reconsider the role of social media tools such as Twitter. I was surprised by the number of people — friends and strangers — who followed my tweets.

It was a tool that helped my family and those of other convoy members to know our exact location. I would make better use of these tools to create awareness of the cause.

Q: What was your main diet?

A: It was mostly whatever that we could find at petrol stations — such as sandwiches and pizza. In Turkey, we had good food and ate a lot because we never knew when or where our next meal was coming.

Q: What did you miss most from Malaysia?

A: My family.

Q: What would you most want to remember from the trip?

A: I want to remember everything because I learned so much from the being part of the convoy.

Q: What was the first thing you did when you arrived home?

A: I had a good laugh at my family's "cheesy" reception. They welcomed me home with balloons, specially printed T-shirts and banners which had colours from the Malaysian and Palestinian flags. When I got home, there were Malaysian and Palestinian flags at the gate!

Q: How has your experience changed your outlook on life?

A: It has reinforced my desire for Malaysians to look at the issue in Palestine as a violation of the rights of Palestinians — Muslims and non-Muslims. Making it a Muslim issue may isolate others from taking action and we can't afford that.

Malaysians should also be able to differentiate between the Jews and Zionist Jews.

I shared a room with a Jewish woman on the boat to Greece. She took a huge risk in raising her own funds to join the convoy as Zionist Jews consider those who are pro-Palestine as self-hating and treacherous. I see her as a hero.

