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**W**HILE many young Malaysians might have ushered in the New Year by watching fireworks and hitting the clubs, Perdana Global Peace Organisation (PGPO) members Juana Jaafar and Ram Karthigasu had an uneventful night in Latakia, Syria.

While PGPO exco member and assistant secretary Juana followed Bernama TV crew downtown to film how locals celebrate New Year's eve, PGPO manager Ram opted to stay at the motel.

The two long-time friends were among some 500 volunteers involved in the third Viva Palestina International Humanitarian Aid Convoy to war-torn Gaza over the festive season in December.

Ram and Juana were tasked to drive an ambulance into Gaza — along with some 86 other vehicles loaded with wheelchair parts, walkers, clothing, milk powders, books, toys and medicine, among other essentials — from London, the United Kingdom.

The rest of the convoy members joined them in Turkey and Damascus, Syria.

The mood all around was somber that night in Latakia, recalls Juana, 28, from Shah Alam.

"Some were homesick or just wanted to be in Gaza to deliver the supplies to needy civilians," says the PGPO exco member and assistant secretary in a text message home.

That morale was low among convoy members at the time was understandable.

The convoy had planned to enter Gaza on Dec 27 to mark the first anniversary of the tightening of the blockade of the territory last year.

However, it was stranded in Aqabah town as Egypt had refused to grant permission for the convoy to cross the border.

This was the biggest setback for the group, which had otherwise proceeded with minor glitches.

As planned, it had moved through Europe, crossing the Adriatic sea by ferry to Greece before making its way through

# 30 hours in Gaza

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**Juana Jaafar and Ram Karthigasu drove an ambulance to Gaza as part of the Viva Palestina International Humanitarian Aid Convoy. The experience has changed their outlook on life, report SUZIEANA UDA NAGU and NURJEHAN MOHAMED**



**Ram Karthigasu (left) and Juana Jaafar feel accountable to the Palestinians for delivering the ambulance in the best possible condition.**

Turkey, Syria and Jordan.

All 250 vehicles involved in the convoy were ready to cross the Rafah border as soon as its members received the green light

from Egypt.

The Egyptian government's lack of cooperation did not surprise many of the volunteers.

Two previous convoys faced similar problems entering the territory.

The Egyptian government was said to be not only uncooperative but had also needlessly stalled the mission by placing "one onerous condition after another", among which was not allowing 43 of the vehicles in the convoy into Gaza.

"Whatever we knew of the situation before embarking on the journey didn't adequately prepare us for what we actually encountered there. Every day brought new surprises," says Ram, who holds a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK in which the Palestinian conflict was one of the main subjects.

"Despite reading about Egypt allying itself with Israel, I didn't realise it was directly involved in closing the border. (This debunks)

the belief among Malaysians that the Muslim world is united in the Palestinian crisis," says Juana, who studied religion at University of Georgia, the United States.

Despite the obstacles, Ram and Juana — who both contributed to New Straits Times' *Youth Quake* in their teens — kept their spirits up by focusing on the mission.

"We were accountable to the Palestinians and those who donated to the cause. We had to make sure that we deliver the ambulance in the best possible condition," says Juana.

PGPO donated the ambulance, three vans and aid worth more than RM300,000.

The duo was initially scheduled to join the convoy in Damascus, Syria, along with the rest of the Malaysian delegation which comprised PGPO group leader Matthias Chang and member Shamsul Akmar Musa Kamal; Bernama TV crew assistant producer and news presenter Azmawati Azmi, journalist Kuzaimah Idris, news presenter

Masrenny Masri and cameraman Mohd Shafie Abdullah; and Yayasan Al-Bukhari representative Colonel Abdul Rafee Abdul Khatah.

The PGPO decided to send the two to London at the last minute to make sure that the second-hand ambulance it bought via Viva Palestina was in good condition.

The last-minute changes gave Juana and Ram less than 48 hours to pack for the trip and say goodbye to their loved ones.

Although they knew the risks involved in the mission, joining an international convoy to show solidarity with the Palestinians was a chance they just could not miss.

The decision to go on the mission "was not difficult to make".

"I've been following the Palestinian issue since my student days. I'm honoured to travel with the convoy," says Juana.

Being new to the Viva Palestina convoy, the Malaysians knew little of what to expect from the journey.

"All we were told was to pack



**Part of the convoy loaded with supplies on its way to Gaza.**

# Blessings from the family

NO one was more worried about the safety of Perdana Global Peace Organisation (PGPO) members Juana Jaafar and Ram Karthigasu — who were part of the third Viva Palestina International Humanitarian Aid Convoy to Gaza recently — than their parents.

PGPO exco member and assistant secretary Juana's mother Azizah Dahlan knew that travelling across 14 countries into Gaza posed many risks to her youngest daughter.

Still, the mother of three did not intend to stop Juana from the mission.

"She broke the news (about her trip) on the way home from work

one day. We discussed it when she got home and I gave her my blessing," says Azizah.

While Juana was on the road, Azizah kept tabs on her daughter's location through Twitter, a social media she had never used before.

She also received phone calls and text messages from Juana.

Juana's frequent tweets (@juanajaafar) kept Azizah calm. Naturally, Azizah became restless when there was a long pause between tweets.

"The family was concerned about Juana particularly because her left foot was swollen due to a fall she had shortly before she left for London," says Azizah.

It was later found that her foot

was fractured.

On top of that, the cold winter had made Juana's cold and sore throat worse.

"She gradually got her voice back but we could hear that it became hoarse again when she called from Syria. That got me worried again. But deep down I knew she was fine and safe."

Three days before coming home, Juana texted Azizah asking for her favourite food — daging goreng, petai, kicap and sambal belacan — to be prepared on the day she arrives.

"We made sure they were ready before we picked her up from the airport," says Azizah.

While Juana shared everything about her mission with her mother from the start, PGPO manager Ram purposely avoided going into details about the humanitarian mission with his parents as he did not want to worry them.

As Ram frequently travels for work, his mother Vanaja Ramachandran thought nothing of his recent trip to London.

"From what I understood, he would be travelling by road through several countries before reaching his destination — it sounded more like a camping trip with a humanitarian goal," says Vanaja, who runs a kindergarten in Rawang.

When Ram informed her that he had to bring his travel plans forward from Dec 15 to Dec 4, Vanaja's only concern was whether or not he would have enough time to pack.

It was only at the airport when she saw his colleague Juana getting a big send-off from her family that Vanaja began to be curious.

"Only then did Ram inform me that he was joining a convoy to



Ram Karthigasus' parents Vanaja Ramachandran and S. Karthigasu motivated him to push on when the going got tough.

deliver humanitarian aid to the besieged Palestinian territory of Gaza," she says.

She grew more worried when news reports of the convoy's progress started coming in. She began to question if it was the right decision to let him go.

"But I would not have stopped him in any case as he was doing it for a good cause," says Vanaja.

Ram's father S. Karthigasu felt relieved when he found out that the number of people and vehicles in the convoy was greatly boosted in Turkey "as that meant that there would be higher chances of them being allowed into Gaza".

Ram kept in constant touch with the family either through phone calls or text messages.

When the convoy faced many obstacles towards the end of its mission, the family motivated Ram to push on.

The reality of the danger that their son had been in hit the couple after Ram returned home and related all that had happened — including being only some 10 kilometres from where Israeli F-16 planes had dropped bombs on Gaza.

"If Ram had to go on such a mission again, I would give my blessing," says Vanaja, adding that when her son sets his mind on a goal, he goes all out to achieve it.

"I left my son's fate to God and I knew that He would send my son back safely to me."

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Juana Jaafar (left) shared everything about the mission with mum Azizah Dahlan.

warm clothes and sleeping bags because we may not always get to stay in motels," says Juana.

What transpired in the following four weeks was something that they could only describe as one of the most memorable experiences of their lives.

Juana and Ram made lots of friends, among them American volunteer Faith Attaguile, 63, who hitched a ride in their ambulance.

Like many other individuals in the convoy, Attaguile raised her own funds to get supplies into Gaza.

The hardship they faced during the journey paid off when they finally set foot on Palestinian soil on Jan 6.

The convoy was charmed by the beauty of Gaza and the fighting spirit of its people.

"Gaza has character and the

Gazans carry themselves with dignity.

"They are survivors and highly admirable considering that they have been occupied and attacked for many years," says Juana.

The Gazans are also extremely proud of their homeland.

"You would half expect the streets to be covered in blood and buildings reduced to rubble but Gaza is clean.

"They have apparently learned to clean up after each attack — to wash traces of blood and remove rubbles out of the way," she adds.

While there is rubble all over the place, adds Ram, there was more rebuilding taking place on the tiny strip of land.

"If you were to fly directly into the city centre for a few days and don't see the badly affected northern and southern parts, you

would have no idea that the city is under attack every day," he says.

During the group's 30-hour stay in the territory, Israeli F-16 planes dropped a number of bombs in the area, killing several civilians, which was not reported.

"The waiter serving us at the coffee house of the hotel where we stayed told us coolly that was nothing — after we leave the Israelis would drop another 10 just for allowing us in," says Ram.

Despite being under constant attack, the Gazans have learnt to rebuild as quickly as they can using limited resources.

At Islamic University of Gaza, where a building housing the institution's medical labs was destroyed, the classes started again after eight days — and evidence of the destruction now is on

display in an exhibition in another building.

"It's like them telling the rest of the world that though they may not be able to get out of their land and that things are blocked from coming in, they will still live in dignity."

The dramatic struggle to get aid into Gaza had been an eye-opener.

Juana was humbled by the generosity of the volunteers whose ages ranged from 23 to 76 years.

"It was heartening to see the diversity of people who joined the convoy — such as the circus performer who stood outside Tesco in the UK to raise funds for the cause; the Irish Catholics and Jews who condemned what is happening in Palestine.

"These are the types of people

you would not expect (to help out with the cause)," she says.

"This demonstrates that the plight of the Palestinians has touched people of all backgrounds — not just Muslims and the typical 'social activists'."

Ram adds that the crisis in Gaza tends to be "hijacked" as a Muslim brotherhood issue but the Gazans do not see it that way.

"Although Hamas (the ruling political party) is an Islamic party, you do not see much of religion being used as a platform in Gaza.

"And the people who voted for them — Muslims, Christians and Jews alike — respect them for that," he says.

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• Read about youth in Gaza in YOU on Saturday.