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Sailing by stealth or by crook

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SHAMSUL
AKMAR



PORTO Rafti, a port town some 40km from Athens, did not seem suited to host a group of activists planning to challenge the Tel Aviv regime.

Then again, given that their action might well affect their well-being, Porto Rafti was the treat before the calamity.

In the balmy Mediterranean weather, a couple of Perdana Global Peace Organisation (PGPO) met up with their partners from the Free Gaza Movement to discuss the course of action following MV *Rachel Corrie*'s unanticipated setback.

By then, word had reached the PGPO members that her propellers had been repaired and she had left Greenore port.

Despite that, the chances of *Rachel Corrie* meeting the May 27 or 28 deadline set for the flotilla to sail together were almost impossible, sparking a debate as to how to deal with the Malaysian flagship.

Some of the Free Gaza leaders seemed to have given up on *Rachel Corrie*. They suggested leaving her behind to be used in another expedition.

The suggestion drew strong protests from the PGPO representatives, who felt that it was unthinkable for the flotilla to sail without *Rachel Corrie*, the ship which was the first conceived from the idea of a flotilla.

With the Malaysians adamant that *Rachel Corrie* must sail no matter how late, it was agreed that she would follow suit a few days later.

The following days from May 18 to 22 were an anxious time for the PGPO members, who were keeping close tabs on *Rachel Corrie* as she sailed towards the Mediterranean, scheduled for refuelling in Ceuta, the Spanish side of the Straits of Gibraltar.

By that time, the Malaysian delegates from PGPO were making their way to Larnaca, Cyprus, where they were supposed to wait for the *Rachel Corrie*, board her and then sail towards Gaza.

As the activists wait to board MV *Rachel Corrie*, they were exposed to the tentacles and insidious network of the Tel Aviv regime attempting to sabotage and scuttle efforts to set the flotilla on course to Gaza



The *Rachel Corrie* was finally able to leave for Gaza from Malta with the Malaysian and Irish delegations on board.

When two PGPO members from Athens joined the others in Larnaca on May 23, the team became a six-man delegation comprising Parit member of parliament Mohd Nizar Zakaria, PGPO representatives Ahmad Faisal Azumu, Matthias Chang, Shamsul Akmar, and Halim Mohamad and Jufri Judin, a reporter and cameraman from TV3 respectively.

They were then joined by the Irish team — former United Nations assistant secretary-general Denis Halliday and the husband and wife team of Derek and Jenny Graham, members of the Free Gaza Irish chapter.

Halliday was also a member of the PGPO's international advisory panel while Derek and Jenny were familiar to Malaysians as they were part of the original Free Gaza members who had discussed the idea of the flotilla with PGPO chairman Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It was a reunion of sorts and the familiarity came into play when *Rachel Corrie* was subjected to Israeli

aggression.

But of greater interest were events in Larnaca. Members got a glimpse of the tentacles and insidious network of the Tel Aviv regime, which attempted to sabotage and scuttle efforts to set the flotilla on course to Gaza.

While waiting for the arrival of *Rachel Corrie*, the team met up with other members of the flotilla, who included MPs from several European nations, on board the passenger ships *Challenger 1*, *Challenger 2* and a Greek ship.

Those ships, too, faced delays and the May 28 deadline was extended a day, which suited those on the *Rachel Corrie*.

On the morning of May 28, all passengers designated to board the three passenger ships were to converge at the Larnaca marina to board boats and ferries which would taxi them to the three passenger ships anchored about 20 miles off shore.

Tel Aviv's sabotage was obvious — the boats and ferries were stopped

from leaving the jetty by the port authorities for no reason.

Passengers were herded onto buses and driven to the Turkish-Cyprus side to board the ships from the port of Famagusta but they were not able to leave the next day.

Word started spreading that port authorities where the flotilla ships were anchored — Greece, Crete and Greek Cyprus — were under tremendous pressure to delay the ships.

While these events were unfolding, the Malaysian and Irish teams, too, found themselves unable to board the *Rachel Corrie* in Ceuta.

Mirroring events in Cyprus, the Malaysian and Irish delegations' hopes of boarding the ship in Larnaca were also quashed.

Finally, it was agreed that they should board the *Rachel Corrie* in Malta with as little publicity as possible and by stealth to avoid the Israelis' attempts to scuttle passage.

The *Rachel Corrie* had by then sailed at an average of nine to 10

knots per hour and was scheduled to arrive in Malta on the night of May 29 and to sail the following day.

The Malaysians and Irish left Larnaca for Malta on the morning of May 29 and were joined by two more Irish activists — Nobel Peace laureate Mairead Maguire and documentary maker Fiona Thompson.

Despite the threat of sabotage, the *Rachel Corrie* was looking good and if everything went smoothly, she would only be three days behind the flotilla in reaching Gaza.

Everyone was in high spirits when they converged in Malta in the beautiful town of Gzira, touted as having "the island's most beautiful esplanade that faces Sliema Creek, the yacht marina and the historic capital city of Valletta".

But the setting proved too idyllic.

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■ Tomorrow: *Rachel Corrie* becomes the last ship sailing