

Turbulent seas but calm spirits

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In the final part of Shamsul Akmar's account of the raid on the *Rachel Corrie* aid ship, the 11 activists on board brave rough weather and cancelled insurance in their attempt to sail on in the face of Israeli violence

HAVING overcome almost all that was thrown her way, the MV *Rachel Corrie* seemed reluctant to leave Malta, the last leg of her scheduled journey to Gaza.

On the evening of May 30, as the six Malaysians and five Irish activists boarded the ship, a squall broke out in the otherwise calm Mediterranean Sea.

Also, there was a mechanical problem with the anchor.

The ship's departure was delayed by seven hours and when she started sailing, she had to brave nasty weather.

With limited cabin space, the passengers slept just about anywhere on the ship, and were tossed about during the strong winds.

By dawn, the storm ceased. The calm sea reduced the activists' sea sickness and it seemed that the *Rachel Corrie* and her passengers were finally going to enjoy some calm.

Just when everyone was about to prepare breakfast, messages came in by the dozens on the mobile phones (still operational as the ship was sailing along the Malta coast).

The MV *Mavi Marmara*, which had sailed ahead, had been attacked by Israeli commandos and many were killed and badly injured.

The 11 activists thought that this was unthinkable as the *Mavi Marmara* was a long distance from Gaza and in international waters.

As the news sank in, calls and messages came in urging the Malaysians and Irish to turn back.

The *Rachel Corrie* was at least four days away from Gaza.

If there was ever a moment of truth for the 11 activists, that would have been it. Huddled in mid-ship, reflecting on the fate of their friends on the *Mavi Marmara*, the Malaysians and Irish discussed whether to end the trip or push on to Gaza.

All agreed to press on and issued a joint statement: "Following what had happened to our friends, we are now more determined to sail on to Gaza."

After the statement was dispatched to the media, attention then turned to the *Rachel Corrie*.

The phones did not stop ringing and when the ship sailed further away from land and the mobile phones rendered useless, the media worked on the two satellite phones on board relentlessly.

The questions posed centred on one aspect: "Are you guys not scared after what had happened to *Mavi Marmara*?"

It was then that Irishman Derek Graham of the Free Gaza Movement said to the Malaysians: "I thought we Irish were crazy; you Malaysians are mad."

No doubt the expression was a backhanded compliment. The crux of the matter was apparent: for the *Rachel Corrie* to press on to Gaza on her own was tantamount to tempting fate.



An Israeli navy boat (foreground) escorting the *Rachel Corrie* as she enters the military port of Ashdod in Israel on June 5. — AFP picture



The aid ship is named after Rachel Aliene Corrie, 24, an American who was crushed to death in the Gaza Strip by an Israel defence forces bulldozer in March 2003. She had been kneeling in front of a Palestinian's home to prevent IDF forces from demolishing it.

However, as media attention grew, the passengers on the *Rachel Corrie* believed that the decision was the best under the circumstances.

Government leaders from Ireland and Malaysia started calling. They wanted to be kept informed of the movement and at the same time condemned Tel Aviv for its belligerence, and warned it not to "touch" those on board the *Rachel Corrie*.

Some of the calls were heart-

warming, from organisations and individuals from the world over, expressing support, love and hope that the *Rachel Corrie* would arrive in Gaza safely.

While the Malaysians and Irish were psyching themselves up in anticipation of Israeli violence, in came the most unexpected opposition that could have put an end to the journey and force the *Rachel Corrie* to turn back.

A call came in saying that the insurance for the crew on board had been cancelled and the ship's management company was not going to risk them going to Gaza.

The Malaysians contacted Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir, the Perdana Global Peace Organisation adviser, to help out on the insurance issue and, after almost 48 anxious hours, the matter was settled.

Rachel Corrie was by then only 225km from Gaza. It had slowed down as it did not want to enter the last 160km in darkness.

The last two nights had seen the activists sleeping out in the open in mid-ship, preparing for the possibility that the Israelis would do another *Mavi Marmara*, that is, sneak in while it was dark.

On Saturday, June 5, about 4am, Scotsman Capt Eric Harcus gave the good news; the *Rachel Corrie* should be at the 32km mark from shore before noon.

The bad news: the radar showed that ships had been following her for the past hour.

"Each time we slow down, they slow down. When we pick up speed, they do likewise," said Graham, who was on the bridge with Harcus.

When there was light, the military patrol boats became visible, two on each side. They were joined by several more over the next couple of hours.

A couple started circling the *Rachel Corrie* with mounted machine guns pointed towards her.

The radar and communications system was then scrambled and it was obvious the moment of truth was

fast approaching.

Then came the call over the radio ordering the *Rachel Corrie* to turn back. The reply: "We are not turning back. We are going to Gaza."

An hour later, another call came in, offering a solution: proceed escorted to Ashdod, the Israeli port, unload the cargo on lorries and send it to Gaza via land with two representatives from the *Rachel Corrie* on board.

The reply was: "We do not want to go to Ashdod. We want to go to Gaza."

The reason the offer was spurned was simple: the mission was not merely to send aid to Gaza but also to challenge the illegal blockade imposed by Israel on Gaza since 2007.

Accepting the offer would have meant that the *Rachel Corrie* acknowledged and recognised the blockade.

An hour later came the final radio call: "We are coming on board."

Israeli soldiers boarded the *Rachel Corrie* while it was in international waters, 55km from Gaza shores. Six Zodiac speedboats, three on each flank, raced to the sides and the soldiers, all in ski masks and armed to the teeth, got on board.

There were more than 50 of them. The passengers and crew were sitting in mid-ship, waiting for them to search and take away their cameras, mobile and satellite phones.

The soldiers took control of the bridge and steered the *Rachel Corrie* to Ashdod, a three-hour journey.

Rachel Corrie is still in Ashdod. Like the person it was named after, her spirit lives on.