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Israeli navy attacks aid ship

THE *Spirit of Rachel Corrie*, the Malaysian-owned ship carrying aid for the Palestinians, was intercepted and attacked by Israeli naval forces off the Gaza coast yesterday morning.

The ship's crew and 12 passengers are safe.

Currently the ship has been forced to anchor in Egyptian waters, 30 nautical miles away from Gaza.

The vessel left the Port of Piraeus, Greece, on Wednesday.

Like others on board the ship, I could clearly hear five to six shots fired during the incident which lasted for about 20 minutes.

Fortunately, no one was injured.

Hours later, three Egyptian navy personnel boarded the vessel and checked our passports, cargo, cabins and the ship's documents.

They told us that they would escort us to Port El-Arish later and suggested we unload the cargo there.

From there, they offered to make arrangements to transport the items by land into Gaza.

This humanitarian initiative is sponsored by Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF) and among those participating are anti-war activists and journalists — seven Malaysians, two Irish, two Indians and a Canadian.

The *Spirit of Rachel Corrie* (officially known as FINCH) is carrying 7.5km of UPVC (plastic) sewage pipes to help restore the devastated sewerage system in Gaza.

The ship was named after the courageous American activist, Rachel Corrie, who was crushed and killed by an Israeli bulldozer in 2003 while trying to prevent the demolition of Palestinian homes. She was only 23.

This mission is part of the (PGPF) "Break the Siege on Gaza" campaign.

It is to highlight the effects of the illegally imposed Israeli siege and raise awareness of the human rights violations of the people of Gaza.

PGPF had followed all Greek port authorities laws and Customs requirement in ensuring the ship as well as its cargo, crew and passengers were declared and legal.

Malaysians on board the ship are Captain Jalil Mansor, ship crew Zainuddin Mohamad and Mohd Jaffery Ariffin, sea mission leader Matthias Chang (PGPF), Mohd Radzillah Abdullah (representative from the Prime Minister's Office/Felda), journalists Mohd Faizal Hassan (Malaysian National News Agency — Bernama) and this reporter.

Also on board are two crew mem-



The *Spirit of Rachel Corrie* leaving Greek waters on Wednesday.

bers of Indian nationality (names were not available at press time) and three human rights activists—Derek Graham (Irish) and his wife Jenny Graham and Julie Levesque (Canadian).

Four Malaysian media representatives are waiting for the ship's arrival at Port Gaza and from there, they will travel from Cairo to Palestine's Rafah border within this week.

The four are Syed Azwan Syed Ali (*Berita Harian*), TV3 broadcast journalist Mohd Harris Hazri Abdul Halim, Ahmad Azizi Adnan (TV3 cameraman) and Rosdan Wahid (NST photographer).

PGPF has also set up a land support group in Greece, led by PGPF trustee Tan Sri Dr Samsudin Hitam, who will be the main spokesperson for the mission.

He will be assisted by Maizatul Akmar Mohd Naim (PGPF communication department head) and Alan Lonergan (Irish human rights activist).

This is the second attempt by PGPF to help Palestine after its then sponsored-ship MV *Rachel Corrie* took part in the six-ship convoy, Free-

'Greatest challenge as journalist'

MY seven years of experience in crime reporting and covering disasters helped control my fear when the Israeli naval forces fired warning shots at our ship yesterday.

But it was still not enough to quell the tightening knot in my stomach as I ducked upon hearing the shots.

As I gingerly moved to get my digital video camera in place to record the attack, I could hear the shots getting louder, although afterwards I realised the whole incident only lasted about 20 minutes. To me, it was like forever.

The risk was worth it though, I managed to record a clip showing the shots fired by the Israeli boat.

dom Flotilla, that was intercepted and hijacked by the Israeli Defence Forces last year.

The IDF had attacked the flotilla and illegally boarded one of the ships within international waters in the Mediterranean sea on May 31 last year, killing nine Turkish nationals aboard a Turkish-flagged ship MV *Mavi Marmara*, and injuring 50 others.

Despite Israel's announcement of an ease to the blockade last June,

many essentials such as drinking water, sanitation and hygiene materials are hard to come by due to delays in delivering them.

Underdeveloped wastewater storage and treatment facilities and unchecked sewage flow in the Gaza Strip further contaminates the groundwater.

Today, only five to 10 per cent of the water of Gaza's portion of the Coastal Aquifer is safe to drink, with the

Luckily for us, nobody on board our ship was injured. There was also no damage to the ship.

In retrospect, this has so far been my greatest challenge ever as a journalist.

I had psyched myself up mentally, spiritually and physically for this journey.

I had even imagined what it would have been like if I had been arrested and imprisoned by the Israelis.

Certainly getting shot at was not part of the picture.

But, as I said earlier, it was worth it. I had braved the challenging Mediterranean sea for five days for this.

Would I want to go through this again? Without a doubt, yes.—By Alang Bendahara

United Nations recommending an immediate cessation of its use to ensure the health of those who depend on the water.

Poor water quality in Gaza leads to serious health concerns, with vulnerable groups such as children suffering the most.

The World Health Organisation is warning of a possible cholera epidemic if nothing is immediately done to resolve this sanitation crisis.

Rep: Relief team forced to use land route

KUALA LUMPUR: All passengers and crew on board the *Spirit of Rachel Corrie* will now use the land route to accomplish their humanitarian aid mission to the people of Gaza in Palestine.

When contacted in Amman (Jordan) yesterday, Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF) representative Tan Sri Dr Samsudin Hitam said that the vessel, anchored in

Egyptian waters, was expected to arrive at Port of El-Arish in Egypt when it gets the green light by the authorities.

"Currently the ship is about 30 nautical miles from Gaza. We are still waiting for word from El-Arish."

Dr Samsudin said the journey by land to Gaza would take about three hours and most likely lorries would

be used to transport the PVC sewage pipes and members of the mission.

"All passengers and crew are safe," he added.

Meanwhile, Foreign Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman said Malaysia condemned the attack by the Israeli naval forces on the humanitarian aid ship.

"Malaysia also demands that Israel not take any further drastic and vi-

olent military action on the unarmed passengers of the *Spirit of Rachel Corrie*," he said in a statement here.

He said all the humanitarian activists on board should be given the necessary assistance to ensure their safety.

"Any Israeli military action on an unarmed vessel transporting humanitarian assistance will deepen

the international community's negative perception of Israel and also demonstrate Israel's total indifference to its international obligations in defiance of world opinion."

He said Israel should engage in peaceful dialogue under the ambit of the Middle East peace process in efforts to promote lasting peace and security in the region. — Bernama