

Libya denies entry to peace mission

RAFAEL D. FRANKEL, THE JERUSALEM POST

Mar. 22, 2006

History was thwarted early Wednesday morning when a peace mission making its way across the Sahara Desert was refused entry into Libya due to the participation of three Israelis who were flatly denied entrance at the border.

The group of people from around the world, including four Americans, was welcome in Libya, a special representative of Libyan leader Mohmar Qaddafi told the mission as it stood on Libyan soil just five meters from the formal border crossing. But not the Israelis.

"Israel does not exist as a country, it is Palestine. We don't allow occupiers into our country," the official said. "Now I order you all to leave Libya."

Earlier, the group had decided it would not cross into Libya unless everyone was allowed in.

After being denied, the nine-person group voted to stay the night at the border and see if diplomacy and their message of goodwill to all peoples would gain them admittance Wednesday into the nation which has until now barred Israeli visitors.

As of Wednesday afternoon, it appeared those efforts had failed and the group was considering its options.

After renouncing his intentions to develop weapons of mass destruction in December of 2003, Libyan leader Mohmar Qaddafi was seen to be realigning his country with the international community after years of isolation following direct ties to terrorist activities.

Until the last minute, the group had not received word from Libyan officials as to whether they would be permitted inside the country. The nine participants and 16-member support staff and media contingency actually waited on Libyan soil for some four hours Tuesday night and Wednesday morning for a decision from the border control.

After initially being refused, an appeal was made to high-ranking officials in Tripoli. It was that appeal which eventually led to the words from the government official.

During the midnight hours on the Libyan side of the border, the group, including the Israelis, was received warmly by the border guards themselves, who provided complimentary coffee and hot sandwiches while they waited. The shopkeeper, a man from Tunis, even wished the group a "good morning" in Hebrew.

The three Israelis, Gil Fogiel, Galit Oren, and group organizer Heskell Nathaniel shook hands and chatted with the border guards in English and Arabic and the guards, including two military colonels, said they hoped the three would gain entrance.

"It's another huge example of the difference between the people and the government," Nathaniel said. "I got the feeling that the [Libyan] people would have taken us home with them."

At the last moment, before pulling up to Libyan border guards, the group turned on the radio only to be greeted by the eight o'clock *Reshet Gimme!* news, which came through loud and clear despite the distance across the sea. Following the news, the song "With a Little Bit of Luck" from the musical *My Fair Lady* came on. "It's a sign," Galit Oren, one of the three Israelis, said at the time, "even the songs are helping us along."

During the final walk up to the Libyan border, the nine participants from the group linked arms as the two Magirus-Deutz fire trucks and support jeep which brought them 3,500 kilometers to this point followed in a row behind them.

As they sang "Give Peace a Chance" and "We Are the World" on the border approach, curious Egyptian soldiers stood on the side of the road with puzzled smiles.

The ride here from the Egyptian border town of Sullum was a raucous one as the group downed whiskey shots to celebrate what they hoped would be the closing chapters of their trek across Egypt. As Palestinian Mohammad Azzam Alarjah played his drum, the group sang, and placed bets on whether they would gain entrance to Libya with the Arabs betting no and the Israelis wagering yes.

Pressed into service when the regular driver's knees gave out, New York Fire Department Cpt. Daniel Patrick Sheridan, one of the two Americans in the group, danced as he drove the 1962, double-clutch truck the final meters in Egypt.

On the roof of his truck, former IAF F-4 Phantom fighter pilot and POW Gil Fogiel struck a statuesque pose with his chest out and head high as cameramen and the support staff joined in singing "The Flight of the Valkyries." Camel herders waved at the truck and Fogiel returned the gesture as the convoy, nicknamed by Sheridan "The Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria," drove by.

Earlier in the day, Fogiel said the prospect of Israelis entering Libya was "a chance to change the course of thinking and from now on produce a new way." Due to their history, Israelis are a skeptical people, he said. "But if you stay all the time skeptical nothing will ever change, so with this step we're trying to break conventional thought."

Oren said she felt a responsibility to represent the "best side" of Israelis. "I want to come with open hands and an open heart... to open the path for others to follow," she said.

"I feel very honored, I still don't see myself as so powerful that we are making a difference, but if we do it we can be the pioneers of change," she said.

Though he was traveling with the group in a support role, Nathaniel said he felt both responsibility in representing Israel and nervousness.

"I wouldn't do it on my own without others with me," he said. "But I feel confident that Latif [Yahia] is taking care of us."

Yahia, the former body double for Uday Hussein, took on the job of shepherding the group through the numerous hoops required at the border, including paying some *baksheesh* to the guards on the Egyptian side to process the group quickly.

On the Libyan side he and Alarjah worked tirelessly with Libyan officials in attempting to move the group through. But even his efforts and the spirit of the peace mission could not overcome the will of the Libyan government, which would not bend in its denial of the Israelis.

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