

Afghan drops out of peace mission

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THE WESTERN DESERT PLATEAU, Egypt - Long-simmering tensions in the "Breaking the Ice" peace mission to Tripoli erupted Thursday, leading to the desertion of one group member but also producing the most intense political discussions yet to emerge from the now eight-person group pieced together from around the world.

A day after being denied entry into Libya due to the presence of Israelis in its contingent and seeing its traveling plans unravel, the group splintered on where it should go. In the end, the decision was made to continue the desert trek in Egypt for the next week, before circling back and finishing the journey where it kicked off, in Jerusalem.

But for Afghani participant Yahya Wardak, the grueling toll of the journey was finally too much to handle, and he announced his intention to leave the mission. Seeking to retain his presence, the group pulled off to the side of the road in the middle of the desert where a dramatic scene unfolded.

As cameras rolled, the participants sat in a circle on the hard, red desert dirt and tried to convince Wardak, who was frustrated by what he felt was too much emphasis placed on bringing Israelis to Libya, to change his mind.

What ensued was the type of conversation the organizers of the group have longed for since this desert trek began two weeks ago, as cultural differences, frustrations and global politics all melded into the narrative.

New York Fire Department Capt. Daniel Patrick Sheridan accused Wardak of "quitting when the going got tough," and implied he noticed a similar trait in other Muslims.

That prompted an impassioned plea from Iranian Neda Sarmast, who agreed with Sheridan's assessment and told Wardak that by quitting he was giving Muslims a bad reputation.

"This is the problem with the Middle East. Whenever anything gets difficult we always break up and never maintain our unity," she said as Iraqi Latif Yahia sat next to her, nodding in agreement.

From there, the conversation quickly turned political, leading Sheridan to mention the 343 New York firefighters, dozens of whom were his friends, who died on September 11, prompting an angry response from Yahia.

'OK, so 3,000 Americans died on 9/11," Yahia, whose sister-in-law was killed in an American bombing raid on Baghdad in 2003, said in a raised voice. "Does that give America the right to destroy my country? A hundred thousand Iraqis have died, and who is next?"

Sheridan responded: "I'm just one guy, I'm not an ambassador of my country. [US President] George Bush doesn't call me when he wakes up in the morning."

At one point during the shouting, US Army Col. Ray Benson went over and placed a hand on the soft-spoken Wardak's shoulder,

telling him the group would miss his presence. "We want you to stay and continue to be a part of this," he said.

But it was to no avail.

So, one person lighter, the desert journey continued Thursday afternoon.

The seven-ton fire trucks carrying the mission made their way down a two-lane barren road to the oasis of Siwa, where Alexander the Great received a fortune from an oracle, who prodded him on to conquer half the known world.

Some things have changed since then and some have not. As the truck convoy stopped alongside the road so a satellite Internet connection could be hooked up for a reporter to send out a story, a camel convoy walked in the distance, probably toward the same destination.

Disappointed, but not deterred, Israeli Gil Fogiel said he was still looking forward to the remainder of the expedition, even if it would not include Libya.

"From the beginning [entering Libya] wasn't the sole goal and also not the important one," Fogiel said. "There are some questions we didn't dare to talk about yet and I think now, including myself, we are ready to discuss some important and interesting issues."

As for Thursday's drama, Fogiel said it was healthy. "In order for every group to really work things out, you need time and detachment from everyday life. You need people to be tired and sometimes fed up with each other in order to, at the end, be real and shed all the veils."

There will be time for that in Siwa, where the group plans to recuperate for the next three days from the disheartening and physically tiring 12-hour ordeal at the Libyan border.

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