

## **Humor breaks the ice in int'l peacemaking trek**

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rafael d. frankel, THE JERUSALEM POST

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THE WESTERN DESERT, Egypt - It took all 10 participants pushing their 1964 Magirus-Deutz truck the first meters from Jaffa Gate to get this expedition to Tripoli rolling.

Eleven days later, battery failure still besets the German fire truck from time to time, but this eclectic group of travelers is too busy laughing with each other to bother helping their lumbering red carrier, which they love to hate, start the day. What, after all, are the drivers for?

After a tense first week in cramped quarters and urban settings, when dysfunction and bickering left two people threatening to leave the trip, tempers have mellowed among the group of two Israelis, a Palestinian, two Americans, an Iraqi, an Afghani, an Iranian, an Ukrainian, and a Tibetan, and their 16-person support staff and media contingent.

The trip is sponsored by the German-based organization Breaking the Ice, which seeks to promote greater peace through individual understanding and cooperation.

Perhaps the serenity of Tibetan Monk Nawang Thapkhe, who meditates in a half-lotus in the back seat and reads Tibetan prayer scrolls at night, is rubbing off on them. Or perhaps the Sahara Desert, with its endless sand, blue horizon, and tradition steeped in perseverance has diffused into the collective conscience.

But more likely, they say, a dark brand of cultural humor - no one is spared from it - which the participants are developing during the long days of travel is both keeping them sane and bringing them together.

"There's a lot of comic relief we're giving to each other," Neda Sarmast, the Iranian, said. With US Army Col. Ray Benson standing nearby she chided, "It's all the Americans' fault." What is the Americans' fault? "Everything," she said, smiling.

A favorite pasttime of the group is using their many languages to push the humor as far as they can take it. Among the results is Thapkhe, who dresses every day in Tibetan robes, saying every few hours in Hebrew "I have cocaine," in preparation for his next encounter with Israeli customs officers in Tel Aviv.

The line, taught to him by Israelis Gil Fogiel and Galit Oren, went even farther today. Thapkhe now knows how to ask if other Israelis want to partake in the drug with him.

"Fun is very important in our lives. Without fun you get mentality disturbed," he said. "A community that is always serious is not healthy."

Fortunately, Thapkhe can dish out the jokes as well as happily be the butt of them. After dinner Friday night, he asked Iraqi Latif Yahia, who has taken to wearing a red Kafiya everywhere, if "Bin

Laden" was finished with his food, sending the group into a fit of laughter.

Nicknames are a big part of the fun.

Yahia, who was once Ude Hussein's body double, is "Iraq Bin Laden." Thapke is "Cupcake." Yahia and Sarmast have taken to calling themselves the parents of Muhammad - the Palestinian participant Muhammad Azzam Alarjah, that is. While Benson has escaped with "The Colonel," Afghani Yahya Wardak is "Baby Ya Ya" because the group says, playfully, that his main habits are sleeping, eating, and whining.

Ukrainian soldier Yevgen Petrovich Kozhushko, who served in Iraq and aspires to serve in the US Special Forces, was dubbed "D.J. Yevgen" after he protested the instructions he was receiving from the group for loading the six-disc stereo.

But most jokes are made at the expense of the support staff, who the participants regard sardonically as their captors. Sarmast tallies the days of the trip in dust on the back of the fire truck, saying that their time in the desert feels considerably longer than the 11 days her finger marks count.

When a reporter asked Oren why she stashed felafel from breakfast in her day pack today, her answer about being a vegetarian and never being sure what the next meal would consist of was quickly followed by a quip from Fogiel.

"Plan ahead, and know your enemy," said the former Israeli Air Force pilot who was shot down over Bekka, Lebanon in 1982 and held prisoner by Syria for two years.

Politically incorrect jokes about Jews and Arabs are common fare now, but the group is seriously considering what would happen if they get to the Libyan border and the Israelis are barred entrance. One of the main points of the trip is to get Fogiel and Oren into Libya, making them the first official Israeli tourists to Muammar Gaddafi's country ever.

They even have an olive tree, named Olivie, making the journey with them which they intend to deliver to Gaddafi himself.

But the Libyan border is still 700 kilometers of sand and two days, desert time, away from here. Until then the serious talks are on the back burner and the participants will continue to bridge their considerable differences with humor.

"We have nothing to do and all day to do it," said New York Fire Department Cpt. Daniel Patrick Sheridan. "It's like in the firehouse, if we don't joke around with someone it means we don't like him. It's all part of our bonding."

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