

'Breaking the Ice' for peace through trans-desert trek

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Shoving off on a journey was never taken so literally before.

With a battery in one of the two 1960s-era German fire trucks - which is to take them across the Sahara Desert - low on juice, 10 people from around the world who were setting out on the journey together had to get out and push their way from Jerusalem's Jaffa Gate until the engine turned over.

It was a fitting beginning to their trip sponsored by the German-based organization Breaking the Ice, which seeks to promote greater peace through individual understanding and cooperation. The near month-long journey will take participants hailing from Israel, the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, Iraq, the United States, Iran, and Russia across deserts in Israel, Jordan, Egypt and Libya.

Standing near an olive tree which the group hopes to present to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi upon its arrival in Tripoli, Israeli participant Gil Fogiel said he is bringing a message with him. "I want to ask [Gaddafi] to address his brothers in Iran to follow his example of abandoning nuclear power and pursuing peace and understanding with the rest of the world," Fogiel said.

Turning his attention to the group with which he is traveling, and the inevitable tense moments that will come up, the El Al pilot, who was shot down while flying for the IAF during the Yom Kippur War and held captive for two years in Syria, said establishing a base of trust was the key to bridging their differences.

"From the experience so far, it should be a great success," Fogiel said.

"That doesn't mean everything will be a party, but the people are ready to listen and ready to share their thoughts."

It has been a whirlwind three days for the desert trekkers since they arrived in Israel on Saturday, as they were whisked from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv to Ramallah for meetings with high-level Israeli and Palestinian officials in advance of their journey.

On Sunday, former prime minister Shimon Peres welcomed the participants to Israel with a Tel Aviv press conference where he told them their "heavily symbolic trip" was an important step in the cause for peace.

"A trip to Tripoli three or four years ago would have looked impossible," Peres said. But "the time will come when going to Baghdad or Damascus would not be considered breaking the ice." "Peace begins with one person trying to convince himself it is our only real chance and good option that we as human beings are carrying," Peres said.

The Peres Center is assisting in the group's Israeli activities.

On Monday, the participants went to Ramallah (without Israelis Fogiel and Galit Oren, who were barred from travel by the IDF) to

meet Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas's Chief of Staff Rafiq Hussein.

"[Hussein] was a gentleman to everyone, and sent his regards to Gil and Galit," said Latif Yahia, the Iraqi participant who was once a double for Uday Hussein. Yahia added that Hussein told the participants "we are all people, we are all human, and we all should love each other."

Much of the journey across the Sahara hinges on whether the Libyan government will allow the two Israelis into the country. Though Gaddafi is aware of the group's intentions to travel through the desert to Tripoli, Libyan officials have not yet responded to the group's request for travel visas.

The politics of the journey surfaced in Tel Aviv when Iranian participant Neda Sarmast elected not to sit at the same table as Peres out of fear of the possible repercussions.

"There's so much sensitivity in Iran right now that I didn't want my presence to make a political statement," Sarmast said. "I want this to be a statement of peace, not politics."

The three days in Israel left many of the Arab participants in slight disbelief that they were visiting Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

"For a moment it was unbelievable," Afghani participant Yahya Wardak said of sharing a table with Peres. "I wanted to come [to Israel] for a long time because every day we see it in the news and talk about the issue, and here I have the best opportunity to understand the background of the conflict.

"Yesterday, [in Jerusalem's Old City], I heard the sounds of the prayers from the mosques and the gongs from the churches and I

have never heard these sounds together," Wardak said. "I saw that normal people are living in peace and have no problem with each other."

Yahia said his notions of what Israelis were like, which were formed by media reports, were shattered after he crossed through the Kalandiya checkpoint without trouble. "No one was getting killed and all the soldiers were very respectful of the Palestinians," he said. "In Jerusalem, I shake hands with the Jewish people in shops and they don't harass me. It's not the picture the media brings across."

