

# THE DAILY STAR

EGYPT

## **BREAKING THE ICE**

### **The group trekking for peace will not let a glitch at the Libyan border dishearten them**

*By Joseph Mayton*

SALUM: The journey to reclaim peace in the Middle East found a rejuvenated spirit late Tuesday night at the Libyan border, despite their biggest setback to date. As the participants in the Breaking the Ice (BTI) campaign to promote peace in the Middle East returned to the Egyptian side of the border, tensions were high, but so was the optimism surrounding the effort to shed some light in what many feel is a region full of pessimism.

The BTI journey, consisting of nine participants from the United States, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, started in Israel two weeks ago and arrived in Egypt after a week of traveling throughout Israeli and Jordan via land.

Leading up to the border, the BTI participants strode arm in arm chanting and singing familiar tunes, including We are the world and Imagine all the people. The feeling was almost euphoric as the border with Libya appeared to be readily approachable. Most were optimistic that it was going to be a

groundbreaking event, as no Israeli citizens had yet to cross into Libya. But the time for change hadn't quite arrived.

"No Way! No one in Tripoli is going to take credit for us at this hour," Gil Fogiel says, noting the late hour BTI arrived. Fogiel, an Israeli,

who currently works for El Al airlines, has a complex history similar to most of the nine participants of the journey from Israel to Libya. Considering his smiling and helpful attitude, it is shocking to know what

he has been through. Fogiel was a fighter pilot in the Israeli military, during which time he was shot down over Syria and imprisoned and tortured for two years before being released in a prisoner exchange.

The group, which has been together now for almost three weeks, made it through the Egyptian border without much of a glitch, but that is when things began to take a turn for the worse. As the sun was setting, the wind began to pick up, making the coming historical event seem less and less likely to occur.

Latif Yehia, a former body double for Saddam Hussein's son Uday and author of numerous titles describing his life, spoke about the difficulties BTI was having with the Libyan government. "If Saif Islam [someone close to Gadhafi] says it's okay and Libya supposedly has no problems with Israelis and their people, then it has to be time for something to change," he says as the group approached the border. Obviously, this was not the time for change to manifest.

Confidence was added when, after waiting at the border for more than an hour, the Libyan border police asked for the passports, intending to stamp visas in them and allow them to past. The historical moment everyone was waiting for seemed ready to happen. However, Yehia, who was dealing with the Libyans, came out of a meeting with one of the officers with a long face.

"Libya says no to Israelis because the government says that it does not recognize the government of Israel," he says, referring to what was just told to him.

The next step was to figure out what to do with a group of almost 15 people, the participants and BTI staff, who were now stuck on the Libyan side of the Salum crossing. Adam Rice, director of Operations for the BTI trip, spoke eloquently, trying to strike fire into the group that stood stunned. "We knew it was going to be difficult to get into Libya," he says. "But now we have a choice. One, we can push and push and see if our contact close to Gadhafi can help get us in, or we can find a second option and retreat from trying to enter Libya and return to Egypt."

His words were met with tired looks of non-movement. "We are not a propaganda machine," Yehia announces. "If they don't call you then they don't want you. I don't want to put more petrol on the fire. Libya didn't accept us and that is that."

The ordeal and frustration at the Libyan border highlighted the growing frustration that many of the participants were having with the journey.

Daniel Sheridan, a New York City Fire Chief who also drove one of the vehicles for the day, said that he felt this setback was telling him that it was time to head home. He was on the job when September 11 happened.

“I am really feeling proud to be an American right now,” Sheridan begins. “But you know, it is sad that all these nice people have to make things so difficult for us. If we weren’t going to get in, that is fine. We need to concentrate on what our mission is here and that is getting people to understand why people do what they do.”

“That is why I am here,” Sheridan says. “I came to the region to seek out a reason for the September 11 attacks and while I still don’t really understand the way people could think blowing themselves up could serve the purpose, I realize that there is a long way to go in this world and hopefully I can be of service in some way.”

The group returned to Egypt after four hours at the Libyan border, only to be stuck for another four hours on the Egyptian side, waiting to get to a hotel and catch some much needed sleep. Finally, at 5:30 a.m., they made it to the hotel. As the weary eyed participants and their entourage entered the hotel, one had to wonder if they were losing their grasp on the journey. A night’s sleep should be able to rekindle a spirit of hope in the face of their most recent defeat.

While the refusal of admittance on the Libyan side of the Salum border disappointed most of the participants to the point of no return, the path that led to the crossing was full of inspiration and hope that BTI believes will live on through the spirit of peace and tolerance between the Middle East and the west.

The nine participants are Fogiel, Yehia, Sheridan; Neda Sarmast is an Iranian-American; Galit Oren is an Israeli woman whose mother was killed in a suicide attack; Mohammed Azzam Alarjah is a Palestinian who had his cousin die in his arms after being shot by Israeli soldiers; Yevgen Petrovich Kozhushko is a Ukrainian soldier that fought in Iraq; Yehya Wardak is Afghani who now lives in Germany; and Raymond Benson is a former U.S. Colonel. They will finish their journey in Tel Aviv the first week of April.