

LIBYA: ISRAELI PACIFISTS BLOCKED AT BORDER

Tripoli, 22 March (AKI) - The Israeli members of a pacifist group attempting to trek from Jerusalem to Tripoli to demonstrate against war, violence and racism were forbidden by Libyan authorities to cross the border with Egypt and enter the country on Wednesday. "Israel doesn't exist as a nation, that is Palestine and we cannot allow the occupiers to enter our country," said a Libyan official patrolling the border with Egypt. The 'Breaking the Ice' group, which includes three Israelis, was camped out in the Egyptian desert after failing to gain entrance into Libya late on Tuesday night.

The nine members of the group - including people from the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, Iraq, the United States and Ukraine - voted to stay the night at the border and see if diplomacy and their message of peace would gain them admittance the next day into Libya, which has so far banned all Israeli visitors.

They also decided to stick together in the event that the Israeli contingent was barred passage into the country - though their ultimate goal was to plant in Tripoli a young olive tree they have been carrying with them from Jerusalem, after a 5,000 kilometre trek.

The near month-long journey took participants across deserts in Israel, Jordan and Egypt. Their idea is that shared difficulties helps reciprocal understanding.

Members include Galit Oren, an Israeli pacifist who lost her mother in a Palestinian suicide attack 11 years ago and Mohammed Azzam Alarjah, a 23-year-old Palestinian whose cousin was killed by Israeli forces during the first days of intifada.

Also in the group is Latif Yahia, an Iraqi who was once a body guard to the son of Saddam Hussein, Uday, and who has acted as the group's spokesman in negotiations with Libyan officials at the border with Egypt. Yevgen Petrovich Kozhushko, another participant, was a soldier in Iraq with international coalition troops from 2003 to 2005.

The US members of the contingent are Neda Sarmast, an Iranian-born US citizen who lived in Iran during the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war and was in the States during the September 11 terrorist attacks, and Daniel Patrick Sheridan, a fireman who lost many colleagues and friends in the 11 September 2004 attack against the World Trade Centre in New York.

Throughout the trek the group had been aware that the goal of ending their journey in Libya depended on the goodwill of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who knew of the pacifists' intention to travel to Tripoli.

(Csc/Aki)

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