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Group crossing Sahara for peace

Jews, Muslims and Christians are on expedition from Jerusalem to Libya

The Associated Press

EASTERN SAHARA DESERT, Egypt — Ex-Israeli fighter pilot Gil Fogiel rarely talked about being a prisoner of war in Syria until he sat across a campfire in the middle of the desert with people he long considered his worst enemies — Iraqis, Iranians and Palestinians.

Breaking into tears, he recounted being shot down over Syria-controlled Lebanon in 1982, parachuting from 14,000 feet while his co-pilot crashed, and spending two years tortured in a Damascus prison.

Now 49, Fogiel is one of 10 people — including a former body double for Saddam Hussein's son, Uday; a Palestinian accounting student; and a New York City firefighter who survived the Sept. 11 attacks — trekking from Israel across the Sahara Desert to Libya on a mission to promote Mideast peace.

The expedition is sponsored by Breaking the Ice, a Berlin-based, nonprofit conflict resolution group that wants participants to confront divisive religious and political issues in a setting where they depend on each other for survival.

Traveling by camel, foot and in two 1960s-era German trucks, the group left Jerusalem on March 7 and hopes to reach the Libyan border by Tuesday.

Carrying an olive tree from Jerusalem as a gesture of peace, the travelers hope to plant it in Tripoli at the end of their more than 3,400-mile journey. If the Israelis are denied entry, the group will stay together in Egypt.

"If attitudes change from my actions, I'm honored," Fogiel said. "Somebody's got to make that first step."

Go to www.thestate.com and click on World (Editor's Choice) for more details on the trek.