

Arrival of blockade-busting boats spells end of Gaza siege

By [Barak Ravid](#)

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Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh on Saturday welcomed two boats that sailed from Cyprus to the Gaza Strip in efforts to break the Israeli-imposed blockade on the Palestinian territory, saying that the arrival of the boats signaled the end of the siege.

The 70-foot (21-meter) Free Gaza and 60-foot (18-meter) Liberty left the southern port of Larnaca about 10 a.m. Friday for the estimated 30-hour trip. The activists planned to deliver 200 hearing aids to a Palestinian charity for children and hand out 5,000 balloons.

The 46 activists from 14 countries belonging to the U.S.-based group Free Gaza include an 81-year-old Catholic nun and the sister-in-law of Mideast envoy and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Advertisement

The arrival of the boats is another 'nail in the coffin of the blockade,' Haniyeh said in an interview with the Qatari-based television network Al Jazeera.

He urged the head of the Arab League Amr Moussa to come to Gaza and called on Egypt to open the Rafah border crossing, which the Egyptians closed in 2007 when Hamas violently seized control over the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas also lauded the activists, who docked at Gaza City's tiny port Saturday evening, receiving a warm welcome from thousands of jubilant Palestinians after a two-day journey marred by communications troubles and rough seas.

'We were all dizzy, nauseous. We were all tired. But in the last hour it was like we were recharged,' said Ayash Daraj, a journalist with al-Jazeera who sailed with the activists.

Since setting sail from Cyprus early Friday, the Free Gaza mission had been in question. Israel initially hinted it would prevent the vessels from reaching Gaza, and on Saturday, the group accused Israel of jamming its communications equipment.

But late Saturday, Israel said it would permit the boats to dock in Gaza after determining the activists did not pose a security threat. Foreign Ministry spokesman Arye Mekel said Israel wanted to avoid the media provocation that the activists were seeking. He said he had no knowledge of attempts to harm the boats' communications.

He went on to say that the authorities in Greece and Cyprus inspected the vessels and their passengers before they set sail from the port of Larnaca in Cyprus Friday morning, and assured Israel that they carried no weapons.

Israel decided to permit the Free Gaza boats to sail into the Strip as a one-time measure and announced that similar missions in the future would be examined individually. It was further announced that the boats would be inspected upon their return to ensure they were not carrying wanted militants or weapons.

Israel has led an international boycott of the Gaza Strip since the militant Muslim group Hamas seized power of the territory in June 2007. Israel closed its trade crossings with the coastal territory, while neighboring Egypt sealed its passenger crossing, confining Gaza's 1.4 million residents.

Israel has allowed little more than basic humanitarian supplies into Gaza, causing widespread shortages of fuel, electricity and basic goods. Only some people are allowed to leave Gaza for medical care, jobs abroad and the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia.

Under a June truce deal which halted a deadly cycle of bruising Palestinian rocket attacks and deadly Israel airstrikes, Israel has pledged to ease the blockade, but Palestinians say the flow of goods into Gaza remains insufficient and there has been little improvement in the quality of life. Israel has periodically closed the cargo crossings in response to sporadic Palestinian rocket fire that violated the truce.

Earlier Saturday, the Free Gaza activist group accused Israel of sabotaging the mission, saying that Israel had jammed the boats' electronic communication systems.

'I can't think of any other reason or any other party with an interest,' said Angela Godfrey-Goldstein, the group's spokeswoman in Israel. She accused Israel of jeopardizing the activists' safety, and appealed for international assistance.

Israel has denied interfering in the boats' communications.

In a statement, the activists said their communications systems had been jammed and scrambled and said they were victims of electronic piracy.

'We are not experienced sailors. As a results, there is concern about the health and safety of the people on board,' the statement said.

'We are following the development and if they are looking for a provocation, we will know how to avoid it,' Foreign Ministry spokesman Arye Merkel said Saturday.

Another spokesman for the ministry, Aviv Shiron, said Friday that all options were being considered when asked whether Israel intended to use force to turn the boats away.

In Gaza City, meanwhile, a small boat zoomed off the coast waving a Palestinian flag as a crowd of activists and journalists gathered in the tiny fishing port hoping to glimpse the vessels.

'I brought the kids so if they [the activists] arrive, I can tell them welcome - and thank you for not forgetting us,' said Jamila Hassan, a 42-year-old Gaza resident who brought along her 14-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter to the port.

Hamas policemen controlled traffic in and out of the Gaza City port in anticipation of the boats' arrival. Youths leaped off high rocks into deep water nearby. Two large tents were set

up for people to watch the scene.

'Nobody thinks that these boats will break the siege in a practical way, but this is a moral message – what is happening [in Gaza] is illegal and inhumane, and must be halted,' said Raji Sourani, a prominent human rights activist.

On Friday, organizer Paul Larudee said the group expected Israeli authorities to intercept the boats and arrest those on board. He said it was highly unlikely the Israeli navy would fire on them.

The boats departed after last-minute engine repairs to the Liberty, passenger safety drills and a final inspection of the vessels' hulls by Cyprus Marine Police divers. Group members sang a peace song in Arabic and formed the peace sign with their fingers before boarding the boats.

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