

Gaza: The Blockade Runners

Pro-Palestinian activism to break the illegal siege

By [Julie Lévesque](#)

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Global Research Editor's Note

The following article by Julie Lévesque is Part I of a review of the lone humanitarian ship to Gaza, "The Spirit of Rachel Corrie" which reached Palestinian territorial waters before being brutally intercepted by The Israeli Navy.

The mission was organized by the Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF) based in Kuala Lumpur.

For several years now Global Research has been actively collaborating with the PGPF in a broad initiative to criminalize war. It is in this context of continued collaboration that Global Research's Julie Lévesque participated in this important endeavor.

Contrary to the Freedom Flotilla, which was the object of active media debate and discussion, the planning of the "Spirit of Rachel Corrie" mission was not made public.

The Israeli authorities were taken totally by surprise. The Spirit of Rachel Corrie was within less than one kilometer of the Gazan coastline. The Israeli navy acted in a totally improvised fashion, firing at the crew and the passengers until the Spirit of Rachel Corrie retreated into Egyptian territorial waters.

In an act of tremendous courage and determination, the Spirit of Rachel Corrie led by PGPF's Matthias Chang challenged the legitimacy of the Israeli government. It managed "to put a hole" in the blockade of Gaza as well as deliver by land, its humanitarian cargo.

Part I of this report focusses on two courageous Irish activists, Derek and Jenny Graham, who played a central role in leading both last year's "Rachel Corrie" and this year's "Spirit of Rachel Corrie".

Michel Chossudovsky, Global Research, July 18, 2011

PART I

At the end of April 2011, I was asked to be part of the Spirit of Rachel Corrie mission to Gaza organized by the Perdana Global Peace Foundation, a Malaysian non-governmental organization promoting world peace founded by former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad.

It was the first attempt to break the siege after last year's violent assault of the Mavi Marmara by Israeli commandos who murdered 9 activists.

So far this year, it is the only mission that reached Palestinian waters. It was forced to turn around at gunpoint by the Israeli navy. It then became stranded in Egyptian territorial waters off the port of El Arish for seven weeks. The cargo, UPVC sewage pipes to help restore the sewage system destroyed by the Israeli army, has now reached Gaza. The second part of this article will focus on the mission and its implications.

The Spirit of Rachel Corrie mission as well as the latest events surrounding the Freedom Flotilla II's failed attempt to break the illegal siege of Gaza has shed light on the importance of international activism dedicated to the Palestinian struggle.

The UN as well as most Western governments have supported the Israeli government, claiming that attempts to break the siege are “useless” and “provocative”. The “international community” has caved in to Israeli demands to dissuade their nationals from engaging in such endeavors.

This raises a crucial question. International activism pertaining to Palestine must now actively challenge the so-called international community.

“Until you found something worth dying for, you’re not fit to be living.” -
Martin Luther King

The Blockade Runners

They have been called the “Suicide boat people” and the “Peace pirates of the Mediterranean”. In 2008, husband and wife Derek and Jenny Graham traded their cozy, quiet life in Ireland for the Mediterranean high seas and the Israeli jails.

We met at the end of April in the green city of Kuala Lumpur (KL), Malaysia, where the couple was recruited as advisors to the [Perdana Global Peace Foundation](#) (PGPF) in the context of a project to break the illegal siege of Gaza. The latter consisted in coordinating the Spirit of Rachel Corrie Mission (SRC a.k.a MV Finch), a cargo ship carrying UPVC pipes to restore the sewage system in Gaza destroyed by the Israeli army.

“So, what do you guys do for a living?” I asked the Irish couple as we were having a typically Irish “cup’a tea” in their KL apartment. To this casual question Jenny Graham replied this unusual answer: “This is what we do!”

Wow. Who does that? Give up everything to fight someone else’s battle?

“When people ask me what I do for a living, I says I’m a blockade runner”, said former electrician Derek Graham with a crooked smile and a sense of pride. “This is what we live for, this is what drives us”, added Jenny. “We were very comfortable in Ireland, but I wasn’t happy. I wasn’t healthy either. One night I told Derek I says ‘This is nice. We have a house, two cars, two businesses. But I’m so bored. This is not for me’”.



Derek Graham, Jenny Graham and Alan Lonergan from [Sedaka](#), The Ireland Palestine Alliance.

Alan was part of the land team for the Spirit of Rachel Corrie mission.

They took a globe, spun it and pointed randomly at a country: Cyprus. They sold their house and their businesses for a pittance and moved to the Mediterranean island, where they unexpectedly became full time pro-Palestinian activists.

“We were already pro-Palestinian, but it’s in 2008 in Cyprus that we heard of boats going to Gaza. I had sailed all my life. I thought, ya I wanna do that.” Since then, Derek has challenged Israel’s illegal blockade six times. He succeeded on three occasions.

“And here we are, running boats to Gaza and I’ve never been happier and healthier in my life”, added the tiny lady with sparkling blue eyes.

During their 9 month stay in Malaysia the couple was often asked why they were devoting their lives to the Palestinian cause. “A question that we’ve been asked repeatedly is: ‘You’re not Muslim, why do you do this?’ This is not a religious issue. It’s a humanitarian issue. That country is war-torn. These people have nothing! Most kids in Gaza don’t even have shoes”, Jenny explained.

Derek added: “Women have to cut diapers to make sanitary towels. How humiliating is that?”

Jenny went on: “Over there you have drones flying over your head constantly. If we get there you will see the desolation. The worst thing is that it is not a natural disaster, it’s manmade. But the greatest thing is the welcome you get. It is such a warm welcome! Tons of people come to you, touch you and kids want to hold your hand. Gazans are so

happy to see that there are still people in this world who care about them.”

Pro-Palestinian activism: Fighting and dying for justice

The Spirit of Rachel Corrie (SRC) was Jenny’s second attempt to break the siege. She was with her husband on the Rachel Corrie last year, along with Matthias Chang, leader of the SRC mission, as well as, among others, Denis Halliday former UN Assistant-Secretary General and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Mairead Maguire.

Jenny remembers:

“We were in international waters and were asked to turn around by the Israeli Navy. We refused. The Israelis boarded the ship screaming. They cannot talk, they can only scream to your face. They took Derek, put him on his knees and put a gun to his head. At that moment I thought I’d never see him again.

I was strip-searched. They wanted to hide me behind some sheet and I said: ‘No, I want everybody to see what you’re doing to me.’ And I took my clothes off in front of everyone. The soldiers were stunned.”

They all ended up in a detention center in Ashdod, Israel and were banned for ten years for “illegally” entering Israel.

The fact of the matter is that they never entered Israel illegally: they were brought by force to Israel by the Israelis. But it’s been demonstrated many times, when it comes to Israel-Palestine, justice could not care less for facts and logic.

“Arbitrary detention is common in Israeli jails. Many people have been detained for years without even knowing why!” said Derek.

The ship named Rachel Corrie, carrying humanitarian aid such as cement, educational and medical supplies, was taken to the Port of Ashdod and wrecked by the Israelis. To this day, the goods have not been delivered. Cement, just like steel, concrete and asphalt, only to name a few, are allowed in Gaza only “for PA-authorized Projects Implemented by the International Community”. (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Gaza: Lists of Controlled Entry Items](#), July 4, 2010)

[Matthias Chang](#), a Malaysian barrister, one of the architects of Freedom Flotilla I and leader of the PGPF mission, has dedicated his life to the causes of peace and justice, for over 40 years. He explained why the two ships sponsored by PGPF were named after the American activist: “Rachel Corrie symbolizes what motivates people other than religion. The first ship was hijacked, but her spirit lives on. Her courage and determination are an inspiration which goes beyond religious issues.” (Here is Matthias Chang’s account of the 2010 Rachel Corrie mission: [Merging with Rachel Corrie – A Dedication to Non-violence](#))



Matthias Chang

“When they were talking to the captain before they arrested us, the Israeli Navy would not even say the name of the ship. They kept calling her MV Linda, her previous name. They never called her Rachel Corrie,” Jenny said.

In 2003, at the age of 23, American activist [Rachel Corrie](#) was crushed to death by an Israeli army bulldozer while protesting peacefully to prevent the demolition of a Palestinian home.

She was unfairly demonized as an “extreme left-wing American activist” (Jacob Shrybman, [Debunking the Gaza Siege Myth](#), May 3, 2010) “interfering with a military operation to legally demolish an empty house used to conceal [a tunnel] ... used by Palestinian terrorists to illegally smuggle weapons from Egypt to Gaza.” (Mitchell G. Bard, [Myths and Facts Online. Online Exclusives](#), Jewish Virtual Library) Her parents sued the State of Israel and are expecting the ruling in April 2012.



Rachel Corrie



Rachel Corrie after she was run over by an Israeli army bulldozer.

Rachel Corrie interview, 2 days before she was killed.

Pro-Palestinian Activists Portrayed as Terrorists

Pro-Palestinian activists are regularly portrayed as terrorists, supporters of terrorism, Hamas

partisans, anti-Semites, etc.

George Galloway, a British MP who delivered humanitarian aid to Gaza with Viva Palestina in 2009, was banned from entering Canada that same year. According to Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, Mr. Galloway had “publicly and overtly handed tens of thousands of dollars to the leader of a banned anti-Semitic terrorist organization called Hamas”. (Cathryn Atkinson, [National security claim rejected by judge in bid to redact Galloway emails](#), rabble.ca, April 20, 2011)

Galloway brought the Canadian government to court. He won his case. The judge concluded that the Conservative government had banned him from Canada “because they disagreed with his political views — not because he presented any threat to Canadians”. (John Bonnar, [George Galloway returns to Canada this weekend](#), rabble.ca September 30, 2011)

Like Rachel Corrie and many others, Derek and Jenny Graham, far from being advocates of terrorism, devote and risk their lives to provide humanitarian aid and essential goods to the victims of the illegal Israeli occupation. Death threats, dead friends — being a pro-Palestinian activist is not easy.

“Oh we received death threats, but we don’t care”, said Jenny raising her shoulders with indifference. “They can threaten us, it’s not gonna stop us.”

Do you not fear for your life? “Ya! But the plight of the Palestinians is what drives us. If Derek dies, I’ll survive. And I’ll keep on going. It’s gonna hurt, but I’ll survive. Same thing for him.”

This perilous humanitarian stance and commitment has claimed the lives of many. In addition to the numerous Palestinian journalists and activists killed in their own struggle, several foreign activists have either been killed by the Israeli military, the Mossad or by hired gunmen.

Thomas Hurndall, a British photography student, was shot in the head in 2003 while trying to save children from Israeli snipers. He died at 22 in January 2004, after nine months in a coma. Like Rachel Corrie, he was a member of the International Solidarity Movement, a Palestinian-led organization.



Thomas Hurndall



Thomas Hurndall shot by Israeli snipers

Derek and Jenny's Italian friend, [Vittorio \(Victor\) Arrigoni](#), was tortured and killed under strange circumstances. Derek describes his late friend: "He was a gentle giant. He had the biggest arms I had ever seen, but he wouldn't have hurt a fly. And everybody loved him, especially the women. Oh they loved him!"



Vittorio Arrigoni with a Palestinian girl



Vittorio Arrigoni while he was held hostage, tortured and strangled to death.

The murder was allegedly committed by a Salafist group, which denied being responsible for his death.

And he goes on with this harrowing tale. “Before he was killed, the Israelis took him while he was acting as human shield on a Palestinian fisherman’s boat and they locked him up for days in a toilet that hadn’t been cleaned for years. He was eaten by maggots and he had blisters all over his body when he came out.”

Video directed by Vittorio Arrigoni showing the daily Palestinian life under Israeli fire.

Victor, 36, was allegedly killed by an obscure Salafist group, supposedly in retaliation to the capture of one of their leaders by the Hamas. Some who knew him, as well as Hamas leaders, rather hint his murder was the work of the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, and that it was intended to “intimidate other foreign activists hoping to sail to Gaza as part of the next flotilla”. (The Associated Press and Haaretz Service, [Hamas official hints Israel killed Italian activist to intimidate future Gaza flotilla members](#), Haaretz.com, April 15, 2011)

Regarding the Mossad, Jenny admits: “Oh we know they’re watching us. They took pictures of us while we were in Ireland. When they were interrogating me in jail I saw the pictures, and I told them: ‘These were taken in Ireland!’ They denied it. I replied: ‘I know they’ve been taken in Ireland, the sweater I’m wearing in that picture, I never took it with me, I left it at home’.”

She adds: “I remember one time, Victor and I were having coffee on a terrace and one of them was in his car on the other side of the street. Victor looked at him and pointed his cup saying, ‘You want coffee?’ But the ones you see are not a threat. It’s the ones you don’t see who are.”

Unfortunately, those deaths don’t draw much media attention. Most people don’t know about Rachel Corrie or Vittorio Arrigoni. If a dead Palestinian isn’t considered newsworthy, why would a dead pro-Palestinian be?

Last year’s brutal attack on the Mavi Marmara was an exception. Although it put Israel in a bad light, the killing of the 9 activists on board has served the purpose of

discouraging activists who challenge to the illegal siege of Gaza.

The number of activists who joined the 2011 Freedom Flotilla, however, shows how ineffective last year's bloodshed was in discouraging activists from attempting to break the siege.

In a bitter irony, however, Israel has succeeded in persuading the United Nations as well as Western governments to condemn such attempts and discourage their nationals from challenging Israel's blatant violation of international law.

The insidious Role of the United Nations Secretary General

With Ban Ki-moon's support, Israel's violation of international law has been rubber-stamped by the UN. In an utterly absurd statement last May, the UN Secretary General has managed to "turn realities up side down", presenting the illegal siege of Gaza as legitimate. According to Ban Ki Moon, "assistance and goods destined to Gaza should be channeled through **legitimate crossings and established channels**".

It is worth noting that several UN envoys such as Desmond Tutu, Navi Pillay and Richard Falk have explicitly condemned the Israeli blockade, underscoring the fact that it violates both the UN charter and the basic tenets of humanitarian law:

U.N. envoy Archbishop Desmond Tutu on Wednesday called the **Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip illegal** [and], "a siege" and a "**gross violation to Human Rights**", echoing rights groups which accuse Israel of collective punishment. ([U.N. envoy Tutu calls Gaza blockade illegal](#), Reuters, May 28, 2008. Emphasis added.)

Pillay said **the blockade is illegal under international human rights and humanitarian law**, and "must end now." ([UN rights chief urges Israel to end 'illegal' Gaza blockade](#), Ma'an News Agency, November 18, 2008. Emphasis added.)

"Richard Falk, the UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories [...] said **the blockade is "a deliberate policy of collective punishment which is legally indefensible and morally reprehensible"** [UN Expert Prof. Em. Richard Falk calls for immediate lifting of Israeli blockade of Gaza](#), UN News Center, June 23, 2011. Emphasis added.)

It is worth noting that the UN Secretary-General in violation of his mandate presented the flotillas as "potentially violent":

"The Secretary-General called on all Governments concerned to use their influence to discourage **such flotillas, which carry the potential to escalate into violent conflict**" (United Nations, [Statement Attributable to the Spokesperson of the Secretary-General on Letters by the Secretary-General about Possible Flotillas to Gaza](#), May 27, 2011)

Yet, in September 2010, the [fact-finding mission](#) established by the UN Human Rights Council concluded it was Israel which had used excessive and unnecessary violence against unarmed civilians:

- Israel demonstrated "totally **unnecessary violence**"
- The **conduct of the Israeli military** and other personnel towards the passengers on the

flotilla was “**disproportionate and excessive**”

- “They demonstrated levels of **totally unnecessary violence**”
- **No arms or weapons of an offensive nature were taken on board any of the vessels** of the flotilla except for a few catapults
- Six of the deceased were the of **summary executions**, two of whom were **shot after they were severely injured and could not defend themselves**,
- “**Passengers were assaulted** by being kicked and gun-butted. Passengers on three of the other vessels were also subjected to **unnecessary violence by Israeli forces** as they took control,”
- When they finally disembarked at the port of Ashdod, **attempts were made to get them to sign confessions that they had entered Israel illegally** – some of **those who refused to sign** or give their fingerprints were **further beaten**.
- The treatment on shore was a continuation of the treatment onboard ship after the military had taken control,” he reported, adding that, at the end of the ordeal, **passengers had to endure further violence including beatings prior to deportation** at Ben Gurion International Airport near Tel Aviv. ([UN rights probe into Gaza flotilla incident rebukes Israel for ‘unnecessary’ violence](#), UN News Center, September 27, 2010. Emphasis added)

The fundamental issue is the undemocratic nature of the UN Security Council. While the UN General Assembly, which is truly representative of the international community has condemned Israel, actual decision making lies in the hands of the Security Council, which consists of the 5 permanent members (U.S., UK, France, Russia, China), who can veto any resolution, plus ten non-permanent members.

In regards to resolutions critical of Israel, the [number of vetoes from th U.S.](#) is impressive and has kept the UN from doing its duty, which is:

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war...

to **reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights**, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in **the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small**, and

to establish conditions under which **justice** and **respect** for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources **of international law can be maintained** [...] ([Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations](#))

The Necessity of Pro-Palestinian Activism

Recently, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared the following:

“We do not believe that the flotilla is a necessary or useful effort to try to assist the people of Gaza... It’s **not helpful** for there to be flotillas that try to **provoke actions by entering into Israeli waters** and creating a situation in which the **Israelis have the right to defend themselves**.” ([Remarks With Philippines Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario After Their Meeting](#), U.S. Department of State, June 23, 2011. Emphasis added)

In a bitter twist, Israel the oppressor, is portrayed as the victim: Israel is threatened and has “the right to defend itself”. In addition, Clinton claims that the flotillas “provoke actions by entering into Israeli waters”, when in fact, they never have and never will. These waters do not belong to Israel: they are either international or Palestinian waters, which Israel illegally controls through its military.

On the ground however, such efforts to break the illegal siege are not seen as unnecessary and useless:

Despite the chorus [which states profusely] that “the flotilla is not necessary”, reality on the ground shows that it is **non-violent direct action that has been the only effective power to make change in the lives of Palestinians.**

The pressure applied by the flotilla effort has led to **three main changes** — in terms of the **policy of the siege** applied by Israel to Gaza; in terms of the media coverage and **public attention to the crime scene that is Gaza**; and in terms of **compelling governments and institutions to take a position on the blockade.** (Adam Shapiro, [Gaza flotillas have made a difference](#), Gulf News, July 6, 2011. Emphasis added.)

As long as the UN violates its own charter and does not challenge Israel for its violations of international law and basic human rights, pro-Palestinian activists will continue relentlessly in the pursuit of justice and dignity. In this regard, hope IS useful and necessary.

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Julie Lévesque is a journalist and researcher with the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal. She was among the first independent journalists to visit Haiti in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake. In 2011, she was on board "The Spirit of Rachel Corrie", the only humanitarian vessel which penetrated Gaza territorial waters before being shot at by the Israeli Navy.

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