

Terror on Aid Ship: “Plan Was to Kill Activists and Deter Future Convoys”

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Nazareth –An Arab member of the Israeli parliament who was on board the international flotilla that was attacked on Monday as it tried to take humanitarian aid to Gaza accused Israel yesterday of intending to kill peace activists as a way to deter future convoys.

Haneen Zoubi said Israeli naval vessels had surrounded the flotilla’s flagship, the Mavi Marmara, and fired on it a few minutes before commandos abseiled from a helicopter directly above them.

Terrified passengers had been forced off the deck when water was sprayed at them. She said she was not aware of any provocation or resistance by the passengers, who were all unarmed.

She added that within minutes of the raid beginning, three bodies had been brought to the main room on the upper deck in which she and most other passengers were confined. Two had gunshot wounds to the head, in what she suggested had been executions.

Two other passengers slowly bled to death in the room after Israeli soldiers ignored messages in Hebrew she had held up at the window calling for medical help to save them. She said she saw seven other passengers seriously wounded.

“Israel had days to plan this military operation,” she told a press conference in Nazareth. “They wanted many deaths to terrorise us and to send a message that no future aid convoys should try to break the siege of Gaza.”

Released early yesterday by police, apparently because of her parliamentary immunity, she said she was speaking out while most of the hundreds of other peace activists were either being held by Israel for deportation or were under arrest.

Three other leaders of Israel’s large Palestinian Arab minority, including Sheikh Raed Salah, a spiritual leader, were arrested as their ships docked in the southern port of Ashdod. Lawyers said that under Israeli law they could be held and questioned for up to 30 days without being charged.

Contradicting Israeli claims, Ms Zoubi said a search by the soldiers after they took control of the Marmara discovered no arms or other weapons.

It was vital, she added, that the world demand an independent UN inquiry to find out what

had happened on the ship rather than allow Israel to carry out a “whitewash” with its own military investigation.

Ms Zoubi spoke as Palestinians inside both Israel and the occupied territories observed a general strike called by their leaders. A statement from the High Follow-Up Committee, the main political body for Israel’s Palestinian citizens, described the raid on the flotilla as “state-sponsored terrorism”.

Demonstrations and marches in most of the main Palestinian towns and villages in Israel passed off quietly. Local analysts described the mood as angry but subdued, not least because of the openly hostile climate that has developed towards Palestinian citizens since crackdowns on their protests during the Israeli attack on Gaza 18 months ago.

However, police were reported to have been put on high alert, with thousands of extra officers drafted into the north, where most Palestinian citizens live.

On Monday, clashes between protesters and police broke out close to the al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem’s Old City and in the northern town of Umm al Fahm after false rumours circulated that Sheikh Salah, the leader of Israel’s main Islamic Movement, had been killed in the Israeli naval operation.

Even before the attack on the flotilla, the country’s Palestinian minority, a fifth of the population, had been braced for a backlash from the government and Jewish public for its leaders’ participation in the flotilla. As the ships set sail, Ynet, Israel’s most popular news website, had asked whether Ms Zoubi was an “MP in the service of Hamas”.

But faced with the severe diplomatic fall-out from Israel’s killing of peace activists, Israel’s Palestinian leaders warned that they were likely to come under even fiercer criticism in coming days.

Yesterday right-wing parties launched their first attacks on Ms Zoubi, demanding the revocation of her immunity and her expulsion from the parliament. Danny Danon, a member of the prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party, called for her to be “tried for treason”.

In her statement on the attack, Ms Zoubi said that at 4am on Monday she had seen at least 14 Israeli boats surround their ship 130km out at sea, in international waters.

She said the passengers had been gripped with fear at the noise and confusion as the commandos abseiled on to the deck. “I did not believe we were going to survive more than five minutes,” she said.

Taleb al Sana, another Arab MP, supported Ms Zoubi’s contention that Israeli claims that the commandos shot only at the passengers’ legs were false. “I have visited the wounded in hospital and they all have shot wounds to the head and body,” he said.

Adalah, a legal centre for Israel’s Arab minority, said nine lawyers had been given limited access yesterday afternoon to the hundreds of activists detained in the southern city of Beersheva and were trying to take testimonies “in very difficult circumstances”.

Its lawyers and human rights groups were also trying to track down who had been injured and where they being treated.

“Our view is that Israel is intentionally trying to obstruct this work and is enforcing an information blackout,” said Gaby Rubin, a spokeswoman for Adalah.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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