

## The Gaza Freedom March and the Cairo Declaration

by Sylvia Schwarz

Most of the participants of the Gaza Freedom March have returned to their homes around the world energized and inspired to continue working. Few of the 1,400 international activists (and none of the seven Minnesotans who had signed up for the march) made it into Gaza from Cairo, where we had convened. We had planned to photograph, interview, and write in an attempt to put Gaza and Palestine into the news, bringing the story of the oppression and human rights abuses of Palestinians to the eyes of the world. 50,000 Gazans waited to join us in a nonviolent march toward the Erez Crossing in the north.

As we were preparing for our trip, unsettling news came from the organizers, Code Pink, that the Egyptian government would not allow us to get through the checkpoint into Gaza. Code Pink had led seven previous delegations to Gaza in the past year, and had always been allowed to enter, but this time the Egyptian government was intent on frustrating our efforts. They revoked all our permits to meet, sent spies and plainclothes police to monitor our activities, and shut down businesses that we planned to patronize (how the Egyptians put up with this is a mystery!). Many groups had humanitarian aid to be brought in, items like school supplies, laptop computers, medicines, toys, all items that have been banned from the region during Israel's brutal blockade, which began after the wrong political party was elected in free and fair elections. Although we were denied entrance to Gaza, we still made good use of our time and felt that we still had an enormously successful trip.

We managed to be front-page news in all Egyptian and European media for more than a week, and though we had hoped to be top news in those media from within Gaza, this media attention brought into sharp focus the collusion between Israel, Egypt, and the United States in enforcing the illegal and inhumane siege on a defenseless population. The Gaza Freedom March even made news in the U.S., in mainstream media from the Washington Post to the New York Times and Los Angeles Times. Given the difficulties of getting any media coverage for Palestine-related issues in mainstream media, this is no small feat. Despite the restarting of the "peace process" so sanguinely reported by Hillary Clinton recently, few people around the world take that seriously any more.

With communication among us a major challenge (among other things, all of our meeting permits were revoked and it is against the law in Egypt to meet in groups of more than six), we still managed to issue the "Cairo Declaration" (<http://cairodeclaration.org/>). This document was initiated by the South African delegation, inspiring and brilliant activists from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and had input from delegates from all over the world, including civil Palestinian society. It demands that Israel comply with international law, and to this end a number of proposals are made. These are legal, economic, and cultural

measures—all nonviolent—that will exert pressure on Israel to end its apartheid policies, and the proposals are specific actions that each of us can take towards that goal. Everyone is encouraged to go to the website and sign the document.

The movement is growing but the work is just beginning. In the next weeks and months I will be asking for help in arranging speaking tours, contacting political representatives, planning Israel Apartheid Week activities, and flooding the media with Palestine-centric op-ed and articles. It was truly inspiring to be among the delegates from all over the world, each with his/her own story and special interest. The Gaza Freedom March was instrumental in galvanizing activism on Israel/Palestine issues. Let's maintain and step up the energy!

Sylvia Schwarz is an engineer and resident of St. Paul, Minnesota. She is a member of International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN) and has been studying the situation in Israel/Palestine for a number of years. A tour of the West Bank and Palestinian villages inside Israel by the group "Birthright Unplugged" (an answer to the pro-Israel organization "Birthright Israel") compelled her to act in support of a just, democratic solution to the conflict – one in which international law is respected. In her words, "I had no choice about participating in the Gaza Freedom March. It was the right thing to do, and I had to go."

For more detail about the Cairo experience (including a photo of the Minnesota contingent) and to learn about the Break the Bonds movement, see: [mn.breakthebonds.org/?p=284](http://mn.breakthebonds.org/?p=284).