

# **Israel bars aid convoy to Gaza**

Al Jazeera Net

**By Rachel Shabi at the Erez crossing, Gaza-Israel border**

The Israeli military has prevented an aid convoy organised by Israeli human rights organisations, peace activists, and former military personnel, from reaching needy families in the besieged Gaza Strip.

Israeli groups braved dipping temperatures and the unusually rain-sodden grounds of the Erez border crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip on Saturday, hoping that Israeli authorities would allow five tonnes of food through.

As of Monday, the Gaza-bound supplies, comprising non-perishable goods, are still warehoused at Kibbutz Kerem Shalom on the southern border of the Gaza strip, awaiting army clearance to cross into the strip.

Adam Keller, of Gush Shalom, an Israel-Palestine peace bloc, said: "We are still in negotiations with the army and are trying to mobilise Knesset members. We have an appeal to the supreme court that is ready to be lodged. We hope it will not come to that, but will use it if necessary."

The Israeli supreme court is already considering a wider appeal made last week by Israeli humanitarian organisations, asking that the court compels the government to lift its blockade on Gaza.

## **Israeli, Palestinian unity**

The Israeli and Palestinian peace activists first arrived at the Erez crossing in a convoy of about 100 cars and 20 buses that wound its way from Israel's main cities to the border on Saturday.

Travelling under the "End the Siege!" banner, the convoy brought about 1,000 demonstrators and five tonnes of food aid to the border.

In the past 10 days Israel had tightened a seven-month blockade of the strip, halting supplies of foodstuffs, medical equipment and fuel.

The Israeli government describes the siege as a response to rocket fire into southern Israel from Gaza, but human rights groups see it as collective punishment.

Saturday's peace activists came from what in Israel is known as the "radical left", groups such as Gush Shalom (Peace Bloc), the International Committee Against House Demolitions, the Coalition of Women for Peace and the Arab-Israeli Balad and Hadash parties.

The action at Erez ran in tandem with a protest in Gaza City, where some 200 demonstrators gathered and were connected to Israeli demonstrators via speeches broadcast in both directions through mobile phones.

Organisers had planned that Israelis and Gazans would protest within eye distance of each other -with the former group located on a nearby Israeli hilltop enabling line-of-sight vision with the latter group - but this proposal was rejected by the Israeli army, citing security reasons.

Making his way to the Erez border from Jerusalem, Reuben Moskovitz, 79, a self-defined veteran campaigner, said: "I am glad to see today that the Israeli peace movement is still alive and there are still people ready to make an outcry against this huge crime against humanity, against international law and against peace that is being committed in Gaza."

### **Symbolic gesture**

Demonstrators of a different generation were of the same mind.

"We just thought that the blockade of Gaza is wrong, that starving people and preventing them from having basic human rights like food, fuel and water is not the solution," said Rachel Aharoni, 17, from Tel Aviv.

Arab-Israeli protesters were also a prominent presence at the crossing.

"It is so painful for me to see this reality in Gaza, as a mother and as a human being, and not to do anything," said Arees Sabbagh, 28, from Nazareth. "I see it as a human obligation to come today."

Demonstrators brought two lorry-loads of food and provisions to the Erez border, which the campaigners expect to cross on Monday morning.



**Demonstrators brought two lorry-loads of food and provisions to the Erez border [AFP]**

"We don't believe that this is going to solve the problem in Gaza," says Amit Ramon, one of the organisers.

"It is intended to be symbolic."

The goods in part comprise parcels made up by individual demonstrators bearing hand-written notes to their recipients.

### **Praising the breach**

Several of the speakers at the Erez crossing on Saturday praised Gazans on breaching the Rafah border last week, while condemning both Qassam rocket attacks from the strip on the Israeli border town of Sderot and Israeli military attacks on Gaza.

Eyad Sarraj, founder of the Gaza Community Mental Health programme, spoke from Gaza City by mobile phone and his voice was amplified on the Israeli side of the crossing.

"I am deeply honoured and proud to have the chance to talk to you," he told the Israelis.

"Every drop of blood shed in Israel or in Palestine is a crime against humanity that has

to be prevented."

Just like Moskowitz, the peace veteran from Jerusalem, Sarraj later told Al Jazeera that demonstrators in Gaza were "pleasantly surprised that there is still a peace camp in Israel".

But the slogans and demands of this camp are clearly drowned out by the opinions of a wider Israeli public.

"The people who are organising those convoys are considered to be fringe, eccentric and liberal in the negative, American meaning of the word," says Akiva Eldar of the Israeli liberal newspaper, *Haaretz*.

In recent weeks, and especially before the Hamas breach of the Rafah border crossing, much of the Israeli media focus was on the rocket attacks on Sderot.

According to the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs, over 200 Qassam rockets and mortar bombs have been fired on Sderot and nearby communities since mid-January.

### **Public supports blockade**

Ephraim Yaar, an academic and co-author of Tel Aviv University's Peace Index which monitors Israeli public opinion, suggests that the national mood is one of support for the tightened seal of Gaza's borders.

"In terms of Sderot and other communities around the Gaza strip, people feel that something must be done about it and that the Israel government's responsibility is to protect its citizens," he said.

Yaar said the Israeli public is sceptical about warnings of an impending humanitarian disaster in Gaza where 80 per cent of the population depends on the UN for food aid.

"They don't believe that the situation in Gaza is as bad as is described," Yaar said.

While international newspapers reported on the severe consequences in Gaza of an Israeli fuel blockade and consequent closure of the electricity generator, Israeli media discussed whether the issue might have been manipulated and exaggerated by Hamas.

Both Yaar and Eldar point out that UN reports do not hold much credibility among the Israeli public.

The most recent Peace Index poll, earlier this month, reveals that 81 per cent of Israelis support increasing "the targeted killings" of Palestinian fighters. And 65 per cent do not think that Israel should reach a ceasefire agreement with Hamas.

### **Sharing the suffering**

But at the Erez crossing, where protesters stayed without incident for several hours under the watchful eye of Israeli border guards, a surprising endorsement of the radical left position came from a resident of kibbutz Zikim, near Sderot.

Addressing the rally, Shir Shudzik, 17, described the trauma of living under rocket fire for the past seven years.

But then she said: "I know that I'm not alone in this situation, that people are suffering even more on the other side."

Shudzik said she does not trust either Hamas or the Israel government to bring peace.



**Several Israeli speakers praised Gazans for breaching the Rafah border last week [AFP]**

"But the fact that we are here together, Arabs and Jews, might be a beginning and it brings me hope," she said.

This message of hope was echoed by the organisers of the rally.

Uri Avnery, of Gush Shalom, in an earlier statement said: "Our hearts and minds are with our Palestinian brothers who are at this moment demonstrating with us on the other side of the fence – Don't lose faith that one day we will meet together in this place without fences, without walls, without firepower, without violence, the sons of two peoples living next to each other in peace, in friendship, in partnership."