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Hunger strike for Gaza

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Cairo, Egypt -- The Gaza Freedom March is truly an unprecedented, historic event for the global grass-roots peace movement. This is one of the largest, if not the largest, mass international solidarity action ever undertaken. Some 1,362 people from 42 nations have traveled here to Cairo in order to journey through the Sinai Peninsula into Gaza to join 50,000 in a march commemorating the first anniversary of the Israeli attack and siege which left 1,400 Gazans dead and 5,000 wounded. Such a massive outpouring never happened during the Vietnam, Central America or Iraq wars. It is a sign of the world's outrage of the U.S.-backed Israeli attack on Gaza, and the continuing strength of the peace movement.

But when we arrived here in Gaza, we learned that the Egyptian government had categorically banned our entry into Gaza, banned any attempt to get to Gaza, banned any public gatherings, and banned our initial orientation evening at the prestigious Jesuit College of the Holy Family.

What to do? Many nonviolent demonstrations and actions have been undertaken over the last few days. Three French people surrounded the French embassy and remained camped out there. Sit-ins have taken place in various other embassies. Some five hundred of us camped out in front of the U.N. offices along the Nile. Others took public transportation through the Sinai in attempts to get closer to Gaza, and have been arrested or detained.

On Monday, 85 year old Hedy Epstein began a hunger strike as a modest gesture to call upon the Egyptian government to let us go to Gaza and for the end of the siege of Gaza. Hedy is a Holocaust survivor and her decision immediately inspired at least 22 others of us to join her.

And so, for several days now, we have been fasting, praying and vigiling, not just to be allowed into Gaza, but for an end to the siege of Gaza itself. In our statement, at a press conference today in front of

Journalist Headquarters, we spoke of sharing "the hunger of all Gazans for justice and peace," and we called upon "everyone in the world to join us in prayer, fasting and other nonviolent actions to speak up for the imprisoned people of Gaza and for an end to the seige."

None of us expected to spend this Christmas-New Year's Week in Cairo. We all want to offer our solidarity and be with our suffering sisters and brothers in Gaza. It is clear that our presence has exposed Egypt's complete participation, with Israel and the U.S., in the ongoing imprisonment of Gaza. But our small witness has stirred widespread interest here, and we hope our prayers are answered.

Even so, the efforts and attempts of the Gaza Freedom March already mark a massive victory. The whole project unveils new possibilities of organized, international nonviolence.

As the fast continues here in Cairo, we urge everyone to stand in solidarity with the people of Gaza, and to explore their own nonviolent actions, as together, we speak out for an end to the siege and occupation, and the coming of a new world of nonviolence.

John Dear is a Jesuit priest, activist and author of 25 books, including most recently, *A Persistent Peace*, *Put Down the Sword*, and *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*. For information, see www.johndear.org

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[2] <https://www.ncronline.org/node/160616>