

September 21, 2003, Sunday

SECTION: FOREIGN NEWS; Pg. 20

LENGTH: 356 words

HEADLINE: JEWS AND ARABS TO BREAK THE ICE' IN JOINT POLAR TREK

BYLINE: ERIC SILVER IN JERUSALEM

BODY:

Six men and two women sailed out of the Tel Aviv marina yesterday on a trial run for an extraordinary joint Israeli-Palestinian expedition to Antarctica.

On 1 January four Israelis and four Palestinians will set off on the real thing: a 35-day voyage from Patagonia in southern Chile to Antarctica, where they aim to scale and name an unclimbed peak.

Named "Breaking the Ice", the expedition enjoys the blessing of Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General, the Dalai Lama and Shimon Peres, Israel's former prime minister who this weekend celebrates his 80th birthday.

Hezkel Nathaniel, a 41-year-old Israeli extreme sports enthusiast with an MBA from Brunel University, masterminded the trip. "We're not a political group," he said. "We're a group of individuals. We shall be travelling under very harsh conditions. We shall have to work as a team. I wanted to show that Jews and Arabs can work in peace together."

One of the Arabs, Ziad Darwish, a 52-year-old Jerusalem journalist, added: "Real peace is made between peoples, not leaders. This expedition will show the world that we can sit together, talk freely, argue."

They don't expect it to be easy. Each has his or her history. Two of the Israelis did their army service in Sayeret Matkal, the Israeli SAS. Nasser Quass, an Arab football coach in East Jerusalem, spent three years in jail for attacking soldiers with firebombs during the first intifada in the late 1980s.

The expedition leader, Doron Erel, who climbed Everest in 1992, is a son of Polish Holocaust survivors. Another Israeli, Yarden Fata, trekked from Ethiopia as a 14-year-old. Most of her family died in the wilderness.

The whole party will fly to Chamonix in November for a week's basic training in snow and ice. But stamina is not the only factor. One Arab candidate was dropped because Israeli authorities refused him a permit to leave the West Bank. Another of the Arab contingent, Mohammed Qasem, 39, is a doctor at a leading Jewish hospital in Jerusalem. He has a permit to enter the city, but not the rest of Israel. He has to apply every time. The ice is not yet broken.

LOAD-DATE: September 21, 2003