



Sahara peace trek stalls at Libyan border

Activists quarrel over visa requirement

SALLUM, Egypt (AP) -- After approaching the Libyan border hand-in-hand, singing songs of peace, a mission of Jews, Muslims and Christians turned on each other when it became clear Libya would not let them enter because they did not have visas.

A grueling two-week trek, sponsored by the Berlin-based nonprofit group Breaking the Ice, from Jerusalem across the Sahara Desert climaxed at the Libyan border.

The nine-member peace mission, including two Israelis, marched in a horizontal line to the Egypt-Libyan border, singing "Give Peace a Chance," John Lennon's "Imagine" and humming Richard Wagner's "Flight of the Valkyries," convinced the Libyans would let them in despite their lack of visas.

The team did not apply for visas because Israel and Libya have no diplomatic ties. The group, including an Israeli ex-fighter pilot who spent two years as a prisoner of war in Syria and an Iraqi who doubled for Saddam Hussein's son, Uday, also wanted to cross borders without visas as a message of peace.

The group spent the night in no-man's land between Egypt and Libya, waiting for a Libyan response.

Tired and cranky from spending long hours driving through the desert in rickety 1960s-era German trucks, the team began fighting about how to deal with the situation, dividing along cultural lines.

The head of Libya's border authority turned them away early Wednesday, telling them they would be arrested if they did not leave immediately. The Israelis, he said, would certainly not be allowed in. The group had decided from the get-go that if the Israelis were barred they would remain together in Egypt.

But the Libyan response was a disappointment after days of camping out in the Sahara's barren dunes, traveling by foot and on camel to complete their mission of planting a Jerusalem olive tree in Tripoli.

The Iraqi, Palestinian, Iranian and Afghan members of the group yelled at their teammates, trying to explain how insulting and absurd it was to think that the Libyan border authorities would let them in without visas. The Americans and Israelis thought their message of peace would convince the Libyans to bend the rules.

"When I go back to the States I'm going to think 'Wow, we have a long way to go in this dialogue.' We keep dividing and arguing along cultural lines," said Daniel Patrick Sheridan, a captain in the New York City Fire Department who lost 343 fellow firefighters in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center.

Breaking the Ice, founded in 2003 by Israeli Heskell Nathaniel, is a conflict resolution group that wants participants to confront divisive religious and political issues in a setting where they depend on each other for survival. In 2004, Nathaniel led a team of Israelis and Palestinians to Antarctica.

Libya doesn't yield to pressure

In the weeks leading up to the trek, a Libyan businessman based in Germany was in touch with the highest officials in Tripoli, negotiating the team's entry and explaining the significance of the mission.

The team has contacted U.S. congressmen, Libyan embassies and consulates in Europe and Washington and even the office and foundation of Seif Gadhafi, Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's son, in an attempt to gain access into the desert country.

The group left Jerusalem on March 7, and spent the last hours of their trip approaching the Egypt-Libya border singing, dancing and blasting Arabic music out of the truck's speakers.

Egyptian villagers lined the roads, cheering on the motley crew of travelers, and waving at the trucks, one of which is flying an enormous flag with the Breaking the Ice logo.

The last hours of the drive, Sheridan took over as driver of one of the old trucks when the German driver began having knee problems. Climbing up the steep hill leading to the border, one of the trucks ran out of gas. The passengers were all forced to squeeze into the remaining truck, hanging out of windows and sitting on the roof.

Mohammed Azzam Alarjah, a 22-year-old Palestinian accounting student from the West Bank town of Qalqiliya, pounded on a drum, energizing the crowds of villagers.

'Not going without my team'

No one in the group has ever visited Libya, but they said they are determined to stick with Gil Fogiel, the Israeli ex-fighter pilot, and Galit Oren, 40, an Israeli whose mother was killed in a 1995 suicide bombing, if the Libyans refuse them entry.

"There was a message (of peace) to pass and it didn't get through. I know Arab countries. When they say no, they mean no. This is coming from a high level in the Libyan government if not Gadhafi himself," Latif Yahia, the Iraqi who doubled as Uday Hussein in the late 1980s, said.

"They said I can come in, but I said, 'No, I'm not going without my team, which includes Israelis. They are my friends. I respect and love each member of this team,'" Yahia said.

If last-ditch efforts to convince the Libyan authorities to let them in fail, the group will spend the final days of the expedition in Egypt, using the time to get to know one another and trying to bridge some of the gaps that have formed in decades of Mideast conflict.

"I'm disappointed about this. We didn't manage to overcome an obstacle," Oren, the Israeli, said. "But this wasn't the most important thing from the beginning. The point is what happens inside this group, not outside."

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