

**THE ISRAELIS COMMITTED WAR CRIMES
ON THE *MAVI MARMARA*, AND ARE LYING
TO COVER UP WHAT THEY HAVE DONE**

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Kevin Neish (1957) is a Canadian, and a retired vocational instructor and former civilian National Defense Department employee. He has spent his life working for peace and justice. He has worked in Guatemala as a human rights observer/human shield in 1989, in El Salvador as an election observer in 2000 and 2009, in a Colombian high security prison for political prisoners as a human rights observer in 2009 and 2010, and in Bethlehem/Palestine as a human shield in 2002.

Why did you join the Gaza Freedom Flotilla? What was your motivation?

My motivation was peace and justice, just like my Mother and Father, who were also fighters for peace and justice around the world.

Did you expect an Israeli attack before setting off? As you know, the Israeli authorities state that they warned in advance that they would not allow the Flotilla to go through.

Yes, I expected them to attack, but not as violently as they did. The Canadian Embassy phoned me moments before I departed on the boat "Challenger II" to tell me not to go as they felt the Israelis would attack. I asked them to tell the Israelis not to attack, instead of telling me not to go to Gaza.

How was the atmosphere on the *Mavi Marmara* before the attack?

Before the Israelis showed up, the atmosphere was happy and jovial. After the Israelis appeared hours before the attack, people became concerned and serious, but not panicky or scared.

Could you please tell us what happened during the Israeli attack? I would like to learn your personal experiences and what you witnessed.

The initial Israeli zodiac assault occurred at around 4:00 a.m. on the outside stern area of the third deck, a few feet from where I was sitting in the aft lounge. A series of loud explosions occurred on the stern, with numerous bright flashes and what appeared to be clouds of tear gas, followed by gunfire (maybe rubber bullets). I watched aid workers repel the Israelis with wooden poles and fire-hoses. I then took my camera, and set about to work as a human rights observer in the stairway between third (upper), fourth (boat) and fifth (bridge) decks.

Immediately after I got to the fifth deck stairway lobby, I witnessed three captured Israeli commandos being brought inside the ship. There they were stripped of their ammo belts, knives, helmets and backpacks. Apparently their guns had already been removed while outside. While one commando was being held on his back, a large enraged passenger attempted to hit him. Aid workers immediately pushed this man aside, protecting the commando. The aid workers then quickly took the Israeli to the third deck for medical treatment. The other commandos were rushed directly to the forth and third decks without incident. I only saw minor injuries and bleeding on the commandos.



Kevin Neish showing the cameras the cards he retrieved from an Israeli commando's backpack, which contain photos and names of some of the Flotilla passengers

I retrieved a set of plasticized cards from one commando's backpack, which contained photos and names of some of the passengers on the Flotilla ships, as well as a set of photos of all the ships with diagrams of their internal passageways.

For the half hour of resistance, I witnessed about twenty dead and wounded aid workers being carried into the ship's stairway. Two of these bodies had bullet wounds in the side or back of their heads, as well as other wounds. These two men appeared to me to have been executed after being wounded.

Near the end of the resistance, I was on the fifth deck stairway landing, with a dozen or more aid workers, who had just beaten back an Israeli commando who was shooting wildly through the open outside door. At this point the captain came on the PA system to announce that the Israelis had seized the bridge, and that the ship was not going to Gaza. All the aid workers around me dropped their chains, bars and sticks, and walked down to their assembly areas as requested by the captain.

I then passed through the third deck stairway lobby/medical area which was completely covered with dead and wounded, with three men receiving CPR at the same time. I recognized one man, I had shared tea with earlier, with a large, likely mortal, chest wound. He was alone, simply propped up against a wall.

AFTER HAVING NO PROPER FOOD FOR ABOUT 40 HOURS, OUR FIRST PRISON MEAL WAS FROZEN BREAD AND CUCUMBERS. DRINKING WATER WAS ONLY SUPPLIED SPORADICALLY. THE PRISON GUARDS WOULD WAKE US UP EVERY 2 HOURS ALL NIGHT, SUCH THAT I ENDED UP NOT SLEEPING FOR 3 DAYS. IN THE END I LOST OVER 7 KILOGRAMS DURING THE ORDEAL.

Following the Israeli take over of the ship, gunshots continued around the ship for one half hour. During this time Lubna Masarwa (from the Free Gaza Movement) on the PA system begged the Israelis to stop shooting and to help our wounded. Myself and about two hundred men waited for over two hours in aft lounge of the third deck, for the twenty or so Israelis on the outer stern area to arrest us. During this time two women (one was Haneen Zoabi, a *Knesset* member representing the Arabs) repeatedly asked these Israeli soldiers to help our wounded, but they refused.

You know, Israel claims that the passengers on the *Mavi Marmara* had weapons. As a human rights observer witnessing much of the attack and the resistance, what do you think about it?

I saw at least fifty well-armed Israeli commandos with machine guns and side-arms on our ship, and dozens if not hundreds more on ships around us. But I did not see any aid worker on our ship with a proper weapon of any sort. The aid workers only resisted with rudimentary tools such as lengths of small chain, wooden poles, broom handles and metal bars, all of which appeared to have come from the hardware of the ship itself.

You were all taken captive on the ship and then forced to sail to Ashdod Port. Could you please tell us your story about what happened during that time, both on board and in Israel? Did you experience or witness any torture or abuse, either psychological or physical?

When we were arrested, we were handcuffed very tightly behind our backs. My wallets, phone and cash were taken from me, and never returned (over \$4000). Over two hundred men and women were then required to sit outside, on the aft port side of the fourth deck. Anyone who tried to move or to stretch was set upon by Israeli soldiers shouting, pointing guns and waving batons over us.



Kevin Neish and Hussein Shukor (a Lebanese man whose family was killed by an Israeli shell in 2006 (On the Lebanese flag are the killed family members))

After a few hours the men were then herded into the forward lounge of the third deck. There, approximately 280 men were required to sit eight to a bench built for four. Several were wounded and bleeding. Once again any excessive movement or stretching brought forth violent threats from the Israeli soldiers with guns being pointed at us and batons being raised over our heads.

We arrived at Ashdod at 6:00 p.m. on Monday, but I was not taken from the ship for immigration processing until 6:00 a.m. on Tuesday. I was among the last of the detainees released from the ship. During my confinement on the ship, the only food offered was a few chocolate bars and sweet cookies. Some water was made available to us. Access to the washroom facilities was extremely limited, and I went without washroom access for the first fifteen hours. One would have to repeatedly beg the soldiers in order to be permitted to use the washroom. If one asked too loudly or persistently, then a soldier would pull the plastic handcuffs up extremely tight, to the point of severe pain, swelling, cutting off blood circulation and feeling. This happened to me three times, for asking for a washroom break too persistently, and for trying to stand up with other arrestees against threatened beatings. Guns were regularly aimed at us, and attack dogs were used to threaten us. The soldiers mocked us constantly, and laughed about all the Gazans who were hopelessly waiting for us to arrive.

In Ashdod, I immediately started demanding my right to see a lawyer and to contact my embassy (I continued these requests with no effect, until I was deported). I was then taken by police wagon to Beersheba Prison. After having no proper food for approximately forty hours, our first prison meal was frozen bread and cucumbers. Drinking water was only supplied sporadically. All blankets were smelly, rotten and full of fine sand. The prison guards would wake us up every two hours all night, such that I ended up not sleeping for three days. In the end I lost over seven kilograms of weight during the ordeal.

What about the way back to Turkey?

On Wednesday, we were very roughly and threateningly processed by immigration authorities at Ben Gurion Airport. I saw blood on the floor from the earlier beating of other aid workers. When I was finally led onto an airplane, it was only then that I found out I was being deported to Turkey.

Fortunately, the Turkish government provided this flight to Turkey, accommodation in a fine hotel for several days with three meals a day in Istanbul, and finally a flight to Toronto/Canada, all at no cost to me. This was very fortunate, as the Israelis had stolen all my money, credit cards and identification. If the Turkish government had not stepped in to assist me, I might have been in an Israeli prison for a long time.

Could you please share with us the most striking events, tragic or surprising, that you experienced or witnessed on this journey, and will never forget throughout your life?

I will never forget two things: Generally, the bravery of the men and women on the *Mavi Marmara* defending the ship, especially around the fifth bridge deck, port side door with broom handles, pipes and chains against the machine guns of Israeli soldiers. Specifically, it was the moment when an Imam [Mustafa Ismail Nashwan] rose and started a call to prayers at noon. After a few seconds, an Israeli officer charged through all the crouching bodies on the deck, drew his pistol, aimed it at the Imam's head from about 10 feet [3 meters], and shouted in English, "Shut up!" The Imam looked past the soldier and continued his call to prayers. I felt the soldier was going to shoot him, so I rose to my feet. The soldier then swung to his right, and pointed the gun at my head from about 15 feet [4.5

meters] away. After a short while the Imam finished and sat down, and I followed him. The soldier did not fire at either of us.

You are a first-hand witness of the Israeli aggression. What do you think about Israel?

I feel it's important to differentiate between "Israel" and the "Government of Israel". I feel the Zionist policies of the Government of Israel are based on racism. I feel that Zionism is racist.

Israel claims that the activists on the Freedom Flotilla were politically motivated, and that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza since they have already been sending food, medicine and other humanitarian aids. What do you think about it?

They are lying. The Israelis committed war crimes on the *Mavi Marmara*, and so they either have to acknowledge that fact, or they have to lie to cover up what they have done. So they have decided to lie.

How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country? How did people react to you, and to the Israeli attack on the *Mavi Marmara*?

The public responded very positively and very supportively, but my Government did nothing for me as they are very supportive of Israel. The mainstream media, who are also pro-Israel, tried their best to ignore me, or call me naive or crazy.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

No. Israel has ignored World Court decisions, the UN Security Council resolutions and the Geneva Conventions; so I do not hold out any hope of having any effect on Israel via the courts. Facts on the ground like a successful freedom flotilla are much more likely to have an effect on them.

What does the *Mavi Marmara* mean to you?

Hope for peace and justice. I returned to Istanbul for the welcoming ceremony of the *Mavi Marmara* last December and January, and being back on board amongst all my fellow survivors, it truly felt like I was in my second home, a home away from home. I look forward to having the privilege of being back on board the *Mavi Marmara* in the spring of 2011 when she sails on the Freedom Flotilla II.