

I WITNESSED VIOLENCE, CRUELTY, INCESSANT LYING AND RACIST BEHAVIOUR OF ISRAELIS

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Nicci Enchmarch is a New Zealander who lives in London. Professionally she works in project management consultancy, but equally has been involved in the Palestinian cause as a humanitarian for many years working with a number of organizations. She joined the *Mavi Marmara* as a volunteer representative of Viva Palestina along with Kevin Ovenden from the United Kingdom. In October 2010, she travelled to Gaza again as the project manager of the Lifeline 5 humanitarian land convoy. She has continued to work with the Palestinian campaigns both in the United Kingdom and abroad for the next flotilla, the Freedom Flotilla II.

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

I have been to Gaza twice with the Lifeline humanitarian land convoys, and witnessed some of the injuries sustained especially by the children who showed us their patchwork of scars, burns on their bodies, and missing limbs, as well as the psychological damage; I have seen the razed areas, and damage from the meticulous cynical destruction; and noticed the impact of the deprivation of life's daily necessities. So witnessing all these, I cannot ignore this cruel collective punishment committed by the Israeli government.

As a humanitarian, I was motivated to continue to work towards breaking this illegal and cruel siege on Gaza by bringing humanitarian aid, and to raise international awareness on the plight and suffering of not only the Gazans but also all Palestinians. The Palestinians in Gaza are under siege for no reason except that they democratically elected a leadership and a party that is not accepted by Israel and its friends.

I have freedom of speech, I can cross borders, I have the resources to contribute what little I can – it is because I can, I do what I can for those that cannot.

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.

I don't think anyone on the Flotilla expected the journey to Gaza to be plain sailing and, of course, we knew the Israelis would intervene at some stage. All participants on the Flotilla were aware of the risk, and were prepared to take this risk to break the illegal siege and show solidarity with the Palestinians. We all knew that whatever risk we face would be nothing compared with the risk and the struggle that the Palestinians have to endure on a daily basis for decades. However, even knowing the risks, I think most never envisaged the extent of the attack and the cold-blooded killing of nine unarmed peace activists and injury of many others in international waters.

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

The atmosphere prior to the attack was so peaceful and wonderful on board. In true Turkish hospitality, we were all looked after well by the IHH on the *Mavi Marmara*, and their organization was very professional and clearly structured. They are a charity after all,

and very experienced in deploying large humanitarian missions like this one.

We had waited a few days in the Mediterranean Sea for the Free Gaza Movement boats to arrive, and spent that time mixing with all the various nationalities on board, talking, listening, learning, and sharing on the open area at the stern of the ship where we spent most of our time.

When we finally departed from the meeting point, it was such an amazing sight to stand at the stern and look out to see the line of Flotilla boats following loyally behind. However, little did we know that hours later that peace would be shattered by illegal acts of murder and brutality.

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?

There are so many...

The violence, the cruelty, the incessant lying, and the racist behaviour by the Israelis that I witnessed...

The last breaths of Cevdet Kılıçlar's life...

Çiğdem Topçuoğlu, the wife of Çetin who was killed by the Israelis while helping to carry those wounded inside... Çiğdem had to helplessly watch her husband die slowly in front of her eyes from his injuries, sit there under horrendous conditions for hours with his body lying not far away, and then incarcerated in prison full of despair at her loss and worry of what the Israelis would do with her husband's body. The image of Çiğdem at the airport as we were leaving... refusing to move until she was satisfied that her husband's body would be accompanying the flight back to his homeland. It was only the day before that I saw the image, from "the raid" documentary, of Çiğdem lovingly and carefully wiping away the blood from her dead husband's mouth – the most heartbreaking image. Çiğdem is a remarkable woman, and displayed incredible strength in such tragedy.

Bülent Yıldırım, an incredibly humble man who put himself at risk on so many occasions... He was outside during the attack, and could have quite easily been targeted by the Israelis given that assassinations are part of their ongoing list of crimes. The IHH treated everyone like family, and the safety of everyone was their priority. This mission was an enormous responsibility carried out under very difficult circumstances, and Bülent Yıldırım and his team have had

ISRAEL HAS BEEN AGGRESSIVELY COMMITTING CRIMES AGAINST THE PALESTINIANS WITH IMPUNITY, AND CONTINUALLY BREAKING INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW. THERE SEEMS TO BE ONE LAW FOR ISRAEL AND ITS FRIENDS, AND ANOTHER LAW FOR EVERYONE ELSE. HISTORY HAS SHOWN US THAT ANY STATE OR RACE THAT BELIEVES ITSELF ABOVE THE LAW IS HEADED FOR ITS OWN DISASTER.

the utmost respect from all of those on board. I was told later that he waved his white shirt at the Israelis to prevent any more bloodshed. The IHH have received so many attacks from the Israeli propaganda machine which is nothing more than lies.

The Turkish government that was quite remarkable... I am forever indebted to them for the way in which they came and rescued us out of Israel. They didn't differentiate on nationalities, but came to rescue everybody, sending three Turkish Airlines aircraft and three military medical aircraft. It is a shame that other governments do not stand up to the Israelis like the Turkish government does; they continue to be selective in choosing which atrocity to intervene and which to ignore when human rights are abused, and the innocent people – as in Gaza – are killed.

How was the atmosphere when you returned to your country? How did people react to you, and also to the Israeli attack on the Freedom Flotilla?

The attack on the Freedom Flotilla received national attention in New Zealand through the media. A film crew from TVNZ Sunday programme – a 60 minute documentary format – flew to London to record their weekly program as soon as I returned from Istanbul. Returning to New Zealand in August to seek forgiveness from my family for putting them through a very worrying time, the media were still very interested.

However, beyond these incidents, it is quite challenging in New Zealand as the press is influenced from the United States, and thus reporting about Palestine is very limited and tends to favour Israeli point of views. Very little is reported about the daily struggle of the Palestinians or the Israeli crimes, but as soon as an incident involving the Israelis happens this is promoted in the news. Therefore, the public is manipulated by this huge Israeli propaganda machine that reaches even as far as New Zealand.



Nicci Enchmarch and Ann Wright (former U.S. Army colonel and retired U.S. State Department official)

Nevertheless, I am hopeful that from these events fellow Kiwis may have learnt more about the plight of the Palestinians and be inspired to get involved. Following the *Mavi Marmara* attack, the organization *Kia Ora Gaza* was established, and accompanied us on the *Lifeline 5* land convoy that successfully entered Gaza in October [2010] travelling through Turkey on route to Syria and then to Gaza. New volunteers from over twenty countries participated in this mission also, since they were motivated to join following the events of the Freedom Flotilla.

Do you think the Freedom Flotilla was successful and achieved its aims? Because some people think that nothing was achieved, and many people were killed and wounded in vain. What are the most important achievements of this Flotilla?

The First Freedom Flotilla, in my view, was very successful despite the tragic loss of life. Their lives were not lost in vain – they are all heroes and will always remain heroes.

The events demonstrated the aggressive, violent nature of the Israeli government, which is experienced everyday in Palestine. It exposed that the Israeli state, despite its claims of being the only democratic state in the Middle East, can still attack a humanitarian mission in international waters and murder people. It demonstrated that the Israeli government and those governments that support it

are complicit in the attack on a humanitarian mission, and worse, complicit in the collective punishment of the Palestinians.

It also demonstrated that just normal people can do a lot. A recent MEMO poll (carried out in January 2010 by Al Jazeera Centre for Studies in conjunction with the Middle East Monitor [MEMO] and the European Muslim Research Centre [EMRC] at Exeter University) shows that the world is now more aware of the Israeli crimes, and the events of the Freedom Flotilla opened the eyes of many that were closed.

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

I certainly don't classify all Israelis as the same, since within Israel there are organizations and individuals that do not accept the actions of their government, and help support those seeking justice for the Palestinians. It is only a small voice, but I hope this voice gets louder – however hard to imagine.

The Israeli government has been aggressively committing crimes against the Palestinians for decades with impunity, and continually breaking international human rights law. There seems to be one law for Israel and its friends, and another law for everyone else. It is as if they don't intentionally break international law, since they have absolutely no regard or acknowledgement of it. History has shown us that any state or race that believes itself above the law is headed for its own disaster.

The Israeli state which was born from terrorist organizations has not managed to purge that mentality. The friends of Israel who financially support not only the state but also the mechanisms of murder are equally complicit. When you create open-air prisons such as those in Palestine based on race, and kill, maim and deprive people of their basic human rights, and leave them nowhere to escape... who is to blame? Those perpetuating all these, or those trying to resist this inhuman treatment? I would have thought Israel knew the answer to that.

The paradox I cannot fathom is how a race of people who were so horrifically treated in the past can now turn on another race with such cruelty:

- A Palestinian child throws a rock at one of the most powerful militaries in the world.
- A slingshot is fired with a small projectile while legally defend-

ing a ship in international waters under attack from submarines, warships, helicopters, zodiacs, and heavily-armed military.

- David fired a rock from a slingshot at Goliath.

So who is David and who is Goliath now?

I witnessed their aggression and crimes on the Flotilla, and it is no wonder that these Israeli mercenaries that attacked defenceless ships wore face masks of shame.

Are you hopeful of the ongoing international legal proceedings?

Yes, I am hopeful, although the procedure is taking longer than usual for other crimes of this nature. The reason for this delay is obvious: The State of Israel is the criminal, and has “superpowers” backing to cover its crimes against humanity. But I believe that one day these war criminals will be brought to justice not only for their crimes against the Flotilla, but also for all the crimes they have committed for the last sixty-three years. We must continue to fight for this and also for the rights of the Palestinians.

Could you please tell us your story about what happened both during the Israeli attack on the *Mavi Marmara*, and also after you were all taken as captives, forced to sail to Israel and kept there in prison? I would like to learn your personal experiences and what you witnessed in detail.

The Night before the Attack

The night before the attack we were informed that the Israelis had been sighted on the radar. The Flotilla boats following behind the *Mavi Marmara* manoeuvred closer together, huddling in a line.

Safety being paramount as a priority, the IHH team instructed everyone to return to the halls and put life jackets on. Everyone was relatively calm and followed the instructions. We were calm largely due to the efficient organization and clear instructions from the IHH management; besides, we were so far out in international waters and even heading away from Israel.

There certainly was plenty of discussion amongst us about how events could possibly unfold the following day, and the only real concern shown were those that were worried not about the Israelis, but about ending up in the sea and unable to swim. Therefore quite a number of the passengers slept that night with their life jackets on.

I went to sleep around 1:00 a.m. thinking that as we were still so far out in international waters with still a distance ahead, the Israelis

WHEN YOU CREATE OPEN-AIR PRISONS SUCH AS THOSE IN PALESTINE BASED ON RACE, AND KILL, MAIM AND DEPRIVE PEOPLE OF THEIR BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LEAVE THEM NOWHERE TO ESCAPE... WHO IS TO BLAME? THOSE PERPETUATING THESE ACTS, OR THOSE TRYING TO RESIST THIS INHUMAN TREATMENT?

would probably only track our boats through the following day, and potentially attempt to block our progress once we approached the Palestinian maritime borders.

The Attack

All women on board occupied the main deck hall at sea level. I woke immediately in the morning to the sound of the call for *fajr* (dawn) prayer, and within minutes heard the spine-chilling sound of the *Mavi Marmara* engines beneath suddenly roar and accelerate into full power. This is a sound I will never forget as I instantly knew that the *Mavi Marmara* was suddenly being chased.

I rushed immediately up to the upper deck, and saw a large number of zodiacs with heavily armed Israeli militants pursuing the *Mavi Marmara* at speed from behind. It was a horrible feeling to look out and no longer see our friends in the other Flotilla boats behind and worrying about what had happened to them.

At first we went from side to side of the ship watching as events unfolded very quickly. In those first few minutes we were oblivious of the risk of standing at the ship railings. A zodiac below came alongside, and attempted to throw a ladder over the railings on the portside; this was promptly thrown back, and we all cheered. We were within every right under maritime law to defend the ship that was in international waters under attack.

The helicopter(s) had arrived within seconds, and were hovering above the centre of the ship and sending debris flying everywhere. A sound grenade went off near us on the deck, and the clacking sound of gunfire could be heard around.

Within moments there was a commotion directly along the portside aisle of the ship which we could see from the side, and so we rushed directly to where two Israeli soldiers were being rolled off the roof [navigation deck] directly down to our deck below. I was only 2 feet away from where they had landed, and they were on the floor kicking and struggling. But they were very easily re-



Nicci Enchmarch, as a participant of Lifeline 5 Convoy, together with the Gazans (October 2010)

strained, and taken inside down to what was already becoming a triage.

One soldier seemed to have fallen and landed on his shoulder damaging it – I saw him later through the hall window laughing with his accomplices, as he was being evacuated out with his arm bandaged in a sling, treated by our medical team. (However, this Israeli certainly wasn't laughing when he came off the roof.) We were humanitarians after all, and our doctors on board treated whoever was in need, although the Israelis did not return the favour; despite our pleas for medical assistance, they ignored our wounded for over two hours.

I returned to the stern, and by now there was a commotion going on everywhere; tear gas landed near us, but was blown away from the ship; people were yelling; there was a continual sound of what I had assumed to be guns firing rubber bullets.

Coming from a peaceful country like New Zealand, I had never heard gunfire or sound grenades before, but I was familiar with tear gas thanks to Hosni Mubarak's security police who hurled this along with bricks and rocks at us when we blockaded and were attacked in the port of al-Arish, Egypt, while trying to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza months before.

I remember going back over towards the ship railings portside, and Nalan [Dal] yelling out to me, "Get back or you would get shot!" Forever obedient to her commands, I returned to the back of the ship bulkhead passing across the sight line of the portside aisle where something hit the outer part of my left leg skimming my

iPhone that was inside my side leg pocket. I didn't ponder on that for long and by and large forgot about it. Many ask me, "When did you notice they were firing live ammunition?" – a crazy question really, as you don't stop to check.

The Killing of Cevdet

The reality that the Israelis were not firing rubber bullets but were actually killing people became evident moments later when Cevdet was carried around to the stern and laid on the floor in front of us. The intent of this shot was fairly evident and very accurate.

A circle formed all around him in absolute stunned silence and disbelief. A doctor [Arief Rachman] was already at his side and kept saying, "I can't do anything for him, I can't help him, I can't help him." The sound of despair in this doctor's voice, and Cevdet gasping his last breathes with a bullet hole between his eyes, I will never forget. The sense of helplessness while someone dying in front of you, and you cannot do anything is just horrible. One of the British men [Osama Qashoo] supporting Cevdet's head was clearly in shock and was so distressed that he was shaking, so I knelt down to stabilise the back of Cevdet's head, and immediately felt the extent of this fatal shot through the back of his head.

I would like to reassure the family who lost a son, a husband and a father that Cevdet, who was killed while just taking photographs, was not alone but was surrounded by his friends, Bülent [Yıldırım] and his IHH family, and none of us even he himself would have foreseen what had happened... *Inna lilaahi wa inna ilayhi raaji'oon (Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return)*

At this moment, it was apparent that the Israelis were actually killing; Bülent immediately issued the instruction for everyone to move inside for safety, and this was followed very quickly by repeated announcements over the intercom to resist defending the ship and move inside. The sound of gunfire from the Israelis could still be heard even after this announcement. The majority of those on board were already inside and had not ventured out during the attack.

As soon as a stretcher arrived to take Cevdet, the few of us remaining including Bülent moved to the inner stern stairway to go down to the hall on the third level below.

A ship stairway is not a good place to be stuck in because of the restricted views and sounds bouncing around in such an enclosed space; you suddenly have no reference to what is going on around

while things were happening fast. You also don't know what you are going to find below with the high probability that the Israelis have already boarded the ship from beneath, as well as above. We stopped and sat waiting on the steps. I heard a person calling from above for someone who spoke English to help with a Turkish man who had been shot in the shoulder. I went back up the stairs and halted abruptly, as the Israelis were pointing their weapons from the other side of the outer door.

Capture and Shock

The majority of the passengers were already inside the halls, pressroom and central ship stairway connecting the two. Seeing all those wounded being brought in one by one – some with horrific injuries – and also those killed would have been very frightening for the passengers who had remained inside during the attack, and did not know what was going on outside or about to happen next.

People everywhere were in a state of shock trying to work out who was missing, where was this person, what happened to this person, etc. No one was really sure at this stage how many were killed, and who exactly were missing. We were all trying to make sense of what just happened in the half-an-hour attack.

From the ship's intercom repeated calls were going out over and over to the Israelis in English, Hebrew and Turkish requesting immediate help for the wounded. The Israelis were now surrounding the hall outside, pointing their weapons in, threatening us through the windows, and yelling at us to sit down. Relieved that I saw Kevin [Ovenden] and Sarah [Colborne], I sat next to them in a cubicle which was closest to the window. Immediately I saw a red laser spot from a gun slowly trail its way across Kevin's chest who was just sitting there. I asked, "Do you realise that they have the gun on you?" Kevin calmly responded, "Yes, I know."

Several females had written a huge sign in English and Hebrew requesting help for the wounded, and tentatively approached the hall windows. They were immediately yelled at, with guns aimed, and told to sit down. One of the Canadians [Kevin Neish], who was sitting near us, showed Kevin and me a set of plasticized cards that had been taken from a captured Israeli's backpack; it had photos of some of the people on board, floor plans and boat specifications.

At the far end of the hall, lying covered, were some of the bodies of the *shaheeds* (martyrs).

THEIR TREATMENT OF THE WOUNDED WAS ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTING. THEY CARRIED THEM IN BLANKETS BY LITERALLY BOUNCING THE WOUNDED UP EACH STEP SMASHING THEIR BACKS AGAINST THE STAIRS. THIS WAS DELIBERATELY DONE. I SAW THIS ARROGANCE, CRUELTY AND NASTINESS TIME AFTER TIME.

Torture and Racist Behaviour

After approximately two hours from the attack, it was negotiated to move our wounded out one by one, so our team were calling for people with some medical knowledge to accompany the wounded. I went forward to go out with the first wounded to be taken. The deck outside was full of masked Israelis. I was instructed to step outside the door along with the two carrying the stretcher – and as soon as I did, I was immediately taken away from the wounded, and told I wasn't going with him. This was the start of the never-ending lies that seem to roll off their tongues with ease. I am not sure where they took the wounded man.

I was searched by a female soldier, and had my wrists cuffed at the front with plastic ties. She didn't do a very good job as she left my iPhone in my side leg pocket. This came in very useful for getting information out later that day when there was reception as we got closer to Ashdod.

I was taken upstairs around to the stern portside, and already there in lines were about thirty mainly Turkish and Arab men on the floor with their hands cuffed behind their backs. Several of them had hoods placed over their heads. This group of men was to endure the longest period of time in this position, and had probably been there already for an hour before we were brought up. I was told to sit on a bench and had my cuffs removed. Then the long process of bringing up our people began, one by one which took hours.

Being a Western woman sitting on a bench with no cuffs, facing twenty-thirty brothers – some struggling to hold these positions on the floor, handcuffed, and some hooded – for me was one of the most uncomfortable situations I have ever been in – a feeling I owed to being a Westerner. So you make the choice and use the fact that you are being treated differently to do what you can get away with, rather than sit there and do nothing.

One of the brothers' hands were bound so tightly that I could see the blood being cut off. So I spoke calmly to an Israeli and asked him



Nicci Enchmarch in the farewell of the Mavi Marmara in Istanbul (22 May 2010)

to release this man's cuffs as they were too tight; he responded, "Shut up." I waited for a period and then asked again, "Shut up" he said; I waited and then asked again. After the third time, he reluctantly arranged for the "chief cuff cutter" to have the cuffs removed, then promptly retied them at the front. Over the course of the next few hours, I kept this up for those that were elderly, had health problems, or jointly in collaboration with those who would be able to help those around them if they were released. Some had their cuffs removed entirely, others re-cuffed at the front. Every request I made was carefully measured but was met with the same cycle of threats.

I remember the Turkish brother who had been shot in the shoulder being brought up next to me. He was amazing; he had obviously refused to be taken to Israel for treatment, and certainly wasn't going to let the Israelis get the better of him.

A couple of men passed out during this time, and one soldier in particular was very aggressive to an unconscious man, yelling at him and prodding him. Those few with hoods over their heads were periodically jabbed in the back from behind, and yelled at for no apparent reason. The Israelis treated the Turkish and Arab men badly, and were clearly racist towards them.

During this period they started to take the wounded up to the helicopters above. Their treatment of the wounded, some of whom were in a very bad state, was absolutely disgusting. They carried them in blankets/slings, not stretchers, and when they went up the stairs to the upper deck, they literally bounced the wounded up each

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step smashing their backs against the stairs. This was deliberately done, one after another, to cause pain to the wounded, and to put on a show to all of us watching. It is this absolute blatant arrogance, cruelty and nastiness that I saw time after time.

We also watched the looting of Israelis who were going up to the helicopters laden with personal effects and equipment. When I was later removed into the corner, an Israeli next to me blatantly smashed the CCTV camera off the side of the ship, and casually put it in his bag.

The threats increased from the soldiers for me to shut up and to stop asking for cuffs to be released, I was told I would be removed to another part of a ship if I didn't shut up. I always spoke to them calmly and was never offensive despite the overwhelming desire to do so.

One soldier, who I think was a doctor, asked me to show him where the toilets were. So I took him there, he just stood there, it was all rather strange, and I could never quite figure out why he took me there as it was obvious where the toilets were.

I was brought back to the bench, and within minutes another Israeli came over and took me to the corner of the ship away from everyone. But the deck slowly filled up, and I was surrounded again, and even they started to move people up to the upper decks. We had already been outside for several hours by that stage.

The helicopters above were still kicking up anything that was still loose, and one of the Turkish brothers in front of me got hit by a flying piece of debris, and it split his face open.

Eventually the commandos guarding us were replaced by Israelis in black uniforms with tasers. I thought the commandos were unpleasant, but this lot were twice as nasty. There was also an Israeli in uniform filming us. There was a discussion when they changed over, and within minutes they walked over to me and recuffed me.

A lovely elderly Turkish brother sitting near me indicated to me that he wanted to go to the toilet. I asked the Israelis, and they promptly refused; then I waited to ask, and was refused again. Then we stood up together, and approached the soldiers which was quite nerve-racking; I told them, "This man needs a toilet," and they reluc-

THE PARADOX I CANNOT FATHOM IS HOW A RACE OF PEOPLE WHO WERE SO HORRIFICALLY TREATED IN THE PAST NOW TURNS ON ANOTHER RACE WITH SUCH CRUELTY. TODAY WHO IS DAVID, AND WHO IS GOLIATH?

tantly agreed. We were taken to the starboard side, and there sitting was a row of men also wanting to use the bathroom. We were told to wait; – I don't know whether it was true or not – I later heard a rumour that some of *shaheeds*' bodies were in that bathroom.

Journey to Ashdod

After about five hours from being held outside, they started to move us back into the hall on the deck below. They brought me back first on the women's side, still handcuffed, and isolated me into a booth at the end refusing to let any of the women to sit next to me. Making light of the situation, I said to the sisters coming in, "I am on the naughty chair!" After about an hour of constant hassling by my sisters, the commandos removed my handcuffs. Who said a woman's nagging wasn't a good thing? Most of the men on the other side of the hall did not have their handcuffs removed for the full journey.

The Israelis cynically trashed the place. What I found disturbing was how they systematically sorted the personal effects and equipment into different piles quite meticulously: piles of cameras and media equipment, piles of small bags, and mountains of large suitcases. Clothes were strewn around the place. Even bags of food were opened and splayed across the area. Later when we arrived at Ashdod, they made an announcement about how we would all get our luggage back, and be taken to a meeting area where there would be given food and drinks – of course none of this we believed.

I had my phone still in my pocket. Of course the phone had no reception, but given we had no idea where the boat was by this stage, I periodically checked it for a signal. The sisters around were amazing, and covered me from the Israelis standing around when I attempted to check the phone. When I finally got reception, I started sending texts out to a friend in the United Kingdom giving him as much information as I could about everyone and the events, and also one message to my sister in New Zealand that I was okay.

This journey to Ashdod was long and difficult, but no journey could have been more painful than that of Çiğdem Topçuoğlu, the wife of one of *shaheeds*, sitting in the next cubicle.

Ashdod Processing

We were marched off the ship under escort either side, and were filmed and jeered at. The Israelis easily get agitated when they see the Palestinian *keffiyeh*, so I proudly wore mine around my neck. It also gave me some small pleasure when my phone was finally discovered at the first of many checks, which sent them into a panic, and then when they powered up the phone in front of me, were confronted with a Palestinian solidarity image.

The process through these checks was very long and arduous, and went on for hours. We were threatened that if we did not sign the deportation document, we would be locked up in prison for a very long time. This document was written in Hebrew with no translation, we later learnt that it stated that we had entered Israel illegally. Given that we were attacked miles out in international waters and taken to Israel against our will, this demonstrates the never-ending Israeli ability to twist the truth and lie.

The whole setup was assembled with what looked like children in t-shirts who behaved as if they were on some social event. The mood amongst them was quite euphoric, and we could hear the yelling of Israeli supporters near the port. Every now and then, one of these children would whisper “Shalit!”, “Shalit!” at us.

Some of us were selected and pulled into a partitioned room at the end of the checks for further questioning, and when I kept refusing to answer the questions the interrogator got quite nasty.

To use the toilet they would take you to portaloos, and leave the door wide open with both a male and female standing outside laughing.

We were photographed and fingerprinted against our will, then shoved into a prison van that was partitioned into sections with three crammed into each cell. There was only a small metal grate at the top to see out of or get airflow. We were left in the vehicle for a long period of time which was very claustrophobic and difficult as we were quite dehydrated and worn out – it was now the early hours of the following morning.

Beersheba Prison

Some of the women ran riot in prison, and it seemed that the Israeli female prison officers didn't quite know how to deal with us. On arrival they gave us soap, toothbrush, a sweater and track pants; also some food of cheese, cucumber, pears and bread. We were not allowed to use the phone or contact our embassies.

The following day we hounded them for our rights to contact our embassies and make phone calls; we were promised that they would visit later that day. Around midday, the mood changed, and the first of the embassy representatives – the Australians – arrived. It was only then we got word of how events were being received outside.

In the afternoon, the embassies swarmed in, and the place was hive of activity. There was an attempt on two occasions by an Israeli film crew documenting our interviews with our embassies. They didn't get very far, and were verbally pounced on by the sisters.

We were visited by the Israeli authorities who again were trying to get deportation documents signed. We were each questioned again.

New Zealand doesn't have an embassy in Israel, so I was visited by a local acting as a representative. I wasn't very happy about the representative, but this is between me and my government. The New Zealand embassies in Ankara, Istanbul and London were amazing, and I am very grateful for all their support. When we returned to Istanbul, the support from my government was outstanding so much, so my fellow colleagues were very envious of how well the New Zealand government looks after its citizens.

Leaving 48 Palestine

The events at the Ben Gurion Airport while leaving were very unpleasant. It was as if this was their last opportunity to make life difficult, and so they were very abusive.

They did not return my passport, and so I ensued a period of trying to get it back. I really thought that without it I would not be able to leave and was going to be stuck there which was a harrowing thought. Two of my colleagues remained with me for support, and we repeatedly got threatened during this period. They kept trying to get me to go into a room out the back, and if I didn't, they would use force. We were verbally insulted; intimidation tactics were used, as well as physical threats.

After an hour or so, two of the brothers from the IHH came over, advised me to leave without the passports, and promised to help me on arrival back in Turkey. It was such a relief to be able to leave.

The Israelis stole the passport, but this was not the first time they had stolen New Zealand passports – something which my government reminded them in the weeks following when they pressured the Israelis to hand it back. The passport was eventually returned three or four weeks after, thanks to the efforts of the New Zealand government.