

A cowardly act of brutality by John Minto - GPJA

The attack by Israeli troops on the humanitarian flotilla bringing food, medical and building supplies to Gaza was a cowardly act of brutality.

The situation was best summed up by one Middle East commentator who said the attack on the convoy in which at least nine humanitarian relief workers were killed meant the Middle East conflict was no longer Israel versus Palestine but Israel versus humanity.

Israel has kept the Gaza strip under a military siege for three years now and Gaza's population is struggling to survive. All land and sea borders have been closed and maintained by brute force. The southern border with Egypt has been closed by the Egyptian regime, whose leaders have grown fat on US money which has bought their compliance with Israeli policy. Gaza is in reality a large open-air prison for 1.5 million Palestinian people, one million of whom are refugees.

An estimated 70 per cent of Gazans are existing on less than \$1 per day with 75 per cent dependent on food rations. The World Health Organisation says 10 per cent are suffering from malnutrition, with children especially hard hit.

Amnesty International in their recent Annual Human Rights Report said the blockade has "deepened the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Mass unemployment, extreme poverty, food insecurity and food price rises caused by shortages left four out of five Gazans dependent on humanitarian aid. The scope of the blockade and statements made by Israeli officials about its purpose showed that it was being imposed as a form of collective punishment of Gazans, a flagrant violation of international law."

The United Nations representative in the territory, John Ging, has called on the international community to break Israel's illegal siege because of the humanitarian crisis in the territory. Israel's chokehold only allows a slow drip-feed of desperately needed essentials to enter the Gaza strip.

And so the flotilla of eight ships with 700 people from 50 countries left for the Gaza strip through international waters to bring 10,000 tonnes of food, medical supplies and building materials for the beleaguered people of the territory.

None of this means much to the rulers of the Zionist state who act with impunity because of the unwavering support of the US for Israel's frequent war crimes, flagrant breaches of international law and flouting of United Nations resolutions.

Here in New Zealand the government response has been pitiful. Foreign Affairs Minister Murray McCully condemned the deaths but refused to condemn Israeli action or those responsible for the killing. He said he didn't want to get into a slanging match over the Middle East conflict but merely expressed concern at the deaths to the new Israeli ambassador, Shemi Tzur, and then called for an inquiry into what other world leaders are rightly calling a massacre.

McCully complained a week or so ago that the previous government was pro-Palestinian, though this was never obvious to Palestine human rights activists. McCully instead is a strong supporter of US and Israeli policy in the Middle East. He claims to be more even-handed than the previous government and says he is listening to both sides - but this is a sick joke. He has ears for only one side of the conflict.

In recent months McCully has welcomed the re-establishment of a new Israeli embassy in Wellington, warmly greeted the new ambassador and announced a privileged arrangement for young Israelis coming to New Zealand for working holidays.

He has never to my knowledge spoken with any elected Palestinian representatives, has never talked of welcoming young Palestinian refugees to New Zealand and never invited Palestinian representatives to set up an official residence in New Zealand. By his actions, as opposed to his words, McCully is a one-eyed supporter of Israel in the Middle East. It would be better if he simply fronted up and said so openly instead of using weasel words to pretend otherwise.

It will be left to the people of New Zealand to express our outrage at Israeli piracy and murder and support the struggle of the Palestinian people for a place in the sun.

It was encouraging to see the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions issue a statement yesterday pointing the way forward. CTU secretary Peter Conway said: "It's not enough for our government to simply call the new Israeli ambassador Shemi Tzur in for a chat. The new Israeli embassy in Wellington should be closed and the special arrangement for young Israelis to travel to New Zealand should be revoked."

Conway went on to say the government should also call for an end to the blockade of Gaza.

Those steps would be important steps forward to justice and peace in the Middle East.

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