

International Participation in December 31 Gaza Freedom March Tops 1,000 As Registration Closes

By Medea Benjamin

Over 1,000 delegates from 42 countries have signed up to participate in the December 31 Gaza Freedom March that will mark the one-year anniversary of the Israeli invasion. Organizers cut off registration on November 30 to give the Egyptian officials enough time to clear the group for entry into Gaza, but also because the numbers were becoming unwieldy. “No one has ever taken a group this size into Gaza,” said coordinator Ann Wright, whose skills as a former U.S. military colonel are coming in handy organizing the logistics for such a massive group.

Since the registration closed on November 30, organizers have been besieged every day with people begging to be added to the list. “I have to turn down 15-20 people every day,” said Emily Siegel. “It has been an insane few weeks, with emails pouring in from people all over the world who want to join. I feel terrible turning them away but we started out thinking we would take 300 people and now we have over 1,000.”

The international delegates hope to join some 50,000 Palestinians inside Gaza, including students, teachers, health workers, women’s groups, farmers and fishermen. The march will start in a neighborhood in northern Gaza in which nearly every building was devastated during Israel’s attack and continue for three miles to the Erez border with Israel. At the same time, Israeli and Palestinian activists will be marching toward the Erez crossing from the Israeli side. Upon reaching the border, participants on both sides will release balloons, fly kites and wave flags to demonstrate their solidarity with one another.

Marking the one-year anniversary of the December 2008 Israeli invasion that left over 1,400 dead, this initiative is designed to draw worldwide attention to the ongoing siege that continues to imprison the 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza. But with the borders still closed, there is no guarantee that the internationals will be allowed in. Gaza is bordered by Israel and Egypt. Both governments have sealed their borders, but sometimes the Egyptians will make exceptions. That’s why Tighe Barry, a Hollywood prop man who has become the “fixer” for the international delegation, has traveled to the region six times in as many months to prepare for this march. “We’ve told the delegates that there are no guarantees we’ll get into Gaza, but we are certainly doing everything humanly possible to convince the Egyptians to let us in,” said Barry from Cairo, where he has been spending his days pleading with officials in the Foreign Ministry, in addition to running around arranging hotels, food and buses for 1,000 people.

The diversity of the international delegation is impressive, with people coming from Austria to Yemen, from Belgium to Bangladesh to Brazil. Some 100 students have signed up, as have seniors in their seventies and eighties. The marchers include judges, doctors and physicists; businesspeople and union reps. Faith-based members

include imams, rabbis and priests. Affinity groups have formed of artists, women, military veterans, diplomats, lawyers and health workers. A muralist from California, Kathleen Crocetti, will build a mosaic memorial to all who died during the invasion. Julia Hurley, a student from New York, has raised thousands of dollars for school supplies that Israel has banned.

Hilary Minch is an Irish development worker. "This will be a remarkably poignant time to visit Gaza. It will be filled with sadness, given what the people of Gaza have endured and lost and continue to suffer. I want to stand beside them and show my solidarity. This is the least I can do." Medea Benjamin is a co-founder of CODEPINK and an organizer of the Gaza Freedom March. The organizers are encouraging organizations and individuals around the world to hold local solidarity events during the week of December 27-December 31. To find or organize an event in your area, and to endorse the march, visit <http://www.gazafreedommarch.org>.