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John Labatt

Londoners join Gaza flotilla

By DALE CARRUTHERS, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

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The team prepares by training. Participants portrayed include Canadians, Australians, Belgians and Danes.

Two Londoners are part of an international team preparing to set sail to the Gaza Strip aboard a 10-ship flotilla, in an attempt to break Israel's blockade of the Palestinian territory.

Roughly one year after the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza ended disastrously, with nine activists dead after Israeli commandos raided the convoy, David Heap and Muhammed Hamou are waiting in a Greek port on the Mediterranean Sea to get the green light to board the Canadian Boat to Gaza.

Scheduled to set sail by the end of the month, the two London men are busy preparing for what could be a deadly voyage.

"We have to work to build a cohesive group and prepare people for the experience they could be facing," David Heap said over the phone from Greece. "You can't be too well prepared for this kind of experience. The better prepared we are, the better we'll deal with whatever challenges come up."

Israel already issued a stern warning to the Freedom Flotilla II, with Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman saying activists challenging the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip were seeking "confrontation and blood."

Israel has tightened its blockade of Gaza, home to 1.5 million people, since Hamas, an Islamist group that refuses to recognize the Jewish state, seized control there in 2007.

The blockade was imposed to stop the flow of illegal weapons smuggled into Gaza, says Israel.

Although the flotilla that includes two cargo ships will be carrying medicines and other humanitarian supplies, the mission is widely seen as a bold political statement, challenging what many consider illegal blockade.

Heap, a linguistics professor at the University of Western Ontario, said the blockade is crippling the Palestinian economy and denying its citizens the right travel outside the territory.

"They want to be able to trade with the world," he said. "They used to have a thriving export economy before it was destroyed."

Muhammed Hamou, a secondary school teacher and Muslim chaplain at UWO, feels optimistic about the upcoming voyage.

"The best case scenario: hopefully we reach the shore of Gaza, we deliver the aid, and we set a precedent of human-to-human, citizen-to-citizen help, when governments fail to do that," Hamou said. "Unfortunately our governments are not taking the proper action."

The father of three leaves behind a family that is worried for his safety but proud.

"They realize that action should be taken and people do have to sacrifice sometimes," he said.

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<http://www.lfpress.com/news/london/2011/06/28/18346111.html>

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