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Two Londoners among Gaza-bound activists

MIDDLE EAST: The flotilla hopes to complete an attempt a year ago that ended in nine deaths

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 getting ready to set sail on what could be a deadly voyage.

David Heap, a professor, and Muhammed Hamou, a teacher and chaplain, are part of an international team preparing to travel to the Gaza Strip aboard a 10-ship flotilla in an attempt to break Israel's blockade of the Palestinian territory.

The voyage comes roughly a year after the first Freedom Flotilla to Gaza ended disastrously, when Israeli commandos raided the convoy, killing nine activists and injuring dozens.

Scheduled to set sail by month's end on Freedom Flotilla II, Heap and Hamou are busy waiting — and preparing — in a Greek port on the Mediterranean Sea to get the green light to board the Canadian ship to Gaza.

"We have to work to build a cohesive group and prepare people for the experience they could be facing," Heap said on 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; Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said activists challenging the Israeli blockade were seeking "confrontation and blood."

Israel has tightened a 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, Israel says.

Although the flotilla — carrying 1,000 activists, journalists and crew members — includes two cargo ships full of medicines and other humanitarian supplies, the mission is widely seen as a bold political statement, challenging what many consider an 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 to 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 (by Israel)."

Muhammed Hamou, a secondary school teacher and Muslim chaplain at UWO, is optimistic about the 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," Hamou said.

Sometimes ordinary people must band together to do what is right when governments fail to act, Hamou added.

The 29-year-old father of three leaves behind a family that is worried but proud.

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

If all goes as planned, the journey to Gaza should take roughly three days.

But conditions must be perfect.

Weather has delayed the flotilla's departure.

"We're prepared to face the military; we're not prepared to challenge mother nature," Heap said. "If she tells us not to sail, we'll listen to her."

David Heap participated in the Gaza Freedom March in December 2009. Speaking from Greece, he explains why he's part of Freedom Flotilla II.

Q As the date of departure approaches, what's going through your mind?

I'm really happy with the group of people we've brought together here. I'm very pleased with the preparation we've been through . . . And we're continuing to hear voices, including voices from Israel, that say 'Why not just let the flotilla through?'

Q *What is the boat carrying?*

It's mainly carrying our strong wish to see the Palestinians of Gaza regain the ability to travel the world freely, including travelling to the West Bank, where many of them have family. In terms of cargo, you don't go empty-handed to this kind of thing, so we've been in touch with medical professionals and hospitals in Gaza about the most important medical supplies that they run short of . . . So, we've got a fresh supply of badly needed medical supplies

Q *Would you say the objective is political or humanitarian?*

It's both. you can't separate the two.

Q *How is this flotilla going to be different than the May 2010 Freedom Flotilla?*

We'll keep sailing until the port of Gaza is open to shipping. It will be different if the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) decided to respond appropriately. They hold the weapons: they hold the ability to ensure a peaceful outcome or not.

Q *Are you fearful for your safety?*

Given the reputation of the IDF and their record for badly botching things like this and overreacting, it would be rational to have some trepidation. But courage isn't about not being afraid. Courage is about being afraid and doing the right thing anyway.

Q *In your opinion, what's the best case scenario of this mission?*

The best-case scenario is that this . . . lets us sail freely to Gaza and allows the port of Gaza to open up so the Palestinians of Gaza can once again trade and travel freely to the world, including to the West Bank.

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