

## Sailing into Gaza (Update 6)

Contributed by Yvonne Ridley  
Thursday, 07 August 2008

ONE of the Free Gaza campaigners is an extremely feisty journalist and friend of mine called Lauren Booth who also happens to be the sister-in-law of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Lauren and I first met through the heroic charity InterPal which raises awareness, funds and aid for Palestinian kids and their communities.

The nearest Blair has been to Gaza is looking out of his air-conditioned room in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

ONE of the Free Gaza campaigners is an extremely feisty journalist and friend of mine called Lauren Booth who also happens to be the sister-in-law of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Lauren and I first met through the heroic charity InterPal which raises awareness, funds and aid for Palestinian kids and their communities.

We've been out to the refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, though not together.

In fact I ended up going to the Jordan refugee camps after the Israelis refused to let me in through the Jordan River Crossing entry point where I was going to cover the elections which swept Hamas to power.

They strip searched me, interrogated me for 10 hours and then called me a terrorist and refused me entry. It was a bizarre experience but this treatment is meted out to anyone who shows interest, kindness or curiosity towards Palestine.

83-year-old Hedy Epstein had the same treatment a couple of years ago, but not only did her questioners strip search her they also snapped on the rubber gloves and internally checked her as well ... what a disgusting way to treat a Holocaust survivor! Hedy's intrusive treatment was at the hands of Israeli security in the Ben Gurion airport.

Sorry, I digressed. Let's get back to Lauren Booth.

Well, we've talked in the past about doing a project together for Palestine and now it seems the Free Gaza Movement has provided the platform we need.

Apart from the fact she's feisty and in the same profession, I'm a big admirer of Lauren because she does something too few journalists are prepared to do these days ... she tells the truth, which is almost an act of resistance in itself.

It would have been very easy for her to jump on the Blair Bandwagon for a free ride, but instead she stood shoulder to shoulder with the rest of us in the anti-war movement and called her infamous brother-in-law a liar over his ridiculous claims of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq.

Shooting from the lip is not that easy where family is concerned, but Lauren - who writes for the Mail on Sunday - did exactly that through Blair's Downing Street years.

And she's got Tony in her sights again, highlighting his inadequacies in his present role at the Quartet's Middle East envoy. He has yet to step in Gaza and was warned off by the Israelis recently because of so-called security threats.

Well Lauren has issued a challenge to Blair. She's told him to: "Show some guts!" and come and join us. And he does have a choice if he doesn't want our company there are two boats The Free Gaza or The Liberty.

Blair has the backbone of an amoeba so I don't expect him to come on board with the likes of Holocaust survivor Hedy Epstein, or the Christian peace activists, or the 70+ years Roman Catholic nun because then he would have to do something he is not used to - he would have to face the uncomfortable truth of the suffering of the people of Gaza.

The nearest Blair has been to Gaza is looking out of his air-conditioned room in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

And while I think the good citizens of Gaza have already suffered enough without having to endure his Cheshire Cat-like grin and weasel words, it would do the impotent peace envoy the world of good to have a reality check.

He might not want to share a boat with Lauren or myself - but we have two boats. In fact he could bring his own as long as he agrees to abide by our rules ... no weapons, no violence, no armed body guards - just peaceful activism.

And there's plenty of time, bad weather has blighted the start of the voyage but we should be able to sail from Larnaca, Cyprus once we pick up the 36 activists there in the next couple of days.

Our aim is to break Israel's illegal siege of the Gaza Strip and establish a permanent sea-link from there.

As yet Israel's Navy has not said openly how it will try and stop us, but they do have previous for bombing, attacking and shooting at anyone who floats a boat in those waters.

In the meantime the government of the Zionist State is trying to bully and cajole the Cypriot Government into stopping us from sailing.

Film-maker Aki Nawaz and myself will be joining the crew of the boats as they come sailing past our own secret location in the Greek islands, and I've just heard that the captains of the 21-metre Free Gaza and the 18-metre Liberty, are both Irish.

Don't you just love the Irish? If anyone knows anything about resistance and standing up to a bullying, imperialistic state it's the Irish.

And I note there is a great deal of solidarity between the Irish people and the Palestinians - go for a stroll down the Falls and you will see Palestinian flags on wall murals and hanging from some windows.

Members of the 32 County Sovereignty Committee often send messages of solidarity with their brothers and sisters in Palestine.

Well, I am really cheered - you must have all heard of the "Luck of the Irish".