

Protesters block U.S. military ship sailing with weapons for Israel

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\Seattle, November 7 (RHC)-- Under dark skies and steady rain, hundreds of pro-Palestinian demonstrators rallied at the Port of Tacoma, in Washington state, to block a military supply vessel they believe will carry weapons from the United States to Israel.

There, they fear any weaponry on board will be used in Israel's ongoing campaign against the Gaza Strip, where more than 10,000 Palestinians have been killed.

"We want a ceasefire now. We want people to stop getting murdered now. We want a real examination and action on U.S. foreign policy and U.S. funding to Israel," said Wassim Hage, one of the protesters at the Tacoma rally.

Hage works as a case manager and community outreach coordinator with the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC), the advocacy group that organized the protests. He said a confidential source tipped AROC off that the vessel would be loaded with weapons and military equipment and sent to Israel, as it continues its military offensive in Gaza.

In Tacoma, Washington, the ship, called the Cape Orlando, faced protesters of all ages in raincoats, puffer jackets and umbrellas marching outside its dock. They waved the Palestinian flag, held signs saying "Defend Gaza" and chanted slogans like "Free Palestine" and "Not another nickel, not another dime, no more money for Israel's crimes!"

Demonstrators used bicycles and cars, with their hazard lights blinking, to block traffic around the port. Seven Indigenous warriors in a ceremonial canoe also circled the waters nearby to block the ship.

Patricia Gonzalez from the Water Warriors Council of the Puyallup Tribe said she was motivated to take to the sea because she relates to the Palestinians' history with violence and displacement. Her ancestors, she explained, were forced to attend Indigenous boarding schools, institutions designed to extinguish native cultures. The Canadian government and even Pope Francis have called the schools instruments of "cultural genocide."

Gonzalez said her community is still grappling with the intergenerational trauma of that history. "When it comes to genocide, we definitely understand that," she said. "It touches our hearts really close," Gonzalez said. "Our ancestors went through that, and we're affected by it every single day. And we would never wish that upon another nation."

Abby Brook, who is Jewish and anti-Zionist, helped organize Monday's rally. Her visits to Israel and occupied territories in the West Bank and the Golan Heights inspired her activism.

"When I was 18, I went to Palestine, and I saw the realities of the occupation and settler colonialism on the ground. I saw the checkpoints, I saw and talked to people about their experience of being displaced in the Nakba," she said, using the term for the mass displacement of Palestinians in 1948.

"When you're seeing the reality that Palestinians live every day, there's no question about what's happening," she said. "And the reality that this is an apartheid state military occupation." She said a broad spectrum of people attended the "block the boat" rally to interrupt the violence in Gaza. "People wanted an opportunity to literally put themselves in the way of the genocide that's ongoing."

This is the second week in a row that the Cape Orlando has faced attempts to scuttle its voyage.

Last Friday, when the Cape Orlando was docked in Oakland, California, three protesters latched themselves to the ship's ladder, delaying its departure for hours.

The U.S. Coast Guard said in a statement that it ultimately removed the three protesters after they “reportedly trespassed” onto the vessel. They “are currently under investigation for potential violations of federal law”.

Other protesters “had breached the fence surrounding the pier that the Cape Orlando was moored to”, the Coast Guard added, accusing some of “tampering with mooring lines”. Hage said the outcry against the Cape Orlando and its suspected cargo sends a strong message to President Joe Biden, who is currently campaigning for reelection in 2024.

“We’re seeing some of the largest anti-war protests since the [George W] Bush years happening right now, and this is ahead of a very competitive election,” Hage said, referring to a presidency that oversaw wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Biden recently called on Congress to provide more than \$14 billion in aid to Israel, which is in addition to the \$3.8 billion the U.S. already pledged to provide for 2023. The U.S. has been the largest provider of military assistance to Israel since the country’s founding in 1948. It funds approximately 16 percent of Israel’s defence budget.

Sarah Yager, the Washington director for the nonprofit Human Rights Watch, said her group is pushing U.S. lawmakers to provide oversight for military assistance to Israel.

“Congress, at the moment, their main job is to provide oversight of weapons sales,” Yager said. “So if they’re not asking questions about where these weapons are going and how they’re being used, then they’re not quite doing their jobs.”

Human Rights Watch has called on countries like the U.S. to suspend the transfer of weapons to Israel and Palestinian armed groups alike, “given the real risk that they will be used to commit grave abuses.”

Despite their efforts, Hage said military personnel loaded cargo into the boat by nightfall on Monday.

While he said it was unfortunate they were unable to stop the cargo from entering the ship, Hage called the action a success because it delayed the vessel for most of the day. He added that a worker on the boat had told activists that he was moved by the protests and wanted to leave the vessel.

“We delayed this vessel by 12 hours and every day [that the cargo] is not used to bomb Palestinians is a win.”

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