

## VIVA Palestina: a convoy of hope

### A civilian humanitarian convoy en route from the UK to Gaza will leave Syria today.

The convoy has been organised by VIVA Palestina, a Palestinian solidarity organisation headed by independent British MP, George Galloway. So far the group, numbering close to 500 volunteers, has visited nine countries and will leave Damascus today for Jordan, before crossing into Egypt in the hope of accessing the Strip through the famous Rafah border crossing. It aims to reach Gaza by 27 December to coincide with the anniversary of the 2008/2009 Israeli invasion. The convoy is the third attempt by VIVA Palestina to reach the isolated Gaza strip which has been crippled by the Israeli-imposed blockade since 2000. The previous two missions, the first in February from the UK, and the second in July from the US were both successful in delivering food and medicine to the 80 per cent of Gaza's 1.4 million who currently rely on humanitarian aid for subsistence. Whether the latest attempt will be successful remains to be seen.

### United Kingdom

The 3rd Lifeline Convoy left London on Sunday, December 6 and was joined by vehicles that had come as far away as Scotland and Ireland. Having received disappointing British media coverage upon their departure, the teams which entered central London were waved off by a massive crown presence and received the support of several British politicians including the MPs and Mayor of York. The convoy includes fifteen ambulances dedicated to the fifteen medical personnel who lost their lives while on duty during the 2008/9 war and also a 44-tonne truck with a massive painting of Wallace and Gromit, curtesy of the famous animation company. Despite the ordeal of having to drive for up to 16 hours a day and sleep in tents or the back of their vehicles, the VIVA Palestina volunteers were high spirits. "The return to Gaza is now on the move!" one exuberant driver from VIVA Palestina shouted at the crowd.

### Italy and Greece

Crossing through the snow-covered Brenner pass in the Alps the convoy arrived in Italy on day four. Despite the frost and ice, the incredibly warm and supportive welcome by the locals, along with some mouthwatering pizza, helped ease the strain. Here the convoy learnt of the as-yet-unconfirmed Egyptian measures aimed at blocking the underground tunnels beneath the Egypt-Gaza border which are used as a gateway to smuggle much-needed humanitarian supplies. After a 20-hour ferry ride VIVA Palestina arrived to a parade and civic reception in Thessaloniki, Greece's second city. The city's mayor, Vassilios Papageorgopoulos, along with two members of the Greek parliament, greeted the new arrivals. "You know you have left Western Europe when the mayors and MPs come out to meet you," one driver wrote on his 'Twitter' profile. Despite getting lost, frightening unwitting villagers and losing a van which collided with a cement truck, the convoy managed to stay on schedule.



### The convoy

A collection of 193 vehicles hopes to cross into Gaza on 27 December, the anniversary of the last Israeli military incursion into the Strip when at least 1,350 Palestinians were killed. This includes two trucks donated by the tiny Muslim community in Belgium, six procured by money from Malaysia, and even one from Switzerland. It also includes 34 ambulances manned by volunteers from over a dozen countries and 47 US trucks which are currently awaiting papers in the hope they may be able to catch up to the convoy by Sunday.