national

Feds urge aid group not to send help to Gaza

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The Canadian Press

VANCOUVER — A British Columbia activist who was on last year's Gaza-bound flotilla when it was raided by Israeli forces says he is going back, this time on an all-Canadian boat.

The Canadian Boat for Gaza initiative is in the process of raising $300,000 for a boat that would deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza.

But after nine activists were killed as part of an attempt to defy Israel's naval blockade last year, Ottawa is strongly advising against the plans by pro-Palestinian Canadian groups to send the Canadian-registered aid boat.

Kevin Neish, a retired government employee from Victoria, was on the MV Mavi Marmara, one of six boats that were part of the Free Gaza Movement last May when violence erupted between those on-board and Israeli forces.

He said he was beaten and arrested by the Israeli army before returning safely to Canada. But Neish, who said he has a long history of activism, said he plans to participate in this latest flotilla, although nine activists were killed during his last excursion.

"The goal isn't to send aid to Gaza, but to break the blockade," Neish said. "I am committed to going back. I was committed to return when I was in prison in Israel."

The MV Mavi Marmara was packed with 546 activists last spring when it was boarded by Israeli commandos dropped from helicopters. When the ensuing melee was finished, nine Turkish activists were dead and an Israeli commando had been stabbed.

The ship was part of a deliberate effort to draw international attention to Israel and Egypt's blockade of Gaza. For more than three years, only basic human aid and food has been allowed to enter Gaza and Israel has argued that allowing the flotilla through could have opened up future opportunities for weapons and militants to be smuggled in.

The deaths, however, were a diplomatic nightmare.

One of the leading organizers for the latest group, Ehab Lotayef, said the plan is to sail on March 30. The Canadian boat would be part of a flotilla that is expected to include boats from Europe and India.

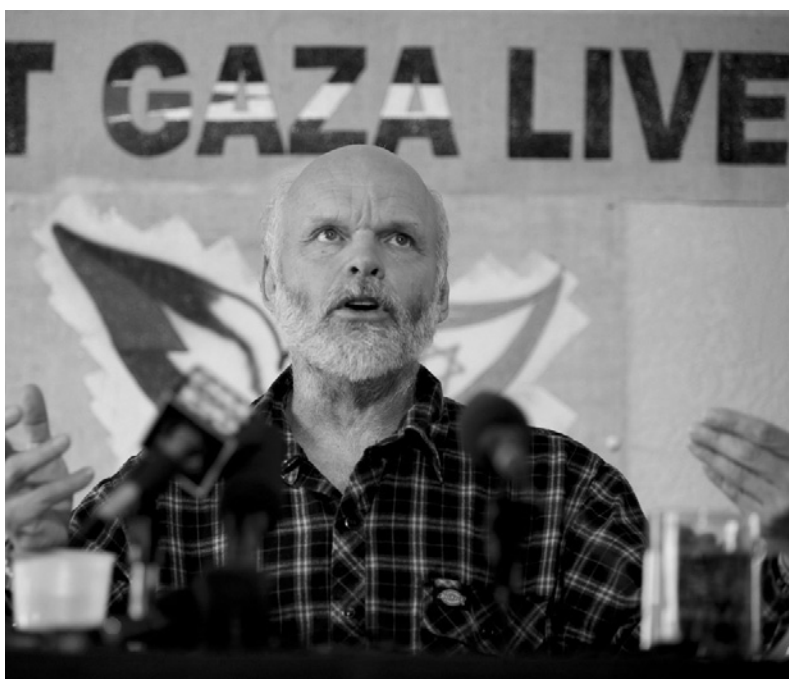
"We are exactly at $152,000 so far," said Lotayef in an interview from Montreal.

The Canadian organizers plan to purchase a vessel, supplies and aid with the money, and Lotayef said depending on the funds, they plan to put up to 40 Canadians on-board.

"It is an initiative to challenge illegality and support people who have no means of supporting themselves ... We are not going except with a peaceful mission," Lotayef said.

Lotayef said organizers are hoping Israel will lift the naval blockade, though they are aware the flotilla could be turned around by Israeli forces or that there could be another violent confrontation.

A spokesperson for the Israeli Embassy in Ottawa said officials are familiar with the initiative, and monitoring the activity.



Canadian peace activist Kevin Neish speaks about his experience being raided by Israeli agents while being part of a flotilla to provide aid to Gaza.
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