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St. Croix's Arab Community Rallies in Solidarity with Gaza: 'Stop the Genocide, Ceasefire Now'

Local Palestinian Group Joins Nationwide Protests Against Conflict in the Middle East

World / **Published On November 05, 2023 09:13 AM /**

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Protesters walked from the Sion Farm Shopping Center's parking lot, ending at the south parking lot of Sunny Isle's Wendy's Restaurant. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Joining other Palestinians on the U.S. mainland, where tens of thousands marched in Washington protesting what they described as Israel's genocide of innocent civilians in Gaza, St. Croix's Palestinian community staged their own protest action against Israel on Saturday.

The protest, a peaceful walk that started at the Sion Farm Shopping Center's parking lot, ending at the south parking lot of Sunny Isle's Wendy's Restaurant, boasted a respectable crowd that included men, women and children of Arab descent, as well as some black, white and Hispanic supporters. They chanted several phrases, all of which sought to highlight the plight of the Palestinian people over the years, with the latest war in Gaza being the igniting force that brought them together. From chants that sympathize with and promise support for the Palestinian people, to phrases that cast Israel a terrorist state.

Since the onset of hostilities on October 7, initiated by Hamas, the Gaza Ministry of Health reports that Israeli air strikes have resulted in the death of at least 9,488 Palestinians, with the death toll including 3,900 children. As of Friday, about 1,400 Israelis had died as a result of the conflict.

The intense bombardment across the Gaza Strip has continued unabated, with Israeli forces targeting a multitude of locations. Residential areas in the north such as al-Nasser, Jabalia, Beit Hanoon, Atatra, al-Sudaniya, and Beit Lahiya have been struck, as well as Gaza City's al-Tuffah neighborhood.

A distressing incident unfolded on Friday evening when an educational establishment, the Osama bin Zaid school situated in the northern Saftawi neighborhood came under attack. The school, which was providing shelter to internally displaced Palestinians, was struck, resulting in over a dozen fatalities.

In an alarming pattern of strikes near healthcare facilities, the area surrounding the Indonesian Hospital was targeted once more. This follows a severe assault on the Al-Shifa Hospital's entrance, which saw 15 lives lost and 16 individuals injured. While the Israeli military claims the ambulance convoy struck was being used by Hamas combatants, Palestinian officials firmly deny this.

The situation for the average Gaza resident has become dire, according to Thomas White, the UN's principal humanitarian official for Palestinian refugees in the enclave. With food supplies dwindling to two pieces of Arabic bread per individual daily and an acute shortage of water, desperation is mounting. Since October 21, Israel has allowed a limited amount of aid into Gaza, providing some relief to the beleaguered population.

Once at the parking lot in Sunny Isle, several individuals spoke, among them Iyad Abdallah, who called for a stop to the war. "Oppressing the Palestinian people for 75 years, placing a siege on Gaza for 17 years, this is the reality of a Palestinian child's life. Our youth deserve to have a life of happiness, a country to represent and a voice to be heard. They do not deserve to live in an open air prison or what has become an open air death camp. Enough is enough," he declared.

Senator Marise James expressed sympathy with the protesters, noting her friendships within the Arab community on St. Croix. The senator called for a two-state solution, saying that just as Israel has a right to exist, Palestinians should be afforded the same privilege.

Perhaps the most important comments Saturday came from Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, who continued to condemn Hamas's actions that ignited the latest war, while condemning what she described as Israel's "brutality and overreach" in Palestine.

Ms. Plaskett said she continues to relay to her colleagues, particularly Jewish congresspeople, that "it is important for me that I can condemn Hamas but also can condemn [Benjamin] Netanyahu,"

she said, referring to Israel's prime minister. "They are not mutually exclusive of one another; that I can support Israel's right to exist and support Palestine's right to be a nation as well, that they are not mutually exclusive of one another. That I acknowledge Israel's right to protect itself, while also condemning them for their overreach and for their brutality as well."

Plaskett vowed to continue "to speak to the Biden administration about the ceasefire, about the need for humanitarian aid, about Egypt opening up its border, about Israel allowing humanitarian support to come in, about fuel that is necessary and is being stopped from coming, to go in. That the innocents cannot be slaughtered with those who are guilty. That the rules of war must be followed, and that war must end. That Israel must sit down with Palestinian leaders and begin the true discussion on a two-state solution. That is my vow: to continue to fight and support for that."

She concluded, "As a black American, I know what it is for my ancestors to be forcibly removed from their home, from their continent, taken to a place that they did not know, and made to be enslaved in that place. We cannot continue with the open apartheid that is going on in Palestine right now."