

# THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION HUMANITARIAN PROJECT



## DUNDEE TO NABLUS 2011





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The Fire Brigades Union has been a supporter and advocate of the Palestinian people's fight for self determination for over 25 years.

Union officers have visited Palestine regularly over this time, forming close relationships with Palestinian Trade Unions and the wider society.

As a result of these contacts, in 2009 the FBU hosted 8 fire-fighters from the Nablus Municipality Fire Department on a visit to the UK. The fire-fighters came to Scotland to receive up to date training in fire behaviour, breathing apparatus, Road Traffic Collision (RTC) and Urban Search and Rescue (USAR).

The Nablus 8 were located at the Scottish Fire and Rescue Training College at Gullane and trained at locations throughout Tayside, they stayed in Nablus's twin city Dundee for the Tayside training.

During their training period FBU Officials also made sure that they returned home with memories of both the sights and sounds of Scotland

On completion of the training in the UK, the FBU enquired as to future practical needs from the Nablus Municipality Fire Department.

It was identified that Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), would be of most assistance.



***NABLUS 8 Fire-Fighters in  
Scotland 2009***



***Rank & file FBU members supported the project***

The Scottish FBU Executive determined to source and deliver a project that would provide the required kit and equipment at the earliest possible opportunity.

Regional Organiser Jim Malone was tasked to coordinate the project, through the support of the Scottish Regional Executive and Regional Committee and liaising with the FBU National Executive Council a logistical and material plan was put together.



Work began on raising the desired funds and discussions were had as to the best method of transporting the humanitarian aid. A decision was eventually reached to transport the kit by land and sea. Numerous routes were discussed and debated, the Arab spring, current conflicts (Syria), on-going wars (Lebanon/Israel) and trade conflicts (Turkey/Israel) influenced the eventual decision.

Funds were raised through the FBU Annual Conference, social events, Dundee/Nablu Twinning Association and private donations.

The equipment that was requested by the Palestinians had now to be sourced. FBU Region 5 officials, Steve Harman and Kevin Brown offered to assist and, through contacts with aid agency Florian UK, 150 sets of Bristol Fire Kit, 90 Pacific Fire Helmets, 90 pairs of Jolly Fire Boots and 100 sets of Fire Gauntlets were donated.



***Project meeting in Dundee City Chambers***

International Fire and Rescue UK were delighted to donate 20 sets of Breathing Apparatus and cylinders to the project, their Scottish lead officer Dave Kay was tasked to assist in the logistics involved in the delivery. Dave also arranged for the correct documentation requirements to be prepared.

A decision was taken to deliver the kit and equipment on two, soon to be retired, fire appliances purchased from Tayside Fire and Rescue, the appliances were given a thorough make over and service by the team in Tayside Workshops with the work co-ordinated by Fleet Manager Scott Roberts.

Politically the FBU were fully aware as to the difficulties that may have faced the project in respect of Middle East politics.

Representations were made to UK and Scottish Politicians for support, Early Day Motions were placed before both Parliaments by Jim McGovern MP and Joe Fitzpatrick MSP respectively.



***Steve Harman & Kevin Brown deliver fire kit to Dundee***

Correspondence was forwarded to the Israeli Ambassador, Palestinian Authorities and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The Project Team was now decided upon, with Regional Organiser Jim Malone retired Scottish FBU officials Gavin Barrie and John Docherty were invited onto the team along with Dave Kay (Fife) and Steve Harman from Region 5.

Arrangements were now put in place for project team members to forward passport details to assist in confirming travel protocols.

Team members were to take their own holiday time to deliver the project.

The team met in Dundee to load the kit and equipment with the appliance lockers being loaded with thought given to security en route.

The team visited Dundee Central Mosque and gave an account of the projects aims to the Muslim community.

Due to the political situation in the Middle East a decision was taken to contact the Israeli Histadrut and inform them of our project.

Histadrut International Relations Officer, Avital Shapira, offered advice and guidance as to the likely reaction



**Donated appliances on view – Dundee city centre**



**Steve at Dundee Central Mosque**



**Letter from the Israeli Ambassador**

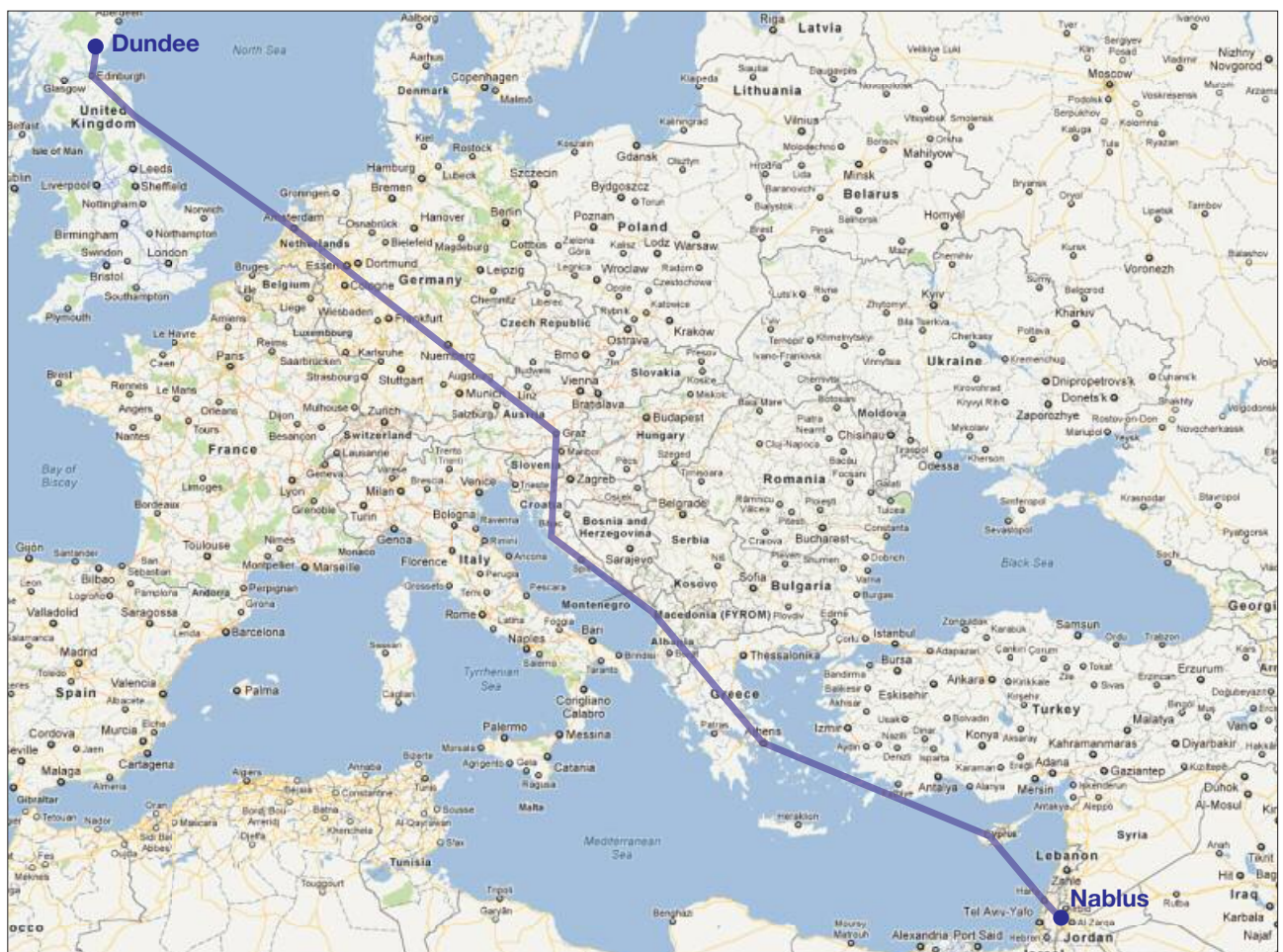


of the Israeli Government Authorities to the humanitarian project. Cognisance was taken of the Histadrut's views and we arranged to meet the Histadrut officials on arrival in Israel.

The Lord Provost of Dundee, John Letford, gave a civic farewell at which the FBU Regional executive presented their project's aims and made presentations to those whose involvement were vital to the success of the FBU Dundee to Nablus project.

The project was now ready to go; final guidance was sought from the UK and Israeli Government's as to their approval and assistance if required. The Nablus Authorities had been updated as to requirements sought by the Israeli Authorities in processing the delivery, transport and customs.

Despite the respective Governments advising against the FBU decision to deliver the humanitarian aid project, the Executive gave the green light. believing that departure would encourage those other parties involved to expedite their work to allow the project to succeed.



The appliances left Dundee on Monday October 3rd 2011, travelling to Holyrood where the press, Minister Fiona Hyslop and members of the cross party Palestinian Support Group gave the project a rousing send off. The team journeyed on to Newcastle where an official FBU send off was given by FBU President Alan McLean.

The Ferry took the team from Newcastle to Amsterdam overnight arriving early on the 4th, taking shifts at driving the team travelled through Holland and Germany arriving very late that night close to the city of Ulm in Batten Wuttemberg.

Next morning the team drove through Bavaria into Austria where a stop was made in Graz and the team had a meeting with local fire-fighters.

After a short break through Slovenia and to the Croatian border at Gornji Macelj where the project encountered their first real problem. Corrupt agents working privately at borders in the Balkans were to cause delay after delay and cost the project almost 1,000 euros.

After several hours and several hundred euros later we were on the move, travelling overnight and through the morning of the 5th/6th and down the Adriatic coast passing through Bosnia back into Croatia to Dubrovnik, They were made welcome by the local Dubrovnik firefighters and gratefully showered and had lunch at the fire station in the old city.

The Croatian fire-fighters gave us advice as to the best (least corrupt) border crossing into Montenegro and we drove down to Herceg Novi and another prolonged wait and the transfer of further cash from our fast depleting funds.

The border crossed we drove to the Montenegrin town of Bijela there was an overnight stop.

The next day, the 7th October, took the team through Montenegro to Albania with the longest wait and smallest bribe at the Albanian border.



***Graz, Austria***



***Dubrovnik, Croatia***



The road around this border and into Albania were of interest, no tarmac and holes the size of tennis courts, torrential thunderstorms also caused delays with average speeds of 10-20mph.

Through Albania and to the Greek border at Bilisht.

On the morning of the 8th we were in Greece, the next challenge was the loss of one of our appliances at the Greek town of Talabaka, this potential disaster was averted by the project team coming together with the help of the local fire-fighters and the transfer of all the kit and equipment to the remaining appliance.

With a strict timetable to keep, the team drove through the night 8th/9th to Athens where the Greek fire fighting Union had arranged accommodation and appliance garaging.

A free day saw the team take a tour of Athens and to meet our Greek Federation Trade Union supporter Zoe Lanara, the political situation in Greece was explained and the team were invited to meet with the Federations General Secretary the next day.



***Early morning brew up, Greece***



***Athens meeting***



The 10th was our day of departure to Israel, in the morning we met with the GSEE President Yannis Panagopoulos and the unions International Organisers including our great friend Zoe Lanara, also attending was the Palestinian representative in Greece Abdalah Abdalah.

This meeting allowed the FBU to express solidarity with the Greek Trade Union movement and support for the people of Greece in their fight against austerity.

The time had come for the team to split, Dave and John travelled to the port of Lavrio and the ferry to Haifa, the remaining project team members celebrated Steve's 50th birthday then travelled to Athens airport for an early morning flight to Tel Aviv.

The early morning flight to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport allowed us to prepare for meetings with the UK Council General and the Israeli Histadrut.



John and Dave's journey with the appliance and equipment on the SS PONTOS gave them an understanding of life as a merchant seaman with them privileged to share the comfort and high quality accommodation with their crewmates, oh and the rodents.

A meeting was held between the FBU project team and Gary Fisher the UK GC, to allow the team to update the UK Govt's Israeli based officials as to the progress

and problems facing onward travel to Palestine. Gary was able to offer further assistance and agreed the FBU had followed the procedures and protocols as instructed.

The meeting between the Israeli Histadrut and the FBU project team at the Histadrut Tel Aviv's office lasted over 4 hours and was a frank, honest and open exchange of views as to the plight of Israel, Palestine and trade union relations between the Histadrut the FBU and other UK trade unions.

The Histadrut expressed the opinion that due to failures on the part of Palestinian Authorities in Nablus the equipment would be impounded on entry at Haifa. We requested the support of the Histadrut to ensure the earliest possible release of the humanitarian aid from customs.

A decision was made to leave for Nablus the next day, which was not as easy as it may sound. The Occupied Territories are surrounded by the Israel Defence Force (IDF) and to enter is difficult with no public transport and no entry allowed into Israel by Palestinians.



***John & Dave leave Greece***



***Histradrut meeting, Tel Aviv***



***Nablus meeting with fire-fighters***

A taxi was hired to take them as far as the border crossing where they were met by Nablus fire fighting comrades and Mohammed Amarah from the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU)

Transported to the Central Nablus Fire Station they were welcomed by the Nablus Fire Chief Jamal Baghdadi. A discussion took place around the serious issues surrounding the release of the humanitarian aid and the Histadrut's claims over the correspondence to allow its safe passage.

Immediately after meeting with the Chief an invitation to address and meet with the PGFTU and the Nablus Trade Council leader Mr Dirar Touqan , we again expressed our concern as to the delay in delivering the project.

Support and assurances were made as to the efforts being made by the Palestinian Authority to have all necessary documentation available for the Israeli military.

The FBU team began to understand the politics that were involved between the Palestinians, the fire-fighters from the municipality had attempted to assist the project without involving the PA civil defence and this had resulted in the Israeli military, who

normally only discuss such issues with the PA, to delay and hinder the projects delivery.

For the third meeting of that day they were then taken from Nablus, through checkpoints, to Ramallah. Here the FBU team met with the Head of the Palestinian Civil Defence General Ahmed Rizq. The General expressed his support for our project and offered full PA assistance in delivering the appliance and equipment from Israel to Nablus.



General Rizq gave the FBU team an update to the current training and operational challenges facing Palestinian fire-fighters. The future structures will include all the municipality brigades coming under the PA Civil Defence fire and rescue remit.

Also at the meeting was Ken Brand, Ken who is in charge of the NGO support team which assists the PA Civil Defence through the UK/US aid programme. Ken became a strong ally to the FBU team in Palestine and Israel. Ken later offered to take the party to visit the tomb of PLO leader Yassar Arafat, this is in the Government compound in Ramallah.

Thursday 13th was to be another hectic day and after a meeting with the fire-fighters at



***General Rizq, PA Civil Defence***



the fire station they met with Mayor Adli Yaish at the Municipality HQ. The meeting was arranged by the Nablus trades union council, and as well as discussing all the FBU aid issues and they were invited to stay and take part in the meeting between the trade unions and the Mayor.

This was a very interesting debate, involving local municipality union leaders who have developed negotiation skills that were alien to the FBU team. It

appears, to achieve the desired outcome, you must be able to shout louder than the Mayor and shake your fist aggressively in his face, after the shouting, tea, coffee and sweet cakes were consumed in a calm respectful atmosphere.



***Mayor Adli Yaish & Trades Council***



***Tomb of PLO President Yasser Arafat***

Thursday also saw a meeting with the General Secretary of the PGFTU Shaher Saed later in the day, Mohammed Amarah the PGFTU International Officer. He briefed the FBU team on arrangements between the Palestinian Trade Union and the Israeli Histadrut, and a discussion was held regarding the FBU's support for the BDS campaign and the recent STUC and UNISON reports from their respective visits to the Middle East.

Shaher Saed expressed his support for the FBU Humanitarian Project; he briefed the FBU on the increasing union membership among Palestinian workers and relations between the Israeli Histadrut and the PGFTU. The FBU expressed support for the Palestinian UN declaration 194 in achieving statehood and we also offered support in the release of Palestinian prisoners held illegally in Israeli prisons. It was sobering to think that all the officials we met in Palestine have been arrested and imprisoned by the Israelis at some point.



That evening the FBU team were invited to a hill top picnic by the Mayor, and again expressed his support, he gave us assurance that he would work with the PA to ensure the speedy release of the aid and would meet them again before their departure to give us an update.

During our time in Nablus we kept in constant communication was maintained with John and Dave on SS PONTOS, which had stopped in Limassol and delayed their arrival by 24 hours.

Friday 14th October was the day Dave and John arrived; they had been interrogated by the Israel customs and told the equipment was being impounded. Mohammed Amarah arranged for their collection at Haifa and transport to Nablus.

After 4 days on the boat they were both glad to see the Palestinians and frustrated by the Israeli's decision to impound the appliance and everything on it, apart from the personal belongings they could personally carry out the docks.

The Nablus fire-fighters had arranged for us to have an afternoon barbecue with them to thank us for our support, that evening they took us to a restaurant to listen to Palestinian folk songs and enjoy a, non alcoholic, cocktail.



***Mothers of the prisoners in Martyr Square, Nablus***



***Picnic with Mayor Yaish, Shams & Co***



Saturday 15th started at the same tempo, with a meeting with Chief Jamal Baghdadi and his fire-fighters, including the great friends from the 2009 visit to Dundee, Shams, Rabee, Saher, Sultan, Bahaaz, Amjad, Motaz and Hasan were present and we were given gifts from the Municipality.

Ken Brand collected the FBU team at Nablus East



checkpoint and took them to Jericho where they visited the new training centre for fire-fighters, before heading to the Dead Sea in Israel and then on to Jerusalem.

This visit was an opportunity for the team to experience the historic issues facing Jews, Muslims and Christians in sharing their respective religious holy sites.

That evening saw the team transported to Ramallah and Ken took them along the most hideous structure that is the wall dividing Palestine from Israel. Returning to Nablus the FBU team prepared for their departure to the UK on the 16th.

The last day in the Middle East was as usual hectic, we said our goodbyes to the Nablus fire-fighters, Mayor Adli Yaish and the PGFTU's Saher Saed. Before leaving there was a visit to the HQ of the PLO and the Nablus Governate where we met with Governor Mahmoud Aloul and Deputy Governor Mrs Anan Atteerah.

This meeting was very beneficial as future support between the Scottish Government and the PA was discussed and mutual support was offered on many issues. The Governor offered full support in releasing the aid to the Nablus fire-fighters.



***Dome of the Rock, East Jerusalem***

Mohammed Amarah had arranged our transport to Ben Gurion and the flight to the UK, as well as a kind invite to lunch at his home in Tulkarm, the journey to the airport was prolonged due to long queues at checkpoints and we experienced a search of bags and deliberate provocation by IDF troops. The airport was more of the same, long queues and interrogation by customs.



***Nablus Governate meeting at PLO HQ***

On returning to the UK, exhausted but determined to deliver the project, Regional Organiser Jim Malone went immediately to Westminster to brief our supporters on the situation. FCO officials offered support and contact with the Israeli authorities.

Over the next few weeks pressure was applied and contact maintained with all those who could influence the delivery of the kit. Press briefings were held at Westminster and Holyrood to keep up the momentum being applied by Cross Party support groups, the cost of the kit being held at the port was causing real concern and further contact between the Histadrut and PA assisted in lowering these costs. The PA gave assurance that all documentation had been presented to the Israeli's and continued political pressure resulted in the appliance, kit and equipment being delivered to the Nablus Municipality on the 2nd December.

The FBU Scotland Dundee to Nablus Humanitarian Project had delivered. This is the first time that an independent aid project has achieved its aims and grateful thanks go to all who supported, funded and assisted the project team.





**On behalf of the project team could we thank all those who supported the Dundee to Nablus Humanitarian project: our friends in both Parliaments, DNTA, FoNsa, DTUC, Mary Henderson, Zahir Haider, Mohammed Isa, LP of Dundee John Letford, Scott Roberts and Alasdair Hay of TF&R.**

**UK FBU members, President Alan McLean, General Secretary Matt Wrack, National Official Dave Green and particularly Region 1 Executive Council Member Roddy Robertson and also John Duffy, Alan Paterson, Paul Wilson and Liz Carmichael.**

