

Flotilla activist witnesses Israeli torture of humanitarians

Cerie Bullivant, a Palestine solidarity activist from Ireland, describes being abducted by Israeli forces while on the Gaza Sumud Flotilla attempting to delivery aid to Gaza. Bullivant details for The Grayzone's Max Blumenthal how he was tortured on camera, and witnessing hideous abuses including sexual assault against his fellow passengers. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

#Max

So, Kerry, just introduce yourself to The Grayzone, and then we'll talk about what you experienced as you attempted to sail to the Gaza Strip.

#Cerie Bullivant

So, first of all, thank you very much for having me on, Max, and I'm a really big fan of the work that you do. Thank you. It's incredible, the amount that you've done. And it's worth saying, while I was on the flotilla, there was an Albanian colleague of mine, a comrade, who was also sailing. He was actually researching all of your work to inform the work that he was doing, speaking in Albanian to the Albanian people. And yeah, your work's really reaching out further than you can even imagine.

#Max

I really appreciate that, thank you for saying that. That's great to know that I was reaching out into international waters. Unfortunately, I personally can't reach the militarized frontiers of Israel any longer because I think they would deport me, but uh...

#Cerie Bullivant

But they deported me a few days ago, so we could have been in that boat together. Yeah.

#Max

So, tell us, why did you join this flotilla knowing that you could face danger? And just tell us what happened.

#Cerie Bullivant

So, I mean, it's not about not knowing that we could face danger. It was evidently clear to us, and explicitly clear to us, the sort of experience that we would have if we chose to go through with this. I joined the flotilla at Crete, and before I joined, 22 boats had already been kidnapped in an act of international piracy by the Zionist regime, and 170 people had already been through this torture factory. And so when we got to Crete, about to join the boats, there were already people there with broken arms, with their arms in a cast, with plastic face guards to protect their broken noses and cheekbones, with people with whiplash collars on. And so that was like a welcoming to the scene — these were the people who had already done it, and many of them came again, immediately rejoining the flotilla to sail straight back into the situation again. Because really, at the heart of this is the genocide — the genocide of the Palestinian people, which has been going on for 75 years now and has accelerated in the last three years.

And this is the test of our times. My mother, God bless her, she was very heavily involved in South African anti-apartheid movements and the struggles of her time. And really, that was the environment in which I grew up. And I now have kids, and I need my kids to know that I will put myself on the line, inshallah, to protect a better future for them. And that's what I would hope that they will do when their time comes, when they're growing up, and if they see injustice. We all have this obligation to stand against these genocides and apartheid. And so that's why I was there. I was there in honor of my mother and our Irish heritage, and the colonialism that the Irish people suffered, and as a witness for my children so that they can know that we can never allow genocide to continue.

#Max

So I guess for those who aren't aware of what took place and some of the footage that Israel's own government put out, I mean, here was a scene. Here's one of the scenes of Itamar Ben-Gvir actually attacking activists. And, you know, he was taking selfies, I think, with his own daughter in the room where activists were being held in torture stress positions. This is just, you know, for public viewing. That's Ben-Gvir attacking her — the security minister of Israel, in charge of the police.

#Cerie Bullivant

And you can see, this part in here, in the tent, I was actually inside. It's just about to appear. Yeah.

#Max

They're forcing activists to listen to "Hatikvah," the Israeli national anthem, while being held in stress positions with zip ties.

#Speaker 1

This is Israel. This is Israel.

#Cerie Bullivant

So inside this tent, this is where I saw Ben-Gvir. You saw him personally? Yeah, yeah. He came in, and this tent was a tent of hell. The torture that was going on in here while they were laughing and joking — I mean, the absolute joy that they were taking from the sadism in this tent was shocking.

#Max

Yeah. What kind of things were they saying and doing?

#Cerie Bullivant

So, for example, just behind me, there was a Brazilian comrade of ours. She was wearing a woolly jumper with stars on it, and she was zip-tied behind her back. And they lifted her up by her hands, by the zip ties. She started screaming. They were breaking her shoulder joints. And another IOF soldier came and literally soccer-kicked her in the face. Wow. A huge kick — she was suspended in the air. While Ben-Gvir is walking around, the guards are singing along with the national anthem, laughing and joking. All the while, they're kicking people in the head. My head was right next to the edge of the tent, so I didn't get kicked in the head, but they were stamping on our feet. Bearing in mind we're already in a stress position, it's already painful.

Kicking us in our sides. The thing that shocked me was how much they were enjoying all of this. I've obviously followed the issue of Palestine for so many years, read so many stories about it, read stories about the games that they play where they try to shoot children in the same body parts on certain days. And yet, when you see it with your own eyes, they're laughing and joking and heckling together as they dogpile people who are tied up. Part of our training was that we in no way resisted anything that they were doing, either physically or even in words. Part of our training was like, you don't swear at them, you don't attack them or accuse them of anything. And they still just absolutely battered people.

And the primary people that they went for were the women, the elderly, and the smaller men. I saw them pick up a guy, a very, very slight build, and they slammed him down on the ground twice and then hit him on both of his ears at the same time. And the day after, when I saw him, he'd gone deaf in one ear. I still don't know if his hearing's returned in that ear, but they'd cracked all of his ribs on this side as well. Even when we were freed and we were finally back in Turkey, you had to be so careful when you were hugging people or celebrating with them that they were free, because so many people had broken bones. I think at final count, around 75 people had various broken body parts, including someone with spinal injuries.

I saw a couple of people with broken feet and broken arms as well. Lots and lots of broken ribs. They were going for the ribs primarily because that's a more hidden wound and a more hidden injury. And if you think about it, there were about 500 people on the flotilla. So if 75 or so had broken bones, that's about 20% of completely nonviolent people who were tied up that had bones and body parts broken in this vicious way.

#Max

And some of the female activists — I highlighted a testimony yesterday by one who I think was an Irish female activist — described sexual assault, sexual humiliation on a very systematic scale. Is that something that you witnessed or know about?

#Cerie Bullivant

Yeah, it is, unfortunately. It's something I experienced as well. I had to hold a young man in my arms afterwards, and he was telling me about his experiences, and they physically raped him. My experience wasn't that severe, but they came up to me with a knife, threatening to cut off my private parts. And this was, unfortunately, completely systematic. When you went in for the strip search, you were completely at their mercy. Max, I don't... I don't think I can explain to you, like, holding a young, like, 20-year-old guy in your arms, and he's crying because of what they've done, how far they took that. And, yeah, go on.

#Max

They took it too far. I mean, obviously, you know, details are not necessary, but they raped him.

#Cerie Bullivant

Yeah.

#Max

Which is what they've been doing in Sde Teiman and other torture centers to Palestinians. The Gaza doctor from Al-Shifa and the Indonesian Hospital, Adnan al-Bursh, was essentially sexually assaulted to death by Israeli prison guards.

#Cerie Bullivant

They inserted their batons. And the thing is that we understand, as activists who have been following this, the levels that they go to with the Palestinians. Like even this, we suffered a tiny, tiny proportion. But this was done with such glee and with absolutely no fear of repercussions. They knew they had carte blanche. And we were—I really need to reiterate this—there was no resistance.

Nobody was struggling, swearing, fighting back. We were delivering seeds to Gaza to regrow food. And this is how we were treated. Imagine how they treat Palestinians who don't have access to food, Max Blumenthal, and don't have access to these sorts of voices to speak out in this way. It's terrifying, it's shocking, and it's only just now, even though these cases have been known about for years, only because the New York Times suddenly reported it, that people are suddenly starting to take some sort of notice. But I mean, it's really horrific when you see it and experience it firsthand.

#Max

Well, this was happening independent of Ben-Gvir, this torture. Am I correct? He came in for the kind of photo op to put it all on display and to proudly show what Israel's values were. But this was happening anyway, correct?

#Cerie Bullivant

So for me, from what I saw, the worst of the physical torture, the beatings, happened in Ashdod Port where Ben-Gvir was. And that's where the sexual assaults mainly happened as well. There were two prison ships. On one prison ship, the one that I was on, they treated us horribly. There was no space to sleep, there were no floor mats, barely any food, barely any water. But they basically, for the most part, left us alone. I mean, they shot my captain of our ship for no reason and left her with a horrible wound on her leg. But mostly, our ship was considered like the good ship, yeah? So to only be shot—I think four people got shot on my ship—that was the good ship. The other ship, the other prison ship, the one that you saw in the video with the blue containers, that was the other prison container ship.

They treated them like actual hell. They were firing every two hours into the containers to wake everyone up and then throwing stun grenades to disorient people while they were trying to rest. There were far more sexual assaults. There was a man who I spoke to—they tasered him over 20 times until his back had almost no skin on it. I mean, these prison ships, both of them, were so overcrowded that there was no space for everyone to sleep, and it was the closest thing I've ever seen to depictions of slave ships when I was growing up—people just sleeping on top of each other in shipping containers with no mats, no nothing, just laying on the cold, hard metal floor.

#Max

This PR move by, I don't know what to call it, a Hasbara move, a reverse Hasbara move, was received very negatively by the Israeli foreign ministry, by Israeli ambassadors, including Yaakov Leiter here, the ambassador here in Washington, who is also sort of like the manager of the Trump administration. And they said that, you know, these are not our values and that Ben-Gvir, what he has done, has hurt Israel's image. This is not who we are, which I found funny. I think Ben-Gvir is sort of like the id of Israel, like the true soul, which is why he's there and why he's increasingly popular among the Israeli youth.

He represents the direction of Israeli society. Here's a foreign ministry tweet just simply declaring, these are our values, showing them treating flotilla passengers like, here, would you like some water? And, we're just talking to you nicely and questioning you, and you get to sit in a nice chair. Oh, she's having a nice time, Grandma. We respect the elderly. What do you have to say about that? Did you see any of that sort of treatment? Are those their values? Yeah.

#Cerie Bullivant

So for me, it shows the values that he betrayed were by showing people what was happening. That was the thing. The golden rule here is that these things happen, but we don't tell. And we leave space for our sort of liberal Zionist friends to obfuscate. With Ben-Gvir, there's no space left for obfuscation. So that's the part that he's going against. As I said, they were taking so much joy in this agony. They took pictures of the people in the seats. Before you're in those seats, you're in a stress position.

Push down as far as they can with your arm lifted up as high as it can. If you're walking down from one place to another and another officer is walking in the opposite direction, they're going to punch you in the face. As a prisoner just passing by, how in a normal workplace you say hi to the person you're working with, they just come and hit you straight in the face. And they did that to me numerous times as I was going. And then they sit you down in this seat for two minutes to answer some questions from a civil servant about what your nationality is and do you agree to be deported?

And that's the moment that they come in and take a picture. I saw one tweet from the ministry, and I'm actually in the picture on the ship, and it says a flotilla of people celebrating being put onto an Israeli ship. And the irony of that situation, after they've just beaten the hell out of us, we were congratulating each other and giving each other a warm reception as comrades who had survived and gone through this situation. But they want to take that and twist it and put it in exactly the opposite light, like we're grateful to Israel.

They held me on the floor while my face was on the floor and my hands were also touching the ground. And I posed no threat to anyone. They tased me for over a minute, constantly, until somebody answered one of the questions. Somebody else answered a question that had nothing to do with me even. This is their values. And the fact that they were smiling and laughing and loving that along the way, that was their values. And that's what they showed. And that was part of what the flotilla was about. There were many objectives to the flotilla, but one of them was to use our bodies to show their values.

#Max

Well, that certainly succeeded. I mean, if that was one of the objectives, it definitely worked. They could not resist. And I think from their point of view, and from Ben Gvir's point of view, he's playing a role which he considers deterrence. He believes, you know, as Meir Kahane, his mentor, believed,

that if you do not demonstrate total force to your opponents, whether they're, you know, the leftists who support the Arabs or the Arabs—there are no Palestinians in their mind—you cannot negotiate. They will keep coming back for more. And so he believes he's warding off future flotillas. Do you think that succeeded on their part, that fewer activists will volunteer to try to challenge, to try to scale the walls of the modern-day Auschwitz?

#Cerie Bullivant

Well, I'd say this. They captured a whole load of people who, within two weeks, were back on another flotilla going in again. And I can only speak for myself in this regard, but I'm going to be going up and down the country raising funds to help put another flotilla together. And even though, like, while we were sailing, I spent five, six days completely seasick—I have apparently no sailing ability in me at all—and was throwing up, I'll be straight back on that flotilla again to keep on applying pressure. I said earlier on my friend was shot in the leg, and that was horrific.

She thought she was going to die. It looked like they might have hit her femoral artery, and thank God they didn't. But our medics managed to get a tourniquet on her leg and cut off the bleeding very, very quickly. But even she said after that, after being shot in the leg, that she would rather that the soldier was there guarding us and shooting her in the leg for crossing an invisible line than being in Gaza or Lebanon and shooting a Palestinian child in the head with a lethal round for crossing an invisible line. So these actions, we have to keep doing everything we can to expose the crimes and the true nature of Israel.