

## **As Turkish photographer is buried, other journalists aboard flotilla speak out**

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Journalists who were aboard the humanitarian flotilla that was intercepted by Israeli naval commandoes on 31 May have been recounting their experiences. At the same time, Turkish journalist **Cevdet Kiliçlar**, who was fatally shot at the start of the assault of the Mavi Marmara, one of vessels in the flotilla, was buried in Istanbul on 4 June. A news photographer who graduated from Marmara University's Faculty of Communication, Kiliçlar had worked in the past for such Islamist newspapers as *Selam (Salute)*, *Vakit (Time)* and *Milli Gazete (National Newspaper)* and had applied for an official press card while working for Milli Gazete.

For the past year he had worked for the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), a Turkish NGO, as press officer and website editor. He was killed by a single shot to the head fired at close range by an Israeli soldier.

The Turkish Union of Journalists (TGS) has protested against Kiliçlar's death, which it says should be treated as a murder, and has called for an investigation to establish the exact circumstances in which he was killed.

All the journalists who were detained by the Israeli authorities have now been deported from Israel and many of them have been talking about what they went through.

### **Mediha Olgun (Turkish woman journalist with the daily *Sabah*):**

"I was released 72 hours after the start of the military operation. I was forced to go back into my cabin where they gave me a full search. They cut into the heels of my shoes to see if I had hidden anything there. That is how they found the copies of the photos we had kept. They seized my laptop, my camera and mobile phone. The only thing I was able to hold on to was my passport. They also took our photos."

### **Ayşe Sarioglu (Turkish woman journalist with the daily *Taraf*):**

"I was terrified when I saw Kiliçlar on the ground. That is when I cried... They searched absolutely everything. From the boat, they took us to a large shed in the port of Ashdod, where we were interrogated. I was humiliated by a policeman, although there was a woman officer there who was very polite. While interrogating me, he spat on me and called me an idiot. He even pulled my tongue. I could not believe my eyes, it was so inhuman!

"They accused us of being within 10 miles of Israeli territory. I replied that we were 70 miles away and in international waters. 'You knew that Gaza was forbidden.' I replied: 'Yes, but I did not come here because I wanted to. I am a journalist and it is my job.' 'It is of little importance that you are a journalist. You have broken a rule.' They asked me to sign a statement but I refused, asking for a translator from the Turkish embassy. 'Whether you sign or not, you will be deported.' We were searched meticulously, between our toes, in our hair, under our gums, under the tongue and so on. They took us to Beer Sheva prison. I was questioned again. They asked me if I was a member of Hamas or Al Qaeda. They also asked me if there were Palestinians in my family.

"I was able to call and talk to my family for just one minute and in English. On the afternoon of the next day, I was put in contact with Turkish embassy officials. We spent a second night in a prison cell. The next morning, they woke us at 6 a.m., gave us our passports and took us by bus to Ben Gurion airport."

### **Erhan Sevenler (Turkish journalist with the semi-official news agency *Anadolu-A4*):**

“When we learned of the presence of military boats and a submarine nearby, we began to take measures. All the journalists gathered at the stern of the boat to be able to film what was going to happen. At around 4 a.m., 15 to 20 zodiacs surrounded the ship. Very quickly, a helicopter lowered commandoes to the bridge. As I rushed towards the bridge, people aboard our ship grabbed a soldier. Until that moment, I thought they were firing rubber bullets. That is when I realised they were firing live rounds. The windows of the bridge exploded under the impact of the bullets. The journalists then sought refuge in the office reserved for the press.”

**Yücel Velioglu (Turkish journalist with the AA news agency):**

“There were three doors to the journalists’ office, two of which were locked. The soldiers knew how to enter the office because we had given them a clear explanation. But they deliberately broke down one of the locked doors. We had a cameras round our necks and our press cards in our hands, but the soldiers kept aiming the lasers of their guns at our eyes in order to intimidate us... That lasted about 45 minutes.”

**Marcello Faraggi**, an Italian journalist who heads a media production company in Brussels, was aboard the Eleftheri Mesogeios (“Free Mediterranean Sea), one of cargo boats in the Gaza-bound humanitarian flotilla, reporting for the TV station Euronews. He described what he experienced to Reporters Without Borders:

“When we left Athens, I was on the passenger ship, the Sfendoni. Once we reached Rhodes, I switched to the freighter carrying humanitarian aid, the Eleftheri Mesogeios, which was flying the Greek and Swedish flags. There were 29 of us aboard it, including two other journalists, **Mario Damolin**, who was working for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and **Maria Psara**, a Greek journalist working for a newspaper that supports the Greek socialist party. There were also some well-known people from Greece and Sweden, including the novelist Henning Mankel.

“The Israeli army intervened at 4:30 a.m. on 31 May, when we were still in international waters. Two helicopters dropped smoke bombs. Several zodiac boats without lights began to circulate among the boats in the flotilla. It seemed like something in a movie but it was real. Real as in war. I heard someone shout: ‘They are firing real bullets. Not just smoke bombs! Real bullets!’ Meanwhile the Marmara just continued on the same course.

“At 6:30 a.m., as the sun was rising, an Israeli army boat circled us. Loudspeakers screamed that we should surrender, that we were putting the boat’s safety in danger. The zodiacs did not stop circling around us. Soldiers climbed on to the cargo. We had gathered in the captain’s cabin. They asked us to surrender. Most of us complied. Those who refused were hit by the soldiers, targeted by the rifle lasers and handcuffed with plastic straps.

“I kept filming all this while. When the soldiers saw me, they grabbed the camera out of my hands, they confiscated it along with the cassettes I had on me. ‘We will give them back to you at the port,’ they said. I told them I was a journalist and showed my international press card but to no avail. It made no difference. After being briefly interrogated in the captain’s office, we three journalists joined the other passengers, who were assembled on the deck. The boat set course for Ashdod. But in we took nearly 10 hours to arrive and in the meantime we were all on the deck like animals.

“When we arrived at the port of Ashdod at around 3:30 p.m. there were masses of people there. Lots of soldiers filmed us as we got off the boat. We felt like animals in a zoo. When I showed my press card, a cassette was returned to me. We were put in a bus and driven to a space where they were lots of tents. Soldiers asked me to undress. They confiscated other material from me. There were five or six of us who had to undress at the same time. It was humiliating. I refused to submit to a medical

inspection. I was then asked to sign a document in English. As an Italian, I asked if I could have an Italian translation. They laughed in my face.

“Then they put us in a truck used for transferring prisoners. We waited for more than an hour squeezed against each other inside the truck, under the sun, without air conditioning. Only when night fell did the army transfer us to Beer Sheva, where we were again searched on our arrival. They gave us a few raw vegetables, some water to drink, pieces of soap and shampoo in sachets. We were given no chance to call a lawyer or contact our embassies.

“Embassy representative came on Tuesday afternoon. But that was when we were about to be taken before a judge. Everyone was in the same room, a sort of big hanger. It was really noisy! We were transferred to Ben Gurion airport on Wednesday morning. In the bus, a Czech journalist wanted to go to the toilet. A soldier laughed at him. I tried to intervene because I had my international press card on me, but in vain.

“On the plane, they made us sign a statement in English recognising that we had entered Israeli territory illegally. Then my passport was returned to me. I saw that some people were given only a photocopy of their passport. Although we had boarded the plane at 1:30 p.m., we did not take off until about midnight. Rumours circulated all this while, including one about an Italian journalist being beaten by soldiers. We were finally flown to Istanbul.

“On our arrival at about 2:30 a.m. on Thursday, they told us our bags had arrived. I found that my camera bag was sealed, so I asked airport officials to open it so that they could witness what I found inside. The bag was full of old clothes and rubbish. My camera was not there.

“Yesterday, 8 June, I went to the Brussels police to report that I had been the victim of armed robbery. I lost more than 20,000 euros of equipment on this job. I was aboard that boat as a journalist, not an activist. The Israeli soldiers are guilty of an act of piracy.”

“Today the chief of police called to say that it was wrong on the part of the police officer to have registered my complaint yesterday inasmuch as the Belgian authorities prosecutor’s office ‘for information’.

Reporters Without Borders has learned that **Surya Fachrizal**, an Indonesian journalist working for the magazine Hidayatullah, was shot and wounded in the chest by an Israeli soldier during the storming of the humanitarian flotilla on 31 May. He is currently hospitalised in Jordan.