

## **#LetThemRide: Support Gazan Paracyclists to represent Palestine for the first time ever at Paralympics**

### **Join us in Calling for Visas to be Urgently Granted for Qualifying Races**

We are the Gaza Sunbirds, Palestine's only paracycling team. Due to Israel's attack on the Gaza Strip, we have had to stop training and, instead, have been distributing food and supplies to our communities. Today, we are closer than ever to our dream of representing Palestine in the 2024 Paralympic Games - it would be the first time ever for paracyclists! Founder and captain, Alaa al-Dali and team member Mohammed Asfour have been evacuated alongside independent athlete Waheed Rabah. We hope they will form part of the national Paralympic team sponsored by the Gaza Sunbirds achieving Palestinian representation and recognition on the world sporting stage. They must first participate in two qualifying races in Belgium and Italy. If visas for them and their technical team are not granted to do so, they will not be allowed to compete in the Paralympics. Help us call on Belgian and Italian authorities to #LetThemRide by signing the petition, writing letters and spreading the message to more who can do the same.

The Gaza Sunbirds' story begins with Alaa al-Dali in 2018 who was, at the time, a top pro-cyclist in Palestine. Whilst attending a peaceful Palestinian rally along the Gaza-Israel border - he was shot by an Israeli sniper in the leg leading to it being surgically removed and, what he calls, the amputation of his dream. The following year, he rewrote his personal dream of competing individually in overseas races into a collective project using sport to empower others after trauma. Assembling 19 team mates who had sustained similar life-altering injuries from Israeli attacks, he launched the Gaza Sunbirds with the dream of representing their country at the 2024 Paralympics. Years of training despite challenges like ongoing bombing and food shortages came to a halt last October in the face of Israel's war on Gaza. Instead, we used our resources to distribute aid to people across the Strip, organising over \$110,000 USD worth and risking our lives for our communities' right to survive. These efforts have inspired people around the world to support us with two global campaigns: [Athletes for Palestine](#) - which has already rallied over 115 sign ups from the sporting industry around our demands for a dignified existence for Palestinians and the [Great Ride of Return](#) - a synchronised solidarity cycle series which has brought together thousands in 60+ cities internationally.

Alaa, Mohammed and Waheed's invitation to Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) Paracycling World Cup races in Ostend, Belgium 2-5th May and Maniago, Italy 16-19th May marks the first of its kind. Never before has a Palestinian paracycling delegation been invited to participate just as there has never been a team at the Paralympics which these events will allow them to qualify for. The threat of being denied the right to compete internationally due to rejected visas, however, is all too common for us. Despite previously being asked to race in events in France, Italy and Switzerland, our sporting ambitions have repeatedly been obstructed as governments fear we won't return to Gaza and instead seek asylum in Europe. This is an experience shared across the community and as a result, the Palestinian National Paracycling Federation is composed of athletes who have never been able to train or compete on a road longer than 33 km, the longest road in the besieged Gaza Strip. We believe that, regardless of where they come from, no one should be held back from pursuing

what they love in sports. It's a world that is so important to us because on the global stage, it's the only place where Palestine is recognised officially as a country.

Belgium and Italy are currently not allowing online applications for visas from the Gaza Strip due to the ongoing Israeli aggressions. As a result, our athletes, wider team and network have had to spend a huge amount of resources to travel to Egypt to apply in person from there, which is far from simple considering the nature of the attacks in Gaza. Having arrived in Cairo before the others, Mohammed is now waiting for a decision on his Belgian visa, Alaa and Waheed have started the process with both Belgium and Italy. The trip has been funded through Amos Trust and supported by ACS Italia.

#### WE'RE ASKING FOR:

The Belgian authorities to swiftly grant Mohammed Asfour a visa so he can reach Ostende in time to participate in the Belgian Paracycling World Cup race. This should be valid for the entire month of May so that he can also travel to Italy and participate in the Italian Paracycling World Cup race in Maniago.

The Belgian and Italian authorities to confirm a visa appointment for Alaa Al-Dali, Waheed Rabah and the rest of their technical team for as soon as possible as well as permission to race in the Belgian and Italian Paracycling World Cup races.

These are crucial steps in keeping our dream alive of representing Palestine in the Paris 2024 Paralympics. If visas aren't granted in time for these World Cup races, they will not be able to compete in Paris.

#### WE RECOGNISE THAT:

The time for processing these visa requests is short, but we ask the Italian and Belgian authorities to be understanding of the stakes involved and the immense obstacles on our athletes' path to pursue their ambition.

#### WE STAND FOR:

We reject the discrimination which athletes from Palestine, and specifically from Gaza, have had to deal with when it comes to visa applications, just because of where they come from. Palestinian athletes, like most athletes around the world, strive to compete abroad and return to their homeland to empower their own sporting communities.

We appeal to the spirit of the Paralympics Games, whose ultimate goal is promoting inclusion and rehabilitation specifically for athletes coming from war zones or who live with disabilities because of conflict. For European governments to continue preventing athletes from competing internationally on the basis of their geographical or economic background is utterly shameful and runs counter to the equal opportunities which should be ever present in sports.

SUPPORT OUR #ROUTETOPARALYMPICS

Sign - this petition calling for Belgian and Italian authorities to grant visas to the athletes so that they can compete in qualifying races for the Paralympics where they can realise their dream of being the first ever Palestinian delegation, composed entirely of athletes and technical support team from Gaza

Speak - to Belgian and Italian Internal Ministry and Embassies in Egypt, email asking them to grant visas [cairo.visa@dipobel.fed.be](mailto:cairo.visa@dipobel.fed.be) | [federico.novellino@esteri.it](mailto:federico.novellino@esteri.it)

Stand - at rallies, protests and events - like our Great Ride of Return global synchronized solidarity cycles - to raise awareness about our plea to represent Palestine in the Paris 2024 Paralympics

Share - our message with your friends, family and networks through word of mouth or social media

Support - by donating to our fundraiser

In the midst of Israel's current assault which has killed so many of the team's friends and family members, we are still determined to reach the international stage to fulfill a dream that started back in 2018. We worked so hard to get to this point. Please support us.