

Cease-fire talks fail to produce agreement; third suicide bombing in three days

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STEVE WEIZMAN, Associated Press Writer

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Responding to U.S. prodding, Israel and Palestinians pressed on with truce talks Friday despite another Palestinian suicide bombing -- the third in three days -- but neither side reported progress.

The Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, a militia linked to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, claimed responsibility for the latest attack. The bomber killed himself and wounded an Israeli army officer at a military roadblock just inside the West Bank.

The Israeli military said the bomber had intended to blow himself up in Israel, but detonated the explosives prematurely when he was stopped by soldiers in a spot check. The assailant had been riding in a van with two other men, who fled after the explosion, said Brig. Gen. Gershon Yitzhak, commander of Israeli forces in the West Bank.

In the Gaza Strip, troops shot and killed a Palestinian trying to break through a fence into Israel, Israeli military sources said. Palestinian officials said the Israelis had informed them that a man had been shot dead but they were not told the circumstances.

Elsewhere in Gaza, Palestinians said a man was killed during a gunfight with Israeli forces that made a brief and short incursion into Palestinian territory in the Rafah refugee camp. The army acknowledged exchanges of fire in the area but made no report of casualties.

Suicide bombings on Wednesday and Thursday were carried out by the militant Islamic Jihad and by the Al Aqsa militia, respectively. In all, 10 Israelis were killed and dozens wounded in those attacks.

The bombings threatened tentative plans for Vice President Dick Cheney to meet with Arafat next week in Egypt. "As of now, the conditions have not been met" for any return trip to the region by Cheney, White House spokesman Sean McCormack said Friday.

Palestinian sources in the West Bank town of Nablus said Friday's attack was ordered by a faction of Al Aqsa that is engaged in a power struggle with veteran local militia leader Nasser Awais. The internal rivalry can only complicate any effort Arafat makes to bring the militants in line.

In an unprecedented public statement Friday, Awais declared himself overall head of the Al Aqsa militia in the Palestinian areas and, in defiance of Arafat's cease-fire call, said his organization would continue to carry out attacks.

On Friday morning, U.S. mediator Anthony Zinni met Arafat and delivered a stern message, saying the Palestinian leader had not done enough to prevent attacks on Israelis.

During a photo opportunity, the tension between Arafat and Zinni was apparent, and neither tried to hide it as they looked at the cameras -- Zinni stern-faced and Arafat dejected. Arafat leaned his head on his left hand.

In Washington, a U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity said Zinni had reported to Assistant Secretary of State William Burns there was "some headway" toward a cease-fire.

Friday's truce talks, held at the urging of the United States, lasted for over three hours, but no agreement was reached, Israeli Defense Ministry spokesman Yarden Vatikai said. "We raised of course what is demanded of the Palestinians in order to stop this awful terror," he said.

Palestinian security chief Jibril Rajoub said the meeting was very tense, with the Israelis focusing mostly on the suicide bombings while the Palestinians complained about Israeli army incursions into Palestinian territory.

"Our position was clear, end the occupation and you get the security," Rajoub said. "As long as there are tanks, it will make the Palestinians angry, the humiliations at the checkpoints make the Palestinians angry."

He said the Americans had written an analysis of the two sides' papers but made no proposals of their own. He said another session was set for Sunday.

Both Israel and the Palestinians have endorsed a cease-fire plan brokered last year by CIA director George Tenet, but disagree on the timetable for implementation, with each side insisting the other take the first steps.

In other violence Friday, Palestinians opened fire on an Israeli tank and two bulldozers that were clearing land in an Israeli-controlled section of the Gaza Strip adjacent to Palestinian-ruled territory, witnesses said. The Israelis returned fire, wounding a gunman and three civilians, one 12 years old, Palestinians said.

After the bombing in Jerusalem on Thursday, in which three Israelis and the bomber died, Israel called off that day's round of truce negotiations, but refrained from retaliating for the attack, as it had done routinely in the past. Arafat condemned the bombing, and said he would act swiftly to prevent attacks.

Israel holds Arafat "solely responsible for the murderous terrorism," Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's office said.

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