

Madrid to be yet another Camp David?

NICOSIA, Oct 30: The Madrid peace conference lends hope to the dream of statehood cherished by the Palestinians but also evokes nightmares that it will seal their fate forever under Israeli control.

Given US and Israeli objections, an independent Palestinian state is a "pipe dream" at the moment, a western diplomat told AFP by telephone from an Arab capital.

"Some form of autonomy would have to be an intermediary stage," the diplomat said, adding that an autonomous entity would then have to build up trust with Israel before a Palestinian state could even be considered.

But the Palestinians, even if they yield major concessions, still have more to gain than the Israelis from the conference, the diplomat commented.

After having lost its strongest allies in the debris of the Gulf war and the Soviet Union's collapse, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) decided it had no choice but to authorize Palestinians to attend the peace talks.

Delegates to the Palestine National Council (PNC) in Algiers last month reluctantly accepted the idea of Palestinian participation in the conference, but may see at least some hope the talks could lead to a state.

"It may be the path to our goal," said Sulafa Hijawal, a PNC delegate from Tunis, adding that she now had more trust in Washington. "It's a national goal. We cannot stop trying to establish our independence."

But George Habash of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who was among the minority at what amounted to a PLO parliamentary session in exile, warned that a conference would "liquidate" the Palestinian cause.

Anan Amrri, a PNC delegate and President of the Washington based Palestinian AID Society, said she feared events were moving toward Palestinian self-rule with administrative autonomy as the final solution.

Israel would retain permanent control over the use of water and defence matters and could even continue Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza strip, Amrri said.

Even among PLO members who have backed the peace conference, there is fear that the Arab states will cut a separate deal with Israel and abandon the Palestinian cause.

Arab ministers meeting in Syria this week are to secure an agreement that the peace conference must yield "a comprehensive solution rather than separate accords with Israel."

PLO official Yasser Abed Rabbo said.

Palestinians have bitter memories of the 1978 U.S.-brokered Camp David accords, which led to a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty a year later but failed to persuade Israel to recognize Palestinian claims to statehood.

More optimistic Palestinians believe the Soviet Union and even the United States as conference sponsors will ensure that United Nations resolutions on exchanging land for peace will be enforced during negotiations.

The Western diplomat said the Palestinian bargaining position remained weak as the talks approached, noting that the Israelis had succeeded in excluding from the talks the PLO, and Palestinians from East Jerusalem and the diaspora.

Israel, which seized East Jerusalem in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, insists that the status of the city is not negotiable.

But the diplomat acknowledged that the Palestinians may have improved their positions with plans to send an advisory committee with far closer ties to the PLO than the actual negotiators to Madrid.

Asked for comment on unconfirmed reports that two members of the Jordanian component of the joint

conference are from East Jerusalem he replied, "If true, it sounds like a plausible way of getting round Israeli objections."

But the key to any success for the Palestinians and for the peace process as a whole depends on the Israelis and what fall-back positions they will accept, he argued.

"That will be the arbiter of how far we get — if we get anywhere," the diplomat observed. "It's up to them to decide. People can't push them."

TUNIS, Oct 30: PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat warned Tuesday that extremist factions threaten to derail the Middle East peace conference and urged Palestinians to support their joint delegation with Jordan, reports AP.

The PLO leader told German television in an interview that he did not completely control Palestinian groups who might want to sabotage the peace talks through violence.

"Extremists Palestinian groups constitute a threat to the success of the negotiations," Arafat said.

In a news conference later at his headquarters in Tunis, Arafat said that they had addressed a videotaped message to Palestinians living in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The address was played on a videotape at East Jerusalem's Al-Hakawati theatre.

"This delegation represents all children, women and men in the interior and exterior of the occupied territories," Arafat said on the videotape.

"It is dedicated to challenging the Zionist enemy and all those who tried to frustrate the Palestinian people and their cause for decades," Arafat said.

The address was an implicit call for Palestinians to spurn extremist factions rejecting the talks.

Arafat deplored a recent meeting in Tehran, Iran by the so-called Conference for the Support of the Islamic Revolution in Palestine that set a day of "anger and protests" October 30.

Rocket fired at US embassy in Beirut

BEIRUT, Oct 30: A rocket hit the wall of the US embassy compound in Beirut on Tuesday, the eve of the Arab-Israeli peace conference in Madrid, a Beirut radio station reported, says AP.

A Lebanese guard at the embassy, who would not give his name, said "We heard an explosion and we are investigating. No losses here."

"We have no report of damage or casualties at the compound," he said.

The Christian-controlled Voice of Lebanon radio station said a rocket fired from a nearby hill hit a wall of the US embassy in Beirut's suburb of Aukar at about 10 pm (2200 GMT).

There was no immediate claim of responsibility. But the Voice of Lebanon said the blast was probably engineered by pro-Iranian Shiite Muslim fundamentalists bent on sabotaging the Madrid peace talks.

US using its clout to keep ME talks on track

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The Israelis insisted that since the Palestinians are part of the Jordanian delegation, they should share the 45 minutes of speech allotted to each party at Thursday's session. The Palestinians wanted 45 minutes to themselves.

The result: despite Israeli efforts to dissuade the Americans from backing the Arab demand, the schedule that was announced Monday evening gave the Palestinians' 45 minutes.

It was the latest in a series of diplomatic slaps the United States has delivered to Israel in recent weeks, starting with President Bush's refusal to expedite loan guarantees for the absorption of Soviet immigrants.

But where Palestinian participation in the conference was concerned, the Israelis had mostly gotten things their own way — no Palestine Liberation Organization, no Jerusalem residents, no separate Palestinian delegation.

The Israelis are anxious to submerge the Palestinians within the Jordanian delegation and rebuff their claim to statehood. So while the issue of speaking time might like an obscure procedural issue, both sides saw it as a matter of principle.

Equal time, argued Zalman Shoval, the Israeli ambassador to Washington, would imply that the Palestinians are "a separate national entity."

The Palestinians are anxious to project themselves not an adjunct of the Jordanian kingdom but as a nation.

"The Israelis will object to anything. But I think that they should understand that there is a basis of equality here," said Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian spokeswoman.

Shoval hurried off to confer with US diplomats, and returned to his hotel saying the issue was not yet settled. Shortly afterward, the schedule was posted and the Palestinians savored a victory.

The Israelis did not formally concede defeat, but their shrugs suggested they were not going to let the issue torpedo the talks.

The conference brings Israelis and Palestinians together as formal negotiators for the first time, but the atmosphere between them Monday was one of suspicion — a war of words and one-upmanship fought from hotel doorsteps and lobbies.

Temper heated after word reached Madrid that gunmen had attacked a busload of Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank, killing two people and wounding six, including five children.

Israeli spokesmen quickly blamed their archenemy, the PLO, as well as Mrs. Ashrawi, claiming she had issued calls to escalate the violence in her native West Bank.

"It certainly harms the atmosphere and it raises some very serious questions with regard to their genuine attitude toward this whole process," said Shoval.

A News Analysis



WEST BANK— A homeless Palestinian family on its way to a new settlement here. Will they get a separate homeland to live in?

Madrid conferees urged to curb human rights abuses

WASHINGTON, Oct 30: Human rights abuses are rife by all parties in the Middle East and should not be overlooked by the peace conference in Madrid, a US based monitoring organisation said Wednesday, reports AP.

Middle East Watch released a 23-page report cataloguing torture and other alleged violations by Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Palestinian leaders and Egypt.

The group said the Madrid conference would only hurt the prospects for lasting peace in the Middle East if it ignores human rights violations.

The world community now accepts a clear linkage between human rights and international security and "the Middle East should not be allowed to become an exception," said the privately-funded, nonpartisan organisation.

The benefits of peace, it said, "must include the basic

freedoms of expression and association, freedom, from arbitrary arrest and torture, respect for the rule of law, an end to discrimination between ethnic and religious groups and the ability of citizens freely to choose and change their government.

"Egypt may be at peace with Israel," the report said, but the 1979 Camp David Treaty "has done little to improve its domestic human rights record."

Middle East Watch accused Egypt of arbitrary mass arrests and use of torture "with apparent impunity."

Israel "has violated human rights on a widespread and systematic basis, particularly since December 1987," when Palestinians launched the intifada uprising against occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the group asserted.

Middle East Watch said it deplored failure of Palestinian leaders within the occupied territories and the Palestine

Liberation Organisation to repudiate acts of violence against unarmed Israeli civilians and suspected Palestinian "collaborators" with Israel.

Jordan has made progress curbing rights abuses, the report said, but "allegations of torture continue to be reported."

Syria "in spite of recent gestures toward liberalisation... remains one of the worst offenders in the region," Middle East Watch said.

It accused Syria of killing at least 10,000 citizens over the past 21 years, resorting to torture and mass detention without trial on both its territory and occupied parts of Lebanon and "kidnapping and assassination to silence critics abroad."

Middle East Watch is affiliated with Helsinki Watch and other organisations that seek to promote the basic rights set forth in the 1975 Helsinki accord on East-West cooperation.

Homeless Palestinians: a flashback

NICOSIA, Oct 30: Here are some facts and figures about the Palestinians, who will be represented at the Madrid peace conference in a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, reports AP.

THE PEOPLE — There are more than 5.5 million Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian. About 800,000 live in Israel and have been granted citizenship. Some 1.7 million live in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Some 700,000 Palestinians fled or were driven out in 1948 when Israel was proclaimed; another 300,000 fled in 1967. Now there are more than 3 million refugees, increasing pressure on host countries and the UN agency set up to assist them. Jordan, with some 1.5 million Palestinians, has been especially hard-pressed to absorb some 250,000 more forced out of Kuwait by the Gulf crisis.

THE LAND — Palestine under the British mandate incorporated what is now Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. The UN General Assembly voted in 1947 to partition Palestine into a Jewish state on 56 per cent of the Arab state on the rest. Jerusalem was to be internationalized. The Arabs rejected that and fighting erupted. By mid-1948, Israel controlled the northern Galilee and the southern Negev.

Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan. Israel captured east Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan in 1967 and Gaza from Egypt. The two territories cover 2,410 square miles (6,242 square kilometers).

RECENT HISTORY — Palestinians have been struggling for an independent homeland since Israel was founded in 1948. They initially sought the return of all the land of mandate Palestine, but moderates now accept a state in the West Bank and Gaza.

The Palestinians' guerrilla war began in earnest after the 1967 war as Yasser Arafat took over leadership of the PLO. A decade of international terrorism followed.

In 1979, Egypt signed a separate peace treaty with Israel in exchange for the Sinai desert, undermining the Palestinian cause.

Then Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon forced the PLO out of Beirut and Syrian-backed Palestinian dissidents drove Arafat out of north Lebanon in 1983.

Frustrated Palestinians in the occupied territories launched an uprising in December 1987.

Arafat in 1988 renounced terrorism and convinced the Palestinians' Parliament-in-exile to recognize Israel, but Israel refuses to deal with him. His backing of Iraq in the Gulf war seriously undercut his support and he was cut out of the US-sponsored peace process.

Israel: occupied territories



I'm not ready to sit opposite PLO representative: Shamir

MADRID, Oct 30: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir met here Tuesday with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev for the first time, following the restoration of diplomatic ties less than two weeks ago, reports AFP.

He also raised an objection to Palestinian delegate to the Middle East peace conference, which opens Wednesday.

Shamir invited Gorbachev to visit Israel, said a Soviet presidential spokesman, who described their meeting as "historic." He said no date had yet been set for the visit.

Gorbachev expressed his "outrage about the terrorist attack yesterday," the spokesman said, referring to Monday's attack on a bus in the Israeli-occupied West Bank in which two Israelis were killed.

The Israeli Prime Minister told journalists that the two men had had a "good discussion" and exchanged views in their first-ever encounter. The two countries re-established diplomatic relations on October 18.

"He gave a picture of the situation, in the Soviet Union and showed great interest in relations between Israel and the Soviet Union," said Shamir.

Israel had demanded the restoration of ties — which were broken off in protest at Israel's seizure of Arab lands in the 1967 Middle East war — as a condition for Soviet participation in the Madrid conference.

Turning to the conference, Shamir told journalists he did not want to sit opposite the delegate Saeb Oreykat, who said last Thursday that his delegation represented the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

"I have not settled all the details but it's a problem. I will discuss it this evening with (US Secretary of State James) Baker," he said.

Israel has ruled out any role in the conference for the PLO, which it terms a terrorist organisation.

Speaking in Hebrew, Shamir also insisted his country would hold on to Eretz Israel, a term used for Israel within its pre-1967 borders as well as the occupied territories.

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JERUSALEM: The cover of the last number of Jewish Settler's monthly magazine "Nekuda" before the Madrid peace conference showing Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir being chased by US President Bush, Syrian President Assad, King Hussein of Jordan and Palestinian leader Faisal Husseini. — AFP/UNB photo

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THE SHUTTLE DIPLOMAT: At long last, an all-party Middle East conference is in progress in Madrid, thanks to untiring efforts of US Secretary of State James Baker. Baker is seen taking a break from hectic diplomacy at a Turkish bath in Damascus.