

Israel pledges pullout from West Bank

Abbas, Sharon end first meet with positive note

THE GUARDIAN, Jerusalem

Israel last night promised to withdraw its forces from the centres of Palestinian cities in the West Bank after a three-hour meeting between the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers in Jerusalem.

The second meeting in two weeks between Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas was hailed as "beneficial" and "positive" by both sides ahead of next week's summit with George Bush.

Bush has been stepping up the pressure for peace in the Middle East and in an interview with *Le Figaro* published this morning warns that Israel must take real steps towards that end.

"I am absolutely determined to carry on [the peace process] to the bitter end because US foreign policy is not limited to defending its own interests ... We want peace," Reuters quoted Bush as saying.

"This region will only have

peace if it has freedom. For the Palestinians, this means the creation of a state. A Palestinian state must be viable. The expansion of (Israeli) settlements is a contradiction to our efforts to create a Palestinian state."

"The prime minister emphasised that only after liquidation of terrorism and a real struggle against it will it be possible to achieve the hoped-for peace," it said.

"The redeployment of troops is dependent on the relentless fight against terrorism," Sharon's spokesman, Raanan Gissin added.

The meeting took place hours after two of the main Palestinian militant groups, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, said they would consider a total ceasefire when they meet Abbas next week.

Abbas has said he expects to deliver a ceasefire. "My assessment is that by next week I will arrive at a ceasefire agreement with Hamas," he told the daily *Yedioth Achronot*.

Mahmoud Zahar, a Hamas leader, said the organisation was willing to discuss ending attacks in

stopping incitement and creating an atmosphere of peace", according to a statement from Mr Sharon's office.

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Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. "Up to this moment we have no fixed conditions," he told Israel Radio.

"These conditions will be agreed upon by all the Palestinian sides. If Abu Mazen succeeds in achieving our national goals, Hamas will discuss the issue of a ceasefire."

Abdullah Shami, a leader of Islamic Jihad, said his group was willing to consider an indefinite ceasefire "if the enemy is committed to not targeting our people as well as releasing Palestinian prisoners".

Hamas supports a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and what is now Israel while Islamic Jihad believes in a united Islamic state encompassing all Muslim countries.

But al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a militant group affiliated with the Fatah faction of the Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat, issued a statement which cast a shadow on peace efforts.



Protestors wearing G8 heads of state masks on Thursday lead a demonstration in Lausanne, of about 10,000 people against the G8 and globalisation, at Lake Leman, facing the eastern France town of Evian, host to the G8 meeting scheduled for June 1-3.



A view of the Dvortsovyy flap bridge, St. Isaac's Cathedral (R) and the Admiralty Building (L) late Thursday in Saint Petersburg, during the celebrations marking the 300th anniversary of Russia's former imperial capital. Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Saint Petersburg on Friday for a series of summits that will see him meet his US counterpart George W. Bush and most European leaders for the first time since the war in Iraq.

World leaders gather for party in St. Petersburg

REUTERS, St. Petersburg

World leaders gather in Russia on Friday to mark the 300th birthday of the old Czarist capital, a glittering occasion many hope will help dispel lingering rancor over the Iraq war.

It will be the first time all the key players in the bitter debate over the US-led Iraq invasion will be together since the war began in March.

The three-day celebrations in St. Petersburg -- its palaces and canals spruced up with a \$1.5 billion renovation some critics say Russia can ill-afford -- comes just days before the world's seven largest industrial economies and Russia hold their G8 summit in France.

Friday's arrivals in St. Petersburg include British Prime Minister Tony Blair, fresh from a trip to Iraq, and his main opponents over the war there -- French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

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