

Uneasy ceasefire announced at US-Israeli-Palestinian summit

Chris Marsden
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US President Clinton on Tuesday announced a last-minute agreement between Israel and Palestine to end the past 20 days of fighting and return to the status quo between the two sides prior to the present conflict. But tensions remain high, and there is every chance that even the limited cease-fire agreement may not hold.

Clinton told the world's media, "Both sides have agreed to issue public statements unequivocally calling for an end of violence" and to "take immediate concrete measures to end the current confrontation". His verbal statement was a stopgap, issued after he was unable to get the two sides to endorse a written declaration.

The two-day summit at the Egyptian town of Sharm El Sheikh was convened by the US to try to halt Israeli-Palestinian fighting that has killed at least 103 people and injured thousands more, threatening to destabilise the entire Middle East. Clinton and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright attended the summit along with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Jordan's King Abdullah and European Union foreign policy supremo Javier Solana. Egypt and Jordan are the two Arab states most closely allied with the US and are anxious to impose a further compromise on the Palestinians. Russia was not invited to attend.

A key aim of the Clinton administration was to pressure Arafat into a climb-down that would help Barak convince his right-wing critics at home—led by the Likud party—to accept a temporary cessation of Israel's military offensive against the Palestinians. On the Sunday prior to the summit, Albright said, "We think he [Arafat] should do more." US National Security Adviser Samuel Berger, who also accompanied Clinton, insisted that Arafat must "do everything in his power to try to stop the violence.... He doesn't control everything, but I believe there's more he

can do."

Israel had earlier demanded that Arafat disarm members of his own Fatah organisation and rearrest hundreds of Islamic militants from Hamas and the Islamic Jihad movement, whom he had released in the aftermath of Israeli missile attacks on his headquarters. On the day the summit opened, Arafat had 35 of those he had earlier released rearrested.

The summit appears to have succeeded in winning further concessions from Arafat. Israel has promised to end its military blockade of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and reopen the Palestinian airport at Gaza, but only as long as Arafat succeeds in calling off all demonstrations and protests. The US, together with United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, would in turn set up a "fact-finding committee" into the conflict.

This last provision represents a clear retreat by Arafat, who had been demanding an independent international investigation into the origins of the violence, and an accommodation to Israel's insistence on a more limited US-led investigation. Israel's acting Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami said, "Israel is satisfied. The objectives we came for have been met."

For Israel, the summit met its aim of placing the onus for any continuation of the fighting on Arafat. Ominously, Barak warned that if the summit "did not lead to a decrease in violence, it is vital for Israel to find any way to decrease the violence. And I say to my sorrow that we will know what to do in any situation that will develop."

Arafat issued no statement at the conclusion of the summit and his delegation quickly left the venue.

Arafat's ability to convince his own people to end the conflict is doubtful. The summit met against a background of continued fighting between Israeli

armed forces and Palestinians. On Tuesday, Jewish settlers shot dead one Palestinian and wounded three more near the West Bank city of Nablus. At the Erez crossing point between the Gaza Strip and Israel, hundreds of protesters clashed with Israeli soldiers, drawing return fire that injured 10 demonstrators. In Bethlehem, Palestinians marched in opposition to the summit and thousands of Arabs throughout the Middle East have joined similar protests.

Arafat's political rivals in Hamas denounced the summit as "totally useless" as soon as it was convened. Conscious that Arafat's leadership position has been undermined by the breakdown of the settlement with Israel he negotiated, one Hamas leader told the press, "I am sorry that Arafat has accepted to go to this summit. Some say that he can never say 'No' to the Americans."

Barak's threat to renew military violence should Arafat fail to stem popular anger amongst his people leaves the way open for further Israeli aggression. Barak has proposed a national unity government with Likud, including Ariel Sharon, whose intentionally provocative visit to the holy sites at Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount on September 28 with an armed guard of a thousand soldiers sparked the present conflict.

Sharon has said Likud would not join the government unless Barak abandoned any discussion on dividing Jerusalem. Without that, he said, "We will go to new elections and he will lose". Other Likud leaders said they would stay out of a government of national emergency if Barak attempted to restart negotiations with Arafat.

Barak has given every indication that he is ready to march to Likud's tune. He preceded his trip to Egypt with a TV interview in which he said that his earlier proposals for a form of joint sovereignty over certain holy sites in Jerusalem were now "null and void". He accused Arafat of having "deliberately launched" the violence and said the Palestinian leader may not be "the right one" for Israel to secure a settlement with.



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