

Powell sent to rescue Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire

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US President George W. Bush is sending Secretary of State Colin Powell back to the Middle East next week to try to prevent the collapse of the truce between Israel and the Palestinians. In addition to the trip by Powell, who will be accompanied by Special Envoy Kenneth Williams, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will be in Washington where he will meet with Bush.

Powell's high-level mission comes hard on the heels of the visit by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director George Tenet, who last week secured a cease-fire agreement from Sharon and Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat, in the aftermath of the Tel Aviv bombing by Hamas that killed 20 young Israelis on June 1.

The truce brokered by Tenet has looked increasingly shaky, with bitter recriminations on both sides. On June 9, Israeli tank fire killed three Palestinian women near Netzarim in the Gaza Strip. Six Palestinians and four Israelis have already been killed in the eight days since the cease-fire agreement, bringing the death toll in the nine months of fighting to more than 600.

The Israeli security cabinet has accused the Palestinians of breaking the agreement by not "halting terrorism, arresting terrorists, stopping incitement to violence and taking measures to prevent attacks". Israel has reimposed a blockade around the West Bank town of Tulkarem, near the site of one of two attacks last Monday on Israeli drivers. Avraham Burg, the speaker of the Israeli parliament, who was in Washington for a meeting with Powell, told reporters that although the Israeli government's policy was to restrain its use of force, "everyone understands that there are limits, especially when the Palestinians are not doing their best". Ominously he said that Israeli military intelligence had concluded that a cease-fire did not in fact exist.

Speaking from Madrid, Yassir Arafat, the Palestinian

Authority chairman, who is currently on a tour of European capitals trying to drum up support for his tottering regime, blamed the Israeli settlers for the violence. But he promised that he would do everything possible to control the situation. Back in the Middle East, however, Palestinian officials were quoted saying that the cease-fire only applied to areas under full Palestinian control, and accused Israel of breaking the terms of the truce by refusing to dismantle the blockades around Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank and Gaza.

Ziad Abu-Ain, a Fatah leader in the West Bank, told Israel Radio, "We have said from the beginning that there is no cease-fire for the settlers," at least 27 of whom have been killed in ambushes and drive-by shootings since fighting broke out last September.

The terms of the truce agreed during the CIA director's visit last week were highly favourable to Israel. Before the suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, Arafat had sought to make any cease-fire conditional upon Israel publicly embracing the recommendations made by the Mitchell commission. Authored by two former US senators, the commission's proposals were published by the United Nations at the end of April and called for an end to the expansion of Israeli settlements on the West Bank and in Gaza. After the Tel Aviv bombing, however, Arafat was forced by US pressure to make the cease-fire unconditional. Tenet demanded that the Palestinian Authority:

- * arrest the 100 or so prisoners freed from jail at the start of the *intifada* plus further "suspected terrorists," including members of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah guerrillas operating from within its areas;

- * unconditionally end the armed confrontation without linking the cease-fire to any of the recommendations in the Mitchell report, most notably

the freeze on the Israeli settlements, or indeed any previous agreements with the Israelis;

* accept a buffer zone around Israeli settlements that would be “no-go” areas for Palestinians.

In return, Israel would have to lift the closures on the Occupied Territories and would not be permitted to mount any offensive against Arafat’s headquarters, or carry out any military operations in areas under complete Palestinian control. Negotiations on the form of a Palestinian entity, including the further withdrawal from the West Bank that Israel agreed to under the Wye Accords but had still not implemented, would not recommence until the cease-fire had taken effect for at least six weeks.

Arafat was being told to assume sole responsibility for ending all resistance to Israeli aggression and risk open conflict with masses of his own people. When he at first refused to accept these conditions, Tenet in effect told him to take it or leave it and set off to the airport to fly home. A desperate Arafat sent a car after him. As the BBC noted, “In the end, the Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat has decided he would rather risk unpopularity among his own people than say no the Americans.”

Sharon’s hard-line stance, rejecting any limits on the “natural growth” of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, increases the dangers of an all-out war between Israel and the Palestinians, which could draw in neighbouring Arab countries and destabilise the entire Middle East. This scenario would prove to be a nightmare for strategic US interests in the oil-rich region. Initially, therefore, State Department foreign policy experts had been critical of the Israeli response to the Palestinian uprising, calling it “heavy handed” and “disproportionate,” even mooted that President Bush should restrain Sharon by threatening to cut off Israeli access to US funds.

In recent weeks, a shift has become apparent. The Bush administration has become somewhat firmer in its backing for Sharon’s militaristic stance. Apart from demanding that Israel pull back its forces after announcing that it would reoccupy Gaza, Bush has given Sharon a free rein to use military force, including the use of F-16 fighter aircraft and fragmentation bombs against Palestinian targets, to put an end to the uprising. While the meeting with Bush next week will be Sharon’s second since his election, Arafat, on the

other hand, has been kept at arm’s length, in stark contrast to his treatment during President Clinton’s term of office, when he visited the White House more frequently than any other foreign leader.

The present situation in the Middle East is balanced on a knife-edge. Sharon faces divisions within his right-wing cabinet. Many, such as Housing Minister Natan Sharansky, are deeply hostile to any accommodation with the Palestinians short of abject surrender. Others have criticised the security cabinet decision to sign up to the Tenet cease-fire, arguing the full cabinet had already taken a military decision to proceed against the Palestinians after the Tel Aviv suicide bombing.

The most vocal calls that all-out war be declared immediately against the Palestinians come from the estimated 200,000 settlers in the West Bank and Gaza. Sharon rests upon these fascistic layers and his government has confirmed 700 new homes in the West Bank settlements in addition to the 6,000 already under construction. But this has not prevented the staging of demonstrations, condemning Sharon for agreeing to any kind of cease-fire.

On the Palestinian side, Arafat faces opposition within the Palestinian Authority and among the Palestinian people at large. A recent poll by Bir Zeit University showed that 78 percent of those asked wanted the *intifada* to continue, come what may.

The US not only offers no viable proposals for preventing the Israeli-Palestinian from spilling over into a wider regional conflagration. Its political sympathy for Sharon and continued policy of building up Israel as its military proxy is one of the major sources of Middle Eastern instability. Earlier this week, the Israeli government announced it is purchasing 50 US F-16 fighter planes at a cost of \$2.5 billion. Israel already has 320 F-16s that make up the backbone of its fighter fleet. The new F-16s will be able to strike further, reaching Iran and Libya, and will be equipped with a more advanced US-made radar system.



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