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Barak May Halt Peace Process

By *Keith B. Richburg*
Washington Post Foreign Service
Saturday, October 21, 2000; Page A01

JERUSALEM, Oct. 20 — Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak threatened tonight to call off seven years of peacemaking with the Palestinians after the bloodiest day of clashes in two weeks killed as many as 10 Palestinians and left a U.S.-brokered cease-fire in tatters.

"We will not agree to an ostrich-like peace," Barak declared.

In a television interview, he said Israel will consider taking "time out, in order to reevaluate the peace process" because of the persistent clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian rioters and gunmen in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. He said that if the violence continues unabated, the suspension will begin after an Arab summit meeting in Cairo this weekend and last "however long is necessary in order to evaluate the situation and determine what we have to do, and what the other side is doing."

In practical terms, peace negotiations between Israel and Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority have been suspended amid acrimony and blame-laying since Gaza and the West Bank erupted Sept. 29 in violence that has killed about 120 people, most of them Palestinians. Barak's statement seemed to be a threat to declare formally that the talks are off and to adjust Israeli policy accordingly.

This would mark a stark admission that peacemaking has become impossible for the time being after three weeks of bloodshed. It would be a dramatic setback for President Clinton's efforts--most recently Monday and Tuesday at a summit conference in Egypt--to shepherd Barak and Arafat out of the current violence and back into the negotiations that only a month ago had seemed promising.

Verbatim

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The person who feels most betrayed is Barak, an Israeli government spokesman said. The violence, he said, "undercut Barak . . . and caused a reexamination in Israeli society of the peace process. This has been the catalyst for a lot of soul-searching."

The suspension could persuade Barak's hard-line political opponents opposed to peace with the Palestinians to join him in a "national emergency government"--a move that would prolong Barak's hold on office but make it virtually impossible to revive land-for-peace negotiations with the Palestinians or Syria. The right-wing opposition Likud Party, which would be the main partner in any such government, opposes terms of the current peace process.

Israeli officials blamed Palestinians, and specifically Arafat, for failing to rein in his armed militia and call off daily protests as agreed at the summit at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. That accord, reached after more than 24 hours of massaging by Clinton, called for a cessation of hostilities and a return to security cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian forces.

But by agreeing to wait until after the Arab summit, Barak essentially set yet another deadline--Monday--for an end to the Palestinian uprising before he puts the peace process in abeyance. He has set several such deadlines, and each time he has seen only a ratcheting up of the protests.

The latest deadline also puts a new spotlight on the Arab summit, which begins Saturday in Cairo. Arafat, who arrived in Cairo today, was looking for Arab support for the Palestinian uprising and a joint condemnation of Israel. But some Arab leaders, worried about stability and the growing militancy of their own people, were looking to keep the violence from spilling over the borders and igniting a regional crisis.

World leaders also sought to calm the rising tensions. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan said: "We are nowhere near the level where I would say it is satisfactory. . . . I think the next 48 . . . [to] 72 hours is going to be crucial, and I hope the parties will stick with the agreement."

From the ground, however, it seemed difficult to imagine that the anger and emotions that have fueled the unrest are likely to diminish. Each day of clashes brings new Palestinian deaths, and each death has become a catalyst for a new wave of protest, creating a cycle of violence and hatred that seems spiraling beyond the leaders' ability to maintain control.

For instance, a funeral in the West Bank town of Nablus for a 34-year-old man slain by Israeli troops Thursday became the focal point today for a rock-throwing demonstration that turned deadly. Israeli troops fired on demonstrators from their checkpoint at the edge of the town, killing at least five and possibly six Palestinians, according to Palestinian sources. Exact numbers were difficult to verify.

In addition, a 13-year-old Palestinian boy was shot and killed in the village of Salfit, south of Nablus; a 17-year-old was killed in Ramallah, the main city in the West Bank, about 12 miles north of Jerusalem; and a 16-year-old was killed in Qalqilyah, near the border with Israel. Their deaths made this the bloodiest day of clashes since Oct. 6, when 10 Palestinians were killed on a self-proclaimed "day of rage." There were also reports of a 16-year-old boy being shot and killed in Tulkarm, another West Bank town just north of Qalqilyah.

The Jewish-inhabited suburb of Gilo in southern Jerusalem came under fire again tonight, and Israel troops responded by cannon fire from tanks against a nearby Palestinian quarter called Beit Jala. It was the first time Israeli tanks have unleashed their big guns, other than their mounted machine guns. There were no reports of injuries in that clash.

While Israeli officials blamed Arafat and the Palestinian Authority for fomenting the unrest, Palestinians accused Israel of instigating most of the violence by firing on rock-throwing demonstrators with standard ammunition and refusing to move troops and heavy equipment away from Palestinian-controlled areas.

"The towns are under siege," said a Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, speaking on television. "Israeli tanks are at the entrance to towns and villages and refugee camps. . . . The more aggression by the Israeli soldiers, the more things are getting out of hand."

Erekat called on Clinton to "come personally to say who is violating the terms" of the Sharm el-Sheikh agreement. As for the broader peace process, he said, "The Israeli government is doing a good job at killing this peace process in a very determined effort."

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