

Balkan, Middle East negotiations unfolding

Arabs, Israelis not focusing on same issue in recent burst of diplomatic activity

By Neil Feldman
Staff Reporter

Ever since Israel deported 415 Palestinians on Dec. 17, the feeling among most officials involved in the Middle East peace process was that the talks would be indefinitely stalled between the eighth and ninth rounds.



But two weeks ago, the first positive sign came when a burst of diplomatic activity in both the Middle East and Washington brought all parties to their toes.

Middle East officials, which included Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, Israeli negotiators and Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi, met with members of the Clinton administration for the first time.

Reminiscent of the Kissinger years, a flash of shuttle diplomacy took place within the Middle East state. Abdullah ibn Abdel aziz al-Saud, the Saudi crown prince, made separate trips to Damascus and Cairo. Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's president, made a quick trip to Damascus, and Rafik al-Hariri, president of Lebanon, visited both cities.

All of those trips, which could have been missed with the blink of an eye, came just prior to U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher's first trip to the Middle East.

There is no question that these lightning-quick displays of diplomacy are a good sign for the future of the Middle East peace talks. But like the previous eight rounds of negotiations, both sides — the Arabs and Israelis — are not focusing on the same issues.

Principally concerned with the 415 deportees cited as being part of Hamas, the Islamic resistance movement, the Arabs have not indicated that they are prepared to give in over this issue.

The Palestine Liberation Organization has taken a particularly harsh stance on this issue. They have repeatedly demanded the return of all refugees before the peace talks resumed.

A recent U.S.-brokered Israeli offer to

bring 101 of the deportees back to their homeland immediately and the rest by the end of this year seemed like it might temporarily quell the rising tensions.

However, the Jordanians, Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians all have rejected this offer, insisting that U.N. Resolution 779, which calls for all the deported men to be returned immediately, is the only way to resolve this issue.

Ghassen al-Khattib of the Palestinian delegation said accepting the U.S.-Israeli deal would be "very dangerous." The reason, he said, was because they do not want to lose other resolutions, such as 242 and 338, which would give Palestinians autonomous rule of the West bank and Gaza Strip.

Representatives from the Israeli delegation continue to harp on the notion that the deportee issue will be resolved one way or another. The Israelis recently have indicated that they are anxious to get the ninth round of Washington-based peace talks off the ground to resume negotiations.

Shimon Peres said Israel assumed the deportation issue was off the agenda.

But Hanan Ashrawi clearly has not dismissed it. Two weeks ago, she urged the Clinton administration to renew the dialogue between the United States and the PLO. The PLO, though, has repeatedly demanded the immediate return of all deportees to their homeland.

This display of politics by the Palestinians may, as one Israeli official alluded, further complicate the crisis.

If the conflict is not resolved, many Washington-based Middle East analysts have suggested the Jordanians, Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians could boycott future Middle East talks, and break down the entire peace process.

Bosnians still seek to use ground forces; U.N. talks turn to political boundaries

By Neil Feldman
Staff Reporter

As Bosnian leaders continue to put pressure on peacekeepers to use force on the ground, U.N. officials in New York are trying to quell the Balkan inferno through peaceful, diplomatic negotiations.

The latest round of talks, which began last weekend, are focusing on the political boundaries of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Initiated by Cyrus Vance of the United Nations and Lord David Owen of the European Community, the Vance-Owen peace plan calls for carving Bosnia and Herzegovina into 10 autonomous provinces.

Vance and Owen are hoping that the U.N. Security Council will endorse their plan by the beginning of next week.

The recent nod by the Clinton administration to support the plan is a plus to the peace process, Vance said last week.

U.S. Special Envoy Reginald Bartholomew and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vitaly Churkin are both new additions to the peace talks and are expected to help speed things up.

But the United States does not see the proposed map as fair to the Muslims, and the Russians have strong ethnic ties to the Serbs.

Many analysts of the Balkan War are skeptical as to whether the negotiators will be able to get past these two barriers.

If talks proceed and nothing close to a consensus is reached, analysts say chances are the Security Council will not endorse the Vance-Owen peace plan.

However, U.N. officials remain optimistic, stressing that they are confident these two temporary setbacks will not hinder the overall process.

A proposal issued by the French that would establish an international tribunal for war crimes committed in the Balkan War is also on the agenda.

George Kenney, the former desk officer for Yugoslav affairs at the State Department, said last week that the proposal by the French probably would get smothered by the intense focus on the Vance-Owen plan.

The United Nations also is concerned with the decision by the Bosnian government last week to halt distribution of relief aid to Sarajevo and Tulza until U.N. convoys are more effective at getting through Serb roadblocks to Muslims under siege in eastern Bosnia.

U.N. officials in former Yugoslavia are aghast at this move, calling it blackmail because the Bosnian armies had harassed convoys.

Serb commanders, though, blocked two aid convoys for four days while they were on their way to beleaguered Muslims in eastern Bosnia.

The United Nations opted to keep the convoy on the road until it was allowed through, clearly displaying that it had every right to reach the Muslims.

Before leaving for the Middle East last week, Secretary of State Warren Christopher said the United States was ready to take "determined steps" to ensure that aid gets through.

This statement came several days after the United States announced that it was ready to participate in negotiations regarding the Vance-Owen peace plan.

Experts on the Yugoslav crisis continue to harp on the notion that all parties must come to an agreement before the peace plan can effectively work.

Otherwise, they argue, the negotiations will result in a stalemate, and they will be back to square one.



Brian Shellito/DN

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