

# Withdrawal, prisoner issue still in negotiations

JERUSALEM (AP) - Blaming each other for creating a crisis atmosphere, Israel and the Palestinians held talks Monday over releasing prisoners and transferring control of West Bank territory.

A day before leaving for Washington to meet Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said negotiators are close to an agree-

ment - except for prisoner releases and the timetable for Israel's withdrawal.

Under the Wye River accord, signed last October, Israel should turn over control of some West Bank land to the Palestinians and release 750 prisoners, and the Palestinians should take steps to control extremists and stop terror attacks on Israel.

Former Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu signed the agreement with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and carried out the first phase, then suspended the process, charging that the Palestinians were not doing their part.

Ehud Barak defeated Netanyahu in Israel's May election and pledged to implement the Wye accord. But he has asked Arafat to agree to some changes. The Palestinians have refused.

Foreign Minister David Levy charged that the Palestinians are creating "an artificial crisis" and trying to involve the United States in the negotiations. He told Israel radio the Palestinians are trying to force Israel to go beyond the signed agreement "to attain more than what is written."

Erekat charged that Levy was at fault for talking about a crisis. "Everyone is working in good faith,

and I hope Mr. Levy will in the future refrain from such statements," he told The Associated Press.

Israel says Palestinian prisoners are to be released Sept. 1 and Oct. 8, but who will be freed remains in dispute. The Israelis refuse to release Palestinians involved in killing Israelis, while the Palestinians say only security prisoners and not common criminals should count.

# Bret's wrath leaves minimal damage

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas (AP) - Texans streamed back to their mostly unscathed homes Monday after Hurricane Bret threaded the needle between Corpus Christi and Brownsville and pushed through open ranch land without causing a single death.

By morning, the strongest hurricane to hit Texas in nearly 20 years had weakened into a tropical storm.

"We're thrilled out of our minds, is what we are," said teacher Rita Clark, whose home had only a downed tree limb in the yard. "It was nice enough to fall gently against my house."

Residents to the west in Laredo braced for flooding, but by Monday night the threat seemed to have diminished. All Laredo businesses were ordered to close at 6 p.m. Monday, and the Laredo International Airport and all three bridges linking Texas with Mexico were closed.

Bret moved slowly across Texas' tip with drenching rain of 8 to 12 inches. About 3,500 people on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border left their homes for higher ground.

"I urge all Texans in the affected areas to take the threat of flooding seriously, to continue to pay close attention to this storm and to follow the advice and directions of local officials," Gov. George W. Bush said.

By Monday, Bret's top winds had decreased to near 40 mph with higher gusts. It was expected to weaken further as it continued its inland trek toward the Rio Grande and Mexico.

Bret had been rated a potent Category 4 storm when it approached over the Gulf of Mexico with 140 mph winds, and the National Weather Service had likened it to Hurricane Andrew, which devastated heavily populated south Florida in 1992. Thousands of tourists and residents fled inland.

But when Bret finally came ashore at 6 p.m. Sunday, its winds were down to 125 mph. And instead of hitting Corpus Christi (population of 300,000) or Brownsville (132,000), which are 160 miles apart, it crossed midway between the two cities like a football sailing through the goalposts.

Mayor Fil Esquivel of Kingsville said the storm "kicked a field goal."

Bret hit sparsely populated Kenedy County, which is the home of the storied King Ranch and has far more cows (tens of thousands) than people (458).

Widespread power outages were reported, but damage was considered light in many places.

"You might call it the great escape. I think the city of Corpus Christi is very fortunate," said Mayor Loyd Neal.

The King Ranch reported downed trees but no livestock losses on one of the country's largest cattle operations, founded in 1853 by riverboat captain Richard King. Ranch President Jack Hunt said all 300 people who live and work on 825,000 acres tending 60,000 head of cattle were evacuated before the storm hit. The cattle were left to fend for themselves.

"About all you can do is open the gates and make sure the cattle can go where they need to go," Hunt said.

Hurricane damage was substantial in Falfurrias, a town of 5,800 about 60 miles southwest of Corpus Christi. Mayor Michael Guerra said. The wind ripped roofs from homes and businesses and up to 90 percent of the town had no electricity. Major damage also was reported in Port Mansfield, about 50 miles north of Brownsville.

A tornado that was spun off by Bret between Rockport and Aransas Pass destroyed a mobile home and damaged several other buildings.

Three of the four downed high voltage lines that bring electricity to South Texas were functioning again Monday, and the fourth was expected to resume operation today. The number of customers without electricity dropped from 16,000 Monday morning to 11,000 in the afternoon, the Public Utility Commission reported.

On Monday, the state Health Department warned of the possibility of dengue fever, a viral illness spread by mosquitoes.

President Clinton issued a disaster declaration Sunday night for seven counties. Hurricane Allen, another Category 4 storm, struck roughly the same area in 1980, causing \$55 million in damage.

On Padre Island, lumber was found blown around from construction sites along with a barbecue pit.

"I expected the tidal surge to be more. I expected to find flooded carpet," said Scott Belcher, who lives on Padre Island and returned to discover his home was just fine.

After all the warnings, the actual arrival of the storm "was kind of a let-down," admitted his wife, Tisha.

# Sudan accepts plan to cease civil war battling

CAIRO, Egypt (AP) - Sudan's government has accepted a plan to end the African country's 16-year civil war, Egypt's news agency reported Monday.

It was not possible to obtain an immediate reaction from the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army, the umbrella opposition National Democratic Alliance, based in Eritrea.

The rebels have been battling government forces in southern Sudan.

Nearly two million people have died in the war and attendant famines. The rebels, who draw support from the Christians and animist majority in the south, seek autonomy from Muslim-majority northern Sudan.

The alliance groups the southern rebels with northern opposition groups opposed to the military-backed government of Gen. Omar el-Bashir.

Egypt's Middle East News Agency said the Sudanese government had accepted the Libyan-Egyptian plan, under which the warring sides would call a permanent cease-fire, attend a national peace conference and stop mounting media campaigns against each other.

The government and the rebels have proclaimed a series of three-month cease-fires since last October. The government's latest truce is scheduled to end in October.

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