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Six die after Mid-East talks



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Clashes in Jerusalem's Old City after Friday prayers

Renewed violence has broken out in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, amid growing signs that there may be one last try for some kind of settlement to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict before US President Bill Clinton leaves office.

Six Palestinians were killed on Friday, within hours of the highest level contact between the two sides for more than two months.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat held a three hour cabinet meeting in Gaza to brief his ministers on recent talks with Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami.

“ [We are exploring the possibility of] direct discussions between negotiators from both sides back here in Washington ”
US State Department



Hamas members killed a sheep as a symbol of the Israeli prime minister

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▶ The BBC's Orla Guerin
"There are no high hopes here"
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Palestinian officials said more talks were possible, but a statement played down prospects of a breakthrough, saying that while Israel raised hopes of renewing peace talks, it continued "aggression and military escalation against the Palestinian people".

▶ The BBC's Jon Leyne
"This is evidence Clinton will be working for a Middle East peace deal right up to the end"
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The Israeli media is speculating about a face-to-face meeting between Mr Arafat and the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, but top Arafat aide Yasser Abed Rabbo said the two sides were not ready for a return to full-scale negotiations.

Washington is exploring the possibility of hosting peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in Washington, according to State Department spokesman Richard Boucher.

A date as early as the middle of next week is being talked about, if the two sides agree.

BBC Washington correspondent Jon Leyne says this announcement is further evidence that the Clinton administration will be working for a Middle East peace deal right up to the end of the President's term in office on 20 January.

Opposition to negotiations

But feeling is running strong against talks among many Palestinians.

At a rally attended by 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza, a leader of the Islamic organisation Hamas condemned the latest talks as pointless, and called for all Palestinians to join a war against Israel.

"The Zionist enemy (has) opened the gates of hell itself and Shlomo Ben-Ami's visit to Gaza will not change that one bit," Salah Shehadeh said.

The director of Mr Arafat's Fatah faction in the West Bank was also critical.

"Palestinians do not want any negotiations," said Marwan Barghouthi. "We negotiated seven years without obtaining anything."

“
The intifada must be pursued and a return to the old negotiation formulas with Israel would be a catastrophe that no Palestinian could accept
”
Marwan Barghouthi

Nevertheless the meeting has raised hopes. French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine ended a two-day visit to the region saying that he "saw a will on both sides to renew the political dialogue".

Friday prayers

But violence continued during the day after the deaths of five people in overnight clashes.

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A 17-year-old Palestinian was shot dead outside the West Bank city of Nablus in clashes following Friday prayers.

In Jerusalem, Palestinians rioted after Israel again restricted entry to the Al Aqsa mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam.

Demonstrators pelted police with rocks. The police responded with stun grenades and rubber-coated bullets.

Three Palestinians killed in overnight clashes in Nablus were buried after a mass funeral procession in the town.

“
Where are you Arabs?
Palestinians are dying
”
Nablus crowds

About 20,000 people marched from a local hospital to the graveyard, shouting slogans and calling for revenge.

Two other Palestinians have been killed in the past 24 hours - a policeman shot dead by Israeli troops near Ramallah and another man who the Israeli military said was shot near the Erez crossing point in Gaza when he tried to stab a soldier.

Heavy Israeli shelling, but no casualties, were also reported in Rafah in the Gaza Strip.

The death toll during the clashes exceeds 325, the vast majority Palestinian.

Election driving events

At a political level the atmosphere has improved since Mr Barak's decision on Sunday to resign and seek re-election.

Both sides are said to want to hammer out a framework peace agreement before the leadership elections on 6 February in which Mr Barak is likely to face the right-wing former leader Binyamin Netanyahu.

In Thursday's meeting the two sides agreed to try again to implement pacts reached at an October summit in Egypt, including a halt to the clashes and an end to the Israeli blockade of Palestinian cities, Israel radio reported.

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