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Israel withdraws from Arafat home Palestinian leader still restricted to Ramallah

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel decided Sunday to draw tanks back from Yasser Arafat's compound but continue restricting him to the West Bank city of Ramallah — a halfway measure that led angry Palestinians to cancel planned cease-fire talks with Israeli security officials.

While the Palestinians had hoped that last week's arrests of three top suspects in the October killing of Israeli Cabinet minister Rehavam Zeevi might end Arafat's almost three-month-long confinement, Israel on Sunday demanded again that they be handed over and that other suspects be arrested as well.

But an Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity, suggested Sunday's was only a preliminary decision, and also that Israel expected the security meeting to be delayed by only one day and held Monday. The Defense Ministry, meanwhile, said the army would exercise restraint in hopes of enabling a truce.

Arafat has been restricted to Ramallah since early December, shortly after a wave of suicide bombings in Israel, and tanks moved steadily closer to his compound, eventually surrounding it.

Israel's Security Cabinet, made up of senior ministers, said in a statement Sunday that such pressure caused last week's arrest in the West Bank city of Nablus of the three members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which claimed responsibility for Zeevi's killing in October.

Raanan Gissin, spokesperson of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, said Israeli tanks would soon be pulled back from Arafat's compound to unspecified new locations.

But Palestinian Cabinet minister Saeb Erekat maintained that this "changes nothing" because Arafat had been able to get around Ramallah already; in recent days he prayed at a mosque about a mile away and



A Palestinian police officer inspects part of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's office compound in the West Bank town of Ramallah after an Israeli helicopter gunship attack.

attended the opening of a play. "This is a very terrible decision," said Erekat. "Why is it that every time we try to proceed with the peace process ... they take such decisions? We expected to hear a decision that will revive hope ... Enough trying to humiliate us!"

Dovish Israelis noted that Arafat's quarantine had not succeeded in lowering the violence that has raged since September 2000, killing 992 people on the Palestinian side and 283 on the Israeli side.

In announcing the decision Sunday, Sharon appeared to leave options open. He said "the closure around Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah will be lifted" but that "Arafat's departure from Ramallah will

require a decision that would be before a forum according to the judgment of the prime minister."

Arafat hopes to attend an Arab League summit at the end of March in Beirut. Israeli officials are concerned Arafat will turn that summit into a show of defiance with redoubled support for a month-old uprising.

There is also some apprehension in Sharon's circles that the summit could momentum to emerging Saudi proposals for wider Middle East peace in exchange for an essentially complete Israeli pullout from the West Bank and Gaza — an idea that has fiercely opposed but Israeli officials likely to embrace.

Colombian presidential candidate abducted by leftist guerrillas

SAN VICENTE DE CAGUAN, Colombia (AP) — A presidential candidate who is a severe critic of Colombia's leftist guerrillas was abducted by the rebels as she headed into a zone they once controlled, her campaign spokesperson said Sunday.



BETANCOURT

Ingrid Betancourt disappeared after setting out for San Vicente del Caguan, a former rebel stronghold that was seized by government troops Saturday in an offensive to retake a large swathe of rebel-controlled territory.

Betancourt and her campaign manager Clara Rojas were kidnapped Saturday by rebels with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, spokesperson Diana Rodriguez told The Associated Press.

Rodriguez said the rebels released two journalists — one French, the other Colombian — and a campaign coordinator who had been accompanying Betancourt and Rojas. The three returned safely to an army base in the city of Florencia, where Betancourt began her trip, Rodriguez said.

Colombia's government said it had warned Betancourt, a former Senator, not to make the trip to San Vicente because it was too dangerous.

Interior Minister Armando Estrada called on the rebels to release Betancourt. "We ask those who are holding her to respect her life and release her quickly so she can resume her advocacy work," he said.

Estrada said the government was search-

ing for her and was doing what it could to establish security in the war zone.

Betancourt was one of a number of candidates in the elections set for next month who had planned to enter the former rebel-run territory to show their support as the government moves to retake the area.

President Andres Pastrana had ceded the zone, an area twice the size of New Jersey in southern Colombia, to the FARC three years ago in hopes of brokering an end to the country's 38-year war. But last week he declared the peace process collapsed, citing

repeated FARC attacks on military and civilian targets, and on Friday thousands of troops began moving into the area.

The troops moved into San Vicente, the main town in the region of 100,000 people, before dawn on Saturday.

Estrada urged other candidates not to visit the area for the moment, and two candidates postponed planned trips.

"It is good that politicians are doing what they can to draw support for their campaigns and their causes ... but it was not necessary to make that trip in those conditions,"

"They were waiting for orders about what to do with Ingrid."

—Adair Lamprea
campaign coordinator

Eventually, the rebels ordered Betancourt into one truck and Rojas into another, Lamprea said. "When (Betancourt) got into that truck, she appeared strong, just always is, but nervous," he said.

"They freed the rest of us at the same time, told us that they had the person they were looking for and that we weren't part of the plan," Lamprea continued. "They dropped us somewhere and we walked and walked until a truck came by and picked us up. There was bombing, and we could hear it strongly. It was horrible."

Betancourt had planned to meet with Vice Mayor Nestor Leon Ramon, a member of her political party. She reported she was determined to stay in San Vicente for "respect for human rights."

Betancourt's husband, Juan Lecompte, said Betancourt felt she had to be with the people of San Vicente "the good and the bad."

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