

Israelis leave Bethlehem

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli troops pulled out of biblical Bethlehem and a neighboring village early Tuesday, witnesses said, edging Israel and the Palestinians closer to a cease-fire in the 18-month-old Mideast conflict.

The pullback came during a visit by Vice President Dick Cheney, winding up a tour of the region that concentrated on the U.S.-led campaign against world terrorism. Concerned that Palestinian-Israeli violence would disrupt the effort, Cheney called on both sides to end their conflict.

Cheney joined the efforts of U.S. mediator Anthony Zinni, and the two Americans held talks Monday afternoon with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Cheney called on both sides to end their conflict.

The effort follows one of the bloodiest periods in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israelis are increasingly impatient for an end to the carnage, while the Palestinians have been suffering very heavy casualties and economic losses.

Leaving Bethlehem, soldiers dismantled rooftop positions, made of sandbags.

Armored personnel carriers and tanks then rumbled along the main roads of Bethlehem and Beit Jalla into Israeli-controlled territory.

However, Israeli troops remained in the village of El-Khader, next to Bethlehem, and enforced a curfew in the Aida

refugee camp adjacent to the West Bank town, traditional birthplace of Jesus.

In violence Monday, Israeli soldiers shot and killed an armed Palestinian near a crossing point between Gaza and Israel, the military said. Also, Palestinians fired two Qassam rockets into Israel from northern Gaza, the military said. Palestinians said Israel sent armored vehicles to search farms afterward.

"The meeting today was tough and serious, but positive."

— Jibril Rajoub
Palestinian security chief

Meanwhile, Israeli soldiers tracked down and arrested two Palestinians who had infiltrated into northern Israel, planning to carry out a terror attack, the military said.

In the most promising sign since Zinni arrived last week, Israeli and Palestinian security officials met three times in less than 24 hours.

"The meeting today was tough and serious, but positive," said Jibril Rajoub, the Palestinian security chief in the West Bank. "The Israelis are

committed to withdrawing from all (Palestinian-run) areas of the West Bank."

Israeli forces have entered more than a half-dozen Palestinian towns and cities in a search for Palestinian militants. They have withdrawn from all the Palestinian population centers except Bethlehem and Beit Jalla, two adjacent West Bank towns just south of Jerusalem.

It was not clear whether Israeli troops would remain in a few Palestinian-run areas of the Gaza Strip — a key road to some farmland — which was also seized in recent months and this was apparently not of Monday's emerging deal.

An Israeli pullout would meet the most immediate Palestinian demand for a cease-fire. However, breakthrough could be undone by Palestinian attacks, which could prompt Israeli retaliation.

Zinni, who has been shuttling between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, is trying to get the sides to implement a cease-fire deal brokered last year by chief George Tenet.

Both sides previously endorsed the plan, which called the Israelis to pull back from where they were before the deal began in September. The Palestinians must prevent attacks against Israel and what may prove to be a long undertaking — collect weapons from militants.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Man dead upon flight's arrival in Phoenix

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — An 80-year-old man who was dead when he arrived on a flight from Phoenix had been slumped over when he was wheeled onto the plane but was breathing, flight attendants said.

A medical examiner said there is no way to determine exactly when James Mark Walsh died.

The medical examiner's report said the man's son, Mark Walsh, who accompanied the older man, had told investigators he was "pretty much convinced" his father had died in the Phoenix airport, although flight attendants were reassured he was all right during the flight.

The Federal Aviation Administration was looking into whether the airline and crew followed regulations, but sanctions were unlikely, spokeswoman Elizabeth Isham-Cory said in Chicago.

Walsh was declared dead Saturday after arriving at Des Moines International Airport on an America West Express flight. He had a history of heart and kidney-related problems.

According to the medical examiner's report, a ticket agent noticed Walsh was "a bit loud" when he arrived at a ticket counter that morning in Phoenix with Mark Walsh, of Green Valley, Ariz., and another family member.

But the report quoted Mark Walsh as saying his father slumped over in his wheelchair and became quiet before they boarded the airplane.

U.S. troops kill 16, capture 31 Afghans

WASHINGTON (AP) — Moving against remnant al-Qaida Taliban forces in Afghanistan, U.S. forces killed 16 fighters in a gun battle and captured 31 others at a military compound, U.S. officials said Monday.

There was no indication that any of those killed or captured were senior leaders of al-Qaida or the Taliban, U.S. officials said.

No American troops were wounded in either confrontation, Pentagon officials said.

The biggest U.S.-led ground offensive of the war, dubbed Operation Anaconda, was declared finished Monday.

"While this particular operation's over, we're still actively pursuing al-Qaida and Taliban personnel throughout Afghanistan as we're preparing for any subsequent missions that may be needed," said Air Force Brig. Gen. John Rosa, deputy director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

President Bush, speaking during a visit to St. Louis on Monday, also said that while Anaconda is over, the war in Afghanistan is not.

"I feel like we've got a lot more fighting to do in Afghanistan," he said. "These are people who are there to die and we accommodate them. They are relentless, but so are we."

In a sign of the global scope of the United States' war on terrorism, Rosa said American troops in the Philippines evacuated Filipino soldiers from Basilan Island after they were wounded in a firefight with Abu Sayyaf, the small Muslim extremist group whose say is linked to al-Qaida.

Rosa said the U.S. troops were not involved in the combat there, nor did they come under fire during the emergency training to Filipino forces.

In Afghanistan on Sunday morning, a team of Army Special Forces soldiers attacked a convoy of three vehicles about 45 miles southwest of the city of Gardez, killing 16 people believed to be al-Qaida fighters and wounding one. One other was detained, Rosa said.

U.S. forces initially fired warning shots from their helicopters and those in the vehicles fired back. A firefight ensued on the ground, he said. He and other officials said they were awaiting other details.

A fourth vehicle traveling some distance behind the three-vehicle convoy also was stopped by the Americans and those inside were determined to include women and children, Rosa said. They were allowed to proceed.

Ammunition, rocket-propelled grenades and other weapons were found in the three vehicles, Rosa said.

Rosa said he was not sure where the three-vehicle convoy had been trying to escape the area attacked heavily during Operation Anaconda.

In a separate incident shortly after the firefight, U.S. forces captured 31 suspected al-Qaida or Taliban fighters in a compound west of the city of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, officials said. They said weapons and a large amount of ammunition were captured.



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SPORTS

No. 17 Aggies host Bears

After dropping games last week, Texas A&M will host the State Bearkats at 7 p.m.

The Aggies' Big 12 struggle has the hands of the weekend in Lubbock. Sam Houston State is in Southland three to the Texas - Arlington weekend.

Sophomore Brian Finch is starting for A&M in a 2-0 record, one strikeout pitched.

Earlier this Aggies' de Houston, 18-A&M has won games played two teams.

A&M class in Invitational

The Texas team tied for second place in the English Invitational.

The Aggies' English show N.M., Saturday, Sunday and the western Sunday. We captured the Sunday, Oklahoma team, 23-20.

The Aggies be at the Championships.

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(AP) NEW YORK — New York forward Pave with the Florida Monday night New York second round defensiveness and Filip N along with the "He's a c said Ranges ager Glen "He's some score any t pick on his artist. He's a