

Islamic militant suicide bomber blows up bus, kills seven

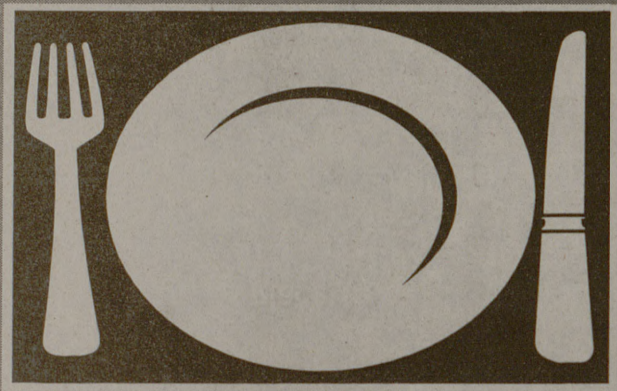
JERUSALEM (AP) — An Islamic militant blew himself up in a packed bus during morning rush hour Wednesday, killing seven other passengers, including four Israeli soldiers. Israel said it would not retaliate for now and agreed to a crucial meeting with the Palestinians that could produce a cease-fire after 18 months of Mideast fighting.

U.S. mediator Anthony Zinni contacted Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to ensure that the delicate truce talks would not be derailed by the bombing near the northern town of Afula. The explosion, which blew gaping holes in the sides of the bus, also injured 27 people, many of them Arab Israelis.

Israelis and Palestinians have both hinted a truce could be declared as early as Thursday. However, the militant Islamic Jihad group claimed responsibility for Wednesday's bombing and said it would not abide by any cease-fire agreement. "I had the honor to organize (this attack), and I want to tell the Israelis that

as long as Sharon is killing Palestinians, we in Islamic Jihad will kill Israelis," said Mahmoud Tawalbi, head of group in the West Bank town of Jenin. The bombing pointed to a fundamental problem facing Israeli and Palestinian negotiators: How to prevent a future attack from unleashing a spiral of retaliatory violence that will swiftly

cause a truce to unravel. But Israel Radio, citing sources close to Sharon, said Israel would hold off on retaliation and would not cancel Wednesday truce talks in Tel Aviv, during which the Palestinians were to respond to Israel's truce timetable. The meeting was convened in Tel Aviv Wednesday, Palestinian officials said.



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