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Israeli troops and their armored vehicles wait to enter the Palestinian town of Bethlehem.

Israel controls Bethlehem

Takeover forces Palestinians to take shelter

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Israel seized control of Bethlehem and another West Bank town Tuesday in a day of wild fighting that left at least 13 Palestinians dead. Palestinian gunmen forced their way into the Church of the Nativity, where tradition says Jesus was born, and Israeli tanks and helicopters pounded the headquarters of a Palestinian security chief.

Amid what has become the fiercest Israeli offensive in 18 months of conflict, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat angrily rejected an Israeli offer to free him from confinement in his compound in the West Bank town of Ramallah — provided he goes into exile. Arafat spent a fifth straight day pinned down by Israeli troops and tanks, his compound now ringed by barbed wire.

Israeli troops pressed ahead with house-to-house searches for Palestinian militants and weapons as part of what Israel calls "Operation Protective Wall" — aimed at halting terror attacks targeting Israelis.

In the seventh such attack in as many days, a Palestinian man blew himself up Tuesday night

when security forces stopped him at a checkpoint in Baka al-Sharkeyeh, a Palestinian village along the line between Israel and the West Bank. The man detonated explosives strapped around his body, killing himself but not injuring others, the military said.

In a dramatic gesture that underscored hardships caused by the Israeli incursion, Palestinians buried 15 of their dead in a hospital parking lot in Ramallah. Families of the dead had been unable to claim the bodies, which were decomposing in a hospital morgue because power cuts made refrigeration impossible. Relatives wailed and gunfire from fighting echoed as the bodies were placed in common graves carved out by a bulldozer — one for 13 men, one for two women.

Ramallah residents, though, got a respite of a few hours from a curfew that has been in effect since Israeli tanks and troops moved in on Friday. People poured into the shops, lugging away canisters of cooking oil and plastic bags bulging with pita bread. Canned goods were popular, as many people have no electricity and perishable food has been rotting in refrigerators.

By nightfall, most of the about 400 Palestinians trapped in the compound of West Bank security chief Jibril Rajoub near Ramallah had surrendered to Israeli troops, in a deal brokered by U.S. and European officials. About eight men remained inside.

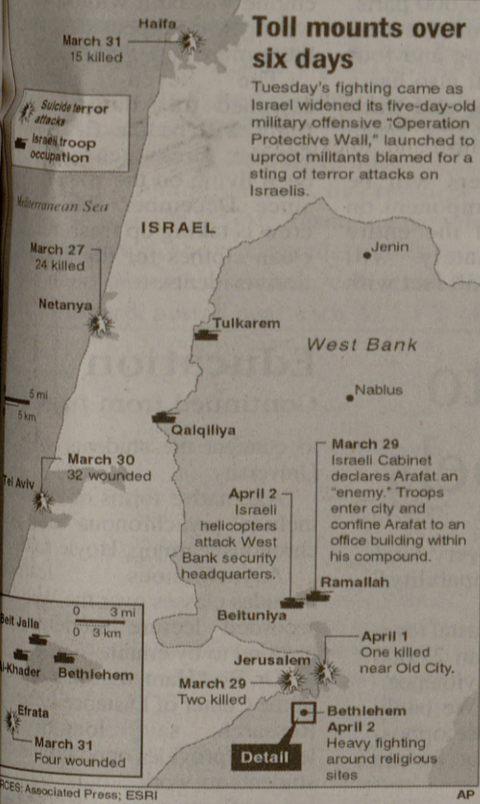
The sprawling compound was battered by the Israeli onslaught, with gaping holes punched in rooftops and building facades by shellfire and rockets.

Holy places were not immune from violence that raged the length and breadth of the West Bank. Dozens of armed Palestinians were holed up inside the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is built over the grotto where tradition says Jesus was born. About 20 of the gunmen were wounded and being tended to by nuns, according to witnesses trapped in the church compound.

The armed men, some of them Palestinian policemen, forced their way into the church after running battles with Israeli troops firing from helicopter gunships and from tank-mounted machine guns.

At nightfall, the bodies of four gunmen lay sprawled just off Manger Square, where the church is located.

As the fighting intensified, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon proposed publicly for the first time that diplomats fly Arafat into exile. Sharon noted such a move would require Cabinet approval.



NEWS IN BRIEF

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty begin broadcasting

PRAGUE, Czech Republic (AP) — Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty will start broadcasting to the troubled North Caucasus region this week, officials said Tuesday, after a month's delay amid concerns of angering Russia over the war in Chechnya.

Sonia Winter, a spokesperson for the U.S. government-funded broadcaster, said the two-hour daily programming will start Wednesday, produced by nine staffers of the newly established North Caucasus service. The service will be in the regional languages Chechen, Avar and Circassian, as well as Russian.

The broadcast had been scheduled to begin Feb.

28 but was delayed at the request of the State Department on grounds it could set back efforts to start a dialogue on ending the Chechnya war.

In Washington, however, State Department spokesperson Philip Reeker said the delay was sought to allow the department time to consult Congress on the best use of funds.

Reeker added that RFE/RL are not subordinate to the State Department and do not broadcast editorials in support of U.S. government policies. The stations attempt to provide objective reporting, he said.

Winter said Tuesday the last meeting of the Broadcasting Board of Governors that oversees U.S. international radio broadcasters decided to proceed with the programming and "instructed us to go ahead."

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