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Israeli demolition crews move on West Bank synagogue, Gaza mosque

Steve Weizman
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM — Israeli troops tore down part of a synagogue at a West Bank settlement outpost Tuesday but made no attempt to move adjacent trailer homes, prompting accusations the government isn't serious about meeting U.S. demands to dismantle dozens of the outlawed sites.

Demolition on a far greater scale took place in the Gaza Strip, where army bulldozers smashed 25 houses and flattened a mosque in a Palestinian refugee camp, leaving 400 people homeless, local officials said.

The military said it targeted buildings from which shots were fired at Israeli forces, but did not know how many structures were demolished.

Also on Tuesday, Israeli planes attacked two Hezbollah guerrilla bases in south Lebanon, the Israeli military said. There were no reports of casualties, Lebanese security officials said.

The evening airstrike followed a border incident Monday, in which Hezbollah guerrillas fired an anti-tank missile at an Israeli bulldozer clearing explosives, killing an Israeli soldier and seriously wounding another.

At the West Bank outpost of Tapuah West, about 150 Jewish activists put up token resistance against hundreds of soldiers and riot police, burning tires and erecting flimsy barricades of stones on the road leading to the isolated hilltop.

It was the first move by the army to clear a structure from a populated outpost since June,

when soldiers and police got into a bloody fistfight with settlers as they tried to dismantle shacks and tents at Mitzpeh Yitzhar, another West Bank outpost.

The wooden synagogue and study center at Tapuah West was dedicated to the memory and teachings of American-Israeli Meir Kahane, whose anti-Arab Kach movement is on the State Department list of terror organizations and has been outlawed as racist by the Israeli government.

Kahane was assassinated by an Egyptian in New York in 1990.

Supporters of the Kahane memorial project watched angrily as soldiers wrestled a large metal safe-like object onto the blade of an armored bulldozer.

They said the strongbox contained a Torah scroll, a handwritten copy of the Old Testament that is a holy object to Jews. The army could neither confirm nor deny that a Torah scroll was inside the box.

A man in a knitted skullcap who gave his name as "Arieh" wept as the bulldozer backed away. "When Jews take a Torah scroll from a synagogue, the state of Israel will fall apart," he shouted.

Three soldiers were slightly injured and 14 settlers were arrested in scuffles at the scene, Army Radio reported.

Critics of Tuesday's operation, which was played out before TV cameramen, photographers and reporters, said it was a meaningless display. After similar army raids in the past, settlers simply rebuilt demolished structures after soldiers left.

"You really need a microscope to see the differences before and after," said Dror Etkes of Peace Now, an Israeli group that monitors settlement expansion. "A few days later, everything is back in place."

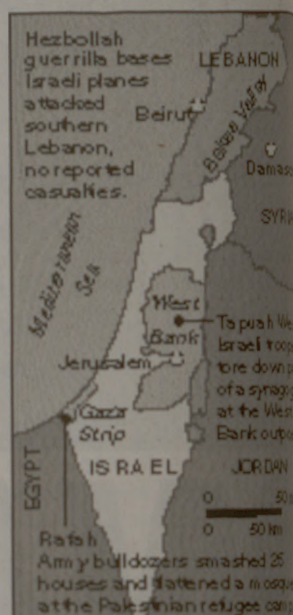
Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz has ordered several outposts demolished. Under the U.S.-backed "road map" peace plan, Israel is required to remove dozens of outposts, but so far has taken down only a few. The Palestinians also have failed to meet their first obligations, including a clampdown on militants.

Shortly before sundown Tuesday, most of the Jewish activists and the soldiers were gone, leaving the synagogue a skeleton with only a few uprights supporting its green, gabled roof. A police officer said demolition would be completed Wednesday.

In Gaza's Rafah refugee camp, the pace was markedly different.

As the Israeli bulldozers went to work, frantic residents threw mattresses and blankets from second-floor windows as ceilings and walls come crashing down around them. One woman, standing just feet from a bulldozer, waved a white flag in a failed attempt to slow the demolition and salvage belongings. A crying girl helped her mother carry a mattress.

The governor of Rafah, Majed Agha, said about 400 people were made homeless Tuesday. Palestinian human rights workers said 17 houses were destroyed and another eight badly damaged. Agha initially



SOURCES: Associated Press, EFR. put the number of demolished buildings at 30.

Israel has demolished hundreds of houses in Rafah near the Egyptian border, more than three years of fighting, saying the buildings gave cover to gunmen and weapons smugglers.

Also razed Tuesday was neighborhood mosque. Tawhid, which had been partially demolished Saturday, is 70 yards from an Israeli road. "This is a crime against God's law and human law," said preacher Ibrahim Abu Jazar.

The military said it was checking the report of a mosque demolition. In the past three years, troops have generally stayed clear of holy sites.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Iraqi Governing Council could take over powers from coalition

BAGHDAD, Iraq — If an influential Shiite cleric sticks to his demand for early legislative elections, then the coalition may turn sovereignty over to the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, coalition and Iraqi officials said Tuesday.

One top Iraqi official said the cleric would accept a transfer of power to the Governing Council as a way out of the standoff.

Transferring power to the Governing Council was among options under study if the United Nations fails to convince Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani that early elections are not feasible, coalition officials told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

Publicly, coalition officials have insisted the best way to choose the transitional legislature is by 18 regional caucuses. U.S. officials hope to convince al-Sistani that a legislature chosen by caucuses would have greater legitimacy than the Governing Council.

Iran seen dragging feet on key assurance of nuclear intentions

VIENNA, Austria — Western diplomats and nuclear experts voiced growing concern Tuesday that Iran has reneged on its promise to fully suspend uranium enrichment — a process that can be used to make nuclear weapons.

Worries over Tehran's nuclear intentions coincided with decreased concern among nuclear watchdogs about Libya's nuclear ambitions. Tripoli volunteered last month to give up chemical, biological and nuclear weapons or weapons programs.

Disarmament teams are in Libya to start dismantling the country's weapons of mass destruction, and diplomats say the North African country apparently was sincere in its vow to disarm.

The most recent developments threaten, therefore, to put Iran at center stage at the next top-level meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency in March.

Tehran announced it had suspended uranium enrichment late last year as it sought to blunt international concern and to defang U.S. attempts to gain U.N. Security Council involvement.

Israeli warplanes attack southern Lebanon after guerrillas kill soldier

BEIRUT, Lebanon — Israeli warplanes struck Hezbollah guerrilla bases in southern Lebanon late Tuesday, threatening to re-ignite another Arab-Israeli front that has been mostly calm for years.

Israel said it was retaliating for a Hezbollah attack that killed one Israeli soldier and wounded another a day earlier, and said the attacks were intended as a message to Syria, the main power broker in Lebanon.

The United States blamed Hezbollah guerrillas for the escalation and cautioned Syria against giving support to the Lebanese militant group.

There was no word on casualties from the airstrikes in a valley six miles north of the Israeli border near the Mediterranean coast, Lebanese security officials said.

One target, a Hezbollah training position, took a direct missile hit and the sound of exploding ammunition was heard in the area, the officials said. They said they couldn't determine the extent of damage because of the remote location.

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