

Israeli helicopters launch major assault on Jericho, Ramallah, Hebron

by Michael Zielenziger
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JERUSALEM — Israeli helicopters unleashed a major assault on the Palestinian towns of Jericho, Ramallah and Hebron on Wednesday night after a day of fierce fighting in which five Palestinians and three Israeli soldiers were killed.

The bombing continued late into the night, apparently in retaliation for the deaths of the Israeli soldiers, who were killed in gun battles with Palestinian guerrillas.

In Ramallah, which is about 10 miles from Jerusalem, the Israeli Army lobbed rockets at the headquarters of Tazim, a military branch of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah organization.

In Jericho, Israeli helicopters targeted a building being used as a training center for Palestinian security forces. Witnesses said the building exploded into a ball of fire after rockets struck it.

There was also heavy fire in Hebron, and the Israeli Army warned the Palestinian Broadcasting Authority to evacuate its building there.

Earlier in the day, Israelis were shaken as a bomb exploded in a wealthy section of West Jerusalem, near the home of Israeli President Moshe Katsav.

"Today there was a very negative jump in the scope and severity of events," said Danny Yatom, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's security aide.

Thursday promises to hold more unrest. The Palestinian Authority has called on residents of the West Bank and Gaza to close shop schools on Thursday in a general strike.

"We will not give up our political negotiations for peace," said

Mohammed Dahlan, head of Preventative Security Services in the West Bank. "But at the same time we will defend ourselves and our cities against the Israeli aggression."

Israelis bombed the Palestinian towns despite a meeting Wednesday night between Arafat and former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres that was called to explore ways to stop the fighting. Acting Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami met with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Washington on Wednesday. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat is slated to meet with Albright on Friday in the United States.

"We will act in exactly the necessary way, the manner and measure in order to serve the needs of the state of Israel," Barak said before heading into a meeting of his security cabinet, where he apparently approved the late-night strikes on Palestinian towns.

It was a violent culmination to a violent day.

Two Israeli soldiers and two Palestinians were killed in a four-hour gun battle in El Khader, near Bethlehem. The two Israelis were among four soldiers who were ambushed. Israeli troops deployed a helicopter gunship to try to rescue the soldiers.

The third Israeli soldier, on patrol outside Jericho, was killed after he was attacked by armed Palestinians.

Fierce clashes erupted Wednesday near the Karni crossing in Gaza, killing three Palestinians, two of them aged 15 and the other 17, Palestinian medical officials said. It was the same area where four Palestinians were killed Tuesday.

Near Jerusalem, the Jewish settlement of Gilo again came under heavy fire from the Palestinian town of Beit Jala, on a neighboring hill-

side. Israeli return fire slammed into a building in Beit Jala. There were no reports of casualties in that battle.

One Gilo resident, Dalia Suleimani, told Israeli Radio that her family was trapped inside its house by the intense gunfire.

"We are sitting in the small corridor between the kitchen and the bedroom, because there are windows in all the other rooms," she said. "It's dark the whole time, because we are afraid to turn on the lights. It's a terrible situation."

The death toll in five weeks of unrest stands at 163, most of them Palestinian. There was no immediate information on any deaths and injuries from Wednesday night's bombings.

After a day of some of the most intense clashes since efforts to finalize a Middle East peace deal effectively came undone, a glum-faced Barak appealed to the Israeli people to persevere.

"We are facing difficult days," Barak said. "We find ourselves in a period in which the ability of the entire society to endure . . . will determine the results of this whole testing time."

Barak spoke to the nation only about an hour after the explosion in West Jerusalem jarred many Israelis, as it showed that the unrest has reached into the heart of the city.

Nobody was hurt in the explosion. Michael Frischer, a 35-year-old driving instructor, was teaching a student how to parallel park when the blast detonated some 12 feet away by the side of the road.

"The other car saved us. It's full of holes," said Frischer. "It's a good thing my student hadn't begun to reverse the car yet." Debris from the explosion blew out one of Frischer's tires.

"This area is near the president's house. There is tons of security

around here and still it happened," lamented Yitzhak Gispán, a 46-year-old municipal employee who was riding his moped when the blast occurred.

"This is a terrible feeling of fear and insecurity."

Meeting in Washington before the attacks, Albright and Ben-Ami discussed the agreement Barak and Arafat reached with Clinton two weeks ago in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt to stop the fighting. They also discussed the controversial fact-finding commission that is supposed to determine the causes of the violence and how to prevent a recurrence.

In her meeting with Erekat, U.S. officials said Albright will stress the importance of avoiding inflammatory public comments. Both she and President Clinton have been critical of recent comments by Arafat who, among other things, said that Barak could "go to hell" unless he recognized Palestinian sovereignty over east Jerusalem.

Despite the diplomatic shuffles, few hold out any hope that the United States will be able to do anything to stop the violence.

"The Israeli and Palestinian leadership have to talk to each other," said Jon Alterman, a Middle East expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington. "Simply bringing them together in a formal way doesn't cause them to either solve their internal problems or move forward together on their joint problems."

Alterman said the United States may well be taking serious moves to try to curtail the violence.

"The truth is I don't know what the U.S. is doing and you don't know what the U.S. is doing. The things that are helpful now are not the things that should be made public. They're really dull but they're important. And ultimately they save a lot of people's lives."

Grandmother accused of directing crime ring from her wheelchair

by Nicole Sterghos Brochu
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Frail and wracked by arthritis, Ernestine Williams spends her days in a wheelchair.

But that didn't stop the Boynton Beach grandmother from commanding a multistate racketeering operation for 10 years, state agents said this week.

In that time, authorities said, she built a highly organized crime ring based in southern Palm Beach County. Williams' group allegedly picked hundreds of elderly victims' pockets and used their stolen credit cards to buy merchandise that was later sold for a substantial profit.

The group left a trail of victims from Miami to Atlanta, Florida Department of Law Enforcement officials said. A good day netted the group \$52,000, which agents said amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars since 1998.

A two-year investigation ended early Wednesday morning when the 63-year-old Williams and three family members — son Timothy Butts, 42, daughter Tomeka Williams, 31, and grandson Jessie Williams, 19 — were rustled from their beds and charged with racketeering and conspiracy to commit racketeering.

If convicted of racketeering, they each face 15 to 20 years in prison. A first-degree felony, racketeering charges are typically used to attack organized patterns of criminal activity. They were held in lieu of \$100,000 bond. All eight suspects have extensive arrest records, mostly for theft and drug charges.

"You don't have to be a Mafia don to do organized crime," said Michael D. Washam, special agent supervisor of FDLE's West Palm Beach office. "This is as organized as they get."

The grandmother was smooth, gradually building up a sophisti-

cated 15-person operation and getting a cut of the profits, authorities said. Williams also personally tutored each of her charges and went along on almost all of the pick-pocket missions that she called "shopping trips," they said.

To avoid detection, the time from a wallet theft to the merchandise sale of the merchandise was short — usually one or two days, agents said. Most of the thefts and purchases were in Georgia and other parts of Florida, but Washam said the goods were resold in the area. As yet, agents have identified no buyers.

Many members of Williams' core group were enticed to join the enterprise with crack cocaine, Washam said. The so-called "shoppers" told agents they earned up to \$1,000 a day and later spent much of it buying drugs from Ernestine Williams, known on the street as "the drug lady."

Her arrest record dates back to a 1960 shoplifting charge and includes at least 28 theft and drug charges.

Agents said it was Ernestine Williams' son, Timothy Butts, who was responsible for providing the operation with drugs and vehicles, spending more than \$3,000 for rental cars and trucks in seven months.

Butts also bragged to group members that he was able to provide stolen credit cards from professional athletes, including Tennessee Titans player Kenneth Holmes. But it was his mother who Washam said was the most enterprising and elusive.

Suspicious officers investigating retail robberies often stopped her car after the thefts, he said. But, seeing a frail woman and a wheelchair in the car, they promptly let her go.

"Nobody thought that a 60-something-year-old lady in a wheelchair would be involved in something like this, when, in fact, she was the ring-leader," Washam said.

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