

Israel approves release of prisoners

By Ramit Plushnick-Masti
AP Writer

JERUSALEM - Israeli Cabinet ministers on Thursday approved the release of 900 Palestinian prisoners and a military pullout from the West Bank town of Jericho within days in overtures intended to improve the climate ahead of next week's Mideast summit.

The ministers also approved an earlier decision by the army chief to halt the targeted killings of wanted Palestinian fugitives and agreed to form a joint Israeli-Palestinian committee to decide what to do about them.

The 900 prisoners represent about one-eighth of the total number of prisoners Israel holds. The decision to withdraw only from quiet Jericho falls short of expectations that ministers would approve the evacuation of five West Bank towns, but followed the Israeli government's decision this week to slow the pullout after a brief outbreak in violence.

Palestinians and Israelis both said Thursday they expect the summit in Egypt to produce a truce ending more than four years of violence.

A joint declaration of a cessation of violence is one of the first requirements in the internationally backed "road map" peace plan, which calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state this year.

"We are not talking about peace now, and not about the 'road map,' but rather about phases that come before implementation of the 'road map,'" participants quoted Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as saying at Thursday's meeting.

In his State of the Union address Wednesday, President Bush expressed hopes for a peace agreement and said he would seek \$350 million in aid to the Palestinians.

"The goal of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace, is within reach, and America will help them achieve that goal," he said.

Israeli and Palestinian officials welcomed the comments. Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev said the government was "totally on board" with Bush's vision.

Maher Masri, the Palestinian trade minister, said: "The trend of the U.S. administration is very positive."

Earlier in the day, both sides sounded optimistic about truce prospects.

"I hope that a cease-fire will be declared, a halt to all violent acts," Israeli Vice Premier Shimon Peres told Israel Army Radio.

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, returning to the West Bank after a five-country trip, said he has already won an agreement from militants to halt attacks and expects Israel to respond positively.

"We have announced a cease-fire, and the Israelis should announce one also," he said.

Sharon and Abbas on Wednesday accepted an Egyptian offer to attend the regional summit, raising hopes for a breakthrough in Mideast peace efforts.

In Thursday's meeting, the Cabinet ministers approved the release of 500 prisoners immediately after the summit. An additional 400 prisoners are to be freed within three months. In all, an estimated 7,000 Palestinians are held in Israeli prisons.

Speaking to reporters in the West Bank town of Ramallah, Abbas said he wanted

Palestinians who have served long terms to be included in the first round of the release.

In Thursday's meeting, the Israeli ministers said prisoners convicted in attacks on Israelis would not be freed.

The Jericho withdrawal could take place before the summit, but approval was largely window-dressing. Jericho has been quiet during the fighting, and troops have moved into the town only a few times to make arrests.

Under the new arrangements, troops would need Palestinian approval before entering the town, and Palestinian police would be allowed to carry weapons, Israeli security officials said. Roadblocks around Jericho are expected to remain in place, they added.

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz told the ministers that Bethlehem, Qalqiliya and Tulkarem would be handed over next, and that Ramallah, the Palestinians' center of government, would be last, participants said. They said each pullout would need to be approved separately by the security Cabinet.

The Palestinians want the towns handed over in one blow.

The participants in Thursday's meeting said the military would also remove some West Bank roadblocks and open the Karni cargo crossing between Gaza and Israel. Karni, Gaza's lifeline, was closed last month after militants killed six Israelis.

Mofaz emphasized that all the measures are reversible, apparently addressing concerns by hawkish ministers.

A joint Israeli-Palestinian committee is to be set up to settle the question of what to do with hundreds of Palestinian fugitives, the ministers decided.

Israel has killed dozens of wanted Palestinian men in targeted assassinations that have elicited international criticism.

The Palestinians want Israel to grant amnesty to all fugitives. Israeli security officials said Wednesday that Israel would at least agree to stop its hunt for the wanted men, including those responsible for planning or carrying out attacks.

The ministers also gave the go-ahead for construction to begin on a seaport in Gaza, which would stimulate a Palestinian economy hurt by the fighting.

Sharon aide Dov Weisglass and Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat were meeting Thursday to finalize the summit agenda.

A group of Palestinian police officers left to begin training in Egypt, which is helping rebuild Palestinian security institutions and prepare them to take over areas of the Gaza Strip set to be vacated by Israel.

And while Palestinians and Israelis were looking for ways to bridge gaps, Israel's Supreme Court rejected a petition opposing construction of separation barrier in an area that would cut off part of Bethlehem. The petition was brought by the Bethlehem municipality and 21 other petitioners.

In violence in the Gaza Strip, Palestinian militants ambushed an Israeli army vehicle, slightly wounding two soldiers with grenades and gunfire before the army returned fire and killed one of the militants, military officials said.

The army said it arrested a 16-year-old Palestinian youth carrying explosives and a homemade gun and bullets at a checkpoint near Nablus, in the West Bank. Witnesses said the youth had been bragging to people at the checkpoint that he had an explosives belt.

Pope's condition improves

Fears ease as pope improves, but Vatican hints he may remain hospitalized for a week

By William J. Kolo
AP Writer

VATICAN CITY - Easing fears about Pope John Paul II's latest health crisis, the Vatican said Thursday he was improving and breathing more easily, but hinted the frail 84-year-old pontiff may have to spend up to a week in the hospital to fully recover.

Prayers and good wishes poured in from around the globe, including a hand-scribbled note from the imprisoned Turk who tried to assassinate the pope on St. Peter's Square in 1981.

John Paul has not suffered from any more throat spasms and spent a second restful night at Rome's Gemelli Polyclinic hospital, where a team of doctors was

watching him carefully for any sign of complications from his flu, the Vatican said in a medical bulletin.

"The Holy Father's general and respiratory conditions show a positive evolution," it read. "The Holy Father spent a restful night."

Papal spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls suggested the pope might spend up to a week at the clinic's heavily guarded papal suite, telling reporters: "When I've had the flu, it lasts seven days."

Italy's ANSA news agency, citing medical sources at the hospital, said the pope had a few sips of water Thursday, which would suggest his throat was more comfortable.

Vatican officials said they were considering setting up an audio hookup Sunday so the pope can make his weekly address from the hospital, rather than from his

usual perch at a window overlooking St. Peter's Square.

The pope, who suffers from Parkinson's disease as well as crippling hip and knee ailments, has been in weak health for many years. But the Vatican took pains to play down the latest crisis.

"All he's got is the flu, which has become dangerous because of the Parkinson's," Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, who heads the Vatican's Congregation of Bishops, told the newspaper Corriere della Sera. "But now the danger is over."

John Paul was rushed by ambulance to Gemelli late Tuesday after suffering what the Vatican called an inflamed windpipe and spasms of the larynx, which made it difficult for him to breathe.

Dr. Attilio Maseri, a leading Italian cardiologist who has treated the pontiff in the past, said John Paul had two things going for him: "exceptional cardiovascular function, guided by exceptional will power."

"If he overcomes the respiratory problems he's suffering, he'll certainly be able to go back doing what he was doing before," Maseri said.

Despite the Vatican's reassurances, apprehension among the world's 1 billion Roman Catholics triggered a fresh outpouring of prayers and good wishes.

Even Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman who shot John Paul in a botched assassination attempt in 1981, sent a letter from prison wishing the pope "a speedy recovery." The clinic treating John Paul is the same one he was rushed to after Agca shot him in the abdomen.

Associated Press writer Marta Falconi contributed to this story from Rome.



Photo by Georges Bartoli/Reuters

Health conditions improve for Pope John Paul II, but he may have to spend up to a week in the hospital to fully recover. A team of doctors are watching him carefully for future complications.

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WORLD VIEW

By Osman Abdalla
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Are we as humane as we're brought up to be? People were too humane when they first existed. What makes them not too humane in the present is their high influential nature. Throughout history, people have gradually taken a path away from humanity. I don't know when this change started, but I have a feeling it was way before any recorded history. This is why they are not too human now. So they have to take that trip again to humanity, which they are capable of doing. What I call human is the perfect entity of the individual, the purified one; which is in another word God.

Empiricists have said the nature thinking is that it is generated by certain chemical variables in the brain. According to this, many ideas can be created from a single stimulus. We are building upon our predecessors' thinking, exposures, and stimuli through inherited characteristics. However, there were too many deceptions that people encountered a long time ago. Nevertheless, that does not make it impossible for us to restore our real identity. Human beings' functionality improves when they are in a suitable environment. That is why we had to create suitable places for the various purposes in today's real life, like schools, hospitals, offices and so on. Parts of these environmental phenomena are the inherited ideas.

Unfortunately, what makes this situation worse is our strong tendency to conserve. For example, consider these questions: How many human beings carry the same beliefs that have been carried at least fifteen hundred years ago? How many casual religions in the world have been followed by hundreds of millions? How many human beings have lived or are still living who have made no significant contribution to the greater good?

I am not very sure about empiricists' hypotheses; my hypothesis is that people in the present are not as humane as they ought to be. If one looks at the value of human beings' behaviors (which are based on beliefs), they are humanely very poor. We are losing our humanity gradually, and in turn passing what I call the "losing-humanity creature" over to the upcoming generations. Humanity is not determined by our body shape or organs; it is our beliefs in the better, not the opposite. However, looking at some contributions human beings have done to accomplish the greater good, we are very slow to establish such an accomplishment. What I mean by the greater good is the environment that enables every single human to function perfectly. Only then can we have a complete description of the universe.

No matter how hard we work and what technology we will always be subjected to deception. The question is: How can we liberate ourselves from such distortion? We have to manipulate ourselves to being better like we manipulate ourselves to certain dreams. If a person wants to be an athlete, he or she will exercise everyday. Everyone needs to make the turn to accomplish the greater good for everyone. This turn to the betterness requires every single human being to be entirely involved. At this point when we make that drastic turn, we will at least leave better influence for next generation to keep going until a day will come when everyone will have a full description for the universe, answers to all questions and wonders. Only then can we decide to progress or not.