

Israel rejects G-8 call for monitors

By Herb Keinon

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JERUSALEM (July 20) - The Group of Eight's call on Israel to accept international monitors yesterday was quickly rebuffed by Jerusalem, which said it would only accept a handful of CIA representatives to listen to both sides' complaints about cease-fire violations.

"Israel's position is a total rejection of international monitors," a senior official in the Prime Minister's Office said last night. "The problem is not one of observers, but of observing the cease-fire."

The G-8's foreign ministers, ending two days of talks before the industrialized countries' summit in Genoa this weekend, issued a statement saying the Mitchell plan is the only way to break the deadlock, stop the escalation, and safeguard the peace process.

The statement said a cooling-off period should start as soon as possible, all extremism and terrorism must be opposed, all the commitments given to securing a cessation of violence must be scrupulously observed, each side must refrain from provocation and incitement, and no action should be taken by either side which undermines the other.

In what was a bit of a surprise in Jerusalem, the US added its backing to the communique, which also stated: "We believe that, in these circumstances, third-party monitoring, accepted by both parties, would serve their interests in implementing the Mitchell Report."

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon immediately put a positive spin on the declaration, stressing that it said that the third-party monitoring would have to be accepted by Israel.

Speaking to a Likud forum in Tel Aviv, Sharon said: "To the best of my understanding, we are talking about an announcement that necessitates the agreement of both sides. That is the most important thing. Nothing here is being done by coercion. That is important in and of itself, and is something we insisted - that there will not be a decision that will force Israel to take a step it does not want to take."

The senior official in the Prime Minister's Office said that a monitoring mechanism already exists, in the form of the trilateral security committee set up after the Wye River Memorandum to monitor whether various clauses of that agreement were being implemented. This committee fell by the wayside as a result of the current violence, but the Tenet plan calls for its resurrection and meetings at regular intervals.

"That is the body that is supposed to judge violations according to Tenet," the official said. "Why do you need to add something else to a delicate and complicated situation?"

The official said that recent allegations that UNIFIL forces were somehow in on the Hizbullah kidnapping of three soldiers from the Mount Dov area in October strengthened Israel's position that international observers in the territories would pose a serious problem.

The official said that an international force can only play a constructive role if there already is an

agreement in place, as there is between Israel and Egypt in Sinai. But where there is no agreement, such as in Lebanon, "what we do find is that once they are deployed, they serve as a shield for those who want to operate against us."

The official said that allowing the monitors would be tantamount to "rewarding" Arafat for violence, since he has been pushing for international forces since the beginning of the current hostilities.

"We've seen that every time you try to pacify Arafat, you don't get a reduction in violence, you get more. You hug him, kiss him, shake his hand, and what do you get the next day?" the official asked. "[Foreign Minister Shimon] Peres met with him in Cairo on Sunday, and that day you had an attack in Binyamina and an attempted attack at the Maccabiah."

Zalman Shoval, a top foreign policy aide to Sharon, said that international monitors are "the first step toward internationalization of the conflict, which is one of Arafat's aims, and would also limit the IDF's ability to respond to terror provocation.

As to whether agreeing to the monitors could be what Arafat needs to take back to his people as an achievement that would enable him to put an end - once and for all - to the violence, Shoval said: "Arafat will not stop the violence - it is an element of his long-term strategic thinking."

Opposition leader Yossi Sarid, however, applauded the monitoring idea, saying: "I am concerned that without this international presence it will not be possible to preserve agreements that were achieved and will be achieved in the future."

Saying that the force will be led by, and comprise mostly, US personnel, which would make it both responsible and balanced, Sarid said that the monitors could help "rebuild confidence and prevent a further deterioration of the situation."

Likewise, former justice minister Yossi Beilin, who has been talking to world leaders and advocating the idea for months, called on Peres and the Labor ministers to accept the proposals.

"The true national interest is for there to be an outside judge of the cease-fire," Beilin said. "If Israel is convinced of the justice of its cause, it is obligated to demand that judge."

Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer spoke to US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld last night and urged him to rally US and European pressure on Arafat to end violence and terror and return to the negotiating table.

Ben-Eliezer also rejected the idea of deploying international observers here, saying they would not contribute to calming the tensions.

"They would only give the Palestinians the sense that they have a shield behind which they could continue their violence and terror," Ben-Eliezer told Rumsfeld.

Former prime minister Ehud Barak, speaking in Washington yesterday, said he does not see how the plan could be implemented. "I believe that it won't work, since there's a basic asymmetry. We will become the target for all the blame" since the Palestinians "are not running a transparent and accountable system," he said.

According to a source familiar with a meeting yesterday between Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Deputy Foreign Minister Michael Melchior, Armitage told Melchior he does not believe

observers are necessary and that they could only cause trouble.

Meanwhile, Reuters reports that Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi urged protesters from around the world not to resort to violence as tens of thousands marched yesterday on the eve of the G-8 summit.

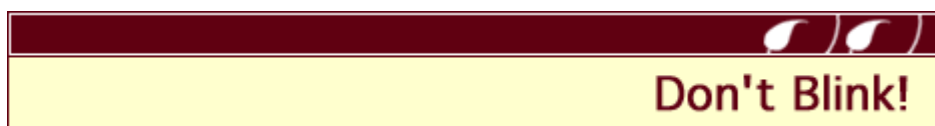
Anti-globalization demonstrators staged the first in a series of planned marches that have prompted authorities to seal off central Genoa behind six-meter barricades defended by riot police and paramilitary Carabinieri.

"I hope there won't be violent demonstrations by a few people who would only do harm to themselves," Berlusconi told journalists in the Italian port city. "The security forces have prepared themselves with a great sense of responsibility. I don't think that any form of violence against young men who represent the interests of the state can be acceptable."

Leaders of the G8 - the United States, Japan, Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Canada, and Russia - will start their three-day meeting today not only under siege from protesters but against a gloomy economic and diplomatic backdrop.

On the summit's eve, South African President Thabo Mbeki added his voice to those of campaigners urging the richest countries to forgive the debts of the poorest. "The goal must be complete debt write-off," Mbeki told Reuters in an interview during a two-day stop in Rome.

(Arieh O'Sullivan and Janine Zacharia contributed to this report.)



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