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Friday, July 20, 2001

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Middle East tops ministers' agenda

Jerusalem: Foreign ministers from seven Western powers and Russia are poised to put the Middle East at the top of their agenda at the G8 summit in Genoa for fear that the region may plunge into a new period of instability.

Under the proposed diplomatic plan an international committee would be established to monitor violations of the Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire agreement reached five weeks ago that has failed to stop the fighting.

At least 39 people have been killed since the truce was brokered, and more than 600 people have been killed since the fighting began in September.

The proposed international panel would include Americans and possibly European representatives and would encourage Israel and the Palestinians to lodge complaints for investigation rather than to respond to every act of violence by military means.

It is hoped this could pave the way for the implementation of the recommendations of an international inquiry into the violence headed by a former US senator, Mr George Mitchell.

His commission proposed a series of confidence-building measures such as a freeze on the building of new houses for Jews in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and then a return to negotiations aimed at securing a peace treaty.

The proposal for the international monitoring committee is based on a set of understandings that were reached between Israel and the militant Islamic group Hezbollah (Party of God) to control fighting in southern Lebanon before Israel withdrew from the area last year.

According to these understandings, Israel and the

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According to those understandings, Israel and the Hezbollah refrained from hitting civilian targets. Violations of the understandings were monitored by the committee which included representatives from the US, France and other nations.

Israel's Prime Minister, Mr Ariel Sharon, has refused to consider the Palestinian demand for an international monitoring force to be allowed into the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

There have been gun battles in recent days between Palestinians and Israeli forces across the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

However, the Israeli Government has held back from permanently reoccupying areas that were handed over to Palestinian self rule in the past seven years.

Mr Sharon said Israel had no plans for military operations against Bethlehem or Jenin, despite mobilising more troops around these Palestinian towns in the West Bank. Instead, the Israeli Security Cabinet approved an extension of its policy of assassinating Palestinians suspected of planning attacks.

Ross Dunn

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