

Israel goes ahead with settlement expansion

By Mark Lavie
The Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Despite hints the Israeli government might compromise on the divisive settlement issue, Israel's housing minister said Tuesday that plans are going ahead for hundreds of new homes in the West Bank.

The development came amid new violence, with three Jewish settlers, including an American immigrant, killed in drive-by shootings and two Palestinians killed by Israeli fire. Another Palestinian was killed when he blew himself up at an Israeli checkpoint in the Gaza Strip.

Israeli and Palestinian security officials were scheduled to meet for the first time in two months at the urging of the new Middle East envoy, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State William Burns. Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said the talks would be held in two rounds — with West Bank security

chiefs late Tuesday and their Gaza Strip counterparts Wednesday.

Past meetings have failed to restore the Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation that evaporated when the current round of fighting broke out eight months ago.

Israel says Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority is directly involved in attacks and that by releasing militants from prison it bears responsibility for suicide bombings and other recent attacks.

The Palestinians blame Israel for the violence and have expressed little faith the talks can bear fruit unless they also address political grievances.

Burns has been pressing the two sides to begin implementing recommendations of an international commission headed by former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, which calls for an end to the violence followed by confidence-building measures, including a total freeze on settlement construction.

Israel says it accepts the report, even though Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has in the past objected to a total settlement freeze, saying the communities had to expand to accommodate "natural growth."

On Tuesday, Israeli Housing Minister Natan Sharansky told Israel Radio he had approved construction bids for 496 new housing units in Maale Adumim, outside Jerusalem, and 217 units in Alfei Menashe, near Tel Aviv.

The settlements are suburbs of main cities and have few vacant apartments, unlike smaller settlements in the interior of the West Bank, where, according to Israeli peace groups, there are thousands of empty units.

Palestinians, who want to set up a state in all of the West Bank and Gaza, say the 144 settlements — where 200,000 Israelis live — are illegal and must be dismantled. The United States has called them an obstacle to peace.

Meanwhile, violence threatened to overshadow efforts to arrange a cease-fire.

Two Palestinians were killed at an Israeli outpost in the Gaza Strip, including a suicide bomber with explosives strapped to his body. The other was shot and killed while throwing a grenade. Two soldiers were injured.

Also Tuesday, Israeli forces shot and killed a Palestinian in a car near Jericho and arrested another Palestinian, the Israeli military said.

Three Israeli settlers were killed and four were wounded in two Palestinian ambushes in the West Bank.

In one attack, Palestinians in a passing car opened fire on an Israeli vehicle near the settlement of Neve Daniel, south of Jerusalem, killing two settlers and wounding three.

One of the dead was Sarah Blaustein, 53, an immigrant from the United States. Her husband, Norman, 53, was slightly wounded,

and a son, Sammy, 27, was seriously wounded with three bullets in his back. The Blaustein family, from Lawrence, N.Y., moved to the settlement of Efrat about a year ago, according to settlers.

Another Efrat resident, Esther Alva, 20, died several hours after the attack.

Earlier, Palestinians opened fire on a car near Nablus, killing Gilead Zar, 41, head of security for settlements in the northern West Bank. Zar was badly wounded in a Palestinian shooting attack last year.

Ben-Eliezer said Arafat's Fatah organization claimed responsibility for the shooting, which he called "very regrettable."

Hundreds joined a funeral procession for Zar, which started in front of Sharon's office and wound through the West Bank. At one point, Palestinians opened fire on the convoy, the military said. No one was hurt.

Fires scorch forests, build fears of long, hot summer

By Martin Griffith
The Associated Press

SUSANVILLE, Calif. — A raging 4,100-acre forest fire forced evacuations of 60 homes and a hospital, coating the town of Susanville with dark soot and giving firefighters an unwelcome taste of what could be ahead this summer.

"This is the closest I've seen to a fire in Susanville in my life," said Bob Garate, 45, a former firefighter whose home was threatened by the blaze. "I haven't seen dry conditions like this since 1977. We're in for a long, hard summer."

The fire, which had burned to the city limits and was within a quarter-mile of an RV park, was one of several burning Tuesday in the region.

Susanville, with a population of 17,500, is located about 80 miles northwest of Reno, Nev.

Firefighters were battling a 6,500-acre wildland blaze near Pyramid Lake, about 40 miles north of Reno. And there was another forest fire about 250 miles southwest of Susanville in the Mendocino National Forest.

In New Mexico, firefighters braced for hot, dry, windy weather in their battle against a blaze that has scorched about 1,400 acres of the Guadalupe Mountains in an unpopulated area of the Lincoln National Forest.

The Susanville blaze started about seven miles west of town Sunday on private timberland after being sparked by a man shooting targets in the woods, said state Dept.

of Forestry spokeswoman Wendy McIntosh. The man, whose name was not released, was cited for causing a fire and letting it escape.

"This is an August fire in May, and you have to wonder where it's going to go from here. It could be a long, expensive summer," said fire information officer Steve Harcourt.

Fire officials said the blaze was about 35 percent contained. About 1,300 firefighters tried to slow the flames' advance using fire engines and bulldozers to build a fire line. Seven air tankers and a dozen helicopters also were used.

Two firefighters were injured while battling the blaze, including one with a possible broken arm.

The fire skirted eight homes, com-

ing as close as 30 feet to some of them. About 140 residents were evacuated, but were allowed to return to their homes late Tuesday morning.

Lassen Community Hospital had to evacuate 25 patients Monday night when the fire burned with a quarter mile of the facility, said Laura Lang, executive assistant at the 59-bed hospital.

"We had quite a few embers blowing this way and the smoke was very thick. For health reasons, and just to calm the patients, we evacuated them," Lang said.

McIntosh said two Susanville-area residents suffered minor injuries, but no structures had been damaged or destroyed.

Residents in the area are accus-

tomed to fires, but this one was too close for comfort, said Dan Merritt of the Susanville Interagency Fire Center.

"It's not uncommon for there to be forest fires in the area, but this is the closest it's come to town in the 35 years since I've been here," Merritt said. "It's also the earliest we've had a major forest fire in those 35 years."

Evacuees were asked to check in at Lassen High School. By 10 p.m. Monday, 15 people had arrived at the school to spend the night on cots.

Elementary, junior high and high schools in Susanville were closed Tuesday due to concerns about air quality.

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