

Church of Nativity deal is 'imminent'

By Sudarsan Raghavan
and Daniel Rubin
Knight Ridder Newspapers

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (KRT)—The 34-day standoff at the Church of the Nativity appeared nearly over early Monday as Palestinians and Israelis reached an agreement in principle that would empty the church.

An Israeli military official confirmed that a deal was "imminent" but said logistical details still had to be worked out.

Under the compromise, most of the 120 or so people holed up inside the ancient church would be freed.

Seven or more militants wanted by Israel would be exiled to Italy. Another 30 would be exiled to the Gaza Strip, a remote section of Palestinian territory on the Israeli-Egyptian border with the Mediterranean Sea.

In an interview by cell phone after midnight local time, Bethlehem's governor, Mohammed Madani, emphasized the deal had not been signed, but the talks were succeeding in defusing the deadly siege.

"Some will be going to Gaza. The numbers are not yet definite. It should be 20 to 30. Some would be hosted in Italy, somewhere between seven to 15. The rest will go home."

He said a three-member committee of Palestinians would likely be set up to handle the exchange.

Ala Husni, chief of Palestinian police force, confirmed that his force was prepared to replace the Israeli troops that have surrounded the church since April 2. "We were instructed to be ready for the hand over of the city from the Israeli forces," he said. "We do not know when, but we are ready."

The withdrawal of the Israelis would remove the last major contingent of Israeli troops remaining in the West Bank since Israel's military offensive began last month.

It is unclear what will happen to the militants exiled to Gaza. They may be imprisoned and face trial in a Pal-

stinian court, as the Palestinians have suggested. Or they may be set free.

Israel Radio reported that the United States had proposed the solution to the impasse at the holy site that Christians believe to be the birthplace of Christ.

The deal ends an impasse that threatened to poison Bush administration attempts to broker a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. It came on the same day that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon arrived in Washington, D.C., for talks with the president and his top advisers. By agreeing to withdraw Israeli troops, Sharon gained a measure of gratitude from Washington as the talks begin.

The impasse began when about 30 Palestinian militants sought sanctuary inside the 1,400-year-old basilica as Israel was sweeping through West Bank cities and towns in search of fighters and weapons. The men included Palestinian security forces, the presidential guard, naval police and members of several militant groups, including Islamic Jihad, Hammers and the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade. Israel demanded that they be tried in Israel or exiled to a foreign country.

Signs of a possible breakthrough came late Saturday when — under American and European pressure — Palestinian negotiators handed over a list of 123 people holed up inside the Church of the Nativity, fulfilling a key demand by Israel, which wanted to determine how many of the Palestinians inside the church are on their wanted list.

Salah Ta'amari, the chief Palestinian negotiator, said Palestinian Chairman Yasser Arafat personally ordered Palestinian Authority aides in Bethlehem to pick up the list at the front of the church late Saturday night and give it to Alistair Crook, the European Union representative, and an unnamed American diplomat.

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