

Palestinian group agrees to cease fire for two years

Aaron Davis

Knight Ridder Newspapers

JERUSALEM (KRT) — Palestinian government officials are secretly negotiating with militant groups in a bid to end terror attacks against Israelis and appeared Tuesday to have reached a two-year cease-fire agreement with Hamas.

The accord, if it held, would hand the week-old Palestinian government its first victory in its bid to restart peace talks after 31 months of violent confrontation.

Aides to two high-ranking Palestinian government leaders told Knight Ridder that Hamas had agreed to a cease-fire, but a Hamas official declined to confirm the agreement.

Israeli observers said a cease-fire could clear the way for an initial breakthrough Thursday in the first security talks in nearly a year scheduled between Palestinian and Israeli officials. It also could raise hopes for the U.S.-backed "road map" peace plan in advance of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's visit to the region Saturday.

In Washington, a U.S. official confirmed the cease-fire talks, which he said are aimed at bridging the gap between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government and the Palestinians over the first delicate moves in the peace process.

The U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, called the talks "a constructive effort." But, he said "people

are skeptical" because similar efforts have failed in the past and, even if a deal is struck, there is no guarantee that leaders of groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad will abide by it.

The possible agreement swiftly follows a terrorist attack last week in Tel Aviv that killed four, including the suicide bomber, and an all-day Israeli raid on a house in Gaza City that killed 13, including two men that Israeli officials said were members of Hamas.

Those tit-for-tat attacks underscored the enormous obstacles to peace, coming in the same week that the road map was officially handed to Palestinian and Israeli officials.

Hamas, a hard-line Islamic group that does not recognize Israel, has claimed responsibility for most suicide bombings since the Palestinian uprising began in September 2000. It last claimed responsibility in November for a bus bombing in Jerusalem that killed 12, including the bomber.

Israeli officials have demanded that the new Palestinian prime minister, Mahmud Abbas, crack down on militant groups and have said a cease-fire would be insufficient to bring a lasting peace. Israeli officials declined to comment on the talks Tuesday night.

Representatives of Abbas are engaged in ongoing negotiations with Islamic Jihad as well as other groups, and the two officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said agreements could also be close with those sponsors

of suicide attacks in Israel.

Egyptian, Syrian and U.S. officials were involved in the secret talks held over the past two days in the Gaza Strip, the officials said.

They also said that Syrian officials agreed on conditions to close offices of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Damascus. Syrian officials had indicated to Powell last week that they would close the offices when he traveled to the Syrian capital.

The "quartet" of road map supporters — the United States, United Nations, Russia and European Union — has said that uprooting militant groups is a prerequisite to success of the plan that calls for an independent Palestinian state within three years.

Still those close to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict said the Palestinians must take what early successes they can to begin building the peace, and a cease-fire is a logical first step.

"The situation is very fragile and very fluid for Palestinians — you're talking about taking action against your own people," said Yoni Fighele, a researcher at the International Policy Institute for Counterterrorism in Israel. "This new government must convert terrorists into regular citizens. They need to lay down their arms first."

Knight Ridder correspondent Warren Strobel contributed to this report. © 2003, Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.

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News brief

Graham launches presidential campaign

MIAMI LAKES, Fla. — Sen. Bob Graham formally launched his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination Tuesday with a promise to better protect America's national security and to correct a "divisive domestic agenda" he believes President Bush has pursued since the disputed election propelled him to the White House.

The Florida senator, one of nine candidates chasing the Democratic presidential bid, said Bush chose to "settle old scores" by fighting a second Persian Gulf war instead of taking concrete steps to secure the nation from terrorist attacks. Graham touted his roots in this politically essential state, as well as a 37-year streak without losing an election, as distinguishing ingre-

dients to his campaign.

"This administration has virtually ignored homeland security in all but the words themselves while it focused all of its energy on Iraq," Graham told hundreds of supporters who endured scorching afternoon sunshine. "I am running for president to bring back a focus on America's security."

While he carries the broadest political resume, having served two terms as governor of the fourth most populous state and three terms in the U.S. Senate, 66-year-old Graham is the latest candidate to join the field. Heart surgery in late January delayed his announcement, and with the first ballots of the 2004 campaign to be cast in eight months, he lags behind his rivals in raising money and drawing support in early primary states.

"It is time to bring America back from one of our longest economic slowdowns ever, and the only eco-

nomie slowdown since when the last Bush was in the White House," Graham said. "It is painfully clear that this president has no economic policy other than granting tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans."

While the Democratic presidential hopefuls make frequent sport of bashing the Bush tax cuts and economic policy, Graham pointed out that he is the only one of them currently in Congress who has voted against each of the administration's tax break proposals. Graham, one of those wealthy Americans who would benefit from the tax cuts, said those policies have deepened the divide between classes.

"We have divided our nation between the few at the very top, served by this administration, and the many who are left to fend for themselves," Graham told supporters.

— Jeff Zeleny,
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

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