

Suicide bombs prompt Israel to seal borders

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JERUSALEM — Israeli officials ordered Palestinian borders sealed along the West Bank and Gaza Strip Sunday following a wave of three suicide bombings. And officials warned that if terror attacks on Jews do not let up, the Israeli military is likely just days away from a retaliation strike so fierce that it would shred renewed peace talks.

The ominous warning came as two Palestinian teenagers were killed and more than 20 were wounded in ongoing fighting in the Gaza Strip and as demonstrators heckled Israeli lawmakers to abandon the U.S.-led peace plan known as the road map.

Early Sunday morning, the first suicide blasts in Jerusalem in six months killed seven Israelis and two bombers and sent a city bus full of wounded passengers careening in reverse down a highway on-ramp.

The deadly attacks shoved the fragile peace plan on a backward slide, as well.

"The road map is unraveling, the plan itself is becoming an obstacle to peace. It's causing attacks," said Jonathan Peled, a spokesman for the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

"A lot depends on the coming days. There may be a second chance for this peace process. There may not."

Both hard-line Israelis and Palestinian militants oppose the three-stage road map, which calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state by 2005. Israeli leaders oppose large parts of the plan that would dismantle Jewish settlements in the West Bank and allow millions of Palestinians to return to their Israeli homes. Palestinian militants believe Israelis must unconditionally end their occupation of Palestinian lands and can only be forced out through armed conflict.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon responded immediately to the latest attack by canceling a planned visit to Washington to discuss road map concessions with President George W. Bush.

Bush was expected to push Sharon to engage the road map and consider what the Israeli prime minister has termed "painful concessions" of abandoning settlements, which would come near the end of the three-year plan. Israel must halt new settlements in the first phase of the plan.

Sharon has refused to begin implementing the plan until Palestinians halt terrorist attacks. Israeli officials said Sunday's attacks only affirm Sharon's argument that the burden of peace rests first with Palestinians cracking down on armed militant groups.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath said Sunday that the suicide bombings and continued fighting in Gaza were exactly the reasons why a successful peace process is necessary.

"The peace process is the only way out," Shaath said. "We are seeking the road map because the attacks of today only confirm that without peace there is no security, no matter what measures the Israelis or we take."

Palestinian militant groups have launched suicide attacks after each advance of the peace process.

Three times, the new Palestinian Prime Minister, Mahmoud Abbas, has taken steps required by the United States and its allies under the peace plan. Suicide attacks on Israelis have followed within hours.

Sunday morning's attack came less than six hours after the first face-to-face meeting between Abbas and Sharon to discuss the road map. The two leaders met for nearly three hours on Saturday night to develop a "working plan," officials said, to curb the activities of Palestinian militant groups.

Israeli TV reported Sunday night that Sharon offered to turn over security control of a section of Gaza and some Palestinian cities to Abbas and his new government, but the Palestinian leader declined. Sources said Abbas did not yet feel confident that he could control the areas, where militants like Hamas and Islamic Jihad are popular.

In the attack Sunday, a bomber dressed as an observant Jew detonated explosives at about 5:45 a.m. after boarding the No. 6 bus as it made its way up a highway on-ramp, according to police.

The front end of the accordion-style bus was obliterated by the blast, and the bus then rolled backward, crushed the front of an arriving ambulance and jackknifed partially off the road into a grassy area.

After that bombing, a second bomber was trapped between two Israeli checkpoints and detonated himself, a police spokesman said.

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