



Robert Fisk: Obama falls short on Armenian pledge

Suicide bomber injures 40 in bus station attack

By Eric Silver in Jerusalem

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A Palestinian bomber blew himself up yesterday, seriously wounding two security guards who challenged him at the entrance to a crowded bus station in the southern Israeli town of Beersheba. Doctors treated more than 40 passers-by for shock and light injuries.

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Gideon Ezra, the Internal Security minister, praised the guards for preventing a major disaster during the morning rush hour. They suffered severe shrapnel wounds. One of the guards, a member of the Bedouin minority, was said last night to be critically injured.

It was the first such bombing since Israel completed the evacuation of 25 Gaza and West Bank settlements last week and the first inside Israel since 12 July, when five Israelis were killed outside a shopping mall in Netanya. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President, called the incident claimed by Islamic Jihad a "terrorist attack".

Nissim Horesh, a bus driver, said the bomber tried to board his No. 9 bus and asked whether he called at the town's Soroka hospital. "I told him I didn't stop there," he went on. "I suspected him as he was wearing a heavy backpack and had a plastic bag in his hands. I drew a security guard's attention to him. He was about 20 metres from my bus. The guard called over another guard, while maintaining eye contact with the terrorist. Then a huge explosion occurred."

David Baker, an official on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's staff, denounced the Palestinian Authority for failing to restrain the terrorists. "Israel has taken necessary steps to advance the peace process with the Palestinians," he complained. "The Palestinians have not taken the necessary steps to curb terror attacks."

Mr Abbas promised earlier to maintain the truce, agreed at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit in February, indefinitely, but has steadily resisted Israeli and American demands to disarm the militants.

Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility last night for the Beersheba attack. It named the bomber as Ayman Za'ariq, 25, from Beit Umar village, between Bethlehem and Hebron on the West Bank.

The bombing came a day after Mohammed Deif, the fugitive Hamas military commander, vowed to continue the Islamic movement's armed struggle until they removed Israel (which he declined to name) from the map. In a video posted on the Hamas website, Deif, the target of a failed Israeli assassination attempt three years ago, rejoiced at the "liberation" of Gaza. "We tell the Zionists you have left the hell of Gaza in shame and you are continuing to occupy Palestine," he said. "We promise you that tomorrow all of Palestine will be hell for you."

The smaller Islamic Jihad militia had also threatened retribution after Israeli troops killed five Palestinians 10 days ago in the West Bank town of Tulkarem. The force was hunting for Islamic Jihad gunmen said to have been behind suicide bombings earlier this year in Tel Aviv and Netanya. An army investigation confirmed at least one of the dead was an innocent teenage boy.

Khaled Tantash, an Islamic Jihad leader in Gaza, praised the Beersheba bomber. "We send a salute of respect and appreciation to those who carried out this heroic attack against the Zionist enemy," he told Al Manar, the television station of Lebanese Hizbollah. "This proves that the arm of the resistance is long and capable of reaching any place in the Zionist entity."

Undaunted by the bombing, Ariel Sharon's Cabinet voted overwhelmingly yesterday to allow Egypt to deploy 750 police to prevent weapons smuggling to terror groups in the Gaza Strip. This reversed a clause in the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, which demilitarised most of the Sinai peninsula.

Shaul Mofaz, the Defence Minister, predicted that Israel would evacuate the "Philadelphi" route, a corridor 14km (8.7 miles) long, by the end of the year. The Israelis retained the right to patrol the border strip under the peace treaty, but have waged a frustrating battle to stop smugglers digging tunnels under their noses. The Egyptians are said to be ready to take up their positions within two weeks.

Israel maintains that, by opening the border, it would cease being an occupying power in Gaza under international law. Palestinian officials are refusing to let it off the hook until it abandons control of all movement in and out of the area.

Under a new deal with Cairo, which the Israeli right says is a dangerous precedent, the 750 border police will be armed with side arms, grenades and light machine guns. They will be backed by coastguard patrol boats and unarmed helicopters. Israel and Egypt will share intelligence.

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