

January 30, 2004

Suicide Bomber on Jerusalem Bus Kills 10 and Himself

By JAMES BENNET

A Palestinian policeman detonated a bomb packed with shrapnel aboard a bus here on Thursday morning, killing himself and 10 others. Despite the attack, Israel proceeded with a planned prisoner exchange with the Lebanese guerrilla group Hezbollah.

The explosion wounded more than 45 people and sprayed body parts into living rooms steps from the prime minister's official residence at the edge of central Jerusalem. It was the deadliest Palestinian attack in almost four months.

Within four hours, and with what one Israeli spokesman called "heavy hearts," Israeli officials went ahead with the planned release of 400 Palestinian prisoners across five checkpoints into the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Israel also released 29 other men, most of them Lebanese, in a German-mediated deal that brought the return of an Israeli businessmen kidnapped by Hezbollah and the remains of three soldiers ambushed by the group while on patrol in October 2000.

It was a rare, delicate exchange, negotiated over years, between enemies who do not officially recognize each other.

Scenes of jubilation in Lebanon contrasted with a somber ceremony on Thursday evening at Ben-Gurion Airport to receive the soldiers' remains. The businessman, Elhanan Tannenbaum, was whisked out of public view for medical examination and questioning by Israeli security.

"The reality of our lives enforces upon us at times the dreadful mixing of sadness with sadness, of sadness with joy," Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said at the ceremony. He defended the decision to hold the prisoner exchange, saying it had been driven by "Jewish sentiment" and an Israeli commitment to "to bring the boys home, to the soil of our homeland."

At the end of his brief remarks, he bowed once, slightly, to each flag-draped coffin.

For his part, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, seemed almost giddy at a rally in Beirut to celebrate what he hailed as "this accomplishment and victory."

For Israelis it was a split-screen day of overlapping conflicts and conflicting emotions, as images of a shattered bus and broken bodies unspooled side by side with images of the soldiers' wooden coffins and smiling Arab prisoners flashing victory signs as they went free.

Points of intersection between the two conflicts, with Hezbollah and the Palestinians, multiplied through the day. According to Israeli news reports, one woman wounded in the bus bombing, Racheli Shani, was the wife of an Israeli officer sent to Germany to help verify that the remains were those of the Israeli soldiers.

The bomb tore the back third off the roof of a green and white No. 19 bus as it climbed Gaza Street in the wealthy Rehavia neighborhood.

Responsibility for the suicide bombing, the first in Jerusalem since September and the first in any Israeli city since Dec. 25, was claimed by Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades. The group, a violent offshoot of Yasir Arafat's Fatah faction, identified the bomber as Ali Muneer Jaara, a Palestinian policeman from a refugee camp in Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem.

Mr. Jaara, who was to turn 25 on Friday, left a one-page handwritten note saying he wanted to avenge the deaths of eight Palestinians killed in an Israeli incursion into the Gaza Strip on Wednesday. Asking his mother not to cry for him, he wrote, "Be happy for the wedding of your son the martyr."

Meshulam Perlman, 59, was setting up a new plant stand outside his flower shop, Lilac, shortly before 9 a.m. when he saw and felt the explosion at the foot of his street, which intersects Gaza Street. There was a moment of shocked silence, he said, and then, "I remember only screaming to get help, to save them."

He pointed toward a stain on the pavement a block from the shattered bus. "I saw a hand that lay on the street, there," he said.

Naim Barazani transferred to the No. 19 bus shortly before the bomb exploded. "What I remember is that the heads of two old people fell next to me," said Mr. Barazani, lying in Bikur Cholim Hospital with a pink brace around his neck. "You don't know what trauma that is -- to look, to see those heads coming down, as if they were chicken heads."

Mr. Sharon was not in his residence at the time of the bombing.

The timing of the attack raised the possibility that rejectionist Palestinians were seeking to block the prisoner exchange and destroy any hint of progress.

The bombing came as John Wolf, the Bush administration's special envoy here, was on his first visit to the region in four months.

Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades is a fragmented group, with some cells, including the one in Bethlehem, financed and directed partly through Hezbollah by Iran, according to Israeli security officials. Yet it is not certain if the violence reflected a strategy of sowing chaos or simply chaos itself. Some Palestinians in Bethlehem said Mr. Jaara was acting impulsively and on his own.

Israeli security officials say that despite the recent appearance of relative calm for Israelis, militants have continued trying to carry out attacks. Since September, Israeli security has foiled at least four attempted bombings in Jerusalem, the police say.

Blocking the prisoner release might not have proved unpopular among Palestinians, who generally did not regard it significant. None of the freed Palestinians were prominent men, and most were due to be released shortly anyway. Israel is holding roughly 6,000 Palestinian prisoners in all.

Yet, particularly after the attack on Thursday, some Israelis criticized the prisoner exchange as a reward for terrorism.

Jonathan Peled, a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry, defended the exchange as reflecting Israel's commitment to "bring all our boys back even if the price we are paying is very high."

He said, "We're releasing the 400 Palestinians with very heavy hearts, because we know that those Palestinians will very quickly return to the cycle of terrorism."

In a statement to the official Palestinian press agency, the Palestinian prime minister, Ahmed Qurei, condemned the suicide bombing, as well as "the continued violence against our people."

David Baker, an official in Mr. Sharon's office, said the attack was evidence that the governing Palestinian Authority was doing "absolutely nothing to stop this terror."

He said the bombing showed the importance of "Israel's security fence," a barrier it is building against West Bank Palestinians.

Israel has built some fences and dug a deep trench, filled with concertina wire, along Jerusalem's boundary with Bethlehem. Some Palestinians manage to bypass the trench on foot.

As part of a deal brokered by the Bush administration, Israel permitted armed Palestinian police officers to begin operating again in Bethlehem last summer. Just Wednesday, Israel allowed uniformed police officers to return to the streets of other West Bank cities, to stem increasing crime. But those officers never operate outside their West Bank cities, and Mr. Jaara was most likely dressed to pass as an Israeli.

In Bethlehem, streets emptied Thursday in anticipation of an Israeli incursion.

[On Friday, Israeli forces pushed into the town for the first time in six months in a sweep for militants, Reuters reported. Palestinian witnesses said Israeli armored vehicles rumbled into Bethlehem before daybreak and troops fanned out to search houses, including one where Mr. Jaara was thought to have lived.]

After the bombing, Mr. Sharon canceled a meeting planned for Thursday evening between Israeli and Palestinian officials and representatives of donor countries. The gathering was to discuss how to improve conditions for the Palestinians.

"There is no room for such discussions on this difficult day where innocent civilians were murdered on the streets of the capital of Israel," Mr. Sharon and his foreign minister, Silvan Shalom, said in a statement.

Mr. Jaara boarded the No. 19 bus carrying about 15 pounds of explosives in a bag, the police said. Bits of metal were packed with the bomb.

Galit Gabai, 29, said she had noticed nothing unusual after she caught the bus to ride to her first day of work downtown at a camera repair shop. Then came the blast.

"I saw black before my eyes," she said. "I heard screaming. Next to me a woman was spread out, with all her organs on the outside." Her voice shaking, she gestured at her own stomach as she recovered from shock in Bikur Cholim Hospital.

Dror Duga, 17, a high school student, said he had been about a block away when he saw the bus explode. "People flew out of the roof of the bus," he said. "The street was dead. Then the people in the buildings started screaming. There were pieces of flesh on the ground, hands and a head."

As emergency workers gathered corpses and body parts into white plastic bags, the charred body of a man, his head thrown back, his skin a dark gray, still sat in a seat in the wreck. He had no feet and no arms.

Mr. Perlman, who runs the flower store, said people had rushed to the scene searching for loved ones. He reassured one man searching for his daughter and another whose relative turned out to be riding a No. 32 bus.

He said that as he went to help the victims, he saw the lower half of a woman's torso. "The socks were brown," he said. "The shoes were black." He said he had seen similar sights as a combat soldier fighting Egypt in the Arab-Israeli war of 1973.

"But it was soldiers, not civilians," he said. "It was a war. This is not a war."