

# Mideast peace accords in delicate situation

by Adam K. East

The foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, and Israel, and a senior official of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), met in Washington on Feb. 12, in an effort to revive the lagging Mideast peace talks. The meeting, chaired by U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, was sponsored by President Bill Clinton, underscoring the U.S. concern for the urgent resuscitation of the peace process.

The United States will redouble "its efforts to get the peace process back in full gear," Clinton told the delegates. "We are not going to let the peace process collapse. . . . Today it is for us to begin to take the specific steps necessary to have the message of peace and a renewed commitment carried out." Clinton emphasized the need for economic development for the Palestinians in order to bring about tangible improvements in their standard of living. "I am absolutely convinced we have to move as quickly as we can to show there are economic benefits from peace," Clinton said.

Although there were no major breakthroughs, Israel and the PLO pledged prompt negotiations on early elections and on withdrawal of Israeli troops from the West Bank.

In a statement issued following a separate meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and senior PLO officials, Christopher said that both sides "reaffirmed their commitment to negotiate promptly all aspects of the interim agreement, including transfer of authority and redeployment in the rest of the West Bank, and elections, in accordance with the Declaration of Principles" by Israel and the PLO in 1993. He added that they "expressed their determination that there can be no turning back and that they must find ways to overcome the challenges ahead."

In an attempt to address the Palestinians' concern over lack of employment, the delegates agreed to establish a series of "industrial zones" in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The plan reportedly calls for two to three industrial zones in the Gaza Strip and four in the West Bank. The idea of so-called industrial zones first received serious consideration at the Taba conference held earlier this month in Egypt, which was attended by the trade ministers of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the PLO, and the United States.

It is not clear how much the Palestinians will benefit from the industrial zones, given their dire economic conditions, but some progress is better than no progress. Since the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, there has been an absence of real economic activity in the Palestinian territories, thanks to the

foot-dragging of the donor states and the sabotage of the World Bank, which has withheld promised funds from the Palestinians.

The continued Israeli closure of Palestinian territories, the unchecked expansion of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem, and the ongoing delay in implementing the peace accords have created rather dangerous conditions for PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and the entire peace process.

Only one day earlier, on Feb. 11, Arafat had appealed to world leaders to help save the peace deal with Israel, after a summit with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin ended in deadlock. The Palestinians are demanding that Israel cease its border closure, which prevents thousands of Palestinians from reaching their jobs in Israel—their only source of income. The latest closure, which is one of the longest ever imposed, has had devastating effects on the already prostrate Palestinian economy. Israel closed off the West Bank and the Gaza Strip following the killing of 21 Israeli soldiers in northern Israel by militants of the Islamic Jihad in late January.

## 'Permanent division' mooted

While Israel has temporarily closed off the territories in the past, the government is now talking of a "permanent division" between Palestinians and Israelis. Palestinians say separation from the Jewish state is agreeable as long as it does not turn Palestinian populated areas into scattered "concentration camps."

Another sore point is the Israeli settlements, which have increased since the Labor Party came to power in 1992. According to the Palestinian National Authority, Israel has confiscated more than 27 square miles of West Bank land in the 16 months since the Declaration of Principles was signed. Since 1992, the number of settlers in the Gaza Strip and West Bank has risen from 112,000 to 140,000, a 25% increase. Israel's continuing policy of expanding settlements aids the cause of Islamic militants. Moreover, a minister-level committee of the Israeli government recently decided to okay construction of over 4,000 new housing units in the three West Bank settlements which are close to Jerusalem. Palestinians who are demanding a halt to all settlement activity, especially around Jerusalem, argue that Israel is preempting final status talks on Jerusalem which are set to begin in 1996.

The neo-conservative crowd in the U.S. Congress, with the active support of the Zionist lobby, has also begun meddling in the issue of Jerusalem. Recently, Sens. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) and Alfonso D'Amato (R-N.Y.) called on Christopher to make preparations to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem by the year 1999. The idea was first floated by that genius of the so-called "Conservative Revolution," House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), during his visit to Israel last month. Gingrich knew or should have known that the Jerusalem issue is the "mother of all conflicts," which is why Israel and the PLO agreed to discuss it only in the final status talks.