

'Peace Now' Hits Sharon Settlement Policy

by Michele Steinberg

On March 30, at the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C., leaders of Americans for Peace Now (APN) and Americans for Middle East Peace (AMEP) called for the government of Israel to pull back the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and other Palestinian areas, and to return to the agenda of the January peace talks at Taba, Egypt, where "there were grounds for compromise." The Israeli settlements are "an obstacle to peace," said Philip Wilcox, president of AMEP. Wilcox demonstrated how Prime Minister Ariel Sharon—using his own words—has *always* used the settlements to block the finalization of the Oslo peace accords.

The Peace Now event was one among several at which a growing number of Israeli and American Zionist lobby voices are beginning to speak out against the policies of Sharon and the worsening crisis that he created.

On April 4 in Tel Aviv, former Labor Party Justice Minister Yossi Beilin blasted the Sharon government at a meeting of the "21st Truth" group at Labor Party headquarters. Beilin focussed intense criticism on Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, who is the keystone of the "national unity government." Beilin took Peres to task for turning the Labor Party into "errand boys."

Beilin told the 21st Truth group that the Labor ministers in Sharon's "unity" government with his Likud party, had gone along with a rejection of a "bridging proposal" made by Egypt and Jordan to mediate renewing peace talks. Beilin said, "It is unacceptable to me that the Labor Party did not discuss this proposal. There is nothing in it which we could not live with. Who decided on our behalf that we must reject this proposal? Have we turned into his errand-boys? . . . No one who represents us has the right to reject such a proposal without first holding a debate."

Peres's inaction has demeaned the Labor Party in the eyes of the world, said Beilin. "In the last few weeks, we have turned into part of the hard-liners, and no one can tell the difference any more between some Laborites and the Likud." He particularly criticized David Ivri, Israeli Ambassador in Washington, who boycotted a Jewish-American event that had invited Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to address them on April 4. He called the action "stupid." "Our ambassador to Washington boycotts a meeting with Mubarak? Who is his superior? Not the foreign minister? Is boycotting Mubarak now policy?"

Sharon the Madman

Sharon's lethal force policy is so insane, that on April 5, members of the Palestinian Authority security delegation were fired on and nearly assassinated by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as they were returning from an official meeting with the Israeli intelligence service, Shin Bet! The talks had taken place at an undisclosed location outside of Tel Aviv, and included representatives of the CIA, which had been designated by President Bill Clinton to serve as mediator between the Israelis and Palestinians on security issues. The meeting was arranged by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, despite an earlier order by President George W. Bush to end the CIA liaison function that Clinton had set up. According to one Israeli source, the shooting at the Palestinian officials as they left the meeting was a "message" from Sharon, that he will not be pressured to restart the Israeli-Palestinian talks.

Sharon's use of the settlements as a pawn in his efforts to block a peace agreement was brought out at a March 30 forum in Washington featuring Dr. Amiram Goldblum, the founder and head of the Israeli Peace Now's "Settlement Watch," and Geoffrey Aronson, editor of AMEP's newsletter, *Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories*.

The forum stressed that without the Jewish settlements, which are often tiny, heavily armed military outposts of about 100 citizens, the IDF would be seen as what Sharon intended it to be—nothing more than an "occupying army." With the settlements present, the IDF can then take the role of policing Palestinian citizens in the name of security for Israeli citizens. Speakers stressed that there is nothing "vital" to Israeli security or to U.S. interests in allowing the settlements to continue—except as an excuse for more violence.

The newsletter quoted Sharon from 1995, saying, "Were there not Jewish settlements today on the Golan Heights in Judea and Samaria, Israel would long ago have returned across the Green Line. The Jewish settlements are the only factor that has prevented the agreement of this [Yitzhak Rabin] government to withdraw and [has] created difficulties for it in the negotiations." The Labor Party's Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated later that year by one of the brainwashed fanatics of Sharon's settlement movement.

The newsletter's March-April 2001 issue recalled that Rabin derided the "political settlements . . . running in a north-south line between Jenin and Jerusalem." It said, "These settlements, which Rabin numbers at around 60, were conceived by Sharon to explicitly forestall the creation of a territorially viable" Palestinian state. These outposts provide a cover to justify the presence of troops for security aims.

Unfortunately, the Jewish opposition groups have not attacked Sharon's policy of assassinating what his government calls "known terrorists." Often the opposition repeats the Sharon-Bush formulation that Palestinian Authority President "Yasser Arafat must make the violence cease." It is this phrase, coined by the right-wing Zionists in the United States, which is giving Sharon cover for his assassination policy.