

BC-Israeli-Palestinians

AP Photos JRL102,106, GAZ101-102< "By DAN PERRY=

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JERUSALEM (AP) After almost a decade of stop-and-go negotiations repeatedly set back by flashes of violence, Israel and the Palestinians have arrived at a crossroads of excruciating choices in an atmosphere electric with fear, hope, anger and confusion.

The Israelis have accepted, with reservations, a U.S.-proposed peace plan, and progress seems to rest in the hands of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who is sticking to the Palestinians' demand that up to 4 million refugees and their descendants be allowed to return to homes they fled, or were driven from, in the 1948 war that established Israel.

In recent days, Arafat has come under tremendous pressure to accept U.S. President Bill Clinton's proposal. The Palestinian leader has received, according to one Palestinian official who spoke on condition of anonymity, some 50 phone calls, many from Arab and Western leaders, urging him to accept the terms.

But even if he does, the result is far from certain. Neither side trusts the other, and implementation, including a jigsaw-puzzle division of Jerusalem and the West Bank, will be complicated, and internal opposition will be tremendous.

If peace comes, said Israeli Ehud Yaari, an Arab affairs expert, it will be for both sides "a peace of broken dreams."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has raised the possibility that Israel could make concessions on holy sites cherished by Jews the world over, withdraw from the strategic Jordan River Valley and dismantle settlements.

But he has stood firm on the refugees' "right of return," a notion that appears to stand no hope of being accepted by Israelis who fear a flood of impoverished Arabs would overwhelm the country's 5 million Jews and utterly change its character.

Many Israelis in the increasingly exasperated pro-peace camp are speculating that the Palestinians may simply be negotiating hard and will come around before two looming deadlines: the Feb. 6 Israeli election for prime minister, and, just as important, the Jan. 20 end of Clinton's term.

If those dates pass without an agreement, some feel it will be a grand opportunity lost.

Barak is under pressure to reach a deal before the election, which he could then present to voters as a referendum on his peace plan.

The new U.S. administration of President-elect George W. Bush is likely to be preoccupied with other issues, and Barak is trailing badly in opinion polls to right-wing hawk Ariel Sharon, who staunchly opposes most, if not all of the Israeli concessions now under consideration.

So far, Arafat has not been fazed by outside pressure.

The Palestinian leader may be more worried about the restless Palestinian population hardened by 14 weeks of violence that have left some 350 people dead, the vast majority Palestinians.

"No Palestinian leader can sign an agreement which does not address the

most important problem of return and compensation for refugees," said

- Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist from the West Bank's Bir University .

For such a painful compromise, Arafat would need the support of fellow Arab leaders. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have given the plan some support, and Arab foreign ministers are to weigh in at a meeting set Thursday in Cairo.

Syria, which hosts some 400,000 refugees, has been extremely critical. The U.S. proposal aims to "eliminate the Palestinians' rights in Jerusalem and the return of refugees, but it sustains the Israelis' occupation of land where they have established settlements," said al-Thawra newspaper, which reflects official Syrian views.

Even if a framework agreement is signed, more negotiations *over* the exact details of a peace treaty could take months if not years.

Some of the ideas being discussed are unprecedented, if not bizarre_ such as an unconventional border in Jerusalem whereby the Palestinians would control their mosques on the Haram as-Sharif, known to Jews as the Temple Mount. The Israelis would have the ground below where lie the ruins of the Jews' ancient temples, as well as the Western Wall, which forms one side of the complex.

Meanwhile, the entire enterprise could be scuttled by the precarious position of Barak.

His parliamentary coalition collapsed in July, and he resigned three weeks ago in a maneuver aimed at bringing on a special election for prime minister. Since then his popularity has been further eroded.

Sharon has made it clear that he considers the emerging deal to be dangerous and illegitimate and would not feel bound to honor it if elected.

Indeed, the legal standing of any deal is not clear.

Legal expert Moshe Negbi said such agreements are not binding until they are ratified by parliament. Barak's attempt to pass off the coming prime ministerial election as a *de facto* referendum on a peace deal could well be struck down in court, he said.