



Thousands attending a Tel Aviv rally on Saturday, calling for a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. (AP)

Over 150,000 attend rally calling for Gaza withdrawal

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More than 150,000 people attended a left wing demonstration at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv on Saturday evening under the banner 'get out of Gaza and start talking.'

Event organizers assessed that some 250,000 were present, Army Radio reported.

The rally opened at 8 P.M. with a minute of silence to commemorate the 13 Israel Defense Forces soldiers killed in the Gaza Strip over the past week.

Amid frequent outbreaks of applause and cheering, opposition leader Shimon Peres told the crowds that 80 percent of Israeli want peace and just one percent is trying to block it.

"We will not allow them," Peres said. "We must not support a puppet government that follows the delusional ideas of the right."

Yahad Chairman Yossi Beilin said that for the past three years the peace camp has been dormant that today it finally awoke.

One Nation chairman Amir Peretz called for a resumption of peace talks, saying that diplomatic and social affairs could not be separated. "as a resident of Sderot [near the Gaza Strip] we do not fear disengagement and we fear neither dialogue nor a peace process."

The event took place under heavy security with some 1300 police officers and volunteer security guards patrolling, and the streets around the plaza were closed from 4:30 P.M.

A delegation of 50 Palestinians, supporters of the Geneva Initiative, were also expected to attend the rally.

The Real Religious Zionist Movement, an organization of moderate observant Jewish youths said late on Saturday that they would have participated in the demonstration had it not been held during the Sabbath.

Groups members said the organizers should been more sensitive to the religious public, but in a statement they said they joined the call for a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and an end to the occupation.

Speaking at the rally were opposition leader Shimon Peres, Yahad Chairman Yossi Beilin, One Nation Chairman Amir Peretz, Peace Now leader Tzaly Reshef and Yochi Brandes, on behalf of the Geneva Initiative, and former Shin Bet head Ami Ayalon, former head of the Shin Bet for the People's Voice. Former GOC Southern Comman chief Yom Tov Samia was also set to speak at the demonstration.

Singers Danny Sanderson and Dana Berger performed at the rally, along with the band Nikmat Hatraktor.

Ahead of the demonstration, the organizers rejected calls from politicians on the right to postpone the rally in the wake of the recent events in the Gaza Strip.

Minister of Social Affairs Zevulun Orlev (NRP) asked Peres on Thursday to postpone the rally, saying it was not appropriate to hold a political demonstration while fallen soldiers were being buried. The organizers responded that national unity was not an issue considered by the prime minister when he decided to leave the decision on going ahead with his disengagement plan solely in the hands of Likud members.

The rally was scheduled by a new forum, Mate Harov (Majority's Coalition), after the Likud referendum rejected the prime minister's plan for a pullout from the Gaza Strip. The forum includes left and center-left groups such as Labor, Yahad, One Nation, Peace Now, the kibbutz movements, the Geneva Initiative organization, youth movements and the Forum of Bereaved Parents.

100,000 Tell Sharon to Get Out of Gaza

Chris McGreal in Tel Aviv

Monday May 17, 2004

The Guardian

Israel said yesterday it would intensify its military assault on the Gaza strip, hours after more than 100,000 people rallied in Tel Aviv to demand that Ariel Sharon follow through on his pledge to withdraw Jewish settlers from the territory.

The defence minister, Shaul Mofaz, told the weekly cabinet meeting that the army would work to "create a new reality" along the border between Gaza and Egypt, where the UN

has said the army destroyed about 200 Palestinian homes in the Rafah refugee camp after seven soldiers were killed in the area last week.

A total of 13 soldiers have died in the Gaza strip since Tuesday - some of the worst casualty figures inflicted on the Israeli army during the present intifada.

More than 30 Palestinians have died. Three more Palestinians were killed last night as they tried to plant a bomb on the Israel-Gaza border.

"We will deepen the fighting," the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz quoted Mr Mofaz as telling the meeting.

Early this morning Israeli helicopters fired five missiles at an office of the Fatah movement of the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat. There were no reported casualties. Yesterday, Israel's high court overturned an injunction preventing the military from bulldozing Palestinian homes in Rafah, saying the army was entitled to act for security or operational reasons.

The army chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Moshe Ya'alon, said the destruction would continue despite an international outcry, including stiff criticism from the White House of demolitions that left more than 1,000 Palestinians homeless on Friday.

"Hundreds of Palestinian houses along the Israel-Egypt border have been targeted for demolition," Gen Ya'alon said, according to Israel Radio.

The cabinet's hard line was reiterated the morning after the rally in favour of pulling Jewish settlers and the army out of the Gaza strip.

The protest was called to demand that Mr Sharon keep to his pledge to withdraw from Gaza despite losing a referendum on the issue in his Likud party last month.

The rally's organisers, led by the opposition Labour party, said recent polls showed a hardening of public support for the withdrawal since the deaths of the 13 soldiers.

Rallying under the slogan, "The majority has decided. Leave Gaza, start talking," the organisers said twice as many people attended the rally as had voted in the Likud referendum to reject the pullout or had joined a rightwing demonstration in support of the settlers.

Shimon Peres, the former prime minister and present Labour leader, said the 80% of Israelis who backed a Gaza pullout could not be held hostage by the 1% of the population who voted to reject it in the Likud referendum.

"We have come here to say tonight, 'This minority, this one and only percent, will not send us back to the wars, to the bloody path,'" he said.

Tzaly Reshev, a founder of Peace Now, told the crowd: "We had this terrible week all because of the settlements. The fact that we have become a vicious, cruel conqueror is because of the settlements."

The left sought to stop Mr Sharon hijacking the rally in support of his broader plan to pull out of Gaza but retain the bulk of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, by demanding the prime minister resume negotiations with the Palestinians.

Mr Sharon has justified his scheme to impose the borders of an emasculated Palestinian state unilaterally, arguing there is no one to negotiate with on the other side. Critics, such as former cabinet minister Yossi Beilin, told the rally Mr Sharon did not want to negotiate because the Palestinians would never accept the terms he wants to impose.

"The biggest lie is that there is no partner," he said. "There is a partner to get out of Gaza with agreement. Anyone who says there is no partner doesn't want to talk."

"Ariel Sharon is not the first prime minister who didn't want to make peace, but he's the first who didn't even try. Sharon is a political and military danger to Israel."

Mr Sharon has said he will present a modified withdrawal plan to his cabinet in about a fortnight.

Yesterday, the US secretary of state, Colin Powell, accused Mr Arafat of undermining American efforts to strengthen the Palestinian security forces and curb attacks on Israel.

He also attacked the Palestinian leader for a statement in which he urged his supporters to "find whatever strength you have to terrorise your enemy".

However, he condemned Friday's demolitions.

"We know Israel has a right for self-defence, but the kind of actions they are taking in Rafah with destruction of Palestinian homes we oppose," he said.

washingtonpost.com

Thousands of Israelis Urge Gaza Pullout

By Glenn Frankel

Washington Post Foreign Service

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TEL AVIV, May 15 -- Tens of thousands of Israelis gathered here Saturday night to press for Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in the first major public demonstration by the country's peace camp in two years.

While many of those in the crowd have been bitter opponents of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, they came out to express their support for his proposal to pull troops and Jewish settlers out of Gaza and to protest the rejection of the plan by Sharon's Likud Party.

Israel announced that it had completed military operations and pulled back its units from southern Gaza. Thirteen soldiers and 30 Palestinians were killed in intense clashes throughout Gaza over four days this week. The army also stopped the mass demolition of houses in the combat area, which U.N. officials said had caused more than 1,000 Palestinians to flee their homes.

The Israeli peace movement has been fractured and demoralized in recent years as a wave of Palestinian suicide bombings of passenger buses, cafes and other civilian targets in Israel have caused deep public revulsion and built support for Sharon's hard-edged security stance. But the recent rejection of the withdrawal scheme in a referendum of Likud members, followed by fierce violence this week -- including the public display of a severed head and other body parts of dead soldiers by Palestinian fighters -- inspired activists to return to the streets to try to rally the majority that, according to a series of opinion polls, favors the plan.

The rally brought together longtime activists from Peace Now, the main antiwar citizens' group, along with former prime minister Shimon Peres, leader of the once dominant Labor Party, trade unionists and other activists who have not shared a platform in almost a decade. They gathered in Rabin Square, named after Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister assassinated in 1995 who, along with Peres, championed the Oslo peace accords between Israel and the Palestinians that have been buried by nearly four years of warfare.

"To leave Gaza, we need the majority to stop its silence," Ami Ayalon, former head of the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security service, told the crowd. "It needs to say, or even scream, what it thinks."

Ayalon, addressing Sharon, declared: "If you make progress, then we're with you, and if not, then you won't remain in power. Gaza is no longer a matter of politics -- it's a matter of life and death."

Sharon's office had no immediate comment on the rally. Leaders of the settlement movement opposed to withdrawal had demanded that the activists postpone the protest out of respect for the dead soldiers.

The crowd was an eclectic mix of young and old, some with small children. "I know I have to work hard now so that my son won't have to go to Gaza when he grows up," said Sharon Amit, 35, a worker at the state-run Voice of Israel radio service, who pushed her 3-year-old son, Rotem, through the crowd in a stroller. She said the events of last week had compelled her to attend the rally. "The feeling is heavy this week," she said. "It caused people to think again, to become more involved."

Galia Golan, an organizer of the rally, said people felt that 60,000 Likud members had in effect wielded a veto over the withdrawal plan -- which was endorsed by President Bush -- in the nonbinding party referendum two weeks ago. Sharon has said he would come up

with a revised plan within three weeks. "We feel we're being held hostage by a small minority," Golan said.

Army officials said they cleared out of the Rafah area Saturday after recovering the remains of five soldiers killed there Wednesday. The army's attempt to retrieve the bodies and avoid a repeat of the body-parts spectacle of the previous day had led to a massive military operation and the demolition of dozens of houses that the army said had been used by Palestinian gunmen.

[Early Sunday, Israeli helicopters fired missiles at three targets in Gaza City, knocking out electricity in part of the city and slightly wounding at least two Palestinians, the Associated Press reported.

[The first strike targeted a building housing a branch office belonging to the Fatah movement of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Two boys, ages 14 and 15, were hurt in the attack, medical workers said.

[The second strike hit a residential building. The third strike knocked out power in the northern part of Gaza City. There were no further details on casualties or the targets of the attacks.]