

Israelis in Lebanon: Substantial Progress Is Reported in Talks

ISRAELIS INTERFERE WITH U.S. OFFICERS

Warplanes, Boats and Ground Troops Harass American Copters Near Beirut

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 9 — Israeli warplanes, patrol boats and ground troops harassed American military personnel near Beirut over the weekend, State Department officials said today. They said that Israel had apologized.

The disclosure of the incidents came as the White House and State Department said that substantial progress had been made in United States efforts to mediate the withdrawal of the 6,000 to 9,000 trapped Palestinian guerrillas from Beirut. But they expressed concern about new Israeli air raids on Beirut.

"If the cease-fire holds, we believe a negotiated settlement can be reached," Larry Speakes, the deputy White House press secretary, said.

The officials said the Americans involved in the weekend incidents were part of a "liaison-planning team" joining the special United States envoy, Philip C. Habib, in planning for the possible deployment of United States Army troops as part of a multinational "blocking force" to evacuate the P.L.O. to Arab nations.

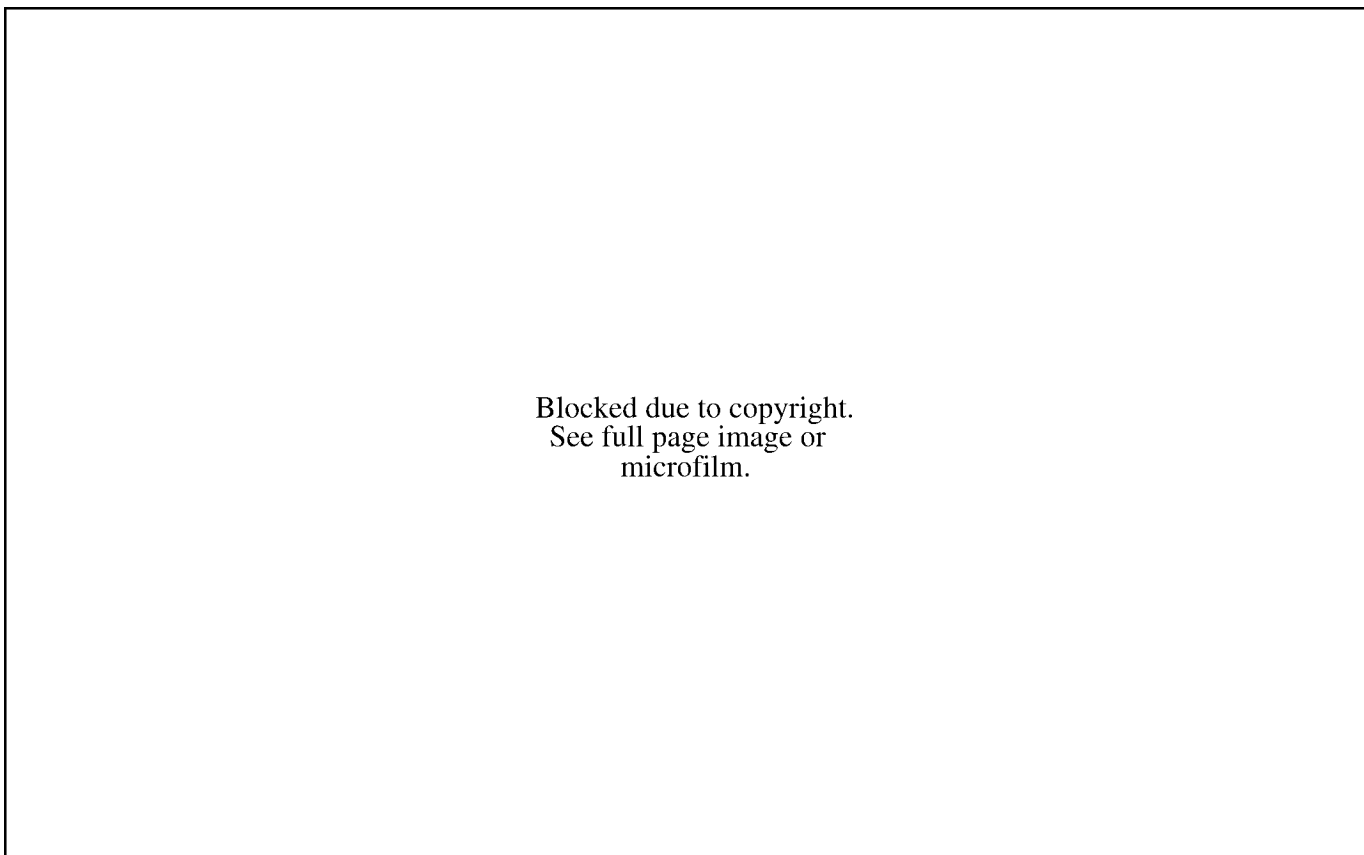
Apparently, the incidents involved such actions as the buzzing of helicopters by Israeli planes but no shooting, the officials said.

Israeli Apology Is Prompt

The incidents were the first known encounters between American and Israeli military elements since Israeli jets bombed the American intelligence ship Liberty off Sinai in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Israel apologized for that incident, saying it was accidental. The attack killed 34 Navy officers and enlisted men and wounded 75.

Although the weekend harassment incidents were termed "very serious" by the United States European Command, which asked the Government to lodge a protest with the Israelis, officials in Israel responded quickly, formally expressing regrets. State Department sources said that even Prime Minister Menachem Begin called American officials to say the incidents were a "misunderstanding and would not reoccur."

According to Administration officials, one of the incidents occurred on



Associated Press
Friends and relatives of victims who were trapped inside an apartment building that was destroyed last Friday in an Israeli bombing raid watched as rescuers searched through wreckage. One child was brought out alive.

Saturday. An Israeli jet fighter made several passes at two American UH-1 helicopters carrying an American military liaison team from the carrier Forrestal to the Lebanese port of Junieh, about 10 miles from Beirut. Administration officials said the Israeli planes were "entirely too close."

Another Incident Sunday

On Sunday, Administration officials said, the helicopters carrying the American team were again heading toward Junieh when a gunboat, probably Israeli, aimed its machine gun at the helicopters.

When the helicopters landed, official said, Israeli military vehicles blocked exits from the beach. An American military attaché from the American Ambassador's residence sought to get the American team through the barrier, and it was allowed to pass after a 45-minute delay, officials said. Members of the team were allowed to leave the landing area only after providing their names, ranks and serial numbers, official said.

Officials added that once the American helicopters left, Israeli military vehicles were parked on the landing zone, apparently to prevent further American operations there.

"We have apologized," said Benjamin Abileah, an Israeli Embassy spokesman. "We said there is absolutely no intention to hurt or harass any Americans, and while this is not entirely our fault, we express regret for any inconvenience that was caused."

The Israeli official said the incidents occurred because of "problems of communications and coordination" of Israeli flights in the area.

A State Department official said: "We registered a strenuous protest, and the Israelis apologized. We consider the matter closed."

Administration officials said Israel's quick apology for the weekend incidents underscored what appeared to be the concern of Mr. Begin and other ranking Israeli officials that relations with the United States not deteriorate further.

Late this afternoon, the State Department issued a statement saying: "Israeli forces interfered with the movement of U.S. helicopters and personnel traveling to and from Beirut this past weekend."

"These incidents are of great concern to us, and the U.S. has made strong protests to the Government of Israel both here in Washington and in Jerusalem.

The Israelis expressed regret and disclaimed any intention of causing harm. Apologies have been received from the Government of Israel, and we have been assured that there will be no further actions of this kind."

'Momentum in the Talks'

In his comments about Mr. Habib and the negotiations, Mr. Speakes, the White House spokesman, said, "We believe there is momentum in the talks and that Ambassador Habib, operating with the full confidence of the President, has made substantial progress in recent days in working out the departure of the P.L.O. from Beirut."

Alan Romberg, a State Department spokesman, said, "Breaches of the cease-fire by any of the parties serve no useful purpose, and it's especially critical now in view of the progress being made on the negotiating front that the cease-fire be scrupulously observed."

State Department officials said that although the Administration was now "hopeful" of a settlement, the crucial detail of where the P.L.O. will ultimately go from Lebanon remained uncertain as of late today. Four Arab countries are the most likely destinations for the P.L.O. These are Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan.