

# On West Bank, Olive Branches and High Hopes

Reuters

RAMALLAH, Israeli-Occupied West Bank — Palestinians poured into the streets after their chief delegate's speech at the Madrid peace talks on Thursday, decorating Israeli army jeeps with olive branches as smiling soldiers looked on.

"We let the world hear our cause," Nasser Ibrahim, a Palestinian who works in Israel, said after hearing a broadcast of Haidar Abdel-Shafi's statement of the Palestinian position at the Middle East peace talks.

Hundreds of men, women and children marched down the main street of Ramallah, a town in which Palestinians and Israeli troops have fought for four years, waving olive branches as a sign of peace.

They climbed onto jeeps of the military-run civil administration and the army, decorating them with the branches.

Soldiers, who had dispersed demonstrators with tear gas an hour before, looked on smiling and shaking hands.

"This conference could be something very big for our people. We hope to get our own

independent state," said Mr. Ibrahim, 20, a laborer. "We hope to get out from under Israeli occupation."

The speech by Mr. Abdel-Shafi, the chief Palestinian negotiator, followed a speech by Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir of Israel that was criticized by Palestinians but drew rare praise from the Israeli left.

The streets of Ramallah, just north of Jerusalem — already quiet because of a general strike called by groups opposed to the Madrid meeting — were deserted as residents listened to radios and watched television for the Palestinian presentation.

"He expressed our opinions and spoke of our rights for the first time in more than 40 years," said Rasmi Matariyeh, a pharmacist. "It dealt with suffering of families or martyrs, prisoners and wounded people."

Once it ended, cars and trucks roared through the streets, olive branches waving from the windows. One convoy of 30 cars was followed by an army jeep carrying soldiers obviously relieved at the change in mood.

Mr. Shamir's speech to the conference had focused on the same theme of suffering, using Jewish history as justification for Israel's 24-year-old occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where two million Palestinians live.

"He only spoke about the suffering of the Jews as if Palestine was a land without people," said Matariyeh, a former Ramallah city councillor.

But Israel peace activists, who rarely praise speeches by the hard-line prime minister, said that Mr. Shamir had not ruled out a settlement to the 43-year-long Arab-Israeli conflict based on Israel trading land captured in a 1967 Middle East war for peace.

"The speech was important because it left all doors open," said Peace Now, Israel's largest peace movement.

Yossi Sarid of the Citizens' Rights Movement noted that Mr. Shamir had not repeated his usual vows to continue settling Jews in occupied territory to ensure Israel's permanent control.

But he added: "I was disappointed that Mr. Shamir did not throw down a gauntlet or roll the ball into the enemy's court. I expected him to say 'We will freeze settlements.'"

The Shamir government's drive to expand Jewish settlement in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem has deeply strained ties with Washington.

Although Mr. Shamir's speech also skirted areas that could offend his rightist allies, Geula Cohen, a hard-liner who resigned this week as deputy science minister to protest the Madrid conference, said she was disappointed.

"It was disappointing for what was and what was not mentioned," said the former aide, who is a member of the far-right Tehiya — Zionist Revival Movement. "And what was mentioned is in fact readiness to discuss territorial compromise, in one form or another also on the Golan Heights."

Syria has demanded that Israel return the Golan Heights, a strategic plateau captured in 1967, as a prerequisite to any peace settlement.