

ATROCITY IN TEL AVIV

THE TERRORIST bombing Sunday in Tel Aviv that killed 22 people and wounded more than 100 was a crime of the most heartless kind. It was intended to kill and rip apart civilians. The nails and ball bearings packed into the bombs expressed a will to disfigure what is human, to cause indiscriminate suffering, to vote violently for pure negation.

It is the mission of political leaders to seek a means to overcome the nihilism of such tribal vendettas. At the moment the terrorists struck, meetings and conferences were in process or planned to stop the spiral of violence and vengeance.

Two dovish Israeli politicians, Yossi Sarid of the Meretz Party and Yossi Beilin, Labor Party architect of the Oslo peace process, were in Cairo that day meeting with Egypt's foreign minister, Ahmed Maher. All three condemned the terrorist atrocity. In a joint declaration, the two Israelis said: "We, like the Egyptians, are determined to fight terror not only with force but through political means. Only with both methods can terror be defeated." A day after the Tel Aviv bombing, their words might sound too vague, too unrealistic. But the need for negotiations to end the cycle of terrorism and military occupation remains as compelling today as it was before the bombing.

Cairo was also to be the site of a meeting between Yasser Arafat's representatives and counterparts from the Palestinian Islamist organizations Hamas and Islamic Jihad. (The

meeting was postponed, but not canceled, before the bombing took place.) Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak had called on these disparate Palestinian factions to sign an agreement for a six-month moratorium on terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. The accord was to be implemented before Israeli elections on Jan. 28. The immediate aim was to prevent Palestinian extremists from enhancing the electoral prospects of Israeli hard-liners. The more encompassing goal was to open the way for a renewal of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

The latest terrorist crime must not be allowed to keep the peace forces in both camps from returning to the difficult but inescapable work of forging an agreement for peaceful coexistence between Israel and a Palestinian state. Not the least of the reasons why this return to the negotiating table appears more and more difficult is the meddling of outsiders. Yesterday a spokesman for the splinter group that claimed culpability for the Tel Aviv bombing said the group was funded by Iran, with the money funneled through operatives in Lebanon who belong to a small offshoot of the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade.

Israelis and Palestinians alike need third parties, particularly the United States, to intervene and help them negotiate an end to terrorism and military occupation. Otherwise the meddling of malign outsiders will recreate a new version of the many-sided war that lasted in Lebanon for 16 years.

Globe 7 JAN 03