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Olmert slammed for refusing independent war probe

Prime minister sets up committees headed by confidants, advisers

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JERUSALEM – Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is under siege from across the political spectrum here for his refusal to appoint an independent state commission to probe his government's management of Israel's 34-day military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Instead, Olmert this week announced the establishment of two government committees to probe the war. The committees are controlled largely by Olmert's office. One is to be headed by a senior war adviser; the other by a close Olmert associate.



Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (PBS.org)

Unlike an independent state commission, Olmert's two committees do not have the authority to recommend officials resign.

"Olmert's commission is an ugly attempt by the government to escape its responsibility for the failures of this war," said Knesset member Effie Eitam, chairman of Israel's National Union party and member of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. "The government created one commission to allow foot-dragging and escaping of responsibility for the politicians and a second committee to lay all of the blame on the military."

Eitam was one of many Knesset members yesterday to slam Olmert's decision not to form a state commission. The vast majority of Israel's 120-member Knesset, excluding the members of Olmert's Kadima party, gave statements to the media blasting Olmert's suggested probes.

Olmert announced Monday the establishment of the two committees of inquiry into the government's and military's handling of the Lebanon war.

The first committee, headed by former Israeli Defense Forces Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, will investigate the military's role in the war. Lipkin-Shahak was a senior adviser to Israel's Defense Ministry during the war.

The second committee, a political commission, is to be headed by former Chief of Mossad Nahum Admoni, a close Olmert confidant.

The committees are directed to report to Olmert's cabinet and are not required to make their findings public. Olmert's office has control over the two panels' parameters, including which ministries and officials to investigate.

The inquiries fall short of demands for an independent, in-depth state probe with the authority to dismiss top government officials.

A state commission of inquiry is mandated by Israeli law and is run by the Supreme Court. A state commission is headed by a sitting or retired Supreme Court justice; has the power to subpoena witnesses and documents; and its findings, including recommendations of resignation, are made public.

Hunger strike

In response to Olmert's probes, the Movement for Quality Government in Israel began a hunger strike to demand a state commission of inquiry, calling Olmert's suggested committees "a joke" and "slap in the face."

Knesset members from the left, center and right blasted Olmert's suggested probes.

Yossi Beilin, chairman of the leftist Meretz Party, censured Olmert's decision and called on the heads of the two proposed committees to refuse to accept their positions.

Ami Ayalon, a Knesset member from the Labor Party, which is part of Olmert's governing coalition, said government ministers should reject the prime minister's proposed investigative committees.

"The Israeli public is developing a feeling of alienation and losing faith in the system. Restoring the public's faith is no less important than examining failures – and anything less than a state commission of inquiry will not achieve this," Ayalon stated.

A senior source in the Labor Party told WND the "vast majority" of Labor's 19 Knesset members disagree with Olmert's commissions. He said 14 are against and five are undecided.

"Anyone called to testify before the committee should not do so because he risks being framed. In a state commission of inquiry, such a scenario does not exist," he added.

Knesset member Eitan Cabel, a minister in Olmert's government, stated, "I strenuously object to such a commission (as Olmert's) and will convince my colleagues to oppose it as well."

The demands for a state probe come amid calls for the prime minister's resignation from protesters who have been gathering daily outside the Knesset in Jerusalem and near government buildings Tel Aviv.

Also, a poll by Yediot Aharonot, Israel's leading newspaper, found Friday 63 percent of the Israeli public want Olmert to resign.

Charges of 'indecisiveness'

"First he didn't let us win the war, now Olmert is playing dirty games with these commissions. But it won't fly," Omri Levy, a reserve soldier who was protesting today outside Olmert's office, told WND.

Levy was one of hundreds of soldiers here who signed a petition last week demanding a state probe. The petition also suggested Olmert resign and accused his government of placing soldiers' lives in jeopardy on the battle field by cancelling missions or asking troops to hold positions for days without instructions.

"The indecisiveness manifested itself in inaction, in not carrying out operational plans and in canceling all the missions we were given during the fighting. This led to prolonged stays in hostile territory, without an operational purpose and out of unprofessional considerations, without seeking to engage in combat with the enemy," the petition stated.

Indeed, senior military leaders told WorldNetDaily earlier this month that on several occasions during the fighting in Lebanon while heavy diplomacy looked to be gaining momentum, such as during U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visits here, the Israeli Defense Forces was asked by the political echelon to halt most operations and troop advances for up to 36 hours while negotiations ran their course.

Military leaders charge that some troop battalions, instructed to hold positions outside villages but not to advance, actually became sitting ducks for Hezbollah anti-tank fire, which killed at least 35 Israeli soldiers. After the diplomacy failed, soldiers were ordered to carry on.

IDF officials also blasted Olmert for allegedly refusing to approve military plans they say were necessary for dealing a decisive blow to Hezbollah.

The officials tell WND that from the start of the Jewish state's campaign in Lebanon last month, the IDF petitioned for the deployment of up to 40,000 ground troops to advance immediately to the Litani River – taking up the

swath of territory from which most Hezbollah rockets are fired – and from there work their way back to the Israeli border while surrounding and then cleaning out Hezbollah strongholds under heavy aerial cover.

But Olmert at first only approved aerial assaults. After Hezbollah retaliated by firing large numbers of rockets into Israel, the Olmert government approved a smaller ground offensive of up to 8,000 soldiers which according to military officials were not directed to advance to the Latani. The IDF was charged with cleaning out Hezbollah's bases within about three miles of the Israeli border.

IDF leaders told WND they suffered in "very specific" ways on the battlefield because of a lack of sufficient ground troops. They cited instances in which they claimed there were not enough soldiers to surround key villages, such as Bint Jbail in southern Lebanon, allowing Hezbollah fighters to infiltrate cities after the IDF began combat inside the areas.

After nearly four weeks of fighting, Olmert's cabinet last week approved the larger assault the IDF had petitioned for, authorizing about 40,000 troops to enter Lebanon and advance to the Latani River. The IDF estimated it would need about three days to reach central Lebanon and another four-to-six weeks to successfully wipe out the Hezbollah infrastructure in the areas leading back to the Israeli border.

But Monday morning – three days after the Israeli army was given a green light to advance – a cease-fire was imposed and the Jewish state suspended operations.

A day before the cease-fire, Hezbollah shot more than 240 rockets into Israel, the largest number the group had fired in one day. One Israeli civilian was killed in the attacks; 26 others were injured.

"The message sent is that Hezbollah absolutely maintains the capability of firing hundreds of rockets per day into Israel. Wasn't one of the military campaign's main goals to eliminate the rocket threat?" commented a military official.
