

Israelis dismiss Farrakhan

By Dafna Linzer
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GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip - Louis Farrakhan was welcomed Sunday in Palestinian lands during an unexpected visit, but was rebuffed by Israel, which said no Israeli official would meet with the Nation of Islam leader.

The fiery black leader later cut short his surprise visit and left for Jordan.

Farrakhan, who had said he would visit Israel next month, arrived Sunday in the West Bank via Jordan, saying he hoped to contribute to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

"During the Christmas season ... it is my hope that this troubled area in the world that needs peace as much as any part of the earth will find peace and goodwill," he told reporters in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Asked about his frequent remarks disparaging Jews and Judaism, Farrakhan said, "I think that I have been critical of some aspects of Jewish behavior toward black people." But he added: "I have never been and am not now anti-Semitic; I do not hate the Jewish people."

But Farrakhan, who had said he hoped to visit Jerusalem on Monday and pray at the Al-Aqsa mosque, one of Islam's holiest sites, instead canceled the visit.

"We have come to this holy land in the interest of peace," said Farrakhan as he boarded a bus that was to take him to the Allenby Bridge and into Jordan.

"We do not wish to incite the Israeli people to do anything that would injure relationships in the United States any further," he said.

The Chicago-based Farrakhan is on a 52-nation tour that will take him to many countries criticized by Washington, including Libya, Iran, North Korea and Cuba. The State Department advised Farrakhan that those governments may use his visits for anti-U.S. propaganda.

Farrakhan's stop here comes at a time when the Palestinians are hoping U.S. pressure will elicit concessions from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and get



AP PHOTO/RICK BOWMER

Surrounded by bodyguards, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan talks to the press Monday shortly before boarding a bus from Ramallah, West Bank to take him to the Allenby bridge crossing into Jordan. Farrakhan, who arrived unexpectedly in the West Bank on Sunday, left for Jordan saying he did not feel welcome in Israel and was concerned for his safety.

the peace process moving again.

The U.S. Embassy refused comment Sunday on Farrakhan's arrival in Palestinian territory.

In Ramallah, the Nation of Islam leader, wearing a dark suit and his trademark bow tie, ate lunch with Palestinian Cabinet ministers and legislators. He went to Gaza City afterward for a meeting with Yasser Arafat.

"We are very happy to have this opportunity to meet our brother in our land," Arafat said. "We spoke in detail of all the difficulties we are facing and how to push forward the peace process."

After their meeting, Farrakhan suggested Israel was to blame for the crisis in the peace talks. But in an apparent reference to the terrorist attacks by Islamic militants, he condemned "any behavior that takes the lives of innocent people for political purposes."

Arafat gave Farrakhan a model of Islamic shrines in Jerusalem.

The U.S. Muslim leader's early arrival caught Israeli officials off guard, and came while the government was distracted by a contentious debate over a troop-pull plan for the West Bank.

Israel has not been enthusiastic about a visit by Farrakhan, who once referred to Judaism as a

"gutter religion."

Farrakhan said he hoped to meet the prime minister, but when asked if Netanyahu would receive Farrakhan, government spokesman David Bar-Illan replied: "Of course not." Nor would any other Israeli official, he added.

Farrakhan's association with Moammar Gadhafi in Libya, Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the ayatollahs of Iran disqualify him from any role as peacemaker, Bar-Illan said.

"To consider him a mediator would be an insult to one's intelligence," he said.

Bar-Illan noted that Farrakhan, as a U.S. citizen, did not need any special permission to enter the Jewish state, but some officials denounced his presence. Cabinet secretary Danny Naveh called it "intolerable that he be walking around among us."

Israel's Foreign Ministry demanded Farrakhan retract anti-Semitic remarks, calling them "harsh and insensitive." However, ministry spokesman Aviv Shir-On said as long as there is no incitement and public order is maintained, Israel would not limit Farrakhan's movements.

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