

Atiyeh visits ruins of town

Syrians blame wreckage on Israelis

Alan K. Ota is traveling with Gov. Vic Atiyeh in the Middle East.

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QUNAYTIRAH, Syria — For Syrians, the ruins of this town, which once housed 55,000 residents, are a memorial to Israeli aggression and Syrian resolve.

It was reduced to collapsed concrete and torn metal by dynamite and bulldozers when Israelis withdrew to the nearby Golan Heights in the summer of 1974. That was just after the signing of a cease-fire agreement by the two nations.

Gov. Vic Atiyeh, accompanied by a phalanx of armed guards and Syrian officials, toured the ruins of Qunaytirah Tuesday in a six-hour trip that he said gave "the Syrian view" of this nation's feud with Israel. He said he hoped to hear the other side of the story next week when he visits Israel.

Atiyeh, obviously moved by what he saw, said he had known little of Qunaytirah before the visit. He said he was uncertain how to evaluate the guided tour, which often had the feel of a propaganda visit.

Atiyeh and his party were carried in a speeding caravan of black limousines to the city, which lies in the demilitarized zone at the base of the Golan Heights about 36 miles south of Damascus.

Under the watchful eyes of their escorts from the Syrian Ministry of Information, the Oregonians passed through three checkpoints manned by Syrian and United Nations troops.

At one checkpoint, Atiyeh looked through binoculars at Israeli troops about 50 miles away and a sign that said "Welcome to Israel."

Costandl Hamati, the ministry official in charge, was so used to the tour that he spent most of it in a parked car.

Hassan Sakka, the governor of the deserted city,

gave Atiyeh an emotional account of its destruction through a translator, Nofal Kasrawi of Portland.

Kasrawi, vice president of CH2M Hill International, is one of four Oregon businessmen traveling with Atiyeh on a Middle East trade mission.

Atiyeh was quiet and pensive as he walked through the ruins. At a cemetery, he walked along rows of tombstones of Syrian soldiers. He picked red anemones from the grassy area and laid them on a tomb for unknown soldiers.

Asked what his feelings were, Atiyeh said, "I just can't put it all together yet. I need more time.

"I've never seen destruction like this before. It's hard to imagine. I am emotionally involved," he said.

Sakka said the ruins were "the prime example of the hatred the Israelis have for the Arab world."

"We look to you, Mr. Governor, and all the American people to understand us," Sakka added. Afterward, the two governors exchanged personal cigarette lighters.

At a gutted, bullet-scarred hospital, security immediately tightened when several busloads of Iranian tourists came into view.

American Embassy officials had earlier told Atiyeh to avoid Iranians because they were known to sometimes attack Americans in Damascus. About six Syrian guards surrounded Atiyeh as he walked through the empty hospital.

There were no incidents.

At lunch, Atiyeh and his contingent ate freeki, a dish of lambs' heads and bulgur wheat, while sitting in front of a picture window facing the Golan Heights.

Atiyeh completed a 10-day trade mission to Saudi Arabia and Egypt Monday and flew to Syria, where he will make a trip to his ancestral homeland, Amar, later in the week. He also hopes to meet with Syrian President Hafez Assad.

Atiyeh finds friendly roots

One can go home again, but it is not easy, even for a governor, and especially if home is Syria, nestled behind a curtain of strained U.S. relations.

Yet, for all the flap about whether the subdued greeting at the Damascus airport was deliberate or inadvertent, Gov. Vic Atiyeh later found the welcome to his father's homeland more enthusiastic "than my wildest dreams," his staff learned from his daily phone call to the Capitol in Salem.

Atiyeh's trip offered the Syrians a dilemma for the very reason relations between his ancestral home and his own country are strained — Israel. On the one hand, Syria would be honored to greet the most prominent Syrian-American politician in the United States, but on the other, he later planned to visit hated Israel.

The governor was right when he was initially invited to go to Israel, to insist if he did so he would also have to go to

Syria. Conversely, if he visited Syria, he would also have to call on Israel.

But if Atiyeh's trip to the Middle East has been unspectacular as seen from afar, it has not produced any recorded gaffes. The State Department has reason to worry about governors traveling around the world, appearing to conduct their own foreign policy, but without constitutional authority to represent the U.S. government. Atiyeh has caused the department no embarrassment. Whether he has opened trading doors for Oregon business is yet to be seen.

The important point of his sentimental journey is that he has discovered the people of his ancestral home to be the open, friendly, peace-loving folks he expected. Therein may lie the greatest hope for an anguished region. Beneath all of the frictions of nationhood, religion, government and history are warm and kind human beings who would like to live in peace and harmony.