

Focus on ME talks

Bush revives land-for-peace formula with a twist at Madrid conference

Israel's hardline won't deter peace: Fahd

JEDDAH, Oct 31 : King Fahd on Wednesday wished the Madrid conference success and said the strong commitment of the international community to the peace process, especially by the superpowers, made him less pessimistic than ever, reports AP.

Fahd pledged Saudi Arabia's full backing for progress toward a Palestinian settlement. Fahd praised President Bush, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and US Secretary of State James A. Baker as well as the Arabs for their determination to establish peace and stability in the region.

"The clear determination from the international community to end the Arab-Israeli conflict and foster factors for security, stability and cooperation among all, makes us less pessimistic than ever before" about the chances of success, he said.

"The hardline Israeli stances will not hinder more strenuous effort and full cooperation to impose the will of peace, right and justice until the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people are restored," said Fahd.

The Saudi monarch said it would be "abnormal" for the Middle East to remain a hotbed of tension when the world was moving toward security, peace, stability and cooperation in the shadow of the new world order.

Stressing the need for "sincere intentions" to ensure success for the conference, Fahd said the Arabs had proved they wanted to establish peace with Israel on basis of a just settlement that would restore their legitimate rights.

Arafat meets King Hassan

MARRAKESH (Morocco), Oct 31 : Palestine Liberation Organisation leader Yasser Arafat met here Wednesday with King Hassan II of Morocco for talks on the just-opened Middle East peace conference in Madrid, officials said, reports AFP.

Speaking on his arrival here at the head of a PLO delegation, Arafat denounced Israel's refusal to discuss the status of the city of Jerusalem during the conference.

Using the Arabic name of Jerusalem, he warned of "manoeuvres aimed at pushing aside the issue of Al Qods." The king is chairman of the Al Qods committee of the organisation the end of Jerusalem's occupation by Israel.

Israel, which seized the city during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, has annexed it and declared it the Israeli capital. Jerusalem is a holy city for Muslims, Christians and Jews.

King Hassan is also president of the Maghreb union, a five-member grouping of North African nations which is taking part in the Madrid conference.

MADRID (Spain), Oct 31: US President Bush revived his land-for-peace formula Wednesday at the opening of the Mideast peace conference — with a twist, reports AP.

Looking for a quick-fix agreement in what could be negotiations over many years, Bush also urged Israel and Palestinians to experiment with a self-rule plan for the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"Nothing agreed to now will prejudice permanent status negotiations," he told the two nervous parties.

Bush's obvious aim is to score a quick dividend for himself and his foreign policy, and also for Arabs and Israelis in the event a more comprehensive settlement of their 43-year dispute proves elusive.

On Tuesday, in a news conference with Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, Bush steadfastly refused to repeat the land-for-peace slogan.

That, Bush suggested, might inhibit the launching of face-to-face bargaining between Arabs and Israelis.

He had other reasons as well.

To prescribe land-for-peace is to unnerve Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Syrian President Hafez Assad.

Shamir, at this point at least, appears determined not to yield any of the land Israel retains from the 1967 Six-Day war. And Assad is unwilling to offer peace to Israel in exchange for the Golan Heights alone.

Determined not to upset the two key players at the outset, Bush fell back on vaguely worded 1967 and 1973 UN Security Council resolutions that are artfully ambiguous.

The United States went to such lengths to satisfy Assad that the invitations to the peace conference did not even propose peace treaties as a goal.

But Bush came roaring back in his speech Wednesday.

"We seek peace, real peace," he declared. "And by real peace I mean treaties. Security. Diplomatic

relations. Economic relations. Trade. Investment. Cultural Exchange. Even tourism.

At most, Assad is willing to offer an end to open warfare.

But, Bush said, the goal "is not simply to end the state of war in the Middle East and replace it with a state of nonbelligerency. This is not enough; this would not last," he said.

At the same time, Bush told Shamir directly that "territorial compromise is essential for peace. Boundaries should reflect the quality of both security and political arrangements."

Bush, in calling for territorial compromise, was exercising the calculated ambiguity that has marked Middle East diplomacy for a generation.

Bush did not rectify the ritual land-for-peace formula in precisely those words.

But Baker said afterward that all elements of US policy were not "necessarily, specifically" in Bush's speech. He said Arabs and Israelis are well aware of the US position and emphasized that the two UN

resolutions that serve as a basis for the current negotiations "embraced the principle of territory for peace."

Faisal Hussein, a prominent Palestinian who serves as adviser to the Palestinian-Jordanian delegation and a link to the Palestine Liberation Organization, said he accepted Baker's explanation.

Bush's formula does not call — at least not yet — for Israel to give up all of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and certainly not east Jerusalem, though he refers to all of the land, including part of Jerusalem, as occupied.

But he just as clearly demanded that Israel pull back, at least over the long haul.

In the short run, Bush focused on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, which administration officials consider the best candidate for an interim agreement.

Bush is aiming for an agreement within a year. Self-rule would go on for five years, but in three years negotiations on an overall settlement.

Israel, Arabs hail Bush's speech

MADRID, Oct 31 : Israeli and Arab spokesmen stressed the positive in US President George Bush's keynote address to Wednesday's Middle East peace conference.

"We felt that the US administration's determination to achieve comprehensive peace in the Middle East is still strong," Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq Al-Shara told Reuters.

Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's chief spokesman at the talks, praised Bush's insistence on formal peace treaties, direct Arab-Israeli negotiations and security for all states.

The Israelis were delighted

that Bush did not repeat past calls for an exchange of land for peace. They interpreted his appeal for territorial compromise as meaning he expected the Arabs, too, to give up some land.

"Israel, that has already ceded a full 91 per cent of the territory that we took in 1967 war of self-defence... seeks a reasonable outcome whereby it could have the margins of existence, the margins of security," Netanyahu said.

He referred to the return of the largely uninhabited Sinai peninsula to Egypt under a 1979 peace treaty, which he said was quite different from handing back the strategic,

water-rich Golan to Syria.

But Shara said: "The president confirmed to me the United States' commitment to implementing resolutions 242 and 338 and the principle of land for peace. I cannot imagine that President Bush would back away from what he said."

Jordanian Foreign Minister Kamel Abu Jaber said there were a lot of positive elements in Bush's speech, and some missing commitments were there by implication.

Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi, in a detailed analysis of the speech, said the Palestinians liked Bush's references to fairness international legitimacy and giving Palestinians meaningful control over their fate.

"We understand that he did not allude to self-determination as a principle but we also know that meaningful control... is in a way leading in the right direction," she said.

She welcomed Bush's statement that interim arrangements would not prejudice the outcome of negotiations and said that in Washington's letter of assurance

to the Palestinians this referred to the dispute over Arab East Jerusalem, which is not represented in the Palestinian negotiating team.

"In many ways there were no real surprises... he tried to steer away from controversial issues, which has always been American policy, not to take the bull by the horns," she said.

"There were deliberate omissions in order not to provoke extreme reactions on both sides," she added.

The omissions included a reference to land-for-peace and to Jewish settlements in the occupied territories but both points were implicit in other phrases of the speech, she said.

Jordanian spokesman Marwan Muasher commented: "We feel that President Bush's remarks this morning and on previous occasions constitute a very good basis for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict."

Bush returns home

WASHINGTON, Oct 31: President George Bush returned home Wednesday to Washington from Madrid where he and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev opened the Mideast peace conference, reports AP.

The President gave a thumbs up sign after his helicopter landed at the White House lawn

Palestinian advisers without security

MADRID, Oct 31: The advisers to the Palestinian delegation for the Middle East peace conference are "extremely vulnerable" because they have been left without security, the Palestinian spokeswoman said here Wednesday, reports AP.

It took us long time to find cars to travel to the press centre and address the media, Hanan Ashrawi said. No bullet proof vehicles or police escort have been made available.

Ashrawi said security was restricted to members of the delegation taking part in the conference itself, rather than the team of

advisers on the sidelines.

"We are extremely vulnerable and we know it," she said, referring to threats against Palestinian delegates from both Arab and Jewish extremists.

"But when we embarked on the quest for peace... we knew there would be risks," Ashrawi said "the only response to people who want to sabotage the peace process. It to prove that peace works."

The Palestinians have split their delegation which forms part of a joint team with Jordan into two parts to skirt Israeli restrictions on the members of the negotiating team.

Iran proclaims death sentence for all Middle East conferees

TEHRAN, OCT 31 : Iran's supreme leader denounced the Middle East peace talks on Wednesday as treason and a leading Iranian hardliner urged Muslims round the world to kill those taking part, reports Reuters.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, successor to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, said the historic talks between Israel and its Arab foes had been forced on the Muslim world.

"Those taking part in this treason will suffer the wrath of nations," he told military graduates in a speech broadcast by Tehran radio.

Denouncing the Madrid talks as a "declaration of war on Islam" hardliner Ali Akbar Mohtashemi told Iran's national assembly.

"Based on Islamic Sharia (law), all participants in the Madrid conference are considered Mohareb those who wage war on Islam and they must face the death sentence."

"It's the duty of Muslims in the world to carry that out." Students and teachers in the holy city of Qom suspended classes and demonstrated against the peace talks.

The demonstrators, quoted by Tehran radio, said compromise with Israel was a betrayal of Palestinian hopes. They pledged readiness to fight to liberate Jerusalem.

The Iranian government opposes the conference, which is sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union and opened on Wednesday.

President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani told a Tehran conference on Palestine last week that Iran was ready to send troops to fight alongside Palestinians against Israel.

But Mohtashemi, who is

head of the national assembly defence commission and has close links with pro-Iranian Hizbollah (Party of God) guerrillas in Lebanon, demanded further action.

In an interview with Reuters, he said Rafsanjani and his government should review Iran's ties with countries attending the conference.

Mohtashemi told the national assembly the conference was a sell-out for Palestinians. "Today the great tragedy of the world of Islam is taking shape and beginning in Madrid

at the hands of the criminal America and with the signature of the hireling Arab leaders and some treacherous Palestinian leaders," he said.

"The objective of holding this conference is to stabilise the occupying Zionist regime, to destroy Palestine and the noble Qods (Jerusalem) and begin confrontation with Islam," he added.

"The leaders of the Islamic states are endorsing this immense treachery through their deadly silence."

He denounced US

President George Bush as "the first-degree criminal" and "the most hated individual."

In remarks to the assembly and to Reuters he said Hizbollah militants would wreak vengeance.

"The countdown has begun. Today marks the arrival of the point of hostile confrontation between 1.2 billion Muslims and Israel," he added.

"Hizbollah cells and revolutionaries will turn the world into a graveyard or hell for criminals — Americans, Israelis and their mercenaries."



BEIRUT : Pro-Iranian Hizbollah supporters demonstrate against the United States, Israel and the Middle East peace conference. Tehran has taken a hardline against the Madrid conference, calling it a crime against Islam and vowing to assassinate those who participate in it. —AFP/UNB photo

First-day talks aimed at cooling off tension

MADRID (Spain), Oct 31 : Arabs and Israelis face each other across the negotiating table Thursday, presenting their toughest demands and greatest aspirations, reports AP.

The second day of the Middle East peace conference was being devoted to speeches by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and by the leaders of the Jordanian, Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian delegations.

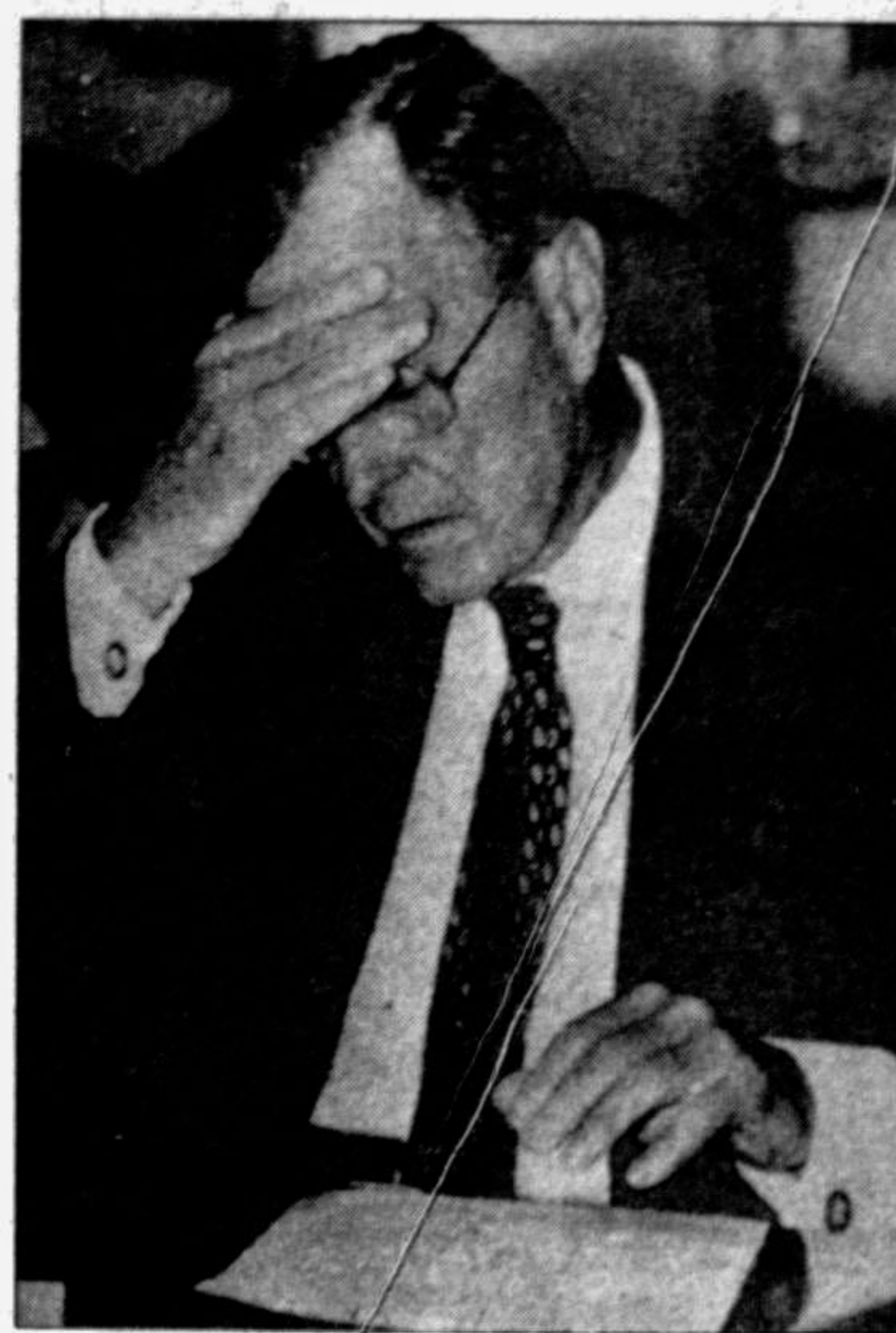
Israel was expected to offer peace to its neighbours, in return for secure borders and guarantees of recognition. After more than 40 years as a state, only one of its neighbours — Egypt — has made peace with Israel.

Syria said it will demand an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, which it captured from the Syrians in 1967, and the creation of an independent state for the 1.7 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Syria has threatened to quit the peace process if Israel does not make quick concessions, but Shamir's hard-line government has staked much of its political future on not surrendering the occupied territories.

The Palestinians say they will demand Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and create an independent homeland on that territory, ending more than 40 years of occupation.

Lebanon, which has thus far kept a low profile at the conference, will likely demand that Israeli withdraw all its troops from a narrow buffer zone in southern Lebanon.



President Bush

Shamir threatens to stay away from talks with Syria

WASHINGTON, Oct 31: Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir said on Wednesday that Israel would stay away from planned bilateral talks with Syria if Damascus insisted on expanding them to include observers, reports Reuters.

"We think that it is important by principle that we do business with them face to face," Shamir said in a US television interview from Madrid, where he is leading Israel's delegation to the

Middle East Peace conference that opened on Wednesday.

Syria wants the United States and the Soviet Union to be present during any direct talks with Israel, Shamir said this was to avoid such a chapter in their history that there were negotiations between Syria and Israel — direct negotiations.

Asked whether Syrian insistence therefore would preclude a bilateral meeting, Shamir, the only head of state

leading his negotiators in Madrid, said:

"Yes, of course, you are right, we will not have bilateral negotiations, and there will not be any continuation and there will not be any practical results."

After the largely ceremonial opening session in Madrid, the peace conference is supposed to break up into bilateral talks between Israel and each of its Arab neighbours starting on Sunday.

Israel wants to continue at sites in the Middle East, the Arabs want to continue in Madrid.

Shamir said a deadlock with Syria did not doom bilateral talks with the other delegations.

"We have not to do everything together," he said. "But what happens is that the Syrians try to impose on the other Arab parties their position, and this is negative."

Foreign Minister Farouq Al-Shara of Syria said in a separate television interview on Wednesday that Israel's wish to move bilateral sessions to the Middle East was aimed at scuttling the peace process.

"Even if we move into another place, they will create another problem of another nature," he said. "Our impression is that the Israelis are not coming here to make peace."

Israeli gunners shell Hizbollah bases

SIDON, Oct 31 : Israeli troops and their militia allies exchanged artillery fire with pro-Iranian gunmen in South Lebanon today, security sources said, reports Reuters.

Israeli gunners and South Lebanon Army (SLA) militiamen shelled Hizbollah bases in a string of villages near the market town of Nabatiyeh and the mountainous ridge of Iqlim Al-Toufah during the night and early in the morning.

Hizbollah returned fire on Israeli and SLA positions at the tip of the Jewish state's self-declared security zone in South Lebanon, the sources said.

Israeli combat plane staged mock raids on two Palestinian refugee camps east of the port of Sidon and Iqlim Al-Toufah, 40 km (25 miles) south of Beirut. Israeli helicopters also hovered over the area.

There were no immediate reports of casualties in the latest exchanges, less intense than those of the past two days, the sources said.

Two attacks by pro-Iranian guerrillas on Monday killed three Israeli soldiers and wounded six, sparking the latest round of violence, two guerrillas and two civilians were killed in the clashes and retaliatory shelling.

Dozens of villagers, fearing an escalation of the shelling, have fled their homes near Israeli and SLA positions, witnesses say.

No accord yet on negotiation

MADRID, Oct 31: US Secretary of State James Baker said on Wednesday there was still no agreement on where and when to hold Arab-Israeli negotiations that are supposed to start immediately following the peace conference, reports Reuters.

Baker spoke to reporters after a one-on-one meeting with Palestinian leader Faisal Al-Husseini, the east Jerusalem activist who is guiding the Palestinian delegation to the peace conference. He is barred from taking part himself because of Israeli objections.

The bilateral negotiations between Israel and each of its Arab enemies are supposed to

begin four days after the start of the peace conference.

But Israel and Syria are locked in a dispute about whether to hold them in the Middle East or in Madrid. Israel wants them in the region to symbolise its acceptance by Arabs but Syria refuses to grant Israel further recognition until it agrees to withdraw from the territories it has been occupying since 1967.

Soviet Foreign Minister Boris Pankin conformed that the dispute had not been resolved. He said the Soviet Union wanted to see the meetings held in Madrid.

Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq Al-Shara confirmed to

Reuters his country's position was unchanged.

Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, told a news conference intense negotiation were under way to resolve the issue.

\$22m US aid for Jordan

NEW YORK, Oct 31 : The United States will provide Jordan with 22 million dollars in military aid in return for King Hussein's participation in the Middle East peace conference, Jordanian and US officials were quoted as saying in today's The New York Times, reports Reuters.

ME peace not a dream : Jordan

MADRID, Oct 31 : Jordanian Foreign Minister Kamel Abu Jaber criticised President Bush's opening speech at the Middle East conference Wednesday for some things Bush did not say, reports AP.

"The spirit and the thrust of the speech was positive. Of course it would have liked to see other things in it, in fact I wish I wrote it myself," Abu Jaber told a news conference.

Bush, who urged the Israelis and Arabs to strike a deal centered on territorial compro-

mise and permanent treaties, said in his speech: "Peace in the Middle East need not be a dream."

The Jordanian said he was pleased that Bush referred to UN resolutions calling for the Israelis to return lands captured in 1967 in return for recognition by Arab states.

"Of course he did not mention the idea of land for peace. He did not mention of the right of the Palestinian people. He did not mention Jerusalem," Abu-Jaber said.