

Focus on ME talks

Part one of ME talks over, but organisational nightmares begin

Pankin's call to stop settlements for peace

MADRID, Nov 2: Soviet Foreign Minister Boris Pankin, summing up at a Middle East peace conference on Friday, said a halt to Jewish settlements in occupied territories could bring reciprocal gestures by Arabs, reports Reuter.

"These (bilateral) negotiations need gestures from both sides as witness to their good intentions just as a man who has run a long way needs air to fill his lungs."

"Undoubtedly one most convincing demonstration of readiness for serious dialogue would be to stop the settlement activity in the occupied territories. I think that were this to happen, the Arab countries could find the appropriate response," he said.

Pankin, co-chairman of the conference with US Secretary of State James Baker, said Moscow was convinced bilateral talks should start in Madrid "without losing the impetus and pace we have already developed."

Baker said later the bilateral talks between Israel and each of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon would start at the weekend but the parties had not agreed on a venue.

The two sponsors wanted them in Madrid and would not understand if any party refused to attend.

Pankin said a peace settlement must include Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights, as well as Israeli recognition of a Palestinian right to self-determination.

"The return of those lands to their legitimate owners will transform inter-state borders into bridges of communication," he said.

"Statements by participants in the conference have shown once more that the solution to this (Palestinian) problem should probably pass through intermediate stages... mutual trust is at a very low ebb."

MADRID, Nov 2: Part one of the Middle East Peace process is over, but Madrid's organisational nightmares are beginning again, reports Reuter.

The three-day conference that brought Israel and Arab together after five wars in 43 years focused on ceremony and speeches. It was held in Madrid's royal palace, a huge neo-classical building normally used as a museum.

Now authorities are looking for somewhere smaller where Israel and each of its Arab foes can talk about talks and their location. The place must be discreet enough for old foes to have a flaming row without disturbing the neighbours.

"They won't be in the palace," said one Spanish official. "The meetings are on a different level now. It wouldn't be appropriate."

Despite wrangling, all the signs are that bilateral meetings between Israel and each of its Arab foes will open in Madrid on Sunday.

No one is quite sure where yet, but Spanish officials at the conference press centre, a hastily-converted glass and steel exhibition hall, are stung up some modest palaces around town.

Three hot prospects on the unofficial list are stately but not too grand, central yet within reach of the 5,000-strong army of journalists—and available from Sunday.

There is the Parcen Palace, a rangy three-storey building with wrought iron balconies and elegant shutters. Formerly the Madrid music conservatory, it is now the Justice Ministry.

Then there is the gracious Viana Palace in the labyrinthine heart of old Madrid. It is part of the Foreign Ministry.

Or there is the secluded square stone building in the business district that is home to the state-owned industrial holding company, National Institute of Industry.

After three days of playing peace capital, Madrid, swarming with 12,000 police and troops forming a talks security cordon, is becoming keen on serenity.

Officials are desperate to erase the pre-conference panic of having to rustle up arrangements at very short notice.

Now they boast they can select conference locations and organise mass security at the drop of a hat. The logistics are not a problem, they say.

"All the plans are taken care of, everything," insisted one official. "It's all totally normal."

But he added wryly: "As far as you can call this normal."

Another report adds: Arabs heads of delegations to the Middle East Peace Conference failed to agree on Friday when to start the next phase of

going to Israel for negotiations and inviting Israelis to Syria for talks would imply recognition — which Syria is determined to withhold unless Israel gives back all the Arab lands it captured in the 1967 Mideast war.

This raises a question in our minds whether they really want peace," said Israel's deputy foreign minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. "They really haven't accepted the legitimacy of Israel."

"We are prepared to move to the Middle East if we have an independent state in which we can hold the bilaterals," said Hasan Ashrawi. "But we are a people under occupation, and we cannot negotiate under duress."

Israel fears holding the talks away from region would invite foreign participation and outside pressure. It also argues that holding the talks away from the immediate region would put Israel to a lot of

expense and inconvenience. Even agreeing to an international opening of the talks and their location in Madrid were painful concessions for Israel, made only under pressure from the United States.

The Americans promised the international phase would be short and would be followed immediately by direct talks.

Going across the border to Syria or Lebanon for talks would also ease the frustrating isolation felt by Israelis, surrounded by hostile Arab states.

"We cannot and we do not seek to barge our way into the Arab capitals," Netanyahu said.

Netanyahu said all the successful negotiations between Israel and the Arabs over the past 43 years were held in the region and were reached face-to-face. But the record shows otherwise.



MADRID: Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara displays an old wanted notice for Israeli Premier Yitzhak Shamir (bearing headshot portrait) during his speech before members of the peace conference here. — AFP/UNB photo

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Palestinians battle Israeli troops

RAMALLAH, Nov 2: Hundreds of young Palestinians defied Israeli soldiers on Friday by demonstrating in support of the Madrid peace conference, reports Reuter.

They were mostly young men and women who have been battling Israeli soldiers with stones for nearly four years.

At a rally in a Ramallah school, they cheered when Sari Nusseibeh, an advisor to the 14 Palestinian negotiators in Madrid, told them their uprising was bearing fruit.

"You, who yesterday challenged the bullets of the enemy, are challenging him today with the olive branch," Nusseibeh said.

Palestinians are split over the historic Arab-Israeli meeting in Madrid. Followers of the PLO mainstream back the decision to send a delegation to Madrid. Muslim fundamentalists and leftist radicals are opposed.

Supporters of the talks have been demonstrating during the past three days with olive branches.

Israeli soldiers in Ramallah blocked roads in front of the 300 pro-talks demonstrators and a convoy of cars honking horns.

The soldiers pushed foreign reporters, tried to take cameras away from photographers, and ordered demonstrators and journalists to go home.

Two journalists who refused to leave the area and stop taking pictures were briefly arrested. The soldiers also beat up an Argentinean journalist, Alejandro Kaminsky, 22, who jumped out of a military jeep after he was detained.

Nusseibeh told the rally: "Through our presence, we managed to go to Madrid with our heads high and to convey to international public opinion that we are seekers of freedom and independence."

Syria, Arab allies at odds

MADRID, Nov 2: Syria is holding back, but Palestinians, Jordanians and Israelis say they are ready to meet in Madrid on Sunday to talk about arrangements for the tough bargaining ahead for Middle East peace, reports AP.

Arab delegates met Friday without resolving their disagreement, and sources said contacts would continue on Saturday.

An Arab official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Syrians wanted to wait two or three days before sitting down with the Israelis to discuss procedures for one-on-one talks. There are also plans for separate negotiations between Israel and the Jordanian-Palestinian team, and between Israel and Lebanon if all parties agree to meet Sunday to plan for the bilateral talks, they will have to resolve a major issue before those talks can begin — where they will be held.

Israel wants the one-on-one negotiations to take place in the Middle East. Arabs say that amounts to a request for de facto recognition of the Jewish state, something they consider a bargaining chip.

US Secretary of State James Baker, who spent eight months persuading the feuding states to come to Madrid, tried to spur them on to the next stage.

"From the perspective of most of the rest of the world, it would be very difficult to understand how a party could now refuse to attend bilateral negotiations simply because of a disagreement over the site," said Baker.

The Israelis want the bilateral negotiations to alternate between Israel and the Arab countries, which in effect mean Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian and Palestinian recognition of the Jewish state.

Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara said Friday that he would be happy to continue talking in Madrid.

Hanan Ashrawi, spokeswoman for the Palestinians, also rejected the Israeli invitation.

"This raises a question in our minds whether they (the Arabs) really want peace," said Israel's deputy foreign minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. "They really haven't accepted the legitimacy of Israel."

Mrs Ashrawi said the Palestinians are prepared to move the negotiations to the Middle East "if we have an independent state in which we can hold the bilaterals."

Just their get-together was a success, says Bush

DALLAS, Nov 2: President George Bush on Friday said that while he did not know what results the Middle East peace conference in Madrid would bring, the fact of bringing together all its participants was, in itself, a success, reports AP.

"I think we've done something great," Bush said at a political rally here. "We've done something that the most cynical believed we can never do."

"I don't know what's going to happen... but it was a success to just bring those parties together, and it was hard work, and you had to stand up against the skeptics... whether it succeeds or not, it's worth the effort," the President added.

It was the second time in as many days that Bush used the Middle East peace conference, which his administration sponsored and strove for ardently for eight months, to counter Democratic attempts to upset his reelection bid in 1992.

Bush returned Wednesday from Madrid, where he attended the opening of the peace conference together with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. In a markedly party-oriented speech, similar to one he gave Thursday in Houston, Bush lambasted the House of Representatives' number two Democrat, Majority Whip David Bonior of Michigan, who, when Bush was in Madrid, noted the President's absence, stressing that Bonior had to tackle some of the nation's most pressing problems.

"I'm sorry, I don't care what this little man thinks. I'm going to keep on leading and try to do my best for the United States of America and peace, for his kids and for my kids. Let him carp, let him criticize," Bush said.

The Arabs want these talks to take place in Madrid. Israel has so far only agreed to a Madrid meeting to discuss another venue, which it would like to see in the Middle East.

underground Stern Gang organisation, of involvement in the assassination of a UN envoy, to what was then Palestine.

At a press conference later, al-Shara refused to answer a question posed by reporter Iliana Dyan of Israel. He said the reporter was unfairly using a loudspeaker to ask a question in the crowded news conference.

At times, the delegates themselves appear frustrated over attempts to interpret every detail of their demeanor. Erekat has been accused of trying to anger Israelis by wearing the keffiyeh, a traditional headdress used by Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat, among others.

A new step towards peace, says Egypt

MADRID, Nov 2: Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa on Friday played down disputes at the Middle East conference, saying the gathering was new step towards peace, reports Reuter.

"It is definitely a step towards peace. I don't want to be overly optimistic, but the peace process has in fact begun," he told a news conference.

The first speech-making phase of the conference ended in Madrid on Friday with a angry exchange of accusations between Israel and Syria and dispute over where the next phase, involving bilateral talks, should be held.

"We should not be concerned by the continuation of such debate," Moussa said. "I believe that negotiations will take place as agreed."

"Rest assured that there will be a beginning, starting on Sunday, of bilateral negotiations."

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Israeli delegates said Shamir left to avoid traveling on the Sabbath, a violation of Jewish law, and antagonizing his governing coalition partners of the religious right. They said the Arabs knew about his departure days ago and denied it was a snub.

But chief Palestinian negotiator Haidar Abdul-Shafi criticized Shamir for leaving the table early, saying the peace talks were more important.

Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara also scolded Shamir, telling the conference his early departure showed the Israelis "were taking the peace conference lightly."

Al-Shara then brandished his own symbol to punctuate a personal attack against the Israeli Prime Minister: a 1984 "wanted poster" photograph of Shamir.

Shamir-Levy rift leads to return of top officials

JERUSALEM, Nov 2: Top officials of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, including its Director-General Yossef Addas, have returned home from Madrid as a result of friction between Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and his Foreign Minister David Levy, Israel Television reported late Friday, reports AP.

Addas, who returned aboard the same plane as Shamir, said that Foreign Ministry officials in the Israeli delegation to the Madrid peace conference had been given the green light to

return home by Levy. According to the television, Levy sought in this way to protect against officials of his ministry being kept on the sidelines of the Negotiations by Shamir's entourage.

Levy refused to go to Madrid after Shamir decided to head the Israeli delegation himself.

The report said Addas complained that Foreign Ministry officials had only been put in charge of negotiations with Lebanon, considered of lesser importance

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'Your place or mine' dispute holding up peace talks

MADRID, Nov 2: On the face of it, the argument seems petty. But the Israel-Arab clash over where to hold their direct talks goes to the heart of the twin issues that divide them: land and acceptance, reports AP.

Israel wants the talks — the next phase of the Middle East peace conference — held alternately in an Israeli and an Arab city.

Syria wants them on neutral ground, and Madrid seems as good a place as any, having hosted the first phase of the conference this week.

US officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Friday night that after Sunday's session, US Secretary of State James A Baker III simply may issue invitations for subsequent talks even without prior commitments from the parties to attend. They said Washington was a possible compromise site.

Our intention is not to continue negotiations in Madrid but there will be discussions and we'll see where things lead."

State-run radio and television said the Israeli representatives would leave Madrid on Monday whether or not agreement was reached on the venue for the bilateral talks.

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flights back to Israel had already been reserved and that Shamir had instructed delegation members to return to Israel regardless of the outcome of Sunday's talks.

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All the Arab delegations have ruled out talks in Israel.

There are problems in general within the Arab delegations, but it is primarily Syria that is firmly opposed to the peace treaty and to bilateral talks," Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Israel Television.

Bilateral talks in Madrid may be short-lived

JERUSALEM: While Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir has said bilateral talks with the Arabs will go ahead in Madrid, there are signs they could be short-lived, reports Reuter.

"Our people are going to a meeting on Sunday," Shamir said, arriving back from the Spanish capital on Friday after a stormy final session of the Middle East peace conference.

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Syria's Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara raised doubts over Sunday's talks when, after a meeting late on Friday with other heads of Arab delegations, he said date had not been agreed for the start of direct negotiations.

The prospects for talks were not enhanced by Israeli attacks on pro-Iranian targets in South Lebanon on Friday. Israeli warplanes and artillery hammered pro-Iranian guerrillas intent on "holy war" to sabotage the peace talks in Madrid.

Where symbols play a role in T-shaped negotiating table

MADRID, Nov 2: An empty chair, an old photograph, a checkered keffiyeh, reports AP.

Symbols have taken on enormous importance in a Middle East peace conference where delegates speak the same language — English — but do not seem to understand each other.

Even before the talks got underway at Madrid's 18th century Royal Palace, representative of Israel and her Arab neighbours debated details like the shape of the table. As the first phase ended Friday, disagreement over where the next round should take place threatened to derail the negotiations.

One of the most potent images in the Hall of Columns where the opening sessions took place was that of Arab speakers delivering their arguments to an empty Israeli seat at the negotiating table.

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Al-Shara then brandished his own symbol to punctuate a personal attack against the Israeli Prime Minister: a 1984 "wanted poster" photograph of Shamir.

The British had suspected Shamir, then a member of the

underground Stern Gang organisation, of involvement in the assassination of a UN envoy, to what was then Palestine.

At a press conference later, al-Shara refused to answer a question posed by reporter Iliana Dyan of Israel. He said the reporter was unfairly using a loudspeaker to ask a question in the crowded news conference.



RAMALLAH: Palestinians supporting the Madrid peace conference, demonstrate with olive branches in their hands, in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank. — AFP/UNB photo