

Palestinians vow to declare state this year

Peace talks break down again

GAZA CITY, Feb 4: The Palestinians vowed they will declare an independent state this year after another round of peace talks with Israel on Thursday again ended in stalemate and frustration, reports AFP.

Aides said Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was "beside himself" with anger after a much-trumpeted summit meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak on a belated handover of West Bank land made no progress.

The looming February 13 deadline for a framework peace deal seemed beyond reach after Arafat abruptly walked out of the meeting and even Barak, who took office seven months ago pledging to deliver Middle East peace, acknowledged the talks were in serious trouble.

The holy city of Jerusalem is the capital of our independent Palestinian state and there will never be peace until it is re-

turned to us," the PLO's central council insisted in its declaration here late Thursday.

"This national decision will not be negotiated or revoked," it said, vowing to declare a state this year, with Jerusalem as its capital, no matter where talks stand with the Israelis.

The council believes that Israel's failure to honour its commitments demonstrates its lack of seriousness about making peace," it said.

The statement, hammered out at a meeting here of the PLO's second-highest body, came just hours after the high-profile summit — the first public meeting of the two leaders since November — fell apart over the land dispute.

Arafat left the meeting at the Erez border crossing after more than two hours of tense talks with Barak and an official said the Palestinian leader was furious about Israel's demands during the encounter.

He said Arafat was "beside himself" after Barak allegedly tried to push back the February 13 deadline for a framework accord that had been set out in Thursday's landmark Sharm el-Sheikh peace deal.

The official said the Israelis had also refused Arafat's request for US mediation to unblock the dispute, which centred on a transfer of 6.1 per cent more West Bank land that had been due to take place in January.

Both sides acknowledged the differences arose over Palestinian insistence that the transferred land be adjacent to 9 areas outside Jerusalem already under Palestinian control.

Arafat spokesman Marwan Kanafani accused Israel of "wasting" the last four or five months by failing to implement agreements that had already been ratified by both sides.

had downplayed talk of a crisis.

The talks with the Palestinians are going through a difficult patch marked by significant tensions and substantial differences," he said.

The Israeli security cabinet gave the green light Wednesday to the 6.1 per cent West Bank withdrawal demanded under the Sharm agreement, fixing February 10 for the move, three weeks after the scheduled deadline.

But Israel once again apparently did not consult the Palestinians on the map for the land handover, which if completed would leave the Palestinian Authority with full or partial control over 40 per cent of the West Bank.

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Russia demands release of detained ship

MOSCOW, Feb 4: Russia called again Friday for a Russian tanker detained by the US Navy in the Persian Gulf to be released immediately, reports AP.

"We imperatively demand the immediate release of the Russian tanker," Deputy Foreign Minister Vasily Sredin, told the ITAR-Tass news agency. "We shall get it back and save both the ship and crew."

A US Navy ship stopped the merchant vessel Volgofonte-147 off the coast of the United Arab Emirates on Wednesday and took oil samples to determine whether it was carrying Iraqi oil in violation of a United Nations trade embargo.

Russian Transport Minister Sergei Frank said Thursday that the tanker was carrying fuel oil from Iran to various ports in the Emirates when it was detained.

Sredin said contact had been established with the ship's captain "and all the circumstances were cleared up," ITAR-Tass reported. He said that diplomats worked overnight to defuse the situation.

The tanker's captain, Abkhan Khasanov, telephoned the Russian Embassy in the United Arab Emirates. He reported that none of the 18 crew members was injured during the boarding of his ship.

Primakov drops out of presidential race

MOSCOW, Feb 4: Former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov today announced that he was dropping out of the March 26 presidential elections, reports AFP.

"After long reflection, I really did make the final decision not to participate in the Russian presidential elections," Primakov told RTR television.

Primakov was considered one of the leading contenders to the front-running acting President Vladimir Putin in the race.

"I will not hide the fact that this was not an easy decision," Primakov said, adding that he made up his mind after Putin struck a controversial alliance with the Communists in parliament that froze the opposition out of power.

Primakov added that Russian society was far removed from "true democracy."

Indonesian army chief dispels coup rumours

JAKARTA, Feb 4: The fate of Indonesia's powerful security minister Gen. Wiranto, who refuses to quit after being blamed for atrocities in East Timor, will not be settled until the president returns from overseas, a senior official said today, reports AP.

Meanwhile, army chief of staff Gen. Tyasno Sudarsono sought to dispel lingering rumours that military commanders loyal security minister Gen. Wiranto may try to overthrow Wahid, the head of state.

"I guarantee as an institution the Indonesian army will not launch coup," Sudarsono told reporters.

Wahid is engaged in a deepening power struggle with Wiranto, a former military commander accused by government investigators of allowing pro-Indonesian militia gangs to devastate East Timor after the territory voted to break away from Indonesia in August.

Wiranto, who led the Indonesian armed forces at the time, denied any responsibility

for the mayhem. He has ignored repeated calls this week from Wahid — who is on a tour of 13 European and Asian nations — to resign from the Cabinet.

Wahid said he had instructed Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono to ask Wiranto to step down immediately.

Addressing reporters on Friday, Sudarsono said: "I have done my duty." The defence minister said Wiranto did not react to the order.

"Let us be patient and wait until president (Wahid) returns on Feb. 13," Sudarsono said, without elaborating whether Wiranto would resign or not.

Speaking in The Hague, the Netherlands, Wahid said on Thursday that a group of army generals had met in the Chinatown district of the Indonesian capital, not far from the presidential palace.

"We fully control the situation, so they have to be careful about what they are doing," Wahid said during a joint news conference with Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok.

The president said he had ordered armed forces head Adm. Widodo Adisutjipto and national police chief Gen. Rusdihardjo to crack down on any attempt to disrupt public order.

On Friday Wiranto met his lawyer, Adnan Buyung Nasution, who later said the government inquiry had failed to produce any evidence implicating his client East Timor's violence.

Wahid assumed office in October as the first freely elected head of state in 44 years. Since then he has antagonized the military elite by whittling away at their position and power. He replaced Wiranto as armed forces chief and has insisted that he become a civilian.

Attorney General Marzuki Darusman is to decide within three months on whether to launch prosecutions.

The government report that condemns Wiranto and five other senior generals echoes the findings of a separate UN inquiry, which also blamed Indonesian forces for the violence.

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