

ME summit to set stage for final status talks: Abbas

Palestinians must accept Israel, says Olmert

AFP, AP, Cairo/ Jerusalem

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said yesterday that a meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert would set the stage for final status talks in the long-stagnant Middle East peace process.

"The three-way meeting with Rice and Olmert on February 19 will pave the way for the start of the final peace process," Abbas said in Cairo after meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

"We had previously agreed with Rice that we must head towards a final settlement and begin negotiations over the issues of borders, settlements, refugees and the state," he told reporters.

"We will lay out a timeframe for implementation at the beginning of the negotiations."

Abbas also said Rice would on February 21 meet the so-called "Arab quartet" -- grouping Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates -- which, play a "crucial role" in the peace process.

Abbas was in Cairo to brief Mubarak on the results of the agreement between his Fatah party and the rival Hamas movement to form a national unity government to end a power struggle that has left scores dead in recent months.

He said he will formally appoint current premier Ismail Haniya of Hamas as prime minister of the new government on Thursday.

"According to the constitution Haniya will resign and I will immediately and formally appoint him on February 15," Abbas said.

Western donors have frozen aid to the Palestinian government since Hamas, which they regard as a terrorist outfit, took office after a

shock election win in January 2006.

The Middle East quartet -- the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia -- has insisted the government meet three conditions before it will lift the boycott: recognize Israel's right to exist, renounce violence and respect past peace accords.

Abbas called on all members of the new cabinet to respect the text and spirit of the agreement.

"The new Palestinian government is required to respect the commissioning letter in text and spirit," Abbas said.

"Those who are not part of the government can say whatever they like but those who are part of the government must respect the commissioning letter," he said.

On Friday, a Hamas spokesman reiterated the movement's refusal to recognise the Jewish state.

The unity government accord

signed in Mecca on Thursday makes no explicit reference to Israel or to respecting interim peace deals signed by the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said yesterday that the new Palestinian Cabinet must abide by international demands to recognise Israel, renounce violence and accept past peace agreements with the Jewish state.

However, Israel had not yet made a decision on how to respond to the national unity government signed Thursday between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, of Fatah, and the Islamic militant Hamas group. Under the agreement, the new coalition government agreed to "respect" past agreements. It made no reference to recognising Israel or renouncing violence.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse (C) and his wife Shiranthi Rajapakse (L) are greeted by Maldivian children as Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (3R) looks on at the Hullule airport yesterday. Rajapakse is on a three-day official visit to Maldives to discuss trade, tourism and education issues.

Lankan president visits Maldives

AFP, Male

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse arrived in the Maldives yesterday for a series of talks on bilateral trade, officials said.

Rajapakse is due to meet Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom for a one-on-one meeting followed by lunch with key government officials here.

The Sri Lankan president is expected to discuss matters of trade, tourism, education and fisheries during his three-day visit to South Asia's most exotic holiday destination.

Officials organising his visit said Rajapakse would also meet some of the Sri Lankan community residing here. Maldives employs a large number of Sri Lankans who work in areas ranging from leisure, finance, trade and education.

The Maldives, an Indian Ocean archipelago consisting of 1,192 coral islands, has had close ties with neighbouring Sri Lanka for many years.

The visit comes three days after Rajapakse sacked three key ministers and ordered a top-level police inquiry into what was reported as an alleged conspiracy to assassinate him.



PHOTO: AFP

AUS-made Boeing Globemaster takes off from the runway during the final day of the Aero India 2007 at the Yelahanka Air Force Station in Bangalore yesterday. India's biggest air show has set the clock ticking for the subcontinent's richest military contract - an order for 126 fighter planes potentially worth nine billion dollars.

Race begins for India's big military deal

AFP, Bangalore

India's biggest air show has set the clock ticking for the subcontinent's richest military contract: an order for 126 fighter planes potentially worth nine billion dollars.

Five contenders scrambled to press their case at the event ending Sunday, showing off the capabilities of their machines and enlisting the support of their governments before India formally invites bids for the deal.

US giants Lockheed Martin and Boeing are in the race with the Russian Aircraft Corp., France's Dassault Aviation, Sweden's Saab and the Eurofighter consortium.

Each wants to clinch what a Boeing official said would be the world's biggest fighter plane contract in 15 years.

This is the first time India will buy combat aircraft after evaluating rival bids through a global tender.

In the past, it negotiated such purchases directly with Russia, the source of 70 percent of its military hardware, and other suppliers.

"It's a different market now," Aleksey Federov, a senior Russian Aircraft Corp. executive, told AFP in Bangalore. "But we still hope that we'll keep our position in India."

India, the biggest arms purchaser among emerging nations and once a virtually captive defence-equipment market for the former Soviet Union and its succe-

sor-state, Russia, is trying to diversify military suppliers.

"The tender will be hard to win," Federov conceded. "For us it will be a serious trial of our ability to compete in an open forum" for a deal from India.

The Russian-built MiG-35 and MiG-29 are vying with Lockheed's F-16, Boeing's F-18, Eurofighter's Typhoon, Saab's Gripen and Dassault's Rafale for the contract, key to an Indian effort to boost its military's firepower.

The sixth Bangalore air show, which brought together some 500 companies from overseas and India, served as a last-chance platform for the manufacturers to demonstrate what they have to offer in the run-up to India's invitation for bids.

"This is a huge thing," said Eurofighter Chief Executive Officer Aloysius Rauhen. "The competition is going to be hard; we'll do our utmost to get it."

Lockheed and Boeing enlisted Indian corporate chieftain Ratan Tata, 69, to fly their planes at the air show. Tata, a trained pilot riding high after making a winning seven-billion-pound bid for European steelmaker Corus last month, took no sides.

"It will be an absolutely critical competition," said Mark Kronenberg, the vice president for international business in the Asia-Pacific at Boeing Integrated

Defence Systems. "It will be fierce, the biggest competition ever seen over the last 15 years."

Boeing offered F-18 plane rides to two journalists and 16 air force officers, a spokesman said.

The US companies are trying to ride a tide of warming relations between India and the United States to win military orders.

The two countries signed of a landmark deal last year that will allow India access to US civil nuclear technology, barred since the country exploded its first nuclear bomb in 1974.

Lockheed sweetened its pitch for the F-16, 4,300 of which have been sold so far, by offering to sell India a range of additional equipment, from the "hit-to-kill" PAC-3 missile to the giant airlifter Super Hercules.

The offer can play "an important role in the growing strategic relationship between India and the United States," said Royce Caplinger, the vice president of Lockheed Martin's office in India.

Dassault will make an unsolicited offer to the Indian government to sell 40 Rafales, independent of the contract for 126 planes, said spokesman Yves Robins. One Rafale costs 50 million euros (65 million dollars).

US scholars struggle with Indian visas

AFP, New Delhi

Despite improving ties between the two countries, many American scholars who wish to study in India face lengthy visa delays and some are forced change their research topics, a report said yesterday.

The last two years have been particularly bad for scholars on prestigious Fulbright fellowships, funded by the United States government, a report in the Indian Express newspaper said, citing official records.

Under the exchange programme, between 55 to 65 US students travel to India to study each year, while an equal number of Indian students head to America.

But as many as 93 applications for Indian visas were still pending in August 2006, by which time the scholars on the 2006-2007 programme were supposed to have arrived in India, the report said.

Pakistan needs more help from US, Afghans

REUTERS, Munich

Pakistan needs more help from the United States and Afghanistan if it is to stop the flow of unwanted Taliban militants crossing its borders, Pakistan's foreign minister said on Saturday.

"Pakistan wishes to take concrete action and we need support from the Afghans and from the United States in telling us what concrete actions are required," Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshheed Mehmood Kasuri told Reuters in an interview at an annual security conference in Munich.

"Simply making a rhetorical appeal - stop extremism - if it were that simple it would have been resolved long ago in Palestine, in Lebanon and Iraq and in Afghanistan. Obviously it's more complicated."

The Pakistani border with

Afghanistan snakes 2,500 km through rocky mountains and across deserts, and is considered a major front line in the US-led war on terrorism.

With more than 4,000 people killed, last year was the bloodiest in Afghanistan since US-led troops ousted the Taliban in 2001. Most of the deaths were in provinces bordering Pakistan.

Kasuri said the Afghan authorities and the United States and its allies could help make the borders more secure. Closing the numerous refugee camps which straddle the border would be a first step.

"Everybody knows that those refugee camps have become the place where some of these trouble-makers hide. So let them (the Afghans) take those refugees back," Kasuri said.

"We are prepared to cooperate and let Europe cooperate. Let the

United States cooperate in resettling them inside Afghanistan," he said.

Kasuri rejected accusations that Pakistan was not doing enough on its side of the border to stop Taliban fighters.

"We need to cooperate. We're on the same side. We cannot afford to lose in Afghanistan. We must win," he said.

On Thursday Kasuri announced in Berlin that Pakistan would no longer pursue a policy of laying mines on parts of the border after the plan was criticised by the EU.

The border area has been unsettled for a long time. During the Cold War it was a front line in the 1980s when Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the West backed Afghan holy warriors and foreign militants battling Soviet occupiers in Afghanistan.

Putin begins ME tour after anti-US outburst

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin kicks off a Middle East tour yesterday, seeking to enhance ties with traditional US allies in the region after launching a scathing attack on Washington's foreign policy.

Putin arrives in Saudi Arabia before heading to Qatar and Jordan on a three-day trip aimed at bolstering energy and military links in a region where US influence has been uncontested since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The visits will be the first by a Russian president to the three Arab states and follow Putin's landmark Middle East visit in 2005, when he travelled to Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian territories.

On the eve of his departure, the Russian leader attacked the United States as a reckless "unipolar" power that has made the world more dangerous by pursuing policies that have led to war, ruin and insecurity.

"The United States has overstepped its borders in all spheres -- economic, political and humanitarian and has imposed itself on other states," Putin said at a conference on security policy in Munich.

Such a situation "is extremely dangerous. No one feels secure because no one can hide behind international law," Putin said. US dominance, he said, was "ruinous".

"Local and regional wars didn't get fewer. The number of people who died didn't get less, but increased... We see no kind of restraint, a hyper-inflated use of force."

The United States, he said, had gone "from one conflict to another without achieving a fully-fledged solution to any of them."

The speech added to tensions between the Kremlin and the United States, which have grown after a period of relative rapprochement in the 1990s.

Boosted by his country's oil wealth, the Russian leader has tried to restore Moscow's international clout, making common cause with fellow critics of the United States, notably Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and maintaining a traditional friendship with Iran.

Putin will spend Sunday and early Monday in Saudi Arabia at the invitation of King Abdullah before travelling to neighbouring Qatar, which holds the third-largest natural gas reserves in the world after Russia and Iran.

Putin then heads on Tuesday to Amman, where he is due to hold talks with King Abdullah II and also Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, who has just hammered out a unity government deal with Hamas aimed at ending a deadly power struggle.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian policemen run into a cloud of tear gas as they chase demonstrators during a protest in Srinagar yesterday. Police detained more than two dozen activists of a separatist group in Kashmir after hundreds took part in a protest march demanding the remains of a leader hanged and buried in a New Delhi jail 23 years ago.

Killings by police stir anger in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The frail, elderly man fell to his knees beside a pile of freshly dug earth that laid bare an unmarked grave.

"Even if I were blind I would know this was my son," wailed Ghulam Rasool Padder as police in Indian Kashmir exhumed the bullet-riddled body of a man wrapped in a white shroud.

Authorities described the dead man as a Pakistani militant, but relatives said he was an ordinary carpenter.

"I can recognise him. He's my blood," sobbed the 65-year-old Padder as the body was placed in a simple wooden coffin in Sumbhal village, just north of Srinagar, the summer capital of Muslim-majority Indian Kashmir.

So far eight policemen -- all belonging to a special counter-insurgency group in Srinagar's Ganderbal district -- have been arrested over allegations that they shot dead civilians and claimed they were rebels to earn cash rewards

and promotions.

The allegations have put the spotlight on security forces in the Himalayan state.

They have also stirred angry demonstrations and cries of "freedom for Kashmir" in the region where more than 44,000 people have died in a separatist revolt that has raged since 1989, according to official figures.

Investigations are also underway into at least four other Kashmiri civilians who are alleged to have met the same fate as Padder's 35-year-old son Abdul Rehman, a father of five.

Rehman disappeared in December on a visit to Srinagar. Kashmir police, seeking to find him, finally traced his mobile phone to an assistant police sub-inspector.

Media reports say the sub-inspector admitted under interrogation that Rehman had been picked up by police, killed and branded a Pakistani militant. The policemen then returned the body to villagers in Sumbhal to bury.