

Israel ready for talks with Arabs on ME peace

Olmert meets with Abbas

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said yesterday that Israel was ready to talk with Arab states over their peace plan as he held the first round of planned regular meetings with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

"We are ready to hold talks with any combination of Arab states on their ideas and I would be glad to hear their ideas on the Saudi initiative," Olmert said at the weekly cabinet meeting.

"I'll be glad to hear their ideas and for them to listen to ours," he said. "I hope there will be a chance for such meetings."

He was referring to a blueprint revived during an Arab League summit last month which offers Israel peace and normal ties with Arab countries in exchange for

withdrawing from Arab land occupied during the 1967 Six Day War, allowing the creation of a Palestinian state and the return of refugees.

Israel, which initially rejected the plan when it was first unveiled in 2002, has said recently it could provide a basis for talks, provided there are amendments to the refugee issue -- something the Arab states have refused.

"We are looking for a way to advance the Saudi initiative," Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres said. "Clearly we don't reject the initiative. Both sides can come with their positions and since there are disagreements between the two sides, we have to find a way to bridge them."

The statements came ahead of a meeting of 12 Arab ministers in Cairo on Wednesday to discuss the

Saudi-drafted peace initiative.

On Sunday, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was to hold talks with her Jordanian counterpart in Amman in preparation for Wednesday's meeting, a senior official in her ministry said.

Critics have accused Olmert, whose ratings are approaching zero, for being disingenuous in turning to the dormant peace process as an attempt to divert attention from criticism over last year's war against Hezbollah and a string of corruption scandals.

Earlier this month, Arab League chief Amr Mussa rejected Olmert's offer to participate in a meeting of Israelis, Palestinians and "moderate" Arab nations because the Israelis described the return of refugees as a "red line."

"Its only goal was to get normalisation for free," Mussa said of the

offer, adding that it "wasn't serious and offered nothing new."

Olmert and Abbas met in Jerusalem on Sunday in the first of what are due to be regular meetings between the two leaders aimed at jumpstarting peace talks, which have been largely stalled for six years.

Ahead of the talks -- agreed to during a visit to the region last month by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice -- Olmert said discussion would focus on the possibility of promoting "a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by creating a Palestinian state."

"We will not touch on core issues, but we will discuss substantial issues such as legislative administration and security bodies in the Palestinian Authority," he said.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian youngmen throw stones at Israeli army vehicles during clashes in al-Shohada village near the West Bank city of Jenin yesterday. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Sunday that Israel was ready to hold talks with Arab nations on their recently revived plan for comprehensive Middle East peace.

UK rakes over fall-out from William-Kate split

AFP, London

Feverish speculation continued Sunday in Britain as to who and what was behind Prince William's shock split from his university sweetheart Kate Middleton.

British newspapers on Sunday picked over the bones of the break-up, but with conflicting accounts of why they went their separate ways.

The split between the dashing prince, second in line to the throne, and his girlfriend of four years, was given blanket coverage in Britain's press.

The News of the World tabloid said the end of the romance was decided at a gathering of "The Firm" -- the mafia-style nickname for the senior royals.

The newspaper said army officer William, 24, told his family that Middleton, 25, wanted more from their relationship but he did not want to commit.

US urges N Korea to act on nukes

AP, Beijing

North Korea was under pressure yesterday to take action after failing to meet a deadline for shutting its nuclear reactor, with Washington calling for Pyongyang to allow nuclear inspectors back into the country.

The US also sent a message to Pyongyang through its embassy in Beijing urging it to act on its promises according to the nuclear agreement, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, the chief US negotiator, said Sunday.

North Korea had until Saturday

to shut down its Yongbyon reactor and allow inspectors from the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, to verify and seal the facility.

In return, it was to have received 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil under an agreement with the US and four other governments to abandon its nuclear programmes.

Saturday's missed deadline marked the latest setback in an agreement, that when reached in February offered the prospect of disarming the world's newest nuclear power. North Korea tested a nuclear bomb in October.

Hill said the US note to North Korea, delivered Saturday, urged Pyongyang to fulfil its commitments and invite UN nuclear inspectors into the country.

"It's their turn now. The ball's in their court," he said in Beijing, ahead of his departure for Washington later Sunday.

"We're not happy that the DPRK essentially has missed this very important deadline," Hill said, using the official name of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. "We're obviously going to be watching the situation very closely in the coming days."

21 people killed during polls in Nigeria

AFP, Abuja

At least 21 people were killed during Saturday's state governorship and parliamentary polls across Nigeria, a top police officer said yesterday.

"We have about 21 persons killed, including some police officers, while trying to protect INEC (Independent National Electoral Commission) officers," Inspector General Sunday Ehindero told Radio Nigeria.

"Of course we have some wounded too -- about 14. We have some arms recovered. We have about 218 suspects arrested," he added.

Protesters, police clash in Russia

AP, St. Petersburg

Club-swinging riot police clashed yesterday with opposition supporters as an anti-Kremlin protest dispersed in Russia's second-largest city, chasing small groups of demonstrators, beating some on the ground and hauling them into police buses.

It was not immediately clear what sparked the violence after the rally, which city authorities had authorised and took place under a heavy police presence with at least one helicopter hovering above.

Although city authorities gave permission for the rally in a square on the edge of central St Petersburg, they had banned plans for the demonstrators to march afterwards to the city government headquarters.

Police trucks and helmeted officers blocked the planned march route. At the end of the 90-minute-long rally, organizers did not exhort them to conduct the banned march but suggested they go on their own to the city government building over the next few days. When the rally dispersed, most participants went to a nearby subway station, where clashes broke out.

Iran plans to build 2 nuke plants

AP, Tehran

Iran said yesterday it is seeking bids for the building of two more nuclear power plants, despite international pressures to curb its controversial programme.

Ahmad Fayyazbakhsh, the deputy head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation in charge of power plants, said the plants would be light-water reactors, each with the capacity to generate up to 1,600 megawatts of electricity.

Each plant would cost up to \$1.7 billion and take up to 11 years to construct, he told reporters during a news conference at his office.

The country has been locked in a bitter funding dispute with Russia, which is building Iran's first nuclear power plant near the southern city of Bushehr.

Russia delayed the launch of the plant, which had been set for September, and refused to ship uranium fuel for the reactor last month as earlier planned, citing

Iran's payment arrears. Iranian officials denied any payment delays under the \$1 billion contract, and accused Russia of caving in to Western pressure.

Iran is already building a 40-megawatt heavy water reactor in Arak, central Iran, based on domestic technology. It is also preparing to build a 360-megawatt nuclear power plant in Darkhovin, in south-western Iran.

Fayyazbakhsh said the two new plants would be built near Bushehr. He also said he planned to travel to Russia next week to try to ease tensions and get the first Bushehr plant back on track.

The bids for the two plants, which will expire in early August, have been published on the nuclear organisation's Web site. Iran has already negotiated with several foreign companies that have expressed interest in the new project, Fayyazbakhsh said. He declined to name the companies.

Moroccan city hit by bomber brothers

AFP, Casablanca

Two brothers blew themselves up near the US consulate in Casablanca on Saturday, while Moroccan police said they had arrested the ringleaders behind earlier blasts in the city.

One of the brothers, named by police as Mohamed Maha, set off explosives 40 meters (120 feet) from the entrance to the city's US consular building.

"He was dressed in jeans and had a black pullover and old sandals and he looked poor and miserable. He blew himself up three meters from one of the police vans," said eyewitness Mohammad, a security guard at a nearby bank.

"Some of his entrails ended up on the bank's terrace," the security guard added.

After the explosion the other brother, Omar, ran off along the chic Boulevard Moulay Youssef towards a private school, the American Language Centre, where he also blew himself up, a local cafe owner said.

A woman passerby was reported injured in the blasts.

Police arrested six people in the area, including one man who was found with an empty explosives belt, a police source said.

Police also said that they had arrested the man thought to be the head of the group responsible for suicide explosions on March 11 and on Tuesday.

The unnamed man, together with his deputy, was arrested in the shantytown of Sidi Mounen, on the outskirts of Casablanca, on Thursday in the course of the police follow-up to Tuesday's blasts.

Police said the men led them to an apartment which contained equipment possibly used for attacks.

"In their room, in which all the windows had been covered, we found communications equipment, documents and two bags," a police official told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP
French Socialist Party (PS) presidential candidate Segolene Royal (5thR) is surrounded by supporters as she arrives to hold a campaign meeting yesterday in Achicourt, northern France. The local socialist federation organises a "rose's party", seven days before the first round of the presidential election.