

Israel signals readiness to quit Golan for peace

AP, Jerusalem

Israel sent secret messages to Syria recently signalling willingness to give up the captured Golan Heights in return for a peace deal that would require Syria to distance itself from Iran, an Israeli newspaper reported yesterday.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had German and Turkish diplomats relay to Syrian President Bashar Assad that Israel is willing to hold direct peace negotiations and give up the strategic plateau, seized in the 1967 Middle East War, the Yediot Ahronot daily said, quoting officials close to Olmert.

Syria did not respond to Olmert's messages, the report said.

Assad has recently urged Israel to return to the negotiating table. But he has not publicly indicated a willingness to accommodate Israel's oft-stated insistence that there could be no talks unless Damascus scaled back its ties with Iran, its main ally in the region, and stopped backing Lebanese and Palestinian militants committed to Israel's

destruction.

Olmert's office had no comment on the Yediot report.

Yediot said President Bush gave Olmert the green light for negotiations with Syria in an hourlong phone conversation last month. The two leaders will further discuss the possibility of talks during their scheduled meeting at the White House on June 19, the report said.

A US Embassy spokesman in Tel Aviv was not immediately available for comment on the newspaper report.

In the past, Israeli and US officials have said privately that Washington does not want Israel to engage Syria, because of its ties to radical elements and meddling in Lebanon, a former proxy. But the Bush administration is also under pressure from allies, lawmakers and advisers who think Washington should warm ties with Syria in an effort to isolate Iran.

Israel and Syria have tried several times in the past to reach a peace accord, which both sides understand would require an Israeli

pullout from the Golan. The last round of talks broke down in 2000 over the scope of the withdrawal, and Israel's demand for normalized relations.

Relations have steadily deteriorated since.

Syria backed Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas in their war with Israel last summer, and harbours the leadership of the militantly anti-Israel Hamas, which shares power in the Palestinian government.

After the Lebanon war, Assad offered to renew negotiations, but Israel dismissed his overtures as a tactic to ease his regime's isolation in the West. But abruptly last week, a senior Israeli official said Olmert was assessing prospects for renewed talks. It is not clear what drove this change. The flawed war made Olmert too politically weak at home to advance his proposed withdrawal from large swaths of the West Bank. New negotiations with Syria could help to dispel the widespread image in Israel that he has no political agenda.

Alternatively, he might have

reached the conclusion that Syria is serious about making peace, or that Israel should not, in principle, rebuff peace overtures.

Reports about possible diplomatic movement on the Syrian front have proliferated over the past week in an atmosphere charged by a recent Syrian military buildup and military preparations on both sides of the border. On Wednesday, Olmert, seeking to ease the volatility, said Israel was interested in peace with Damascus and had no belligerent intentions.

Giving back the Golan, which Israel annexed in 1981, is not a popular concept in Israel. The heights dominate much of northern Israel, are adjacent to Israel's largest source of drinking water, and are home to wineries and popular tourism sites.

Olmert's weak domestic standing could make it even more difficult to push a withdrawal ahead if the current diplomatic feelers evolved into something more substantial.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (C) walks with Chinese President Hu Jintao (L) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday on the last day of the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, northeastern Germany. The leaders of the five top developing countries and African leaders are attending the summit to meet the Group of Eight leaders. The Group of Eight wealthiest nations agreed to pledge 60 billion dollars to fight AIDS and malaria in Africa.

Weakening storm Gonu leaves Oman swamped

AP, Muscat

People dragged soaked bedding and carpets from homes Thursday after Cyclone Gonu's winds blew down trees and power lines and its rains sent torrents of water and mud surging through Oman's seaside capital, a city often called the Arab world's tidiest.

After pummelling normally hot and dry Oman and Iran's southeastern coast, Gonu weakened to a tropical storm and was expected to dissipate into a rainstorm by Thursday night as it moved over the sea toward Iran. At least 35 people were dead, most of them in Oman, and 30 were missing.

The storm spared the region's oil installations, and oil prices dipped on world markets.

Cleanup crews fanned out across Muscat. Bulldozers scraped away layers of mud and rocks that washed down from the mountains when heavy rain flooded canyons and dry riverbeds Wednesday night. Soldiers pumped water from low-lying roads.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan activist Nimalka Fernando (L) leads a demonstration in the capital Colombo yesterday against the government eviction of minority Tamils from the city as part of a crack down against Tamil Tiger rebels. The Supreme Court halted the eviction and fixed a hearing on the violation of human rights for later this month.

Lanka court halts Tamil evictions

Rights groups blast Colombo for evictions

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court yesterday ordered a halt to the eviction of minority ethnic Tamils from the capital, as rights activists attacked the use of "collective punishment" to fight Tamil rebels.

The Supreme Court intervention followed a complaint by a political lobby group that Thursday's police swoop, in which hundreds of Tamils were dragged out of hostels and bused out of Colombo, was a violation of basic rights.

"The court will hear the case on June 22, and in the meantime the police Inspector General was restrained from carrying out any eviction of Tamils," a court official told AFP.

Police and troops pulled Tamils from their sleep early Thursday, bundled them into overcrowded busses and left them at a displaced

persons camp in the conflict-ravaged area of Vavuniya, 260km north of here.

The unprecedented move came as Japan's peace envoy to Sri Lanka, Yasushi Akashi, was visiting the island in a bid to bring the warring Tamil Tigers and the government back to the negotiating table.

Sri Lanka's defence ministry insisted the operation was necessary to prevent bomb attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who have been fighting for separation from the island's Sinhalese-majority south since 1972.

But opposition lawmakers described the swoop as ethnic cleansing and similar to Hitler's action against Jews in Germany. The United States -- a key backer of the Colombo government -- also condemned the operation.

The US embassy said in a statement that while Washington "understands and supports Sri Lanka's obligation to defend itself against terrorism... this action can only widen the ethnic divide" on the war-torn island.

"We call upon the government of Sri Lanka to stop the forcible removal of its citizens from Colombo, to make public the destinations of those already removed, and to ensure their safety and well-being," the embassy said.

Rights activists also warned the anti-Tamil action had added to the already serious humanitarian crisis in the country and would fan ethnic hatred.

"Nothing could be more inflammatory in Sri Lanka's polarised climate than identifying people by ethnicity and kicking them out of the capital," Human Rights Watch said.

UN, India promise Nepal help on the road to democracy

AFP, New Delhi

India and the United Nations Thursday promised help to the Himalayan nation of Nepal in its transformation to a democracy as Nepalese officials announced a November date for the country's first post-war polls.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon discussed progress in Nepal towards democracy on the sidelines of the Group of Eight meeting in Germany, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

"Both leaders said they looked forward to helping Nepal achieve its democratic transition in a peaceful and orderly manner," the agency quoted Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon saying.

During his talks with Singh, Ban said the UN would do whatever it could to help the process of elec-

tions, the report added.

Giant southern neighbour India is a major donor to Nepal and is a key supplier of essential goods to the landlocked nation.

On Thursday, Nepal's eight political parties announced agreement on holding elections in November. The polls had earlier been scheduled for June.

The elections will decide the future of Nepal's embattled monarch King Gyanendra, who has been stripped of most of his powers after being forced to end a much-criticised 14-month period of authoritarian rule last April.

Nepal's former rebel Maoists, who ended last year their decade-long civil war that claimed at least 13,000 lives, have been given five ministerial portfolios in the interim government.

ROW OVER MISSILE DEFENCE

Putin proposes joint US-Russian base

AFP, Heiligendamm

Russian President Vladimir Putin called for a joint Russian-US base to detect missile attacks in a startling proposal to overcome a crisis between the two countries.

Putin offered President George W. Bush the joint use of a Russian radar base in Azerbaijan as an alternative to plans for a US missile shield in central Europe.

Russia has angrily opposed the planned US shield in Poland and the Czech Republic and Putin had threatened to return to the Cold War policy of aiming Russian missiles at European targets, if it was deployed.

Putin said a joint base would "remove the need, would allow us to not change our policy on non-targeting of our missiles."

Russia says it is the target of the

proposed US shield in Europe while the United States insists its system is to guard against an attack by Iran or North Korea.

"We have an understanding of common threats but there are differences over the means for overcoming these threats," Putin said after the talks, with Bush at his side.

The Russian leader insisted that the US and Russian military could detect any long-range missile test by Iran and would then have up to five years to set up a joint base before there was any major threat.

Putin argued that the Azerbaijan-based system would cover all of Europe rather than just parts of it and that any missile debris would fall in the ocean rather than on land in Europe.

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Pak judge's lawyer slams government 'fairy tales'

AFP, Islamabad

Lawyers for Pakistan's ousted chief justice yesterday accused top government officials of "fairy tales and fabrications" in their affidavits against the judge.

Three officials filed statements to the Supreme Court on Thursday contesting Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry's account of his suspension by military ruler President Pervez Musharraf on March 9.

One of them, military intelligence chief Major General Nadeem Ijaz, said that Chaudhry wanted Musharraf to dissolve the government several months ago and make him head of an interim administration.

The statements also accused the judge of various acts of misconduct including that he asked Pakistan's intelligence agencies to spy on other judges for him.

"All three affidavits are based on fairy tales and fabrications. There are total lies in the affidavits," Aitzaz Ahsan, the head lawyer for the chief justice, told reporters outside court.

"This is heinous and criminal to file fabricated affidavits before 13 judges," added Ahsan, who is also a legislator for the opposition Pakistan People's Party of former premier Benazir Bhutto.

Dutch to vote on giving papers to 30,000 illegal immigrants

AFP, The Hague

The Dutch parliament is to vote next week on whether to give 30,000 illegal immigrants residency permits, following a debate Thursday.

The measure, which has the support of the ruling coalition and several opposition parties, looks set to be passed when it is presented next Tuesday.

Under its terms, asylum applicants who arrived in the country before 2001 and who are not listed for deportation would be given papers to stay, as well as their families if they arrived before December 13, 2006.

Those convicted of war crimes or other serious crimes would be exempt.



PHOTO: AFP

92-year-old Indian artist Maqbool Fida Husain (R) shakes hands with Bollywood star actor Shah Rukh Khan past their painting on Thursday at Bonhams' "Art For Freedom", in London. The highlight of the evening occurred when the two artists finished off a painting, which then went to auction to raise funds for Tehelka, a media house in India, and the country's fastest-growing English weekly newspaper.

CIA prisons in Romania, Poland approved by presidents

AFP, Paris

CIA ran secret prisons in Poland and Romania from 2003 to 2005 to interrogate terror suspects under a programme authorised by the countries' presidents, a report said yesterday.

The prisons in northeastern Poland and southeast Romania were part of a "global spider's web" of detentions and illegal transfers spun out around the world by the United States and its allies after the September 11, 2001 attacks, said the report by Council of Europe investigator Dick Marty.

Marty also suggested that Nato and the United States reached a secret deal in 2001 allowing the Central Intelligence Agency to run the covert prisons.

"We believe that the framework for such assistance was developed around Nato authorisations agreed on 4 October 2001, some of which are public and some which remain secret," Marty said in the report.

He said former Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski and

Romania's former leader Ion Iliescu as well as current President Traian Basescu authorised the programme and should be held accountable.

"We have sufficient grounds to declare that the highest state authorities were aware of the CIA's illegal activities on their territories," the report said.

He also named the national security advisers, military and intelligence chiefs in both countries as having had a hand in the interrogation programme set up as part of Washington's "war on terror."

Under an agreement reached with the United States, at least eight terror suspects were held in Poland including Abu Zubaydah, a close associate of Osama bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohamed, considered al-Qaeda's mastermind of the September 11 attacks.

"The CIA brokered 'operating agreements' with the governments of Poland and Romania to hold its high-value detainees in secret detention facilities on their respective territories," said the report.