

Abbas, Olmert hold talks to bridge differences

AFP, Jericho

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert talked fundamentals yesterday, aiming to bridge gaping differences ahead of a US-called conference later in the year.

The two leaders huddled for nearly three hours in the casino of an upscale hotel in the West Bank town of Jericho, trying to find common ground ahead of the international peace conference called by US President George W Bush.

"I came here in order to discuss with you the fundamental issues outstanding between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, hoping this will lead us soon to negotiations about the creation of a Palestinian state," the Israeli premier said at the start of the talks.

It was the first time in seven years that such a high-level meeting

had taken place in Palestinian territory, and security was extremely tight.

Swarms of Israeli security personnel were deployed around the hotel complex, blocking it off by a radius of one kilometre (more than half a mile), and telling employees to stay at home.

But expectations of progress were low, as the two sides cannot agree on how to proceed ahead of the conference that Washington has called in a bid to jumpstart peace talks, which have been dormant for more than six years.

"We don't really have a lot of expectations for this meeting," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said ahead of the encounter.

While the Palestinians want Abbas-Olmert discussions to focus on "core issues" - the thorniest problems dogging the decades-long conflict such as Jerusalem, borders

and refugees - Israel says it is too early to tackle these.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed optimism that there would be progress after she met the two leaders separately last week, but the camps remained far apart ahead of Monday's talks.

Washington is keen to capitalise on a thawing of relations between Abbas and the Israelis in the wake of the Gaza takeover by Islamist Hamas in mid-June and to speed up the peace process.

Abbas's senior aide Nabil Amr said the Palestinian president was planning to "focus on political issues and final negotiations," adding that "both sides... must decide on a resolution for the final issues."

But Israeli government spokesman David Baker said that there would be "no negotiations on issues" and that the meeting's aim

was "to build confidence among both leaders... to maintain the relationship and build upon it."

Palestinian officials have insisted that the two sides come up with a deal on the "core issues" ahead of the autumn peace conference, and then implement the agreement at the meeting.

But Israeli officials have said there would be no final agreements reached before the US-called conference, which they expect to take place in November.

"I can't see the two sides sitting down to discuss the core issues before November," a senior Israeli government official told AFP.

Rather the two leaders would "discuss ways to move forward by November to create some kind of basis for a peace agreement, but no permanent settlement will be reached at the summit itself."



Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (L) talks hands with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas prior to their meeting in the Israeli occupied West Bank city of Jericho. Abbas and Olmert meet in a bid to bridge widespread differences ahead of a US-called peace conference later this year.

190,000 small arms given by US to Iraqis unaccounted for

AFP, Washington

The US government cannot account for more than half of all small arms given to Iraqis in the hope of bolstering their security forces, raising fears the weapons may have found their way to insurgent groups, according to a new congressional probe.

The disclosure, made in a report released by the Government Accountability Office, comes ahead of a crucial review of US military operations that may pave the way for a reassessment of the US role in the violence-ravaged country.

The top US military commander in the country, General David Petraeus, and US Ambassador Ryan Crocker are scheduled to report to Congress by mid-September on whether efforts to halt sectarian violence and return Iraq to viable self-governance

were bearing fruit.

Creating efficient security forces capable of taking over counterinsurgency operation from the United States has been a linchpin of this strategy.

But in its damning report, the investigative arm of the US Congress said at least 190,000 small arms given by the Pentagon to these forces since 2003 in the hope of boosting their combat readiness were nowhere to be found.

The United States has spent about 19.2 billion dollars since the beginning of the war to stand up Iraqi security forces that are supposed to gradually replace US troops in providing security for the country.

This total, according to the GAO, included at least 2.8 billion used to purchase and transport weapons and other military equipment necessary to improve the Iraqi arsenal.



A villager pulls his cattle through a flooded street in Muzaffarpur, some 100km north of Patna yesterday. The death toll from floods sweeping across India topped 1,100 on August 5 as more people drowned in swollen rivers that have stranded millions with little food or drinking water.

Aid too slow for South Asian flood victims

AFP, Guwahati

Helicopters on Sunday dropped food and other essentials to the millions of people forced from their homes by floods across South Asia, but officials warned that the aid efforts were insufficient.

The floods, triggered by unrelenting monsoon rains and glacial snow melt from the Himalayas, have inundated large swathes of India, Bangladesh and Nepal, leaving some 20 million people homeless or marooned.

At least 1,400 people have died since June in the worst flooding to hit the region in decades. The Ganges, the Brahmaputra and dozens of other rivers have burst

their banks, submerging thousands of villages.

In India's worst-hit state of Bihar alone, 11 million people - nearly 10 percent of the state's 120-million-strong population - have been affected by the disaster, leading aid officials to make a desperate plea for help.

"We have to do much more than what is being done," Job Zachariah, head of the hard-pressed Bihar chapter of the UN Children's Fund (Unicef), told AFP as he coordinated relief efforts in the area.

"Two million are living on open embankments," he said.

Four helicopters dropped 11,000 emergency packets - each weighing five kilos (11 pounds) and

packed with dry rations, candles, plastic sheets and match boxes - to those in need in Bihar, the Indian air force said.

But Zachariah warned: "It is just not sufficient. There is a need for a massive airlift to help people in 19 of Bihar's 38 districts."

State chief minister Nitish Kumar said he was deploying his senior aides to the worst-hit districts to speed up rescue and relief operations, as officials warned that water levels were still on the rise.

State monitoring teams mean-while headed to India's border with Nepal to keep an close eye on water rushing down from the Himalayas into Bihar and neighbouring Uttar Pradesh state.

Officials in Bihar, the Indian state worst affected by the inundation, said neighbouring Nepal had failed to build dams to control water surging down from the Himalayas.

But Nepal hit back immediately, claiming that Indian dams were to blame for the flooding in Nepal.

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Marcie Ries, minister-counsellor for political and military affairs,

for the US delegation, Reeker said.

"They agreed to continue the discussions at a date to be established through regular diplomatic channel," he added.

In Tehran, a foreign ministry spokesman said the ministry's pointman on Iraq, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, headed up the Iranian delegation at the talks.

"This morning the meeting of the tripartite committee of Iran, America and Iraq started its work," said spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini.

On July 24, the Iranian and American delegations, led by their ambassadors to Baghdad, were unable to agree during a landmark second meeting on ways to restore security to war-torn Iraq.

But Iraq said the two sides did

agree to create a tripartite security committee aimed at curbing militia activity, battling Al-Qaeda and securing borders, but without reference to the Shia militias Iran stands accused of arming.

Republicans reserve right of attack in Pakistan

AFP, Washington

Top Republican 2008 White House hopefuls on Sunday reserved the right to launch US strikes against al-Qaeda in Pakistan, and insisted on victory in Iraq, in a feisty fourth televised debate.

Accusing Democrats of weakness in the war on terror, some in the field also subtly distanced themselves from Republican President George W Bush, as the race hit a new level of intensity five months

before first nominating contests.

Rivals Mitt Romney and New York's ex-mayor Rudolph Giuliani declined in the debate in Des Moines, Iowa, to rule out an incursion into remote tribal areas in Pakistan where, according to US intelligence estimates, al-Qaeda fighters are holed up.

"I would take that action if I thought there was no other way to crush al-Qaeda, no other way to crush the Taliban, and no other way to be able to capture bin Laden,"

said former New York mayor Giuliani.

But Giuliani, who leads nationwide Republican polls, said he hoped to get results by exerting more pressure on Islamabad to crack down on Al-Qaeda and the Taliban close to the Afghan border.

"I think Pakistan has, unfortunately, not been making the efforts that they should be making," Giuliani said in the debate televised by ABC.

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Iranian, Iraqi and US experts

yesterday held the first meeting of a joint security committee looking to ease the insurgency in Iraq that has put arch-foes Washington and Tehran at loggerheads. The Iraqi government hosted the session, which lasted around four hours, inside the heavily fortified Green Zone compound in the heart of Baghdad - an area which US commanders say is bombed daily with Iranian-made shells.

It was the first meeting of a security sub-committee whose creation was agreed at a second round of landmark talks in July between the Iranian and US ambassadors to Baghdad.

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