

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 Erakat 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."



PHOTO: AFP
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.



PHOTO: AFP

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 meanwhile 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.

Darfur rebels agree on platform for peace talks

AFP, Arusha

Eight Darfur rebel groups on Monday agreed a common platform to enter final peace negotiations with the Sudanese government at the end of three days of talks.

A unified position for the fractious rebels was seen as another important step towards ending four and half years of deadly fighting in Darfur. The UN Security Council last week decided to deploy 26,000 peacekeepers there.

The rebel factions represented in the Arusha talks "presented a common platform on power sharing, wealth sharing, security arrangements, land and humanitarian issues, for the final negotiations," the eight groups said in a final statement.

India, Nepal trade blame for worst floods in decades

AFP, Kathmandu

India and Nepal blamed each other yesterday for some of the worst flooding in South Asia in decades, which has affected 25 million people and left rescuers scrambling to help victims.

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.

IAEA experts in Iran to talk inspections

AFP, Tehran

A team of experts from the UN atomic energy agency arrived in Iran on Monday to agree on a plan for future inspections of its uranium enrichment plant, the state-run IRNA news agency reported.

"A four-member technical team of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) arrived in Tehran on Monday. They will meet Iranian atomic energy organisation officials this afternoon," an official, who was not named, told the agency.

The talks are aimed at agreeing a framework for future inspections of the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz in central Iran, the country's most sensitive nuclear site.

Two Koreas exchange fire across border

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korean soldiers exchanged fire yesterday across their heavily fortified border in the first such incident for a year, the South's defence ministry said.

The North started the shootout by firing machine gun rounds, it said.

"North Korean troops fired a volley of shots. In response, South Korean soldiers fired 10 warning shots from a machine gun. There were no casualties from the shooting," a ministry spokesman said.

"After firing the counter-shots, our side issued a warning through a loudspeaker and demanded an apology. But there was no response from the North Korean soldiers," a spokesman for the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said separately.

Lanka guilty of rights abuse: HR Watch

AP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government has committed a wide array of human rights abuses in its fight against Tamil rebels, illegally detaining some opponents, secretly abducting others and waging battles with little regard for the safety of civilians, a human rights group said Monday.

In a sharp rebuke to the government, New York-based Human Rights Watch called for the creation of a UN human rights monitoring mission in Sri Lanka and appealed to donors to withhold aid to pressure the government to end its abuses.

The government said the report was baseless and a violation of the country's sovereignty.

"We take every possible step to maintain human rights," said spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella.

The government has long blamed the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam rebels for any abuses that have occurred during the new round of fighting that began nearly two years ago.

The 129-page report said the rebels were responsible for killing civilians, recruiting child soldiers and extorting local populations, but that did not alleviate the govern-

ment's responsibility.

"Abuses by the LTTE are no excuse for the government's campaign of killings, 'disappearances' and forced returns of the displaced," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Sri Lanka has been locked in a civil war since 1983, with the rebels fighting to create an ethnic Tamil homeland in the north and east against the majority Sinhalese-dominated government. More than 70,000 people have been killed in the fighting.

HIROSHIMA DAY Japan vows not to seek nukes

AFP, Hiroshima

Japan vowed yesterday never to seek atomic weapons and urged nuclear powers to give up their own arsenals 62 years after the world's first nuclear attack on Hiroshima.

Some 45,000 people recited silent prayers at 8:15 am, the exact moment in 1945 when a single US bomb instantly killed more than 140,000 people and fatally injured tens of thousands of others with radiation or horrific burns.

"I have strengthened my determination not to repeat this tragedy," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said in a speech in the western city.

Iran, US experts talk Iraq security

AFP, Baghdad

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 bombarded 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.

"We could call the talks frank and serious, and focused as agreed on security problems in Iraq," US embassy spokesman Philip Reeker told AFP.

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



PHOTO: AFP

A mother helps her son to send off floating lanterns on the Motoyasu river, beside the Atomic Bomb Dome (R) yesterday to mourn victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945.

Bush, Karzai target Afghan security woes

AP, Camp David

Beleaguered by a hostage crisis and insurgent violence, Afghan President Hamid Karzai is seeking fresh backing from a reliable ally: President Bush.

Karzai, Afghanistan's first democratically elected president, is awash in crises at home civilian killings, a booming drug trade and the brazen resurgence of the Taliban.

His two-day visit to Bush's moun-

tain retreat, which culminates Monday, is a time for the leaders to figure out how to improve Afghanistan's security. Karzai wants support and reassurance from Bush, who in turn wants Karzai's government to exert and extend its power.

The deteriorating security and sporadic rule of law in Afghanistan set a tone for the summit a point underscored by the ongoing captivity of 21 South Korean volunteers.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian youth throws stones at a convoy of Israeli military vehicles as they carry out a search and arrest operation in the al-Ain Palestinian refugee camp in the northern West Bank city of Nablus yesterday. One Palestinian man was injured and ten others were arrested by the army Monday morning during the ongoing operation.

S Korea puts faith in direct talks with Taliban

AFP, Ghazni

South Korea's embassy said yesterday it had "high hopes" for face-to-face talks with Afghanistan's Taliban militia holding 21 of its citizens, one of whom has been able to speak to a negotiator.

The extremist group said meanwhile it would await the outcome of a meeting between the Afghan and US presidents to see if its demand for the release of Taliban militants from jail in exchange for the hostages' liberty would be met.

South Korean negotiators in Afghanistan were able to speak with one of the hostages on Saturday, the embassy said, in the first known contact between the captives and their government.

"The telephone conversation was very brief and we cannot disclose the contents of the conversation due to the safety of the hostages," an official said on condition of anonymity.

The Taliban seized 23 South Korean church aid workers on July 19 and have murdered two of them to try to force the Afghan government to release Taliban prisoners.

Asked about a new threat from the extremists Saturday that more of the captives could be killed if there was no progress in negotiations, the embassy official said: "We are worried all the time for the safety of the hostages."

The South Korean delegation was still looking towards a face-to-face meeting with the Taliban, pending a decision on a venue and finalisation of the agenda, he said, adding: "We have very high hopes."

Taliban spokesman Yousuf

Ahmadi said South Korean negotiators had "assured" the militants that their President Roh Moo-Hyun had asked US President George W. Bush "for help to free Taliban prisoners in exchange for the hostages".

The issue was likely to have been raised in two days of talks between Bush and Afghan President Hamid Karzai that were to end later Monday.

"We are waiting for the result of the talks," Ahmadi said. "If any of the hostages face any problem, Bush and Karzai are responsible for it."

The United States was the leading critic of a deal in March that freed five Taliban prisoners in exchange for an Italian journalist, whose Afghan driver and translator were beheaded.

Two ministers quit Maldives cabinet in protest

AFP, Colombo

Two senior Maldivian ministers have quit the cabinet accusing President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of obstructing reform, officials and dissidents said Monday.

Attorney General Hassan Saeed and Justice Minister Mohamed Jameel quit Sunday blaming Gayoom, Asia's longest-serving ruler, of blocking reforms ranging from a new constitution to independence of the judiciary.

The duo were members of the "New Maldives" reform group and the resignation was a blow to Gayoom ahead of an August 18 democracy referendum, the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) founder Mohamed Latheef said.