

Olmert, Abbas talk Palestinian state

Scores of charities closed in WB, Gaza

AP, AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas spoke at their meeting yesterday about how to establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel, an Israeli government spokesman said.

The two men have met several times in recent months in an effort to bolster Abbas in his power struggle with Islamic Hamas militants and restart long-stalled peacemaking.

"They spoke about fundamental issues, about how to arrive at the solution of two states for two peoples," Israeli government spokesman David Baker said.

Olmert and Abbas tackled the major issues dividing the two sides at their meeting on Tuesday final borders, Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees, an Israeli official said.

It was the first time the two men discussed these matters in depth, the official said.

"These core issues have to be discussed on the way to finding a diplomatic solution of two states for two peoples," the official quoted Olmert as saying.

He spoke on condition of anonymity because the talks were private.

Abbas pressed Israel to be more specific on how it plans to approach peace talks, saying Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's proposed "declaration of principles" would not suffice. President Bush has called for a Mideast peace conference, expected to take place in November, to advance a final Israeli-Palestinian accord.

"If there is a clear framework including final status issues, we will welcome this and go to the conference,"

Abbas told Voice of Palestine radio.

Pressure is mounting on the two sides to work out differences that have blocked the resumption of peace talks that stalled in 2001 amid intensifying violence.

The US has been prodding Israel and the Palestinians to make progress before the November conference. Olmert's office said Tuesday's meeting in Jerusalem was part of an attempt to reach understandings before then, but spokesman David Baker said the big three issues "would not be discussed."

Abbas and Olmert have been meeting regularly for several months, in an attempt to boost Abbas against Islamic Hamas militants who violently seized control of the Gaza Strip in June. So far, there have been few concrete results, with Israel preferring to

focus on general outlines and the Palestinians pressing for detailed talks on the main issues.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian government said it has ordered more than 100 charities closed following a review that the rival Hamas movement has slammed as a crackdown on the Islamists.

In an interview with several Palestinian newspapers published on Tuesday, prime minister Salam Fayyad said 103 associations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had been ordered to close.

The charities and local associations affected had "committed legal, financial and administrative violations," Fayyad said.

He denied the move targeted Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement that derives much of its support from a network of welfare agencies and associations.

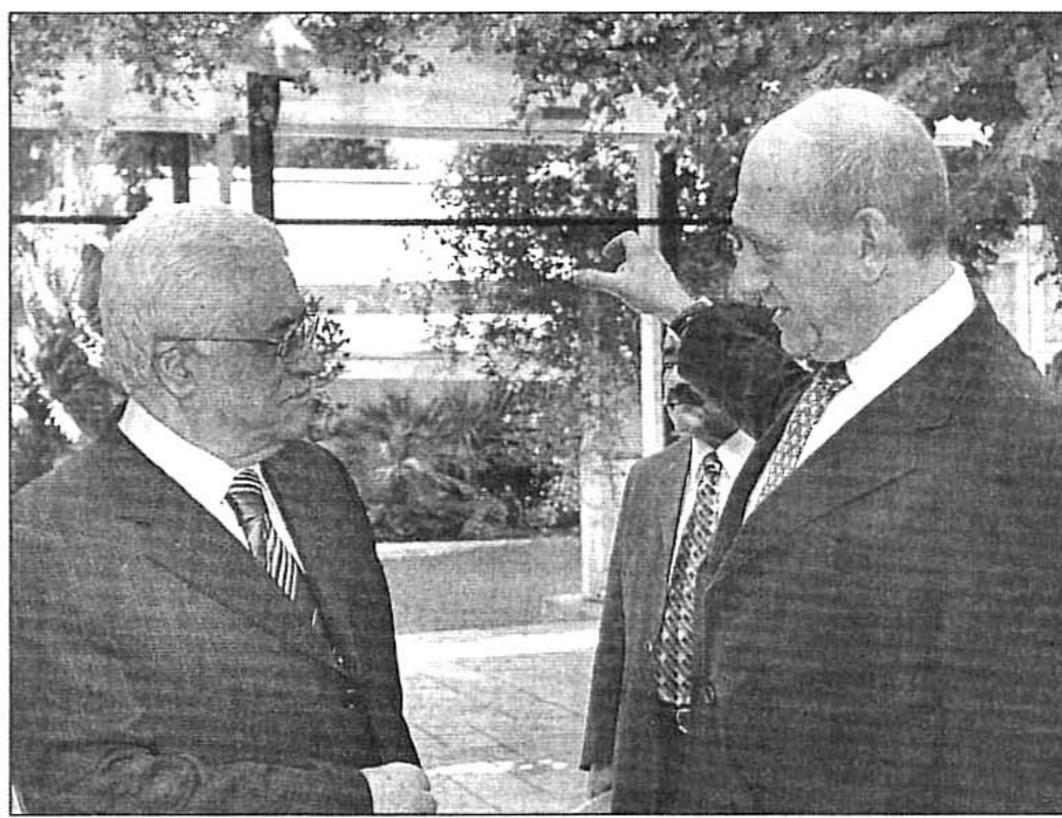


PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is talking with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert at his official residence in Jerusalem yesterday. Olmert and Abbas met to discuss core issues of the Middle East conflict ahead of a major international peace conference.

Ex-Islamist Gul elected Turkey's president

AFP, Ankara

The Turkish parliament yesterday elected Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul as president, making him the secular republic's first head of state with an Islamist past.

Gul, who is deeply mistrusted by the secular establishment, won 339 votes in the 550-member parliament, well above the simple majority of 276 votes required in the decisive third round ballot.

The governing Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) had failed to get Gul elected in the first two rounds of voting held last week, with its 340 seats falling short of the required two-thirds majority.

Militants free 19 Pak hostages

AP, Islamabad

Militants on Tuesday released 18 soldiers and a Pakistani government official kidnapped near the Afghan border earlier this month, the army and the militants said.

Army spokesman Maj. Gen. Waheed Arshad said the hostages were released in South Waziristan, a stronghold of pro-Taliban militants in Pakistan's lawless frontier region.

A militant leader, Rehmanullah Mehsud, said the captives were handed over to tribal elders in Kaniguram, a village north of Wana, South Waziristan's main town.

Iraq is front line against Iran, al-Qaeda: Bush

AFP, Bellevue

US President George W Bush yesterday described Iraq as the front-line against Shia extremism championed by Iran and the Sunni extremism of al-Qaeda, an aide said Monday.

Bush was due to level the charge in a speech to the American Legion veterans group, the second of two presidential addresses meant to bolster support for the war in Iraq ahead of a critical September 15 progress report.

"The president will talk about Sunni extremism and Shia extremism. Neither represents Iraq. They represent a brutal and heartless ideology of death and destruction," a senior aide told reporters in a preview of the speech.

Iran agrees to reveal nuclear information

Tehran should avoid more sanctions this year

AP, AFP, Vienna

Iran on Monday offered some cooperation with an International Atomic Energy Agency probe of an alleged secret uranium processing project linked by US intelligence to a nuclear arms programme.

Aslam said the statement of Japanese Defence Minister Koike in which she had urged Pakistan to sign the NPT was a desire for the non-proliferation regime, but "Pakistan is not bound to accept the demand".

She said Pakistan had repeatedly asked India to sign the NPT so that Islamabad would follow suit, but New Delhi always gave cold shoulder to such suggestions. "So, we are also not bound to become a signatory."

According to the spokesperson, Pakistan would maintain minimum credible deterrence and that's the main reason for conducting nuclear tests in 1998 immediately after India tested its nuclear bomb.

The document reiterated Iran's allegations that the search for information on the so-called "Green Salt Project" was "politically motivated" and founded on "baseless allegations".

But as a "sign of good will and cooperation with the agency... Iran will review" documentation on the project provided by the agency "and inform the agency of its assessment," according to the memorandum.

There was no official comment from the IAEA.

Less than a week ago, Iran and the Vienna-based IAEA announced an agreement on the timetable for full Iranian cooperation with the agency's nuclear investigation. It is only one of the demands set by the UN Security Council in attempts to dispel suspicions that Iranian claims it wants to develop a full nuclear cycle for generating power is merely a cover for a covert weapons programme.

But of most concern to the council are activities that could lead directly to the making of nuclear weapons. Tehran has defied demands to stop developing its uranium enrichment programme, which can produce fuel and the core

of warheads, and mothball construction of a plutonium-producing reactor which, once completed, can also make weapons material, leading to two sets of council sanctions.

In the past, Iran has refused to answer questions about secret plutonium experiments in the mid-1990s and IAEA findings that Iran has not accounted for all the plutonium it has said it possessed, and warhead design work.

Iranian cooperation with UN nuclear inspectors should stave off new UN sanctions this year but Tehran must open up further to fully quash the threat of punitive action, diplomats said yesterday.

Uranium conversion is the chemical process that changes raw uranium into the gas fed into centrifuges and spun repeatedly to separate out isotopes. Low enriched uranium can be used to make energy which Iran insists is its only goal. But highly enriched uranium is used to make nuclear weapons.

Taliban agree to free S Korean hostages

AP, Ghazni

The Taliban agreed yesterday to free 19 South Korean church volunteers held hostage since July after the government in Seoul pledged to end all missionary work and keep a promise to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year.

In eastern Afghanistan, a suicide bomber attacked Nato troops helping build a bridge, killing three soldiers.

The Taliban originally seized 23 South Koreans, but have since killed two of the hostages and released two others. They had initially demanded the withdrawal of South Korean troops from the country and the release of prisoners in exchange for freeing the hostages, but Afghan officials had ruled out any exchange, saying it would only encourage further kidnappings.

At the same time, Indian troops shot dead three more militants in Kupwara close to the de facto border, the spokesman said.

Qari Yousef Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, said South Korean and

Taliban delegates at face-to-face talks Tuesday in the central town of Ghazni had "reached an agreement" to free the captives.

South Korean presidential spokesman Cheon Ho-sun said the deal had been reached "on the condition that South Korea withdraws troops by the end of year and South Korea suspends missionary work in Afghanistan," he said.

South Korea has already said it planned to withdraw its troops by the end of the year. Some 200 South Korean soldiers have been deployed in Afghanistan for reconstruction efforts, not combat.

"We welcome the agreement to release 19 South Koreans," said Cheon.

South Korean missionaries have been active in Afghanistan, although the hostage group's church has said those kidnapped were not missionaries, but were doing aid work.

There was no word on when the captives would be released.

Not too late for Lanka peace talks: Egeland

3 soldiers killed in fighting

AFP, Singapore/Colombia

We have now amply proven that there's no military solution to this conflict. We spent a generation to prove that. Now it's time to look to the future and agree on peaceful co-existence.... That's the only way," said Egeland.

As Norway's deputy foreign minister in the early 1990s, he began work on peace efforts in Sri Lanka.

Norway remains the island's peace broker, making a bid as recently as July to revive moribund negotiations aimed at ending the bloodshed.

Meanwhile, at least three Sri Lankan soldiers were killed and five others wounded in a gun battle in the island's restive north, the Tamil Tiger rebels said yesterday.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have been fighting for an independent homeland in a 35-year ethnic conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

A 2002 truce now exists only on paper as worsening fighting since late 2005 has killed more than 5,000 people, according to government figures.

"What can be done is that the two sides say, 'We want to sit down.'

Sarkozy warns against attack on Iran

AP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy said Monday that it would be "catastrophic" to resort to military force in confronting Iran over its suspect nuclear programme.

"For me, Iran having a nuclear weapon is unacceptable," Sarkozy said in his first major address on foreign policy, but he stressed that he opposed an attack on the Islamic regime and urged that the West rely on diplomacy.

He said Iran can choose between dialogue with the international community or more UN sanctions. "This tactic is the only one that allows us to escape from a catastrophic alternative, an Iranian bomb, or the bombing of Iran," he said.

Sarkozy also said Iran is entitled to use nuclear power for civilian needs, such as generating electricity.

If countries like Iran run out of fossil fuels, and if they don't have the right to the energy of the future, then we will create conditions of misery and underdevelopment, and therefore an explosion of terrorism," Sarkozy said.

Foreign firefighters join Greece battle

AP, Athens

Foreign firefighters and aircraft joined the battle yesterday against blazes in southern Greece, and officials expressed optimism that wildfires burning some of the country's lushest landscape could be brought under partial control.

The fires, which began about five days ago, have killed at least 64 people and burned olive groves, forests and orchards. Beyond the loss of life and environmental damage, Greece braced for the economic impact of the worst wildfires in memory, with the government budgeting upward of \$40 million for immediate relief. The bill was expected to be much higher, the finance ministry said.

The fire department said 56 fires broke out from Monday to Tuesday. The worst were concentrated in the mountains of the Peloponnese in the south and on the island of Evia north of Athens, spokesman Nikos Diamandis said.

He said most of the efforts would be concentrated in those

US-led force admits they had no permission for Pakistan strike

AFP, Kabul

two regions, with most of the firefighters that have arrived from 17 countries operating in the Peloponnese.

A group of 55 Israeli firefighters would be used to assist in combatting one of the worst fires in Krestena, near Ancient Olympia. Large parts of the world heritage site, which was the birthplace of the Olympic Games, were burned over the weekend.

Diamandis said that 18 planes and 18 helicopters including four from Switzerland would be used in the southern firefighting effort.

"The picture we have gives us some optimism" in the south, Diamandis said. "We have a good picture and hope for some good results."

Diamandis asked people to heed instructions from authorities and evacuate villages when asked to do so. Greece's civil defence agency said there was a high risk of fires around the country Tuesday because of high winds and temperatures, especially in the Athens region.

"We regret the miscommunication in this event," said the coalition's deputy commanding general for operations.



Police stand guard as protesters hold placards outside the Hyatt Regency Hotel where US President George W Bush was to attend a fundraiser for Representative Dave Reichert and the Washington State Republican Party on Monday in Bellevue, Washington.