



PHOTO: AFP
This undated image released during a briefing by senior US officials on April 24 in Washington, DC shows what US intelligence officials said was a Syrian nuclear reactor built with North Korean help. US intelligence officials said the facility had been close to becoming operational when it was destroyed in early September, 2007 by an Israeli strike.

Palestinian state is 'high priority,' says Bush

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush assured Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas Thursday he was "confident" about reaching an agreement on creating a Palestinian state before he leaves office.

"I assured the president that a Palestinian state's a high priority, for me and my administration -- a viable state, a state that doesn't look like Swiss cheese, a state that provides hope," said Bush, whose

terms ends in January.

During brief statements in the Oval office, Abbas thanked the US president for reviving stalled Middle East peace talks at a November peace conference in Annapolis, Maryland, but warned "we are in a race against time."

"We believe that you actually are truly seeking a true, genuine and lasting peace in the Middle East. And I am certain that you would like to see an agreement and settlement before the end of your term," said Abbas, who

which Bush nodded in agreement.

The negotiations are due to tackle some of the toughest issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict including the fate of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees, and what to do about Jewish settlements on the West Bank.

But Abbas suspended the fortnightly talks at the beginning of March after an Israeli military operation in Gaza killed more than 130 people. They were only renewed earlier this month.

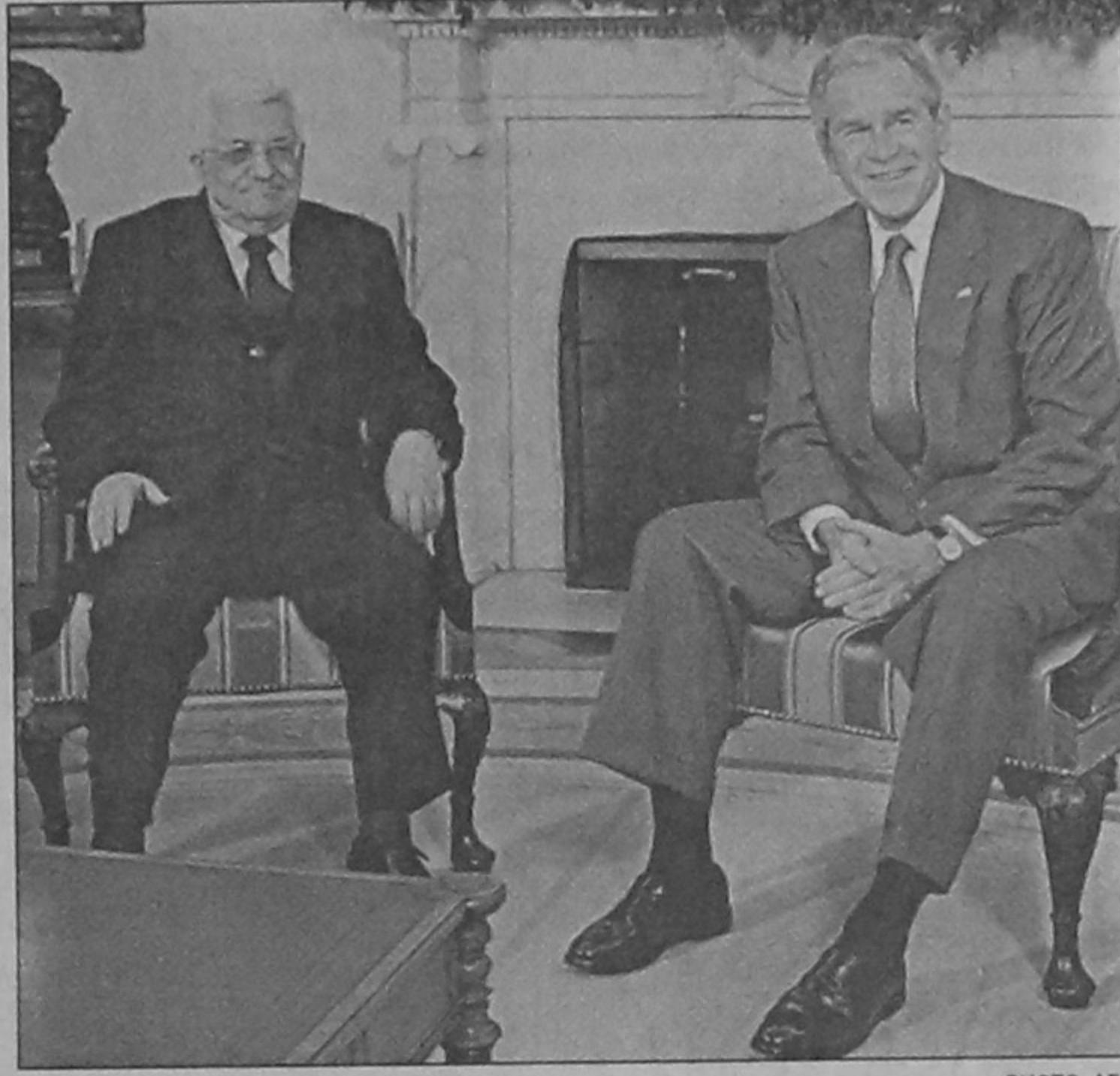


PHOTO: AFP
US President George W. Bush (R) sits with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas during a meeting in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, on Thursday.

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IAEA chief slams Israel, US for Syrian nuke site bombing

AP, AFP, Vienna

The head of the UN nuclear monitoring agency angrily criticized Israel on Friday for bombing an alleged Syrian nuclear facility, and chastised the US for withholding information on the site.

The International Atomic Energy Agency said Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei also was not provided information about the site until Thursday, the same day US officials briefed members of the House Intelligence Committee about evidence including dozens of photographs taken from ground level and footage of the interior of the building gathered by spy satellites after the Israeli strike seven months ago.

ElBaradei was briefed by telephone by John Rood, the US under-secretary of state for arms control.

"The Director General deplores the fact that this information was not provided to the Agency in a timely manner, in accordance with

the Agency's responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to enable it to verify its veracity and establish the facts," ElBaradei's office said.

Additionally, "The Director General views the unilateral use of force by Israel as undermining the due process of verification that is at the heart of the non-proliferation regime," it said.

ElBaradei did not criticize North Korea or Syria in his statement.

The IAEA's mission includes trying to keep nuclear proliferation in check, and it depends on member states for information in trying to carry out that task. It is currently probing allegations Iran tried to make nuclear weapons using not only its own research but intelligence provided by the US and other members of the 35-nation IAEA board.

Intelligence committee members also expressed anger Thursday over the seven-month time lapse before their committee was

briefed.

Top US intelligence officials who briefed reporters in Washington Thursday said they had high confidence in the judgment that North Korea had aided Syria with its nuclear program and the intention was to produce plutonium.

But they claimed only low confidence for the conclusion that it was meant for weapons development, in part because there was no reprocessing facility at the site something that would be needed to extract plutonium from spent reactor fuel for use in a bomb.

The Syrian reactor was within weeks or months of being functional when Israeli jets destroyed it, a top US official told The Associated Press in Washington, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.

The official said the facility was mostly completed but still had needed significant testing before it could have been declared operational.

China govt will meet Dalai Lama aide EU hopes for 'positive developments soon' on Tibet

AP, Beijing

The Chinese government plans to meet with a private representative of the Dalai Lama in the coming days, state-run media reported, after weeks of pressure from world leaders.

The official Xinhua News Agency said it had learned of the development "from official sources." It quoted an unnamed official as saying there had been requests repeatedly made by "the Dalai side for resuming talks."

China has faced repeated international calls, including from President Bush and the European Union, to open a dialogue with the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader since anti-government riots rocked the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in mid-March.

The official said "the relevant department of the central government will have contact and consultation with Dalai's private representative in the coming days." No date was given, and it was unclear exactly which representative was expected to take part in the meeting.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry and the Communist leadership's international affairs office said they did not know about the Xinhua report.

The policy of the central government toward Dalai has been consistent and the door of dialogue has remained open," the official was quoted as saying.

China says 22 people died in the Lhasa violence, while overseas Tibet supporters say many times that number have been killed in protests and the ensuing security crackdown across Tibetan regions of western China.

Meanwhile, the head of the European Commission said Friday he hopes to see "positive developments soon" in Tibet after talks with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso told reporters in Beijing that he remained opposed to a boycott of the Olympic Games, which have become a lightning rod for criticism of China's human rights record, especially after a crackdown on anti-government protests in Tibet.

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11 killed in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Fierce overnight clashes between Shia militiamen and US and Iraqi forces in east Baghdad's Sadr City killed at least 11 people and wounded 32 others, a medical official told AFP yesterday.

The medic from Sadr City -- stronghold of anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia -- said the dead included four old men, two women and a child.

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