

Israel sees progress toward Gaza truce

Rice warns settlements could harm ME peace

AFP, Jerusalem

A top Israeli official on Sunday reported "significant progress" toward a possible truce with the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas although it would not include the release of a captured soldier.

"There has been significant progress in the negotiations on the ceasefire agreement," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity, but added: "The release of Gilad Shalit will not be part of the ceasefire agreement."

Shalit, 21, was captured nearly two years ago in a cross-border raid by three militant groups, including the armed wing of Hamas, and has since been held at a secret location

in the densely-populated territory.

A Hamas delegation was in Cairo on Sunday to receive Israel's response to the truce proposal from Egyptian security chief Omar Suleiman, who has been heading the mediation efforts.

Senior Hamas leader Mahmud Zahar said on Saturday that a ceasefire could take effect in less than two weeks but Shalit's release would not be included in the deal, adding that Hamas would only free him in a prisoner exchange.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert expressed hope ahead of a weekly cabinet meeting that the two sides could reach an agreement, but warned that if Palestinian attacks continued

Israel would resort to other means.

"If (attacks) can be stopped in this way all the better. If unfortunately the reality on the ground shows that the terror doesn't stop this way, then Israel will know how to stop it through other means," Olmert told reporters.

During the cabinet meeting on Sunday, Olmert insisted that "making headway towards the release of Gilad Shalit is inseparable from efforts to reach calm in the south of the country," according to a statement from his office.

Israel's political and military leaders have been mulling a wider military offensive aimed at ousting Gaza's Hamas-run government since the Islamists seized power

there exactly one year ago.

Israel has meanwhile relaunched peace talks with moderate Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in a US-backed bid to sideline Hamas in Gaza by reaching a comprehensive peace deal by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on a new bid to inject impetus into the faltering Middle East peace process, warned yesterday that Jewish settlement expansion could harm the talks.

Rice said she would use her latest visit -- her 17th to the region in less than two years -- to press Israel to curb settlement growth on occupied Palestinian land.

Sadr group to boycott Iraqi local elections

AFP, Najaf

In a fresh blow to Iraq's embattled political process, the movement of hardline Shia leader Moqtada al-Sadr said on Sunday it will boycott the provincial elections in October.

"The Sadr group will not take part in the (provincial) elections as we did in the parliamentary election," said Sheikh Salah al-Obeidi, a spokesman for Sadr in the holy city of Najaf.

"This is the decision as of now by Moqtada and the Sadrist. We want to avoid making the same mistakes of being part of the sectarian divisions."

Iraq is due to hold elections in its 18 provinces on October 1, a key benchmark set by Washington to stabilise the war-torn country by giving more power to local provincial councils, especially for economic projects.

The Sadr group has 32 lawmakers in the 275-member parliament and its latest decision not to take part in the elections is seen as a step to consolidate its image as a nationalist and anti-American movement.



Soldiers, policemen and firefighters work yesterday on the site of a resort hotel (L) carried away by a landslide in Kurihara, Miyagi prefecture. The powerful earthquake struck northern Japan on Saturday killing nine people and injuring more than 100 others.



Chinese residents make their way through a flooded street in boats, in Zhangzhou town, southeast China Fujian province Saturday. Torrential downpours in China have now claimed 64 lives, state media reported, with flash-floods destroying thousands of homes as well as bridges and large swathes of crops.

No timetable for Iraq withdrawals: Bush

AP, London

US President George W Bush said there should be no definitive timetable for the withdrawal of Coalition forces from Iraq, according to a British Sunday newspaper.

Asked by the Observer newspaper about reports that Britain was preparing plans for the reduction of its forces in Iraq, Bush said he did not want the issue tied to a formal schedule.

"There should be no definitive timetable," Bush was quoted as saying. "I am confident that (British Prime Minister Brown), like me, will listen to our commanders to make sure that the sacrifices that have gone forward won't be unravelled by drawdowns that may not be warranted at this point in time."

The Observer said Bush was interviewed in Rome, where the president spent Thursday and Friday as part of his weeklong tour of Europe.

The trip has largely focused on shoring up support for the Nato mission in Afghanistan and a tough

line on Iran's nuclear program. However, Bush is also addressing climate change, trade and the situation in Iraq which Bush said he would discuss with Brown in London.

The British Broadcasting Corp. has reported that Britain could set a date for the withdrawal of its soldiers from Iraq within months, although officials have dismissed the report as speculation.

Britain currently has some 4,000 troops serving in southern Iraq confined to a base on the outskirts of the city of Basra. The military planned to withdraw an additional 1,500 troops from the country, but those plans were shelved after the city was rocked by an upsurge in violence in Basra in March, a point noted by Bush in his interview.

The Observer newspaper cast its interview with Bush as a warning to Brown over further British troop reductions, but the White House insisted that the two leaders who are due to meet for dinner Sunday evening were in complete accord.

More sanctions against Iran if it rejects N-offer

Says US official

AFP, Washington

Iran will likely face further UN sanctions if it rejects a new offer on Saturday to halt sensitive nuclear work, a senior US official said while acknowledging disappointment with its initial response.

"We don't know the official Iranian reaction yet, (but) I believe a rejection of this package would lead to further isolation of Iran and would lead to further international sanctions," the State Department official said.

But the official, who spoke to reporters here on the condition of anonymity, recalled that the "initial comments out of Tehran were not very encouraging" and that President George W. Bush said he was disappointed with them.

The United States, he said, was hoping Iran would accept the so-called refreshed package of economic and trade incentives because it addresses what Iran

claims to want: a civilian nuclear energy programme.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has voiced doubt over Iran's stated desire to pursue a peaceful nuclear programme, saying it would have accepted western incentives a long time ago in return for abandoning its sensitive work.

The United States -- together with Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany -- has been pursuing a carrot-and-stick approach to force Iran to halt uranium enrichment, which it fears is aimed at building a nuclear bomb.

The UN Security Council has in the last two years imposed three rounds of increasingly stiff sanctions on Iran for its decision to spurn the incentives and continue pursuing its enrichment programme.

The State Department official acknowledged that the new package presented in Tehran Saturday by EU foreign policy chief Javier

Solana on behalf of the six powers is not "dramatically different" from one offered in 2006.

However, he said it offers "more details" on civil nuclear energy cooperation, such as guarantees on fuel supplies, and on access to higher education as well as on agriculture cooperation.

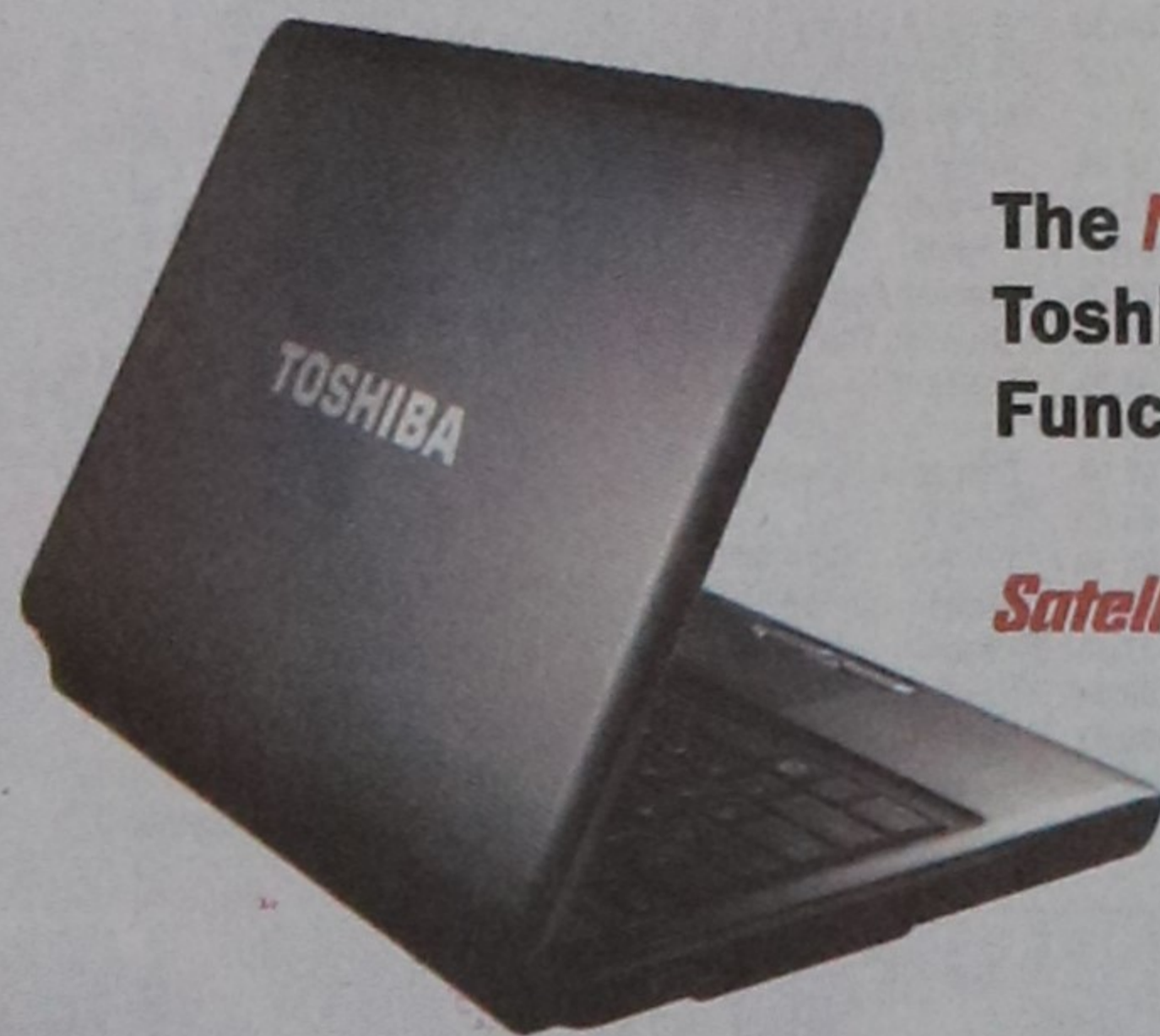
Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said on Saturday its answer to the offer presented by Solana would depend on how the West responds to an Iranian package Tehran put forward last month.

Iran has put great emphasis on its own package submitted to the international community, which it portrays as an all-embracing drive to solve the world's problems, including its nuclear standoff with the West.

The US State Department official said the package was submitted with a "cover letter" that recognises Iran's historic role in the region and in the world.

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