

Arab FMs back indirect ME peace talks

AFP, Cairo

Arab foreign ministers meeting in Cairo agreed to back the resumption of indirect Palestinian-Israeli talks after months of US-led shuttle diplomacy but said the talks should be ended within four months.

"The Arab foreign ministers meeting at the Follow-Up Committee have agreed to aid the holding of indirect talks between Palestinians and Israelis for four months," Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat told AFP.

"This is so that American efforts to revive the peace process will succeed."

Negotiations have been on ice since Israel launched a devastating attack on the Gaza Strip in December 2008.

The Palestinians have said they will only return to the negotiating table if Israel first halt all settlement construction in the occupied West Bank.

But Israel has agreed only to a 10-month freeze that excludes public buildings and annexed Arab east Jerusalem, failing to satisfy the Palestinians.

US Middle East envoy George Mitchell proposed US-brokered indirect talks as a way of getting around the deadlock.

Syrian ambassador to the Arab League Yusef Ahmed said: "The committee does not object to indirect negotiations and, if nothing is achieved four months from now, the issue will be taken to the UN Security Council."

Arab delegates said talks should be based on the principles of a 2002 Arab peace initiative, which calls for full normalisation with Israel in exchange for a complete withdrawal by Israel from Arab land, the creation of a Palestinian state and an "equitable" solution for Palestinian refugees.

Negotiations must "adhere to Arab principles defined by the Arab peace initiative," Oman's top diplomat Yusef bin Alawi bin Abdullah told reporters on Tuesday.

"What has prevented (Palestinian) president (Mahmud) Abbas from pursuing negotiations is the continued policy of settlements," Abdullah said, adding that any negotiations must be during Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's term of office.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (L) listens to Arab League Secretary General Amr Mousa during a meeting with Arab foreign ministers in Cairo on Tuesday. Abbas said he will weigh up holding indirect talks with Israel during a Arab meeting in Cairo this week, Egyptian state media reported.

Iran court upholds death for opposition activist

AP, Tehran

An Iranian opposition-run Web site says an appeals court has upheld the death sentence for a student who took part in an anti-government rally in December that left eight people dead.

The kalem site reported late Tuesday that 20-year-old Mohammad Amin Valian had testified he threw stones at security forces and plainclothes pro-government militiamen as they "savagely" beat demonstrators during the rally in Tehran.

Valian was found guilty of Moharebeh a religious offence that translates as defiance of God, a crime punishable by death under Iranian law.

50 fake bombs found in dead Australian's house

AP, Sydney

Sydney police used explosives to blow up suspected bombs found throughout a dead man's house but then discovered they were fake, officials said yesterday.

More than 50 bomb-like devices were found in the house and in the man's car, New South Wales state Detective Superintendent Gavin Dengate said.

The recently deceased man, a 69-year-old former electrician known as a recluse, apparently wanted to scare people away, Dengate said.

Friends of the man, whose identity was not released, called police after visiting his home Tuesday and spotting what looked like bombs. Neighbours were then evacuated as bomb squad officers sent in robots and detonated six of the devices, Dengate said.



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi police commandos inspect destruction at the site of a suicide bombing in the restive city of Baquba, northeast of Baghdad yesterday. Three powerful co-ordinated suicide attacks in the central Iraqi city killed at least 33 people and wounded 55, just days before nationwide parliamentary elections.

China, US work to mend ties

AFP, Beijing

Two top US envoys sat down for fence-mending talks with China yesterday pressing for cooperation on Iran and to overcome a setback in relations over key issues such as trade, Tibet and Taiwan.

US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and senior White House Asia adviser Jeffrey Bader were in Beijing to put ties back on track, following the recent setbacks, and also as Washington tries to bring North Korea in line.

The three-day mission comes as Washington and Beijing are trying to bring Pyongyang back to stalled nuclear disarmament talks, and to resolve a standoff with Tehran over its suspected atomic programme.

It also comes ahead of a series of key meetings, including a global nuclear security summit in Washington in April, and the next round of Sino-US "Strategic and Economic Dialogue," which last took place in July 2009.

"If this (visit) suggests that we are refocusing on the future and the important issues that we can work on together, I think we are encouraged by this," State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said Tuesday.

"This is expressly why we sought this meeting -- to be able to refocus on very specific issues, not the least of which is obviously our joint concerns about Iran," Crowley said.

Neither side has offered any details about the Beijing schedule of Steinberg and Bader, who is US President Barack Obama's top Asia adviser on the National Security Council. The pair will head to Tokyo on Thursday.

But the agenda looks set to be chock-full, with a wide range of bilateral concerns, along with the North Korea and Iran dossiers, all up for discussion.

Washington and Beijing have been on the same page with respect to Pyongyang, pushing for an early resumption of the six-party talks which the North left in April last year.

But China, which holds veto power on the UN Security Council, has hesitated in supporting tougher US-backed sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme, which Western nations suspect is an effort to build atomic weapons.

In a commentary carried in the state China Daily, two researchers from Renmin University voiced optimism that relations were about to rebound from the low point seen in early 2010.

"Beijing and Washington have shown restraint in the most recent diplomatic spat and there is room for reconciliation," said the researchers, Jin Canrong and Dong Chunling.

Steinberg and Bader may nevertheless have a tough task ahead, as Chinese officials have repeatedly said in recent weeks that the blame for the trans-Pacific woes rests squarely with Washington.

"The responsibility for the current difficulty in China-US relations goes completely to the US side," foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang told reporters Tuesday. "We hope the US side takes the Chinese position seriously."

Israel silent on Dubai call for Netanyahu's arrest

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli officials remained doggedly silent yesterday in the wake of a Dubai police decision to seek the arrest of the Israeli prime minister and the head of its spy agency over the murder of a top Hamas militant in the Gulf emirate.

Neither Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office nor the foreign ministry would comment on Dubai police chief Dahi Khalifa's order for arrest warrants against Netanyahu and Mossad chief Meir Dagan.

Khalifa says the hit on Mahmud al-Mabhuah was carried out by Mossad agents using European and Australian passports.

Israel has not confirmed or denied the accusations, although opposition leader Tzipi Livni has praised the killing as "good news for those fighting terrorism."

The affair has, however, caused a diplomatic storm, with the countries whose passports were allegedly used protesting to Israeli envoys and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman.

The Dubai police say 12 people linked to the hit used British passports, three had French travel documents, six carried Irish passports and one used a German identity.

The British embassy in Tel Aviv said that visiting detectives of the UK Serious Organised Crime Agency had begun questioning dual nationals whose names appeared on passports Dubai said were used in the January killing.

Embassy spokesman Rafi Shamir told AFP that detectives met the first of "about 10" subjects on Monday and were continuing to carry out interviews during the week.

He gave no further details.

Bottled ghosts for sale!

ANI, Melbourne

Spooky as it may sound, but online auction site TradeMe is putting two vials, which apparently contain spirits of ghosts exorcised from a house in New Zealand, up for sale.

Entitled "Two Captured Ghosts" the auction had reached a top price of 62 New Zealand dollars after 35 bids yesterday (AEDT).

The auction description claims the spirits were captured by an exorcist from a spiritual church at a property in Christchurch, the largest city on New Zealand's South Island.

And the seller has claimed that one spirit belongs to a man who died in the house in the 1920s.

"We have had no (paranormal) activity since they were bottled on July 15, 2009," the Herald Sun quoted the seller as saying.

Troops thwart looters in quake-hit Chile

AFP, Concepcion

Thousands of troops were on high alert yesterday across quake-ravaged Chile as armed vigilantes patrolled neighbourhoods to ward off looters and soldiers distributed emergency aid to desperate survivors.

With the country's reputation for stability at stake, authorities raced to help thousands of homeless and hungry, but they also were scrambling to defuse an explosive situation in cities and towns where gangs of looters roamed the streets after one of the strongest earthquakes ever measured.

"The thugs have taken over the city. Now we are not afraid of the earthquakes, we're afraid of the criminals," Marcelo Rivera, the mayor of Hualpen, told a Chilean radio station.

President Michelle Bachelet, forced into defending government efforts to maintain order and coordinate rescue and relief operations for thousands of homeless and hungry, doubled the number of troops patrolling the worst-hit areas to 14,000.

An 18-hour curfew was also imposed in Concepcion where armoured military vehicles guarded strategic points of Chile's hard-hit second city.

"Military personnel will be present in the streets of Concepcion until midday to maintain public order, and they will not waver in carrying out their duties," warned General Guillermo Ramirez.

Similar exceptional curfews were also imposed on six other towns badly damaged by Saturday's 8.8-magnitude quake, which has killed some 800 people and affected two million in total, or one-eighth of the population.



PHOTO: AFP
Chilean soldiers arrest and restrain alleged looters in downtown Concepcion, Chile, on Tuesday. Thousands more troops were deployed across quake-hit Chile Tuesday as residents took up arms to stop a wave of mass looting in the nation's second city.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Sudan fighting kills 27

AFP, Juba

At least 27 have been killed in fighting sparked by cattle raiding in south Sudan's troubled Lakes state in recent days, a state official said on Wednesday.

Fighting between rival Atuat and Ciek clans of the Dinka ethnic group broke out in the remote Yirol region over the weekend, as young gunmen battled each other after an argument over cattle raiding turned violent.

"There has been bad fighting, and the military authorities have gone in to restore calm," said Gabriel Gakmar, director-general of the state information ministry.

Mogadishu clash claims 9 lives

AFP, Mogadishu

At least nine Somalis were killed and more than 30 wounded in an exchange of fire between government forces and Islamist insurgents in Mogadishu, witnesses and medics said yesterday.

Government forces moved in late Tuesday on positions held by fighters from the al-Qaeda-inspired Shebab rebel group in the southern area of Tarbunka, sparking a heavy exchange of gunfire and mortar rounds.

19 dead in China bus wreck

AFP, Beijing

The bodies of 19 people have been recovered from a bus that careened off a rain-soaked bridge in central China and fell into a reservoir at the weekend, state press reported yesterday.

The accident occurred on Sunday in Henan province, with the long-distance bus plunging some 40 metres (132 feet) into the Jiayang reservoir, the China News Agency reported.

Seven people were rescued following the accident, but it took searchers several days to find the bodies of the victims, said the report, citing work safety officials.

5 'muggers' hurt in Rab

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Rashid, 24, were shot and later arrested in Kadomtoli following a gun battle involving Rab-10 team around 1:00am.

According to Rab-10 officials, the gunfight broke out when the gang attempted to rob the Rab personnel, who were on patrol duties in the Wasa Pukurpar area.

A Rab official said that shortly after being challenged by the Rab personnel, the alleged muggers opened fire and the law-enforcers retaliated with gunshots.

Several of the gang mem-

bers managed to flee the scene, leaving behind the wounded Shafiq and Harun.

A firearm containing five bullets and a knife were recovered from the spot.

In a separate incident in Rampura, another alleged mugger, Abul Kashem, 30, was shot in the leg and arrested after his cohorts and Rab men were locked into a gun battle, said Rab-3 sources.

He was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

Speaking to The Daily Star from his hospital bed, Kashem

said, "Rab men picked me up from Malibagh bus stand in the evening on Tuesday and I was shot in the leg around 2:00am."

Kashem alleges that four Rab men caught his legs and hands while another shot him in the leg.

He denies any involvement in the mugging.

Alleged muggers Abdal Halim, 28, and Mohammad Yunus, 30, were shot and captured around 8:00pm after a separate gunfight involving Rab-10 personnel in Konakhola, Keraniganj.

5 rental power deals deviate from contract

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signing of the agreements requesting PDB to shift their signing of agreements which the Board ultimately had to do.

Sources say these companies never had complete power plant equipment ready to be installed within the contract period. Rental power companies are supposed to own equipment ready to be installed any time, and not procure them after winning a contract.

"After winning the bids, the contractors are now buying equipment. But it appears they can't find the equipment quoted in the bid documents, which is a clear deviation," says an official.

Rahimafrooz bagged a 30MW power project in Jamalpur for five years and was supposed to sign the contract on February 7. Insiders say it has expressed inability to sign the contract and PDB has taken move to encash bid bond against this project.

The same company signed its contract for the Thakurgaon 50MW diesel-fired project for three years on February 4 and deposited PSD worth Tk 22 crore on February 17.

The same day, it wrote to PDB about changing its diesel engine generator. The company wrote that in the tender schedule it had quoted use of heavy-duty diesel plant consisting 35 units of Caterpillar diesel generator.

But due to delay in tender

process, the company could not secure these units. Instead, it has secured 41 units of Mitsubishi equipment.

On February 11, Rahimafrooz wrote that it has selected a route for an underground power line from its switchover to the designated substation of the Power Grid Company of Bangladesh. The company then went on saying if PDB did not approve laying of this cable by February 14, they cannot be held responsible for Thakurgaon project implementation delay. February 12 and 13 were weekly holidays.

Otobi won Bheramara 100MW diesel and Noapara 100MW furnace oil projects and signed the contracts on February 4. The company was supposed to submit its PSD for both the projects within its deadline of February 18, which it did not.

Otobi came up with its PSD for the Bheramara project on February 22, four days after expiry of deadline. PDB, however, accepted it.

For the Noapara project, Otobi submitted PSD on February 25 under its newly-formed company Quantum.

On February 9, it wrote to PDB that originally it had proposed to build the plant as a combined cycle one, but instead it wanted to build it with "reciprocating engines with co-generation facility".

The company argued that the Noapara plant "probably

will not run at base load and this has given rise to some concerns as to the constituent of plant machinery and equipment". It added if the plant is not set to run with base load mode, frequent start-stoppage with combined cycle system will pose problems from technical and economic points of view. That is why the company is proposing the configuration change.

But Otobi did not mention anything about how such configuration change could affect other aspects of power generation in the machine heat rate configuration efficiency or if extra land would be required.

However, PDB recommended to the power ministry that Otobi's request for change be accepted.

Coastal Saba, the company that was awarded 50MW furnace oil-based plant in Barisal delayed signing of the agreement. While other bidders signed the agreements on February 4, it signed the same on February 15.

On February 16, Coastal Saba wrote to PDB that it wanted to change its power plant configuration to operate with "reciprocating engines under a co-generation" system instead of setting up a combined cycle system as was promised during the bid.

Like Otobi, Coastal Saba said if this plant does not operate as a "base load" plant, it will

create technical and financial problems.

"All of these violations are serious in nature. Unfortunately, PDB has become hostage to the situation due to persisting power crisis," quips an official.

The PDB had originally planned to sign agreements for eight rental power projects totalling 530 mw within early December with a view to ensuring the extra power supply during the Boro irrigation period from early March.

But external influence over PDB's selection process and hectic lobbying by various influential business lobbies slowed down the tender process. The government ultimately picked the bids of some local companies that had no prior experience to install and operate rental power projects.

On delay of submission of PSD against the Otobi projects, a company source said it was caused by error of the bank issuing the PSD.

On the question of changing the configuration of power plant equipment after signing of the contract, a top executive of a power company requesting not to be named said it would not affect power generation.

"The heat rate of the plant will remain unchanged and no additional land would be required for the change. Besides, everyone else did it," he said.

Lawmakers debate over

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attack on Amar Desh acting Editor Mahmudur Rahman and death threats issued to New Age Editor Nurul Kabir.

Sajeda Chowdhury blasted the last BNP-led government for torturing journalists. She cited the killing of Humayun Kabir Balu, Manik Saha and editor of Runner, a Jessore-based local newspaper, and his son during the BNP government.

At the attack on Mahmudur Rahman, the deputy leader of the House said, "He has played different roles. Now he is an editor of a newspaper. This newspaper is not the people's newspaper, it is BNP's newspaper."

"He keeps on writing on everything in an untrue way.

Therefore, he was reminded and asked to write in a decent way," Sajeda said.

As BNP lawmakers protested Sajeda's statement about warning Mahmudur Rahman, the deputy leader said, "Yes... Yes... He has been warned... write in a decent way."

Sajeda said if journalists speak about themselves the government must hear them. "But who is he? What type of a journalist he is?" asked.

Taking part in the discussion on the thanksgiving motion on the president's address, Awami League lawmaker Shahrier Alam said the opposition raised the issue of torturing journalists to create chaos in parliament.

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