

ME peace hopes in tatters

No talks until Israel halts settlements, say Palestinians

AFP, Ramallah

Prospects for indirect peace talks lay in tatters yesterday after the Palestinians said they would not negotiate with Israel unless it reversed plans to build 1,600 settler homes in east Jerusalem.

The move came following a similar decision by the Arab League as international pressure mounted on Israel after the project was announced during a visit by US Vice President Joe Biden aimed at promoting the talks.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said he could not go through with the indirect talks that the Palestinians had reluctantly agreed to on Sunday unless the new housing project was cancelled, his top negotiator told AFP.

"I am waiting for (US Middle East envoy George) Mitchell to come back next

week to give us the answer that the decision has been cancelled," Abbas told Arab League Secretary General Amr Mussa, according to Saeb Erakat.

The Arab League had issued a statement overnight following an emergency meeting of Arab ambassadors saying "the Israeli measures must be stopped before any discussion on a resumption of talks, direct or indirect."

State Department spokesman Philip Crowley confirmed on Wednesday that the United States had raised the issue with Israeli officials.

"We are talking to the government and trying to understand what happened and why," he told reporters in Washington.

The news had already sparked a strong condemnation from Biden, who met Abbas and other senior Palestinian leaders in the West Bank on Wednesday.

It also sparked a row within Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's rightist-led coalition, with a minister from the centre-left Labour party, a key partner, warning that it may quit.

"Members of the Labour party have more and more difficulty in taking part in a coalition government that they joined with the purpose of relaunching the peace process with the Palestinians," Agriculture Minister Shalom Simhon said.

"The anger of Biden is justified. A grave error has been committed and there is a price to pay," he told army radio.

Cabinet secretary Zvi Hauser admitted the decision was a "mistake" in an interview with public radio and said Netanyahu had held a long discussion with Interior Minister Eli Yishai, whose ministry had announced the plans.



US Defence Secretary Robert Gates (L) meets with Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz at the Janadriyah farm in Riyadh on Wednesday. Gates flew into the Saudi capital for talks expected to focus on Iran's nuclear programme and Washington's push for tough sanctions against Tehran.

Fighting kills 43 Somalis in 2 days

AP, Mogadishu

Heavy fighting between Somali insurgents and pro-government troops has killed at least 43 people over two days, as African Union peacekeepers used tanks to help the beleaguered government beat back an insurgent attack, officials said yesterday.

Militants attacking from the north on Wednesday reached within a mile (2 kilometers) of the presidential place in the heart of the capital, Mogadishu, before African Union peacekeepers in tanks reinforced government troops, residents said.

Nepal peace process at 'serious point'

Says UN official

AFP, Shaktikhor

Nepal's peace process is at a "very serious point", the United Nations' top political official said yesterday, urging party leaders to act on pledges made at the end of the war.

B Lynn Pascoe said he was concerned that the peace process had stalled, three and a half years after the decade-long conflict between Maoist guerrillas and the state came to a close.

"We do see things at a very serious point here, the process is just not moving the way it should be," he told journalists after meeting Maoist army commanders at a cantonment, 175 kilometres (110 miles) south of Kathmandu.

"I'm here to see what we can do to push the process along by emphasising that it is very important to move and it's time to take action," said Pascoe, the UN under-secretary-general for political affairs.

More than 16,000 people were killed in Nepal's conflict, and Pascoe warned there was a "danger of moving backwards", pointing out that 50 percent of countries return to war within 10 years of a peace agreement being signed.

GUJRAT RIOTS Indian SC summons Modi for questioning

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Chief Minister of BJP-ruled Gujarat state Narendra Modi has been summoned by the Indian Supreme Court-appointed Special Investigation Team (SIT) to appear before it on March 21 in connection with the communal riots that rocked India in 2002.

"We have summoned the Chief Minister (Modi) and we will be asking a few questions based on the evidence collected till now. Nothing more than this," SIT Chief RK Raghavan said.

The summon is based on a petition by Zakia Jaffrey, widow of the late Congress MP Ehsan Jaffrey who was burnt alive in the Gulbarg Housing Society massacre in Ahmedabad during the riots.

The riots, which had left more than 1,000 people dead in Gujarat, had broken out across the state after the burning of 54 people in a train returning from Ayodhya.

But the summon has been delivered to Modi only for Jaffrey's murder.



Minority and female delegates arrive on Tiananmen Square for an ongoing session of the National People's Congress, the annual parliament of China's ruling Communist Party at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday.

Iran sentences professor to 6 years

AP, Tehran

An Iranian appeals court sentenced a university professor to six years in prison for suspected involvement in the country's post-election turmoil, local media reported yesterday.

Several pro-reform newspapers, including the Bahar daily, quoted Mahmoud Alizadeh Tabatabaei, a lawyer for Saeed Leilaz, as saying the appeals court sentenced his client to a six-year jail term. He did not say when the court ruling took place.

Gulf states wary of both Iran's nukes and punitive sanctions

AFP, Riyadh

Gulf states are worried about Iran going nuclear, but equally fret about a dangerous confrontation that could arise from more sanctions and military threats against Tehran, analysts say.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates was in the Gulf Wednesday and Thursday seeking support for a new round of UN sanctions to press Tehran to halt its drive to acquire nuclear weapons capability.

Gates told Saudi King Abdullah, Crown Prince and Defence Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, and other top security officials that Iran had "largely rebuffed" US overtures for a conciliatory dialogue, and that Washington was now focused on ramping up pressure on Tehran, according to a US defence official.

Gates was only the latest of several high level US visitors, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Energy Secretary Steven Chu, who have pounded the path to Riyadh to sell Saudi leaders on more pressure on Tehran.

But Saudis and other Gulf states remain dubious about whether heightened economic sanctions would be supported by enough countries to be effective, and whether they would have the right impact on Tehran.

"We have a shared interest in preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power," said Mustafa Alani, research director at the Gulf Research Centre, a Dubai think-tank.

However, he said, "We don't recognise economic sanctions as going to change the Iranians' mind."

"If there are sanctions, it will accelerate their nuclear programme."

Half of my letters brand me an idiot, says Obama

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama joked on Wednesday that half of the 40,000 letters that pour into the White House each day brand him an "idiot."

Tongue-in-cheek, the president remarked that his staff did not spare him the wrath of his correspondents -- selecting a representative portion of 10 letters for him to read when he returns to the White House residence at night.

"I will tell you, that my staff is very even-handed, because about half of these letters call me an idiot!" Obama said, chuckling at his own joke during a rally in Saint Louis, Missouri.

The president went on to make a serious point, saying that many senior citizens wrote to him to tell him to keep the government's hands off Medicare, a health plan for elderly people.

Hunt on for Maoists in 2 Indian states

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Ranchi/Bhubaneswar

A major drive has been launched against Maoist guerrillas in five districts of West Bengal and Jharkhand, and Orissa will soon join the campaign, a senior officer said yesterday.

An unspecified number of police and paramilitary personnel are pursuing the guerrillas in the coordinated operation called Green Hunt that began three days ago, the officer told IANS on condition of anonymity.

"Initially, the operation was kept a

secret," the officer said.

"The operation has been launched in five bordering districts. The paramilitary forces and state police are sanitising the jungle areas. Some landmines have been recovered and four Maoist camps have been destroyed."

"The operation has air surveillance. Security forces have made a makeshift helipad in Saranda jungle area (in Jharkhand)," the officer added.

In Jharkhand, the operations are going on in three places. In West Bengal, the Maoists are being chased in Purulia and West Midnapore districts.

"The move is to zero in on Maoists in bordering areas," said the officer. Orissa would join the campaign soon, he added.

Vijay Raman, the special director general of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Wednesday met the Jharkhand police chief here to reportedly discuss the inter-state operations against Maoists.

On Feb 9, Home Minister P. Chidambaram met the chief ministers and top officials of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa, reportedly to give a final shape to the anti-Maoist drive.



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