



Palestinians protesters are detained by Israeli border policemen following clashes in east Jerusalem, on Tuesday, while protesting against the Israeli new settlement plan in Jerusalem.

SETTLEMENT PLAN

ME quartet slams Israel

AFP, United Nations

The Middle East diplomatic quartet on Friday issued a rare condemnation of Israel for its plans to build new settler homes, warning that unilateral actions would not be recognized by the world community.

The group -- the European Union, the United States, Russia and the United Nations -- "condemns Israel's decision to advance planning for new housing units in East Jerusalem."

"The Quartet reaffirms that unilateral actions taken by either party cannot prejudice the outcome of negotiations and will not be recognized by the international community," it added in a statement.

Separately, Washington also sharply rebuked its close ally, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton telling Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the latest Israeli move was "a deeply negative signal about Israel's approach to the bilateral relationship."

The Jewish state announced Tuesday during a landmark visit by US Vice President Joe Biden that 1,600 new settler homes would be built in predominantly Arab east Jerusalem.

The announcement angered Arab and Palestinian leaders, just as fledgling indirect talks appeared to have been coaxed back to life by the United States.

It was also criticized by both the European Union and the United Nations, which reiterated that all settlements are "illegal."

Russia called the move "unacceptable" and Britain said it would "give strength to those who argue that Israel is not serious about peace."



Blind soldier 'sees' with his tongue

AFP, London

A British soldier left blind by a grenade in Iraq has told how his life has been transformed by groundbreaking technology that enables him to "see" with his tongue.

Lance Corporal Craig Lundberg, 24, can read words, make out shapes and walk without assistance thanks to a device developed in the United States, which could revolutionise life for other blind people.

Lundberg, from Liverpool, completely lost his sight after being struck by a rocket-propelled grenade while serving in Basra in 2007.

IRAN SANCTIONS

China shows no sign of budge

AP, Beijing

China showed no sign yesterday of throwing its support behind new sanctions against Iran following talks with Britain's foreign minister, who had hoped to persuade Beijing to join a growing international consensus for more stringent measures.

Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi maintained that sanctions weren't the solution to disagreements over Iran's nuclear program and that more talks were the way forward.

"Sanctions do not provide a fundamental solution to the Iranian nuclear issue. Ultimately, this issue has to be appropriately resolved through peaceful negotiations," Yang said at a joint news conference with Britain's David Miliband following their discussions in Beijing.

With Russia appearing to move closer to supporting new sanctions, China -- which depends on Iran for much of its energy needs -- would be the only one of five veto-wielding permanent UN Security Council members opposed to the measures.

Further punishment of Iran is among a host of issues dividing the nations, whose relations deteriorated badly last December after China ignored personal appeals from British Prime Minister Gordon Brown not to execute 53-year-old Akmal Shaikh for drug smuggling.

Shaikh's family said he was mentally unstable and was lured to China from a life on the street in Poland by men playing on his dreams to record a pop song for world peace.

Brown said he was "appalled" by the execution China's first of a European citizen in nearly 60 years -- prompting a warning from Beijing that such comments threatened to damage ties.

Even before that exchange, the two had clashed over who was to blame for the failure to reach a binding agreement on emissions reductions at December's UN-sponsored Copenhagen climate talks.

Neither Yang or Miliband offered indications of a clear improvement in ties following the discussions.

Palestinians riot in Jerusalem

US envoy cancels ME trip amid US-Israel feud

AFP, Jerusalem

Hundreds of Palestinians clashed with police in mainly Arab east Jerusalem yesterday amid heightened tensions in the Holy City where Israel vowed to expand Jewish settlements.

As the unrest rocked Jerusalem, US Middle East envoy George Mitchell delayed a visit to the region amid the most severe diplomatic row in decades between Israel and the United States, which has been struggling to revive peace talks.

Police fired rubber bullets and stun grenades at protesters who hurled rocks at security forces in the Shuafat refugee camp. The Palestinians dispersed after security forces moved in.

Similar clashes broke out in other parts of mainly Arab east Jerusalem, which Israel occu-

pied in the 1967 Six Day War and later annexed in a move not recognised by the international community.

Police said two officers were injured, but did not mention Palestinian casualties. Several people were arrested, said police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld.

A heavy security presence was evident around the Old City, and police said they deployed 3,000 officers in Jerusalem.

Israel's announcement last week of plans to build 1,600 new Jewish settler homes in mainly Arab east Jerusalem infuriated not only the Palestinians, but also the US administration which had sent Vice President Joe Biden to the region to promote new Middle East peace talks.

Mitchell on Tuesday postponed a visit to region, the Israeli president's office said, without giving further details.

Hillary visits Russia in arms treaty quest

AFP, Moscow

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrives in Russia Thursday for crucial talks on clinching a new nuclear disarmament treaty between the Cold War foes.

The 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) expired in December and negotiators have failed to agree a successor -- to the embarrassment of two powers keen to promote a "reset" in sometimes troubled relations.

The official reason for Hillary's two-day visit is a meeting of the Middle East diplomatic quartet. But officials from both sides have confirmed she will have bilateral negotiations on START with her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

US President Barack Obama and Russia's Dmitry Medvedev had targeted a new agreement by the end of 2009 to drastically reduce nuclear stockpiles but negotiations have lumbered on in Geneva amid reports of stark differences.

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