

Direct ME peace talks to start 'in weeks': Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak yesterday said he saw direct peace negotiations with the Palestinians starting "within a few weeks," his office said in a statement.

"There really is a good chance that we are on the verge of direct talks between us and the Palestinians on all the issues," the statement quoted Barak as saying after he met a group of US senators in Jerusalem.

His comments were made just hours after Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu held talks with Barack Obama at the White House, at which the US leader said he was expecting to see direct talks "well before" the end of September.

Barak said he had spoken by phone with Netanyahu after Tuesday's White House talks, which both Obama and Netanyahu presented as very positive.

"There will be other ups and downs and difficult moments during this process," Barak said. "But I hope, and believe, that within a few weeks we will have started direct talks that will advance the prospects of peace and bolster the security and vital interests of the state of Israel."

Since May, the two sides have been engaged in so-called proximity talks, with US special envoy George Mitchell shuttling between officials in Jerusalem and the West Bank city of Ramallah.

The indirect talks are scheduled to last four months, after which -- progress permitting -- the two parties would sit down face-to-face for what would be their first direct peace negotiations in more than 18 months.

The Palestinians froze the negotiations in December 2008 when Israel launched a deadly 22-day offensive against the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip to halt rocket attacks.



Ultra-Orthodox Jews hold signs during a demonstration against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Lafayette Park across from the White House in Washington on Tuesday while he (Netanyahu) was attending meetings with US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Guns went missing from Israeli PM's security escort

AFP, New York

Four guns went missing and were believed to have been stolen from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's security detail after American Airlines lost luggage containing the weapons, NBC reported.

It said the Glock 9mm guns had been placed in checked baggage -- as security protocol dictates -- at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport and were supposed to be placed on a flight to Washington for Israeli agents assigned to Netanyahu, who was meeting President Barack Obama on Tuesday.

But workers mistakenly sent the luggage to Los Angeles where it was learned the guns were missing, and police said they believe they were stolen, NBC television reported Tuesday out of New York city.

The station said police at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey were investigating whether the weapons were stolen at the airport in New York, or after the bag arrived in Los Angeles.

US govt sues Arizona over immigration law

AFP, Washington

The US government has filed suit against Arizona in a bid to block the state's controversial immigration law which President Barack Obama's administration has slammed as abusive and divisive.

A Justice Department statement Tuesday said the state law hampered the authority of the Obama administration to enforce national immigration policy.

Federal laws do not permit the development of a "patchwork of state and local immigration policies," it said.

"Setting immigration policy and enforcing immigration laws is a national responsibility," US Attorney General Eric Holder said in the statement.

Arizona, the Justice Department said, "crossed a constitutional line."

The suit sets up a major legal showdown between the administration and the state of Arizona, just months before crucial legislative elections in November.

The Arizona law, due to take effect on July 29, makes it a crime to be in the state, which borders Mexico, without proper immigration papers.

It also requires local police, who are not federal agents responsible for immigration matters, to determine if people are in the country legally. Many critics charge that will fuel ethnic profiling.

US officials said they took the action after consulting with various law enforcement departments, chiefs of police, civil rights groups and other local officials.

Many said they were concerned the law would make victims of crimes or witnesses

"less likely to contact or cooperate with law enforcement" if they did not possess proper legal papers. Critics also charge the law will prod local police to single out for questioning people they think appear not to be American.

Arizona Governor Jan Brewer reacted swiftly to the suit, dismissing it as "nothing more than a massive waste of taxpayer funds."

"It is wrong that our own federal government is suing the people of Arizona for helping to enforce federal immigration law," she said in a statement.

"As a direct result of failed and inconsistent federal enforcement, Arizona is under attack from violent Mexican drug and immigrant smuggling cartels."

Officials in Arizona argue they have been overrun by illegal immigrants leading to a spike in the crime rate and straining state resources. They say the measure was necessary only because of lax federal enforcement of the southern US border.

"Arizonans are understandably frustrated with illegal immigration, and the federal government has a responsibility to comprehensively address those concerns," Holder said.

But "diverting federal resources away from dangerous aliens such as terrorism suspects and aliens with criminal records will impact the entire country's safety."

Meanwhile, Arizona's two US senators slammed the lawsuit.

"The American people must wonder whether the Obama administration is really committed to securing the border when it sues a state that is simply trying to protect its people by enforcing immigration law," Republicans John McCain and Jon Kyl said in a joint statement.

Sarkozy donation probe opened

BBC ONLINE

Prosecutors have launched an investigation into claims of illegal campaign funding for French President Nicolas Sarkozy, officials say.

The move follows allegations by a former accountant for France's richest woman, Liliane Bettencourt.

The accountant reportedly told police she was involved in channelling 150,000 euros (£124,000) to Mr Sarkozy's presidential campaign in 2007.

Mr Sarkozy dismissed claims surrounding the case as a "smear". The money was to be handed over to Eric Woerth, who ran Mr Sarkozy's campaign, according to Bettencourt's former accountant, Claire Thibout.

Her allegations were reported by the French website Mediapart after she made a statement to police on Monday.

The limit for donations to political parties is set at 7,500 euros in France.

Mr Sarkozy has been facing growing pressure over the affair, which is linked to a trial over the 87-year-old Bettencourt's estimated 17bn euro fortune. The trial opened briefly last week before being adjourned.

Woerth, who has denied the allegations, is currently minister for labour in Mr Sarkozy's government and is leading efforts to push through a major pension reform.

He has rejected calls for his resignation. In a television interview on Tuesday he dismissed what he called "a political plot orchestrated by the Socialist Party".

Earlier that day, opposition MPs had walked out of the French parliament after a minister accused them of extreme-right tactics for repeatedly asking about the allegations.

The comments were a reference to extreme-right newspapers that denounced the French political class in the 1930s.

Woerth, who is treasurer for Mr Sarkozy's UMP party, has also come under scrutiny because his wife worked for the company that managed Bettencourt's fortune, and their names emerged in tapes secretly recorded by Bettencourt's butler.

Sanctions may slow down nuke work: Iran

AFP, TEHRAN

Newly-imposed sanctions "may slow down" Tehran's nuclear drive, including its sensitive uranium enrichment work, but will not halt the programme, atomic chief Ali Akbar Salehi said yesterday.

Salehi's comments marked the first time a top Iranian official has acknowledged the impact of the news sanctions imposed on June 9.

"One can't say sanctions are ineffective," ISNA news agency quoted Salehi, who supervises Iran's nuclear programme, as saying at a press conference in the southern port city of Bushehr.

"If sanctions are aimed at preventing Iran's nuclear activities... we say they may slow down the work, but will not stop the activities. This is a certainty."

Salehi, who is also one of the several vice presidents in President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government, said the sanctions would not affect nuclear plants such as the one being built in Bushehr, but could impact the uranium enrichment programme by making it difficult to procure certain equipment.

Australian PM rocked as defence minister quits

AFP, Sydney

Australia's Defence Minister John Faulkner yesterday announced plans to quit the cabinet, dealing a blow to new Prime Minister Julia Gillard as national elections loom.

The heavyweight senator said he would return to the back benches after the polls, but denied the move was prompted by last month's Labor party coup that dumped ex-leader Kevin Rudd, a close political ally.

"Inevitably some will suggest that the recent change in our party's leadership is responsible for my decision," he told reporters. "I can't say strongly enough that any such speculation is just plain wrong."

Faulkner said he had always intended to step down after Labor's first term to encourage younger talent, adding that Gillard had persuaded him to contest his Senate seat in the elections later this year.

"Julia Gillard has my absolute support," he said. "I was unstinting in my efforts to see Kevin Rudd elected prime minister three years ago and no one will work harder than me for the government's re-election under Julia's leadership."

Faulkner is the second senior cabinet member to announce his resignation since Gillard's sudden rise to power, after popular Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner said he would not contest the election.

The 56-year-old powerbroker became Rudd's defence minister in June last year, after his predecessor Joel Fitzgibbon stepped down following a series of scandals.

His announcement comes during rampant media speculation that Gillard is about to call elections after moving quickly to tackle the key issues of a controversial mining tax and immigration.

"I'm a little bit old-fashioned about these things," Faulkner said. "I wasn't willing to be placed in a (difficult) position during the election campaign, if asked whether I would serve as defence minister in the government if the government were re-elected."

Noriega sentenced for money laundering

AFP, Paris

A French court yesterday sentenced Panama's former dictator Manuel Noriega to seven years in jail for laundering drug money.

The court also ordered the seizure of 2.3 million euros (2.9 million dollars) in frozen French bank accounts held in the 76-year-old general's name.

Prosecutors had sought the maximum 10-year jail sentence for Noriega, who has already served two decades in a US jail and was extradited from the United States to France in April.

US urges Laos to release 158 Hmong refugees

AFP, Hanoi

The United States has urged Laos to allow 158 minority Hmong people, who are internationally recognised as refugees, to leave the country, a US senator said yesterday after talks in the communist nation.

Senator Al Franken said he spoke "at some length" during his visit to the country this week with the Laotian deputy foreign minister.

"We certainly urged them to get the documents of these 158 people so they can go to the countries the UN said they can go to," Franken, of Minnesota, told reporters during a visit to Vietnam with two other senators.



Queen Elizabeth II arrives at the World Trade Center site to pay tribute to the victims of the 9/11 attacks during a visit to Ground Zero on Tuesday.

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