

Israel, Palestine queue for Cairo talks

AFP, Cairo

The Israeli and Palestinian leaders met with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak separately yesterday, after Mubarak conferred with the US Middle East envoy on a push for direct talks between the two men.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who are holding US-brokered indirect talks, did not make any statements after the meetings.

The official MENA news agency said Mubarak affirmed to Netanyahu the "necessity of preparing the right conditions to achieve the vision of a two state solution on the ground."

Mubarak, who publicly supports Palestinian conditions for resuming direct talks with Israel that were suspended 18 months ago, first hosted US envoy George Mitchell, who met with Netanyahu in Jerusalem earlier in the day.

Netanyahu told reporters before flying to Cairo that he would discuss the prospects for direct talks with Mubarak.

Abbas agreed to the indirect talks in May after face-to-face negotiations broke off in December 2008 following a devastating Israeli military offensive against Gaza.

The Palestinian leadership restated the conditions after a meeting between the US envoy and Abbas in the West Bank town of Ramallah yesterday.

Senior Palestinian official Yasser Abed Rabbo called for greater clarity from Washington about its position on new negotiations, insisting the Palestinians wanted to address the core issues of the Middle East conflict.

"Until now there is no clarity in the (US) position on a number of issues, especially those related to moving into final status talks," Abed Rabbo told reporters.

"The three-hour meeting between Abbas and Mitchell was important but there are several issues, most important among them the

settlements and the situation in Jerusalem, that need more clarity," Abed Rabbo said.

The Palestinians have demanded a complete freeze on Israeli settlement expansion ahead of direct talks and have accused Israel of undermining the process by approving new settler homes in annexed Arab east Jerusalem, which they want as the capital of their promised state.

Earlier this month, during a visit to Washington by Netanyahu, Obama said he hoped to see direct talks begin before a partial Israeli moratorium on the expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank ends in September.

In recent weeks, Abbas had appeared to back away from his previous demand for a full settlement freeze as a condition for opening direct talks, instead insisting on "progress" on the issue of borders and security.

In an interview published on Saturday, he said he would meet Netanyahu if Israel agreed in principle to a Palestinian state based on the borders before Israel's occupation of the West Bank during the 1967 war, with equal land swaps and the presence of an international security force.

"Israel must accept that the Palestinian territory in question be that of the 1967 borders and with the presence of a third party," he told Jordan's Al-Ghad newspaper, referring to Gaza and the West Bank, including east Jerusalem.

"This will push us to embark on direct negotiations," Abbas said.

The Palestinians say Netanyahu has yet to respond to the proposal, and the prime minister has previously said Israeli forces must remain in the strategic Jordan Valley after any peace deal to prevent weapons smuggling.

In an indication of the domestic pressure Abbas faces, his own Fatah party on Thursday told him not to join direct talks with Netanyahu's right-wing government without showing progress in the US-brokered indirect talks.

Abbas rejects direct talks

IANS, Ramallah

Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas rejected a call by US special envoy George Mitchell to hold direct negotiations with Israel, Fatah member Mohammed Dahlan said.

During the three-hour meeting in the West Bank city of Ramallah, Mitchell 'did not give Israeli responses to the Palestinian questions regarding borders and security', the Fatah Central Committee member said in a statement.

'Going to direct negotiations requires that there should be progress and clear Israeli answers regarding borders and security. In the absence of an Israeli response to these two issues, Fatah has not changed its position regarding its refusal to hold direct negotiations,' Dahlan said.

US President Barack Obama had urged Abbas in a telephone call last week to move from the current indirect or proximity talks to direct negotiations with Israel.

The Palestinian Authority said it would start direct negotiations, suspended since December 2008, only after progress in the proximity talks on borders and security.

In an interview with a Jordanian newspaper, Abbas said Saturday that he would be ready to enter direct negotiations if Israel accepted a third party or international force to maintain security of the borders with the Palestinian state.

Mitchell said the aim of his visit was to press on with Obama's vision for a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, "which must begin with an agreement between Israel and Palestine that will provide for two states living side by side in peace and security".



The coffin of a foreigner who died in a fire at Soma Hotel is loaded in an ambulance before it is repatriated to his country, at Sulaimaniya airport, 260 km (160 miles) northeast of Baghdad yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

US on track for Iraq troop drawdown

Vice President Joe Biden says

AFP, Washington

The United States remains on track for its drawdown in troops from Iraq by August despite the political stalemate in Baghdad, US Vice President Joe Biden said in an interview broadcast yesterday.

"There is a transition government. There is a government in place that's working," Biden told ABC's "This Week" when asked if the US administration can meet its commitment to end its combat mission in August.

"Iraqi security is being provided by the

Iraqis, with our assistance. We're going to have -- still have 50,000 troops there. We will have brought home 95,000. There is no one in the military who thinks there's any reason we can't do that."

Biden acknowledged the difficulties among Iraqi parties in reaching a power-sharing agreement but said this would not affect the US drawdown.

"I don't have a doubt in my mind that we'll be able to meet the commitment of having only 50,000 troops there and it will not in any way affect the physical stability of Iraq," he said.

Iraqi political parties "are in negotiations right now to figure out how to allocate the power within that government," he said.

"In other words, share power. And it is about just that. And it's underway. And it's going to happen. There will be a central government with control of its foreign policy, with control of the military."

Biden's comments came days after Washington urged Iraqis on all sides to make greater efforts to overcome differences and end a four-month stalemate in forming a government.

EU calls for opening Gaza borders

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Catherine Ashton, the European Union's foreign policy chief, has said Gaza's borders must open to enable the territory's battered economy to recover.

"The position of the EU is very clear. We want to see the opportunity for people to be able to move around freely, to see goods not only coming in to Gaza but exports coming out of Gaza," Ashton said yesterday during a visit to Palestinian territory.

Ashton is the most senior diplomat to visit Gaza since Israel announced earlier this month that it would relax its three-year blockade to allow most consumer goods into the coastal strip of 1.5 million Palestinians.

Israel continues to ban virtually all exports and restricts the import of badly needed construction supplies and raw materials for industry. And along with Egypt, it prevents most Gazans from travelling.

Ashton, who was due to meet Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, later yesterday, said she would take her argument to the Israeli government "as well as of course making sure that we're putting the right kind of pressure to the international community".

Other voices in the international community have also risen lately to call for the end of Israel's Gaza restrictions.

A coalition of 18 European aid and human-rights groups, including Amnesty

International UK, issued a statement yesterday saying the EU "must insist on the full lifting of the blockade of Gaza, not just its easing".

The foreign ministers of 10 southeast Asian countries have also called for unimpeded aid access to Gaza and "strongly condemned" the May 31 Israeli military raid on an aid flotilla bound for the territory, according to a draft document obtained by the Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency.

Nine activists died in the raid, which sparked an international outcry.

The AFP obtained the document ahead of the annual meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), which begins in Vietnam on Monday.

"We reiterated the call for the unimpeded access of humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people in Gaza in order to help alleviate their plight," the document said.

In their draft, the ministers call for a resumption of negotiations for "a final, just and comprehensive settlement with the realisation of two states, Israel and Palestine".

Along with Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation in the world, Asean includes Muslim-majority nations Malaysia and Brunei.

Some members of Netanyahu's administration used Ashton's visit to fire back at Israel's critics.

"(Israel) did everything it could as far as the humanitarian aid to the civilian population of Gaza is concerned," Yudi



European Union foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton during a visit to the Israeli town of Sdeot yesterday. Ashton, who was due to meet Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, later yesterday, said she would take her argument to the Israeli government. PHOTO: AFP

Edelstein, minister of public affairs and the diaspora, said.

Yuval Shteinitz, the minister of finance, said that "some Europeans tend to ignore the real character of the Hamas regime in Gaza. This is the most

brutal regime, the Hamas

regime in Gaza, on the face of

earth. In Gaza, there are more executions per capita than in any other country in the world."

Ashton was not scheduled to meet with any Hamas representatives during her three-day

tour of Gaza.

On Friday, she held a joint news conference with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

"What we all are looking for is to end the suffering of our people in Gaza by lifting the

siege and, once again, by having a policy of openness that is clearly defined and one that is implemented in the way that it is announced. What we do not want to see is actually old policy with a new name," Fayyad said.

Nato 'intercepts letter from Mollah Omar'

AFP, Kabul

Nato said yesterday it had intercepted a letter from fugitive Taliban leader Mollah Mohammad Omar in which he called for any Afghan supporting their country's government to be captured or killed.

Omar had issued the directive in June, Nato spokesman Brigadier Josef Blotz said, adding that the Taliban chief was believed to be in hiding in neighbouring Pakistan.

"The message was from Mollah Omar, who is hiding in Pakistan, to his subordinate commanders in Afghanistan," Blotz said.

He said the order to Taliban fighters was to fight coalition forces to the death, and to capture and kill any Afghan civilian supporting or working for coalition forces or the Afghan government.

It also encouraged the recruitment of any Afghan with access to Nato or US bases in the country, Blotz told reporters.

The one-eyed Omar is a founder of the Taliban and is often referred to as its "supreme commander" or spiritual leader. Many analysts and diplomats have long believed he is in Pakistan, although Islamabad has denied his presence.

The letter, if genuine, appears to be a departure from an earlier directive that urged Taliban not to harm captives.

"Whenever any official, soldier, contractor or worker of the slave government is captured, these prisoners cannot be attacked or harmed," said the August 2009 code of conduct, attributed to Omar.

By contrast, the latest letter says women should also be killed if found to be helping or providing information to coalition forces.

The United States and Nato have almost 150,000 troops deployed to Afghanistan, fighting an insurgency of almost nine years that is becoming more virulent as foreign forces take the fight to the Taliban's heartland.

Casualties among foreign troops have spiked in recent months, with more than 370 killed so far this year, compared to 520 for all of 2009.

Military commanders say the higher death toll was expected as battlefield engagements are escalating with the coalition's attempts to speed an end to the war.

World marks Mandela's birthday

AP, Pretoria

A South African community once riven by anti-foreigner violence came together yesterday in the spirit of Nelson Mandela to play a little soccer.

The so-called "goodwill games" were among activities around the world marking Mandela's July 18 birthday and was conceived as an international day devoted to public service. Community leaders in Atteridgeville organized the unity-building tournament of teams of South Africans, Zimbabweans, Mozambicans and Somalis who all live in this poor, black neighbourhood on the western edge of South Africa's capital.

Mandela, who turned 92 years old yesterday and is largely retired from public life, was spending the day with his family in Johannesburg. Early Sunday, his wife went to an orphanage in Soweto to help plant a vegetable garden.

"Today is an opportunity for millions of people around the world to look inside themselves and find those beautiful qualities as any human being has and say: 'I am able to make a difference to my neighbour, to someone underprivileged, I can extend my

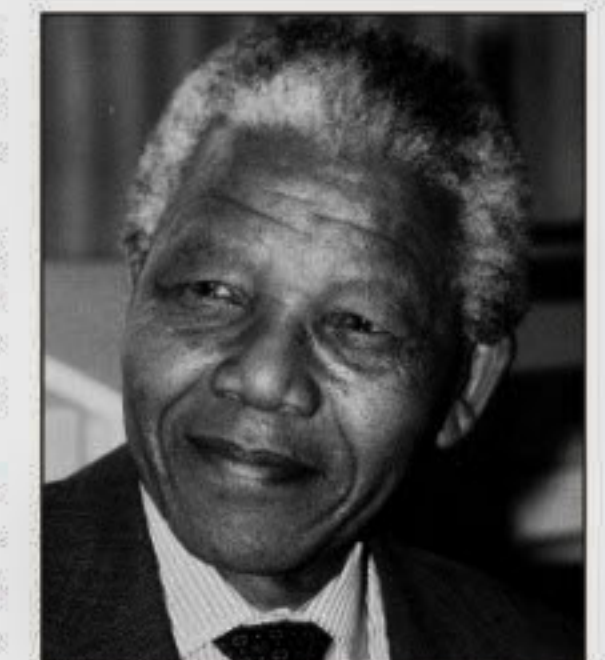
goodness to other people,'" Mandela's wife Graca Machel said yesterday.

She said that while her husband was no longer so physically strong, "his spirit is strong as ever."

President Jacob Zuma and other government officials were marking the day in Mandela's birthplace of Mvezo by planting trees and painting class rooms in that far southern region of the country that is among the poorest in South Africa.

In a speech in Mvezo, Zuma said Mandela taught South Africans that "we must work together to entrench African unity and solidarity in our country."

He said South Africans had



democracy, compassion and reconciliation," President Obama said.

He encouraged the public to heed the call to engage in some form of service to others, and said of Mandela, "We strive to follow his example of what it means to truly give back to our communities, our nations, and our world."

Mandela Day organisers in South Africa this year had called on citizens to, among other things, honor the anti-apartheid leader by devoting time to calming fears anti-foreigner sentiment could again erupt into widespread violence, as it did in Atteridgeville and across the country in 2008.

National police commissioner

Nathi Mthethwa was in Atteridgeville Sunday. He kicked a ball around with young men on a dusty field next to a cemetery before the tournament began. Earlier, he addressed a crowd of about 1,000 on the field. Mthethwa said Mandela had taught South Africans about the need for unity and cohesion.

The people of Atteridgeville listened intently to Mthethwa, some recording him on their mobile phones, as he spoke in a mixture of Sotho and English. He said other Africans had supported South Africans in the fight against apartheid, and now were bringing skills and resources that would help build the economy.

"My brother from another mother is still my brother," Mthethwa said. "My sister from another mother is still my sister."

In 2008, protests over lack of homes, schools, jobs and clinics for the poorest South Africans erupted into anti-foreigner rioting. More than 60 people were killed two in an Atteridgeville squatter camp in weeks of sporadic violence scattered in squatter camps and other impoverished areas across South Africa.

Ashraf slates bureaucrats

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to remove administrators from local government bodies if it receives any specific information, added Ashraf, also general secretary of the ruling Awami League.

POLLS TO LOCAL GOVT BODIES
On holding polls, the minister said elections to the municipalities and union parishads countries are likely to be held by next November and December respectively.

The Local Government Division has already asked the Election Commission to hold the polls, which were supposed to be held in early 2008 and 2009 respectively, he said.

The last elections to over 4,000 union parishads and over 200 municipalities were held in early 2003 and 2004 respectively. Tenure of those bodies was expired in early 2008 and 2009.

But due polls to the union parishads were not held on time due to the state of emergency in 2008 and later in absence of law.

Similarly, EC could not go for holding polls to the municipalities last year in absence of the law. The government introduced

the local government (union parishads) and the local government (municipalities) acts in the end of last year.

But EC in March this year asked the LGRD to amend a provision of the act dropping the system for redrawing the boundaries of wards of union parishads and municipalities maintaining 10 percent more or less population disparity from one ward to another under those.

In defence of the amendment, EC said it is not possible to redraw the boundaries in line with the provision and any move to do so will create social anxiety.

The government has yet to amend the law.

About formation of district councils, the minister said the government plans to form the district councils.

The immediate past caretaker government promulgated the local government (district council) ordinance. Now work is going on the draft district council bringing some amendments to the ordinance.

On completion of the draft, it will be sent to the Cabinet Division, the minister said.