

AFTER 20 MONTHS

Obama launches ME peace bid

AFP, Washington/Cairo

US President Barack Obama on Wednesday launched a long-odds bid to forge Israel-Palestinian peace within a year, despite widespread scepticism and violent attempts to strangle his efforts.

On the eve of the first direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians for 20 months, Obama gathered regional power brokers for one-to-one sessions and a joint dinner at the White House, putting his personal credibility on the line.

The talks will take place with few of the parties, or outside observers, predicting success, and widespread regional distrust and suspicion are reflected in the lack of obvious popular momentum for a new era of peace-making.

Low expectations for the peace drive were borne out as key players entered the talks with entrenched positions and after the Islamist Hamas movement delivered a bloody riposte to the talks by killing four Israelis.

And the issues on the table -- the status of Jerusalem, security, the borders of a Palestinian state and the right of return for Palestinian refugees have confounded all previous mediation attempts.

The Palestinians have warned they will walk out of direct talks if the restric-

tion is not extended, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak warned in The New York Times the freeze must stay if the peace drive is to succeed.

But the White House insists that a "window of opportunity" has opened up to forge a two-state solution in the Middle East, at a time when Iran's growing influence is threatening to reset the regional political map.

Obama first huddled in the Oval Office with Netanyahu, who responded to the Hamas strike on the West Bank by vowing to avenge the spilling of Israeli blood.

In a flurry of high-stakes diplomacy, coming at a time when his domestic popularity is ebbing due to the slowing recovery, he was then due to hold separate talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, King Abdullah II of Jordan and Mubarak.

All five leaders were then due to appear together at a potentially awkward White House appearance to make individual statements, before retiring for a dinner also featuring Quartet diplomatic representative Tony Blair.

The White House said the day of intense presidential engagement was meant to build trust ahead of direct US-engineered Israeli-Palestinian talks due to be compared by Hillary on Thursday.



US President Barack Obama (R) holds a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel yesterday at the White House in Washington, DC. Obama on Wednesday launched a long-odds bid to forge Israel-Palestinian peace within a year, despite widespread scepticism and violent attempts to strangle his efforts.

Netanyahu rules out extension on settlement freeze

AFP, Washington

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton there would be no extension of an Israeli moratorium on settlement construction that expires at the end of the month, his office said yesterday.

"It is impossible to take the issue of settlements in the West Bank, which is an issue for the permanent agreement and deal with it separately at the beginning of the direct talks," a statement from his office quoted Netanyahu as telling Hillary during their meeting Tuesday.

The Palestinians say that a renewal of settlement activities after September 26, when a 10-month partial moratorium expires, would end the negotiations.

"Israel does not condition its participation in the talks on the Palestinian Authority regaining control of the Gaza Strip or rehabilitating West Bank refugee camps to find a solution for refugees outside Israel's borders," he said referring to other thorny issues at the heart of the talks.

"We are not looking for excuses to stop the negotiations. The opposite, we came here to find a real solution without preconditions," the statement quoted him as saying.

Middle East peace initiative at a glance

BBC ONLINE

Agreed and the Palestinians have agreed to resume direct peace negotiations in September - their first face-to-face meeting since December 2008.

US special Mid-East envoy George Mitchell had been shuttling between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for months in a bid to get them to agree.

Hopes are that direct discussions will resolve issues at the core of one of the world's most intractable conflicts, which nearly two decades of on-off talks have so far failed to solve.

WHAT WERE THE OBSTACLES TO DIRECT TALKS?

For many weeks there has been disagreement over guarantees to precede direct talks. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted he is ready to return to the negotiating table but says there should be no preconditions.

However the Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud

Abbas, wants assurances that the borders of a future Palestinian state would be based on the 1967 ceasefire lines. He is also calling for a complete freeze of Jewish settlement building in the occupied West Bank. There is pressure from Washington to begin talks before 26 September, when Israel's 10-month moratorium on settlement building is due to end.

Full-scale return to settlement construction could deal a fatal blow to peace efforts.

WHAT DO THE SIDES WANT?

Netanyahu says he supports a Palestinian state, but it must be demilitarised, with an Israeli presence along its eastern side, and it must recognise Israel as a Jewish state. Jerusalem, where the Palestinians want their capital, must remain Israel's eternal, undivided capital. This is a tougher stance than that of his predecessor Ehud Olmert, but it remains unclear whether it is an initial bargaining position rather than a statement of un-crossable red lines.

The Palestinians want a viable, inde-

pendent state in the West Bank and Gaza, with their capital in East Jerusalem. They want the state's territory to be based on the land that Israel occupied in 1967, but are willing to accept a partial land swap, allowing some Israeli settlement blocs to stay in Israel in exchange for territory now in Israel.

WHAT HAPPENED LAST TIME THEY TALKED?

Direct negotiations between Olmert's government and the Palestinians broke down in December 2008, as Israel launched a major military offensive in the Gaza Strip. This coincided roughly with the end of Olmert's term in office and his replacement by Netanyahu, who took several months even to back publicly the concept of a Palestinian state. During the talks, Olmert and Abbas's teams exchanged maps of possible border solutions, but failed to reach agreement. Olmert says his offer was the most generous ever made to the Palestinians - international supervision of Jerusalem's holy sites, the symbolic return of a

few thousand Palestinian refugees and, according to Haaretz newspaper, Israeli withdrawal from 93.7% of the West Bank, plus the equivalent of 5.8% of its area from Israel in land swap.

Abbas's team said it produced a map which offered to let the Israelis keep 1.9% of the West Bank in exchange for land in Israel.

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES OF SUCCESS?

There is little optimism from either side, with both saying they doubt the other's sincerity. There is also an obvious gulf between their positions.

As it stands, Netanyahu has little room for manoeuvre as his current coalition includes strongly right-wing parties which would be opposed to even discussing the status of Jerusalem. But he does have the option of bringing the centrist Kadima party into government if he wants to make concessions.

Abbas's position is weak. His democratic mandate has run out - elections are due but cannot be held because of the feud between his

Fatah party and the Hamas movement. The two factions are bitterly divided. Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, home to 1.5 million Palestinians, is strongly opposed to the negotiations. If Abbas did reach agreement with the Israelis, it would most likely be on terms Hamas would reject, although some of its leaders have suggested they might accept a deal if it was backed in a referendum.

WHAT IF THE TALKS FAIL?

Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is working to build the economic and security institutions of a functional state by mid-2011. There has been speculation that this might lead to a unilateral declaration of independence by the Palestinians. Although Abbas has ruled this out, the possibility remains troublesome for Israel. There are always fears that failure in the political process can lead to violence on the ground. Also, in a volatile region a conflagration between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, or with Hamas in Gaza, could undermine attempts to make peace.

Iran distances itself from insult to Bruni

AP, Tehran

Iran on Tuesday sought to distance itself from harsh remarks by a hard-line newspaper, which called France's first lady a "prostitute" for condemning the stoning sentence against an Iranian woman convicted of adultery.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said insulting foreign dignitaries like Carla Bruni-Sarkozy is incorrect and not sanctioned by the government.

The Kayhan daily first called Bruni-Sarkozy a "prostitute" Saturday, repeating its criticism Tuesday with the addition that the French first lady also deserved to die.

In its first public comments on the affair, the French Foreign Ministry said it found the comments unacceptable.

"We are making known to Iranian authorities that the insults made by the Kayhan paper and picked up by several Iranian internet sites regarding several French public personalities including Bruni-Sarkozy are unacceptable," said spokesman Bernard Valero at a briefing Tuesday.



Nasa team advises Chile on trapped miners

AFP, Copiapo

Nasa experts advised Chilean officials to be frank with 33 miners trapped deep underground about how long their rescue will take, as a giant drill slowly burrowed toward the desperate men.

Meanwhile, the owners of the Chilean mine begged for "forgiveness for the anguish" caused by the collapse of the San Jose gold and copper mine August 5, which sealed in the miners 700 meters (2,300 feet) under the earth.

"This is a terrible situation, and we hope that it will soon come to a happy end," Alejandro Bohn, co-chief of the San Esteban mining group, told a parliamentary committee looking into the 26-day-old drama.

They denied any negligence on their part in implementing safety regulations at the San Jose mine, near Copiapo, and said all the mine's inspection documents were in order prior to the August 5 cave-in.

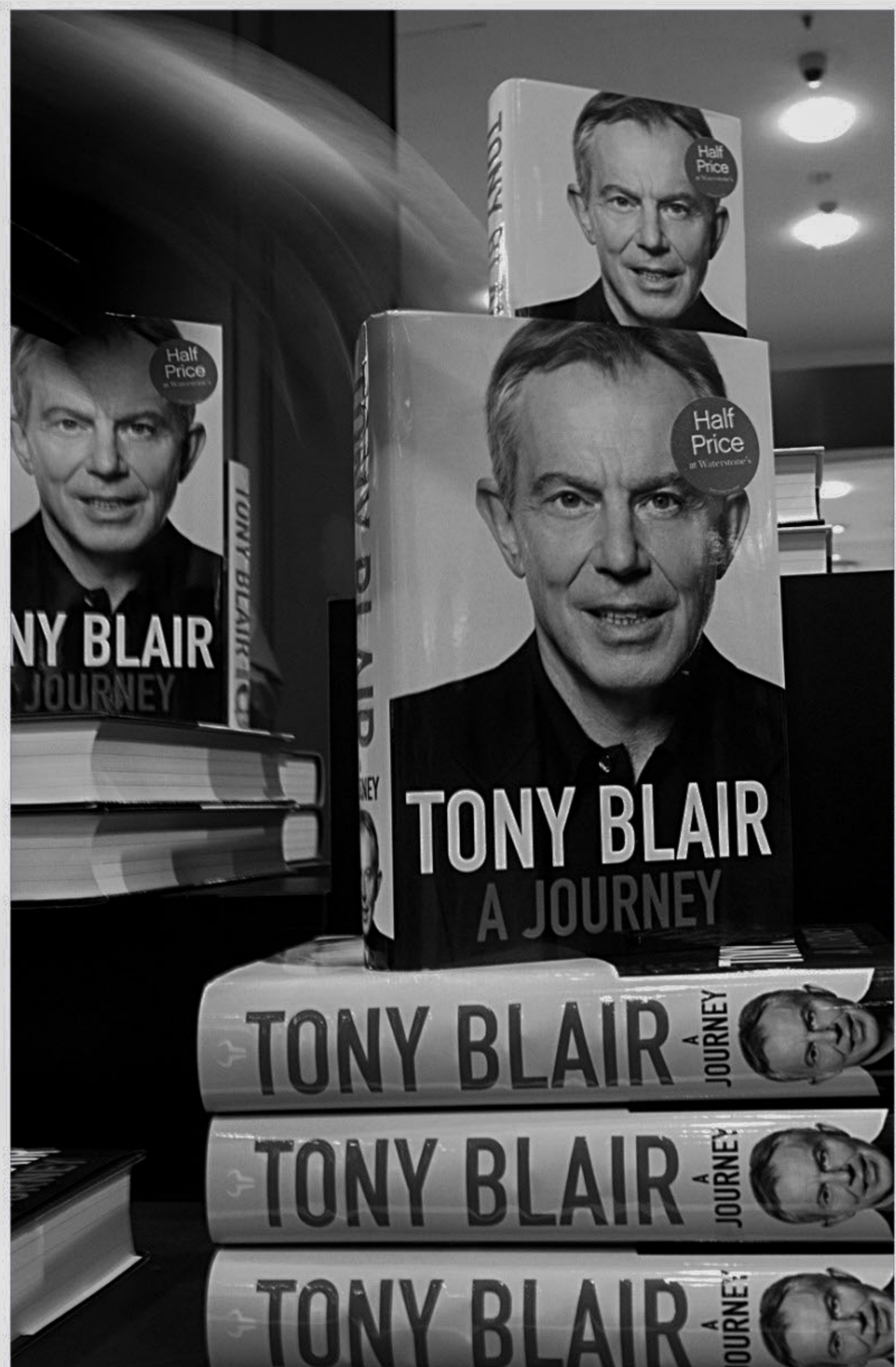
Rescuers say it will take three to four months for a 30-ton hydraulic drill to chew through the rock to where the miners were holding out.

They have been told they are in for a long wait before they can be pulled out, but have not been given any date by Chilean officials concerned about their mental state.

The Nasa experts, experienced in getting astronauts through extended periods of isolation, told Chilean Health Minister Jaime Manalich and Mining Minister Laurence Golborne and other officials to avoid conveying "false hopes" to the trapped men.

Honesty was key, Nasa's deputy chief medical officer James Duncan, explained to reporters in Santiago.

The miners' experience and expectation that rescue would take a long time had to be taken into account, he said, drawing parallels with the training and professionalism of astronauts.



A man takes a copy of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's memoirs, "A Journey" as it goes on sale at Waterstone's book store in London yesterday. Blair said he was "desperately sorry" over the deaths in the Iraq war, in extracts released from his memoirs. He said he was "sorry for the lives cut short", but maintained it was right to remove dictator Saddam Hussein from power, in extracts from "A Journey", his account of his decade in office.

Australian Green party backs PM Julia

AFP, Sydney

Australia's only Greens MP yesterday declared his support for Prime Minister Julia Gillard as tortuous negotiations to form a minority government inched forward.

Green leader Senator Bob Brown said MP Adam Bandt would back Julia's Labor party in parliament after she offered to set up a climate change committee, invest in dental care and study a high-speed east-coast rail link.

"We have made a decision here," Brown told a press conference. "We are the first people in this balance of power in both houses to make a decision."

"We think that will help lead to others making a decision."

The move was widely expected after the parties agreed to swap preferences votes during August 21 polls, and as the alternative Liberal/National coalition is led by Tony Abbott, who doubts mankind's influence on climate change.

Bandt's endorsement gives Labor 72 seats in the 150-seat lower house, still

short of the 76 needed for a majority, with Abbott's centre-right coalition on 73, according to the official tally.

Four independents have yet to declare support for either side while one seat remains in doubt as postal and absentee votes are counted, after cliff-hanger elections returned the first hung parliament since 1940.

Seat numbers remain volatile as tallying continues in the extremely close contest, with candidates in some marginal seats separated by just a few hundred votes.

About 83 percent of ballots have been counted, and the definitive result is not due before the end of this week.

Disillusioned voters swung sharply away from Labor and towards the Greens, who enjoyed a record vote share, after the government hesitated to act on climate change and sacked elected prime minister Kevin Rudd in June.

The deadlock has been largely shrugged off by financial markets but experts warn protracted uncertainty could unsettle business confidence and harm Australia's reputation for stability.

Mass breakout from Aussie immigration centre

AFP, Sydney

More than 80 asylum-seekers broke out of an Australian immigration detention centre yesterday after days of riots and staged a seven-hour protest outside, police said.

The detainees escaped from the centre in the far northern city of Darwin at about 6:30 am, a spokeswoman told AFP. Media reports said the protesters were Afghans and unfurled a banner saying, "We need protection not detention."

Police said the protest ended when 76 were taken into custody at the Darwin watch house and another five, including two suffering from heat exhaustion, were taken to a nearby hospital where they remained under immigration custody.

"They peacefully came into our custody," Assistant Police Commissioner Rob Kendrick told reporters.

'Kangaroo' cuddle saves Australian baby

AFP, Sydney

An Australian couple yesterday spoke of how they believe the skin-to-skin "kangaroo" cuddle they gave their newborn baby saved the infant's life after their doctor had given him up for dead.

Speaking to Australian television, Kate and David Ogg said medical staff told them that their Jamie -- delivered prematurely at just 27 weeks and weighing only one kilogram (2.2 pounds) -- could not be saved.

They said their doctor, who was not named in the Channel Seven report, spent 20 minutes trying to resuscitate the child before giving them the bad news.

"He turned to look at me while his hands were still on the bed and said, 'Have you chosen a name for your son?' And we said his name was going to be Jamie. He turned around and said, 'We've lost Jamie. Jamie didn't make it.'"

Given the tiny baby to hold, Kate gently placed him on her bare chest and cuddled him in what is known as the "kangaroo" care method, named after the hopping Australian marsupial which carries its young in a pouch.



In this position, Jamie would have been able to hear his mother's heartbeat and feel the warmth of her skin.

"He started gasping more and more regularly and I'm like, 'Oh my God what is going on?' Then a short time later he opened his eyes," Kate said of the two-hour experience, which Channel Seven said was backed by hospital staff.

"Coming back from the dead sounds pretty miraculous," she added.

Kate and David said they sent a message to the doctor that Jamie seemed to be showing signs of life but were informed that his movements were natural reflexes and there was no way he could be alive.

"I would say that we would have been the only two people in the hospital that believed the possibility of him coming back after he started showing signs of life," David said.

The couple, who are about to take their thriving five-month-old son and his twin sister to the United States for media appearances, said they were astonished at the interest their story had generated around the world.