

Israel 'ready to compromise' on settlements

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday raised the possibility of a compromise on settlement construction...

Just two days before the conclusion of the 10-month partial moratorium on settlement construction...

Israel is prepared to reach a compromise acceptable to all parties...

But he stressed that "there cannot be zero construction" in West Bank settlements.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was "making intensive efforts to reach such a compromise before the expiration of the moratorium on September 26..."

Israel was previously adamant the restrictions would not be renewed even though Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas had threatened to walk out of the peace talks over the issue.

Obama on Thursday firmly restated his conviction the moratorium should be extended.

Abbas welcomed Obama's remarks, "especially his call for a halt of the settlement activities and for the creation of a Palestinian state."

The Palestinian leader reiterated his threat to quit the talks if new construction curbs are not imposed.

"At the end of the freeze period on the 26th of this month, if the response about the freeze of settlement is not positive, we will halt negotiations..."

Israeli settlers accused Obama of caving in to Abbas's threat.

"If President Obama wants to be perceived as an honest broker in this process, he should make clear to Mr Abbas and his colleagues that threats, blackmail and preconditions are not acceptable..."

The US administration also said on Thursday it was proposing "ideas" to Israeli and Palestinian negotiators...

In recent days, Netanyahu has discussed the issue with US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other leaders...

The Obama administration had already played a key role in getting the two sides back to the negotiating table on September 2 after a 20-month pause in

the peace talks.

The previous round of direct negotiations collapsed when Israel launched a devastating military offensive on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip in December 2008.

Abbas and Netanyahu did not appear to have made any progress towards narrowing their differences during talks last week in Egypt and in Jerusalem attended by Clinton.

In a bid to resolve the row, US officials have suggested a three-month extension to the moratorium during which time the two sides could agree on borders, which could neutralise the settlements dispute...

The Palestinians and US negotiators want a complete halt to settlements while Israel is insisting on continuing to build in major blocs it hopes to keep in any final peace accord.

Abbas told AFP this week he was "not opposed to a settlement freeze for a month or two."

The international community considers Israeli settlements in the West Bank, including annexed east Jerusalem, to be illegal. The settlement issue has long been among the thorniest in the peace process.

Some 500,000 Israelis live in more than 120 Jewish settlements across the West Bank and east Jerusalem, territories expected to form the bulk of a future Palestinian state.



Members of the Palestinian Popular Committee hold a protest calling for the boycott of Israeli settlement goods sold in Palestinian areas, yesterday in Maasarah, near the West Bank city of Bethlehem.

Aquino orders halt to shanty demolition

AFP, Manila

President Benigno Aquino ordered a halt to the demolition of thousands of squatter shanties in the Philippine capital following violent street protests...

The order came after hundreds of squatters blocked Manila's main thoroughfare for hours on Thursday to resist the demolition of their homes...

Aquino's executive secretary Pacquito Ochoa said.

The World Bank estimates up to half of Manila residents live in slums.

"The president has instructed me to order the National Housing Authority to suspend the relocation of families living in the... property that oppose their transfer to the proposed relocation site..."

Some 6,000 families still live in the overcrowded slum area known as North Triangle and have refused government efforts to relocate them outside the capital.

Japan to free China boat captain for sake of ties

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan yesterday released a Chinese trawler captain yesterday at the heart of a fierce territorial row with China that has threatened ties between Asia's two biggest and increasingly interdependent economies.

A prosecutor from Naha city on Japan's southern Okinawa island said the decision to release the captain, whose trawler collided this month with two Japanese patrol boats in waters near islands both sides claim, reflected consideration for Sino-Japanese ties.

Japanese prosecutors have not said when the captain will be released, but China said it was sending a chartered plane yesterday to take him home.

"It is a fact that there was the possibility that Japan-China relations might worsen or that there were signs of that happening..."

The expected release follows the detention of four Japanese nationals who were being investigated on suspicion of violating Chinese law regarding the protection of military facilities...

Emotions have run high over the issue in China, where memories of Japan's invasion and occupation of parts of the country from 1931 to 1945 still fuel public anger.

The disputed islets are known as the Diaoyu

in China and the Senkaku in Japan.

"The Chinese government will welcome this," said Liu Jianguo, an expert on Japan at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

But the basic issue of jurisdiction over the Diaoyu Islands is a long-term issue that won't be resolved for a long time. That issue will remain and dealing with it will test the wisdom of politicians on both sides.

The roots of the trawler dispute lie in a long-standing disagreement over sovereignty in an area with potentially rich natural gas resources...

China said it was sending a plane to pick up the captain and issued a statement bristling at even the possibility of Japan claiming the right to charge him.

Japanese Finance Minister Yoshihiko Noda had warned earlier that worsening ties would be bad for both economies.

"A cooling of relations between Japan and China over the Senkaku problem would be bad for Japan's economy, but it would also be a minus for China..."

Japan's sluggish economy has become increasingly reliant on China's dynamism for growth. China has been Japan's biggest trading partner since 2009 and bilateral trade reached 12.6 trillion yen (\$147 billion) in the January-June period, a jump of 34.5 percent over the same time last year, Japanese data shows.

Liberia ex-warlord in leader race

BBC ONLINE

Former Liberian warlord Prince Johnson has told the BBC there is no reason he cannot stand in the country's presidential elections next year.

Johnson, now an elected senator, said military leaders been elected in other countries.

His party was given the green light to compete in the polls earlier this week.

He is notorious for a 1990 video, in which he was seen drinking beer as his men cut off the ears of ex-President Samuel Doe, before killing him.

There has been a mixed reaction to his bid for power, with critics saying it could threaten the country's fragile peace.

Johnson was a warlord during civil war between 1989 and 2003, in which some 250,000 people died.

Johnson told the BBC's World Today programme that Liberia was no different to other countries that had fought war.

Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has recommended that Johnson be banned from holding public office for his role in the war.

Most blame US for 9/11 Ahmadinejad tells UN

REUTERS, United Nations

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told the United Nations Thursday most people believe the US government was behind the attacks of September 11, 2001, prompting the US delegation to leave the hall in protest.

Addressing the General Assembly, he said it was mostly U.S. government officials and statesmen who believed al Qaeda Islamist militants carried out the suicide hijacking attacks that brought down New York's World Trade Center and hit the Pentagon.

Another theory, he said, was "that some segments within the U.S. government orchestrated the attack to reverse the declining American economy, and its grips on the Middle East, in order to save the Zionist regime."

"The majority of the American people as well as most nations and politicians around the world agree with this view," Ahmadinejad told the 192-nation assembly, calling on the United Nations to establish "an independent fact-finding group" to look into the events of September 11.

As in past years, the U.S. delegation walked out during Ahmadinejad's speech. It was joined by all 27 European Union delegations and several others, one Western diplomat said.

Mark Kornblau, spokesman for the U.S. mission to the United Nations, reacted before Ahmadinejad finished speaking.

"Rather than representing the aspirations and goodwill of the Iranian people, Mr. Ahmadinejad has yet again chosen to spout vile

conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic slurs that are as abhorrent and delusional as they are predictable," he said.

Ahmadinejad raised a third theory about the attacks, saying: "It was carried out by a terrorist group, but that the American government supported and took advantage of the situation. Apparently this viewpoint has fewer proponents."

He said the main evidence for that theory was "a few passports found in the huge volume of rubble and a video of an individual whose place of domicile was unknown but it was announced that he had been involved in oil deals with some American officials."

"It was also covered up and said that due to the explosion and fire no trace of suicide attackers was found," he added.

Similar to past years, the Iranian president used the General Assembly podium to attack Iran's other arch foe, Israel, and to defend the right of his country to a nuclear program that Western powers fear is aimed at developing arms.

"This regime (Israel), which enjoys the absolute support of some western countries, regularly threatens the countries in the region and continues publicly announced assassination of Palestinian figures and others, while Palestinian defenders ... are labeled as terrorists and anti-Semites," he said.

"All values, even the freedom of expression, in Europe and the United States, are being sacrificed at the altar of Zionism," Ahmadinejad said.

The Iranian president has previously raised doubts about the Holocaust of the Jews in World War Two and said Israel had no right to exist.

European countries reject Atlantic oil drilling ban proposal

AFP, Oslo

Countries bordering the north-east Atlantic rejected a ban proposal on deep-sea offshore drilling destined to avoid an environmental disaster comparable to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, Norway said yesterday.

The ban was proposed by Germany at a meeting in the western Norwegian city of Bergen of the OSPAR commission, a body through which the 15 countries with western coasts and catchments of Europe, together with the European Union, cooperate to protect the environment of the North-East Atlantic.

The proposal was quickly withdrawn following pressure from the region's oil-producing countries, namely Norway, Denmark and Britain, Greenpeace said.

"Instead, another proposal was ... before taking any other decision, we will wait for the reports on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig to be presented to President Obama in January," Gard Nybro-Nielsen, a spokesperson of Norway's environment ministry, told AFP.

Shortly after the BP-leased Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in April, killing 11 and causing a catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, US President Barack Obama ordered a six month freeze on deepwater offshore oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.

The freeze was annulled by a court in July and promptly reinstated by the government. It expires on November 30.

Germany's failure to push a common ban for all OSPAR countries means eventual bans would have to be put in place by individual countries.

Environmental organisation Greenpeace, which is pushing for a ban of deep-sea offshore oil drilling, said the failed proposal was a "total victory for the oil industry."

Officials meeting in Bergen "did not have the political courage to protect us against another accident like Deepwater Horizon, while it was in their reach to do so," said Truls Gulowsen of Greenpeace Norway.

Activists from the environmental group have since Tuesday occupied Chevron-operated oil drilling ship anchored off the Shetland Isles to push for a ban on deep-water drilling in the North Sea.

At the end of August, Greenpeace activists climbed on to an oil rig operated by Scottish oil exploration group Cairn Energy off the coast of Greenland and halted drilling for more than a day.



A Bulgarian Orthodox priest carries an icon during a national march demanding religious courses in the school curriculum in Sofia yesterday.

Sri Lankan president for rethink on war rules

BBC ONLINE

The Sri Lankan president has called for a rethink on international rules governing the conduct of war.

Addressing the UN General Assembly in New York, President Mahinda Rajapaksa stopped short of explicitly calling for the Geneva Conventions to be changed.

Diaspora groups, meanwhile, have renewed calls for an international tribunal over the alleged war crimes committed by the security forces.

The Sri Lankan government denies its side committed any war crimes.

Speaking 16 months on from the military victory over the separatist Tamil Tiger rebels, Mr Rajapaksa called the rebels brutal, highly organised and effective.

The asymmetrical nature of conflicts gives rise to serious problems which need to be considered in earnest by the international community."

In Thursday's address, he said the Tigers had rejected attempts at dialogue with "contempt".

The president said Sri Lankans had faced the "atrocities of terrorism" for decades, and that the country lost nearly 100,000 lives.

It was therefore, he said, worth re-examining the capacity of international humanitarian law to meet today's needs.

This law is embodied in the Geneva Conventions, which among other things govern how prisoners of war should be treated and how civilians should be protected in conflict.

President Rajapaksa said that these laws had evolved for conflicts between states.

As Mr Rajapaksa arrived in New York, a pro-separatist Tamil diaspora group called for a tribunal to be set up to prosecute alleged war crimes committed by Sri Lankan forces.

Special drive

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illegal occupancy, experts say, it would significantly reduce the city's nagging gridlock that inflicts financial damage and causes environmental degradation.

Occasional eviction drives by Rajuk and experimental introduction of lane system and automatic signalling by DMP and leasing out a couple of city streets for on-street parking to ease the traffic congestion have proved futile and counter-productive.

Meanwhile, a proposal to empower four executive magistrates of Rajuk to conduct mobile court to recover car parks from illegal occupation is pending with the establishment ministry.

"Spot penalty with fine and imprisonment would effectively deter the errant building owners from renting out for parking space for other purposes, and also those who constructed buildings with no parking facilities," Mannan told The Daily Star, talking about the justification of empowering Rajuk magistrates.

According to records of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), the capital has 1,838 kilometres (excluding the Airport road and those in the cantonment area) of road and 388 kilometres of footpath.

At least one-third of the city streets remain illegally occupied, said SM Saleh Uddin, additional executive director of Dhaka Transport Coordination Board.

Prof Md Shamsul Hoque, director of Accident Research Institute at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), said on some days nearly 80 percent streets in Motijheel area

remain under the control of illegal occupation.

At some points of Mirpur Road (Azimpur to Aminbazar), street vendors and illegal car parking occupy more than half of the road, he added.

One motor vehicle occupies 160 square feet of space for parking.

Aminul Islam Suman, authorised officer of Rajuk, said the ground floor and basement car parking spaces at all buildings on Mirpur Road and Hatirpul Road (Sundarban Hotel to Kataban Mosque) are occupied with various kinds of shops. The same is the case with buildings on both sides of Kemal Ataturk Avenue.

Government agencies responsible for keeping the road and footpath free from illegal possession point fingers at each other saying their drives eventually fail due to manpower and logistical shortages coupled with lack of political will of the government.

DCC Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka last week said although they are legally responsible to keep the road and footpath free from the grip of illegal occupants, they have to depend on police to accomplish the job.

Md Shafiqur Rahman, DMP joint commissioner (Traffic), observed it is impossible on their part alone to do it without endorsement of the political authority."

Speaking about their workforce, he said the traffic department has only 300 traffic sergeants against the total need for at least 1,200 to manage some 5.5 lakh motor vehicles in the capital.