

Europe, US in Mideast peace push

REUTERS, Jerusalem

US envoys raced yesterday to try to revive Middle East peace talks and avert a Palestinian bid for United Nations membership, but a UN official said it was probably too late to stop the move opposed by Israel and the United States.

US Middle East peace envoy David Hale and senior White House aide Dennis Ross, who met both sides last week, planned to hold talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu later in the day and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Thursday.

Their visit appeared to be a last-ditch effort to persuade Abbas to abandon plans to seek to upgrade the Palestinians' UN status, a step the Western-backed leader has said he is taking in the absence of peace negotiations.

"There is a lot of intensive diplo-

macy on a formula that could avoid a diplomatic train wreck, and it is still going on," a senior Israeli government official said.

Israel and the United States have urged Abbas to return to talks rather than pursue unilateral steps at the world body during the General Assembly session that begins on Monday.

Abbas broke off those US-sponsored negotiations soon after they began last September, after Netanyahu refused to extend a 10-month partial moratorium on Jewish settlement construction in the West Bank, land Israel occupied in a 1967 war and which Palestinians seek as part of a future state.

Robert Serry, the United Nations' special coordinator for the Middle East, said that based on his contacts with the Palestinians, he believed they would not abandon their UN bid.

In another sign of international concern over a looming showdown

at the United Nations, the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, met Netanyahu, Defence Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman.

Ashton later said she had extended her trip to meet again with Netanyahu, at the Israeli leader's request.

"I hope that in the coming days (that) what we'll be able to achieve together will be something that enables the negotiations to start," she said.

Lieberman, who leads a far-right party in Netanyahu's governing coalition, warned the Palestinians of "grave consequences" if they pressed ahead with plans to upgrade their UN status, currently at observer level without voting rights.

He did not elaborate, but other ministers have suggested withholding funds from the Palestinians or annexing settlements.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents float in a small boat in their house amid flooding near the Chao Phraya river in Ayutthaya yesterday. So far the rising waters have left over 70 people nationwide dead and affected the homes and livelihoods of 4.3 million people, officials said.

Syria bloodshed must end Says Arab League

AFP, Damascus

The Arab League on Tuesday demanded an end to the bloodshed in Syria, as activists there staged anti-Russia protests and a Western-led drive for UN sanctions over the regime's deadly crackdown ran into new opposition from Moscow and Beijing.

The US and French ambassadors travelled to the Damascus district of Daraya on Tuesday to attend a condolence ceremony for slain Syrian activist Ghayath Matar, who reportedly died under torture, activists said.

The activists also posted a brief clip on YouTube, showing the US envoy Robert Ford and his French counterpart Eric Chevallier sitting on chairs at a large ceremony.

Matar, a key player in organising protests against President Bashar al-Assad's regime, died in detention after being tortured, according to the international watchdog Human Rights Watch (HRW).

Activists said that the Japanese and Danish ambassadors also attended the ceremony, and that immediately after diplomats departed, security forces attacked the ceremony, launching tear gas and firing in the air to disperse the gathering.

Meanwhile, demonstrators burned Russian flags in the flashpoint protest hubs of Homs in the centre and Daraa in the south in protest at Moscow's support for President Bashar al-Assad, activists said.

Carter Backs Palestinian UN State Bid

CNN ONLINE

Former President Jimmy Carter said Tuesday he supports the Palestinians' effort to secure statehood recognition at the United Nations this month, despite White House concerns for the region.

The Georgia Democrat said he wouldn't be in favor of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' bid to win U.N. recognition if President Barack Obama's administration had "put forward any sort of comprehensive peace proposal." But he told Palestinians have few other options but to seek statehood since no deal is in the works.

"As an alternative to a deadlock and a stalemate now, we reluctantly support the Palestinian move for recognition," he said at a town hall event at the Carter Center in Atlanta.

US says Gaddafi's son in Niger 'custody'

AFP, Tripoli

Muammar Gaddafi's son Saadi was under guard in the Niger capital yesterday after fleeing Libya over the weekend but Nato acknowledged it has no idea where his fugitive father is holed up.

The alliance stressed that the toppled strongman was not a target in the daily bombing campaign it has kept up against his remaining forces as the World Bank formally recognised Libya's new leaders and pledged to play a major role in their post-war reconstruction efforts.

Saadi Gaddafi, 38, the third of Gaddafi's seven sons, is among 32 officials of the ousted regime, three of them top generals, who have fled through the desert to neighbouring Niger this month.

Washington accepted Niamey's assurances that Saadi Gaddafi, who commanded an elite army unit after a brief career as a professional footballer in Italy, was in the custody of Nigerian security forces.

Nato said it had no idea whether Gaddafi himself had also fled his country.

Colonel Roland Lavoie, spokesman for Nato's Libya mission, said the alliance had received, at

"various points" in the conflict, intelligence confirming that Gaddafi was still in Libya, but that his whereabouts were now a mystery.

"To be frank we don't know if he has left the country," Lavoie told reporters on Tuesday.

Gaddafi has only been heard from in audio recordings broadcast by a friendly channel, Syria-based Arrai television. And his most recent statement was read out by the channel's owner on Monday.

Lavoie said advances by rebel forces in the past two days had cut pro-Gaddafi forces in the strip of territory between his hometown of Sirte on the Mediterranean coast and the desert town of Bani Walid from those in the southern oases of Waddan and Sabha with their access to Libya's desert border.

Nato said yesterday that its aircraft had hit nine targets around Sirte, seven around Waddan and one around Zillah, another oasis town to its east, in its latest raids.

And The World Bank on Tuesday became the latest international organisation to recognise the victorious rebels' NTC but South Africa said that the African Union had yet to decide on whether to give it Libya's seat in the continental bloc.

BP OIL SPILL US report shares blame

BBC ONLINE

A US federal report yesterday blamed the worst oil spill in US history on "key mis-steps", poor leadership and a poor cement job by BP and its contractors.

BP was "ultimately responsible" for rig safety, with Transocean responsible for safe operations and worker safety.

BP tried to save time and money at the cost of safety, and Transocean operated normally despite the hazards, it said.

"Multiple causes, involving multiple parties, including Transocean and Halliburton" were to blame, BP said.

The April 2010 Deepwater Horizon blast killed 11 workers and spilled four million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

It took three months and highly complex undersea engineering effort to plug the well and stop the oil flow.

The report, issued by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement and the US Coast Guard Joint Investigation Team, echoes previous reports in concluding that multiple factors contributed to the disaster.

The explosion was "the result of poor risk management, last-minute changes to plans, failure to observe and respond to critical indicators, inadequate well control response, insufficient emergency bridge response training by companies and individuals responsible," it said.

As well as labelling BP "ultimately responsible" for safety, the report blames Halliburton for conducting a poor cement job to seal the well that failed in the run-up to the blast.

NEWS IN brief

Argentina's Menem cleared in arms-smuggling case

AFP, Buenos Aires

Former Argentine president Carlos Menem on Tuesday was cleared of charges that he orchestrated the smuggling of arms to Croatia and Ecuador in the 1990s, a court in Buenos Aires ruled.

Menem, who was president from 1989 to 1999 and is now a senator, would have faced up to 12 years in prison if convicted of authorizing a shipment of 6,500 tonnes of weapons to Croatia and Ecuador via Panama and Venezuela.

Seventeen other defendants -- including former ministers, retired military personnel and arms makers -- were also cleared, prompting disappointment

French court acquits Sarkozy rival over smear scandal

AFP, Paris

A French appeals court yesterday confirmed the acquittal of former prime minister Dominique de Villepin over a political scandal in which he was accused of smearing President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The public prosecutor had called for the suave potential candidate in next year's presidential election and bitter Sarkozy rival to be given a 15-month suspended sentence in the so-called Clearstream scandal.

"I want to salute the independence of our judiciary which has held out against political pressure," Villepin said after the verdicts were read out in a clear attack on what he claims was a politically motivated case.

Iran judiciary denies decision taken on freeing US hikers

AFP, Tehran

Iran's judiciary said yesterday that no decision has been taken on releasing two US hikers convicted of spying, a day after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said the duo would be released soon.

"While denying... release of two Americans accused of espionage, the public relations of the judiciary announces that the request of the lawyer to post bail and free them is being studied by the case's judge," a statement posted on the judiciary website said.

"Any information in this regard will be issued by the judiciary and any release of information from other sources is not valid," it added.

Ahmadinejad told The Washington Post on Tuesday that Tehran would soon release Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal, convicted of spying but who claimed to have accidentally strayed into the country, "in a couple of days so they will be able to return home."

Clashes kill 12 in Yemen

REUTERS, Aden

Fighting between the Yemeni army and militants in and around the southern provincial capital of Zinjibar killed at least 12 people yesterday, just days after the government declared it had "liberated" the city from Islamist fighters.

An army official said seven militants and one soldier were killed in a suburb of the coastal city, which the army last week recaptured from Islamist fighters suspected of links to al-Qaeda's Yemen-based branch.

Four more militants were killed in another part of Zinjibar.

"The militants snuck into the area to try to carry out a suicide attack, but the snipers from the army prevented them and killed seven extremists," said the military official.

Attacks on security forces kill 17 in Iraq

AFP, Hilla

A spate of attacks appearing to target security forces in central and west Iraq yesterday killed at least 17 people, including five policemen and two soldiers, officials said.

The violence, which also left around 50 wounded, comes with just months to go before US forces are set to withdraw from the country completely, with questions over the capabilities of their domestic counterparts.

In the deadliest attack, a car bomb exploded in front of a restaurant frequented by security force members in the town of Medhatiyah, just east of the central city of Hilla, in Babil province.

Provincial deputy governor Sadiq Rasul al-Mohannah put the toll at 13 dead and 42 wounded. He said three policemen were among the dead, and added that the casualties also included women and children.

Meanwhile, a "sticky bomb" attached to a vehicle inside an Iraqi air force base in the town of Habbaniyah, about 80 kilometres west of Baghdad in mostly Sunni Anbar province, killed two soldiers and wounded 10 others, according to defence ministry spokesman Major General Mohammed al-Askari.

And in Baghdad, insurgents opened fire on a police checkpoint in the Qahira neighbourhood, in the capital's north, killing two policemen and wounding another, an interior ministry official said.

New Jackie Kennedy tapes offer White House insight

BBC ONLINE

Audio tapes of Jackie Kennedy, recorded months after the 1963 assassination of her husband President John F Kennedy, have been released for the first time.

In the interviews with a White House historian, she says civil rights leader Martin Luther King is "a terrible man".

Jackie Kennedy, who died in 1994, reveals how JFK was scathing about Vice-President Lyndon Johnson and some world leaders.

She recalls, too, how her husband joked about the threat of assassination.

Jackie Kennedy opened her heart to White House aide Arthur Schlesinger at her Washington home, four months after JFK was killed in Dallas, Texas.

She agreed to the interviews on condition that they would not be

released until long after her death.

The eight hours of recordings are the subject of a book - Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic Conversations on Life With John F Kennedy - published yesterday.

She strongly criticised Dr King, recalling how her brother-in-law Robert Kennedy told her the civil rights leader had been intoxicated at JFK's funeral and mocked Cardinal Richard Cushing's Mass.

"He made fun of Cardinal



John F Kennedy with Jacqueline Kennedy.

world leaders, too.

French President Charles de Gaulle was "that egomaniac" and "that spiteful man", while future Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was a "bitter, kind of pushy, horrible woman".

Jackie Kennedy also said her

Cushing

and [Robert] said that he was drunk at it. I can't see a picture of Martin Luther King without thinking that man's terrible."

She reserved sharp criticism for

Everyone thought I was a snob from Newport, who had bouffant hair and had French clothes and hated politics," she said.

But, after entering the White House, she said the situation improved.

She recalled that her closest moments with her husband came during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when the US and Soviet Union seemed on the brink of nuclear war.

husband had been disappointed upon meeting Winston Churchill in the 1950s.

"Jack had always wanted to meet Churchill. Well, the poor man (Churchill) was really quite gaga then," she said.

"I felt so sorry for Jack that evening because he was meeting his hero, only he met him too late."

She also said it had not been easy marrying into the Kennedy family.

"I was always a liability to him. Everyone thought I was a snob from Newport, who had bouffant hair and had French clothes and hated politics," she said.

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PHONE HACKING ROW Media probe launched in Australia

BBC ONLINE

Australia confirmed yesterday it will hold an inquiry into media regulation in the wake of Britain's phone hacking scandal.

The review, to be headed by former judge Ray Finkelstein, will focus on the print and online sectors.

Communications Minister Stephen Conroy said it would look at strengthening Australia's media watchdog.

But he said it would not be a "witch-hunt" aimed at News Limited, Rupert Murdoch's Australian arm.

News Limited controls 70% of Australia's newspaper market and has extensive holdings in TV and the internet.

RELIGIOUS OPPRESSION US keeps 8 nations on blacklist

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged governments Tuesday to do more to defend religious freedom as Washington released a report citing eight countries with troubling records on the issue.

"We reaffirm the role that religious freedom and tolerance play in building stable and harmonious societies. Hatred and intolerance are destabilizing," Clinton said, releasing the State Department's International Religious Freedom report for the second half of 2010.

The report named China, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan and Uzbekistan, a list unchanged since 2009, as "countries of particular concern" regarding religious freedom.

Ten other countries were cited for failing to sufficiently protect religious rights: Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Venezuela and Vietnam.

The report, previously published annually, detailed actions such as active state repression, violence against religious groups, apostasy and blasphemy laws, anti-Semitism and restrictions on religious attire and expression.

Clinton praised Turkey for taking "serious steps to improve the climate for religious tolerance" with a decree in August that invited non-Muslims to reclaim churches and synagogues that were confiscated 75 years ago.

9/11 terror threat 'ongoing'

AFP, Washington

The United States remains on alert for a possible terror attack, even though the 9/11 anniversary has come and gone without incident, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said Tuesday.

"We consider it as an ongoing threat," Napolitano said, testifying before a congressional panel.

Napolitano and FBI director Robert Mueller appeared before the US Senate Homeland Security panel to discuss US vulnerability to terror threats 10 years after the September 11 attacks by al-Qaeda.

Officials had feared Sunday's 10th anniversary could provoke terrorists to launch attack on US.