



ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN LEADERS ENTER PEACE TALKS

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The Prime Minister of Israel will meet with his Palestinian counterpart Tuesday for the first time since the Palestinian uprising -- known as the intifada -- began four years ago.

Both sides have said they hoped the meeting would mean a halt to violence that has killed thousands and revive the U.S.-backed "road map" for a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel.

A possible cease-fire

Officials indicated that newly elected Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas may announce a long-term cease-fire with the Israelis, and that Israel may reciprocate by releasing some prisoners and agreeing not to hunt wanted Palestinian militants.

Israel recently announced a pullback of its military forces from Bethlehem, Jericho, Ramallah and other population centers in the West Bank and has promised the United States that it will lift checkpoints and roadblocks that have hampered the ability of Palestinians to work and go to school.

In Gaza, where violence has dropped sharply, a spokesman for the militant Hamas group said it would "study the outcome of the summit" in Egypt and then decide on its course of action.

Renewed U.S. involvement

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice proclaimed that "a time of optimism" had arrived in the Middle East. She called on Israel to make "hard decisions" in negotiations with Palestinian leaders as they wage their own fight against militants.

"We will have to, all of us, make certain that there is an effective fight against terrorism, because security and terrorism are at the core of peaceful existence," Rice said after meeting with Israeli leaders.

Rice's visit marks a new level of involvement in the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. The United States has played an on-and-off role as "monitor" to coordinate peace talks since the late 1990s, and President Clinton held several high-profile peace summits. However, when President Bush was elected in 2000, he refused to negotiate with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, who died in November.

Mahmoud Abbas won the presidential election in January -- the first in nine years.

Rice announced that the Israeli and Palestinian leaders had accepted invitations by President Bush to attend separate meetings in the United States next spring. She also named a U.S. general, William Ward, to act as security coordinator for the Palestinians. Ward helped train security forces in post-war Bosnia.

"There should be no doubt about the commitment of the United States to this process at this time -- no doubt about the commitment of the president, no doubt about my personal commitment," Rice said at Abbas' headquarters.

Tough disagreements to overcome

Rice said Israel is aware of U.S. concerns over its controversial West Bank barrier, which Palestinians call a land grab and Israeli leaders say hinders suicide bombers.

But she praised Israel's planned pullout from the Gaza Strip this summer as "historic and monumental."

Palestinians have welcomed any withdrawal from occupied territory but cite Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's vow to hold on to large West Bank settlements in any future peace deal.

On her way to the Palestinian presidential building, where Arafat was confined for nearly three years, Rice's motorcade swept past his tomb without stopping, a symbolic action indicative of Washington's view that the former president was an obstacle to peace.

Now that new leadership is in place, President Bush has pledged \$350 million in aid to the Palestinians build schools, hospitals and security facilities.

--Compiled by Leah Clapman for NewsHour Extra

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