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U.S. Envoy Meets Palestinian Leaders to Discuss Peace Talks

By Robert Berger
VOA News

Jerusalem – President Obama's point man in the Middle East is continuing with a shuttle mission aimed at reviving the peace process.

U.S. envoy George Mitchell met Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank to discuss plans for indirect peace talks with Israel. The Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee will consider approving the new talks May 8.

The peace process has been deadlocked for 16 months. The key stumbling block to resuming negotiations has been Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem – territory which the Palestinians seek for a future state. But under pressure from Washington, Israel has curbed settlement construction, clearing the way for the resumption of talks.

Distrust on both sides runs deep. Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat says Israeli actions could quickly doom the peace process.

"If the price that we will pay for saying yes to Mitchell will be more settlements and more dictations, that's a big question mark about the possibility of continuing," said Erekat.

Israeli officials say the Palestinians have soured the atmosphere going into peace talks with their anti-Israel rhetoric.

"The question I want to raise specifically to the Palestinians [is], are they a partner for this peace?" said Israel's deputy foreign minister, Danny Ayalon.

Mitchell plans to shuttle between Jerusalem and the West Bank for four months in the framework of indirect peace talks. Expectations are low for a breakthrough, but both sides say they are prepared to give peace a chance.

Karzai Visit to Washington Comes at Important Time, U.S. Says

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington – Afghan President Hamid Karzai leads a delegation of senior Afghan officials to the United States May 10-13 for what Obama administration officials describe as an opportunity to evaluate the broad strategic partnership between the two countries as they focus on shared security, governance and development goals.

Speaking to reporters May 7, U.S. Army Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, special assistant to the president for Afghanistan and Pakistan, said Karzai's visit comes midway between President Obama's December 2009 announcement of his strategy for Afghanistan and its one-year review in December 2010.

Lute said it also comes ahead of Karzai's consultative peace jirga in May and his hosting of an international conference in Kabul in July, where he is expected to deliver action plans on his November 2009 inauguration commitments, followed in September by Afghan parliamentary elections and a second round of the U.S.-Afghan strategic dialogue.

Karzai's visit "takes place at a very important time," Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes said.

"This can be an important opportunity for the two sides to come together and to ... take stock of where we are, take stock of what the next steps are, what additional steps might be taken, what additional support the international community can provide, and what additional steps the Afghans can take to implement their own plans as relates to improving governance and security in their country," Rhodes said.

The Afghan delegation will include the ministers of foreign affairs, defense, interior, finance, education, agriculture, labor, and health. They will meet with U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, at the State Department on May 11, and with President Obama at the White House May 12.

The two presidents will have "more than three hours together, which itself is extraordinary," Lute said. The large delegation of Afghan Cabinet officials will also allow for "break-out sessions and ... bilateral sessions around security, around governance, and around development issues that will allow us to go into much more depth." The four-day visit also allows them to engage with member of the U.S. Congress and analysts at policy institutes, he said.

Rhodes said Obama administration officials are also approaching the talks with an eye toward beginning the transition of security and governance from U.S. and other international forces in Afghanistan to Afghan authorities in July 2011.

OPERATION HAMKARI UNDER WAY IN KANDAHAR

Karzai's visit comes as U.S. defense officials say they are expanding the Afghan and international effort to assert Afghan government control beyond Helmand province to Kandahar.

Army General David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. Central Command, told the MSNBC television channel May 6 that “we have already long since commenced the operations in Kandahar” to expand security and establish local governance “that can be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people.”

“This is not going to be an operation like Fallujah [in Iraq], where you start at one side of the city and fight your way to the other and clear it of insurgents. Rather, it’s going to be an expanding tide, if you will, a rising tide of security,” Petraeus said.

In testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives’ Armed Services Committee May 5, U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant General John Paxton Jr., who is director of operations at the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the effort in Kandahar is named Hamkari, which means “cooperation” in Dari, and was “planned and will be conducted with our Afghan partners in the lead.”

As with Operation Moshtarak, which has been conducted in Helmand province, the coalition is integrating military efforts to improve security with civilian projects that are focused on improving local governance, development and agriculture.

“The focus of Hamkari is on providing Kandahar with credible and effective governance that gives the population hope for the future. More effective government will deliver security, basic services, development and employment. If these ends are achieved, the people of Kandahar will reject the insurgency and support the government,” Paxton said.

“A more capable, representative and responsive government will be able to bring the economic development and rule of law that the area so badly needs,” he said.

Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michelle Flournoy told the committee that Afghan and international civilian operations begin with an assessment for each district, asking “What do the people need and want? What do they view as important? What do they prioritize? What do they expect? And what will be most meaningful to them?”

The civilians are focusing on grass-roots efforts, with “a lot more building at the local, district, and moving ... up to provincial level,” while “appreciating the importance of incorporating traditional societal structures” such as tribes and ethnic groups.

The attention to more local needs and appreciation for the demographics and cultural landscape in each district “is a really key emphasis in Afghanistan going forward,”

Flournoy said.

Highlighting the U.S. Commitment to Nuclear Disarmament

This May 6 statement by Ellen Tauscher, under secretary of state for arms control and international security, was taken from the State Department’s blog DipNote.

On Monday, Secretary Clinton delivered the opening U.S. statement at the Eighth Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference (NPT RevCon), reinforcing President Obama’s goal of achieving the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.

“I represent a President and a country committed to a vision of a world without nuclear weapons and to taking the concrete steps necessary that will help us get there,” Secretary Clinton said. “I come to this conference with sincere and serious proposals to advance the fundamental aims of the NPT and strengthen the global nonproliferation regime.”

Ever since the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty entered into force in 1970, the Parties to the Treaty have gathered every five years to review its effectiveness and members’ implementation of its provisions. We hope that the 2010 Review Conference will reaffirm the support of Parties for the Treaty, and also strengthen both the NPT and the broader nuclear nonproliferation regime.

At the conference, the United States delegation will hold a number of briefings for other delegations and non-proliferation NGOs on key NPT-related issues. The first of these, held at the United Nations on Wednesday, focused on our commitment to disarmament, which is one of the NPT’s three central pillars. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Strategic Affairs Dr. Michael Nacht and Under Secretary of Energy for Nuclear Security Thomas D’Agostino joined me in highlighting U.S. disarmament efforts.

I began the discussion with a review of the agenda for disarmament outlined by President Obama in Prague one year ago, and I discussed the concrete steps that the U.S. has been taking since then on this issue, such as signing the New START Treaty, releasing the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), and hosting the Nuclear Security Summit. From there, Assistant Secretary Nacht provided a more intensive explanation of the NPR, including reductions in the role and size of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense policy. Administrator D’Agostino then discussed reductions to our nuclear stockpile and how the Department of Energy Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration is leading U.S. efforts to dispose of excess fissile material. He also spoke about reductions in our nuclear weapons complex and how the NPR has

affected our nuclear stockpile management.

After our official remarks, we were able to spend forty-five minutes answering a number of questions from the mixed audience of delegation members, NGO representatives and press. Those exchanges helped us to make clear how much effort the United States is making on the disarmament pillar of the NPT and to further explain our goals for this Review Conference. Questions ranged from detailed inquiries on our stockpile management techniques to our policies on nuclear weapons in Europe and how the United States intends to move forward on our efforts to increase peace and stability worldwide. Many of the questions focused on the recently-released NPR and prompted a more in-depth discussion of the conclusions, policies, and recommendations contained in that document. Unfortunately, there were many more questions than we had time to answer, but we look forward to additional discussions on how, by working together, we can achieve President Obama's goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

This was a fantastic first event for our delegation, highlighting our important transparency and disarmament commitments, and we hope for continued engagement with the non-proliferation community throughout the course of the RevCon. The United States has made a strong effort, but there is still a lot of work to be done – by all of the Treaty Parties.

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