

Middle East Envoy Urges 'Lasting Peace'

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By Griff Witte
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JERUSALEM, Jan. 28 -- Arriving in Israel for his first visit as the Obama administration's Middle East envoy, former senator George J. Mitchell on Wednesday pushed for a more durable truce in the Gaza Strip, calling for a halt to weapons smuggling and for the territory's border crossings to be opened.

Speaking after a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Mitchell said the United States is "committed to vigorously pursuing lasting peace and stability in the region."

But his visit came as the relative calm of the past week and a half was being tested by violence that threatened to reignite the 22-day war in Gaza. An Israeli soldier was killed by an explosion as he patrolled on Israel's side of the boundary with Gaza on Tuesday, an attack praised by Hamas. Israel responded with an airstrike on a Hamas fighter, wounding him. On Wednesday, Israeli jets bombed several smugglers' tunnels.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak canceled a planned visit to Washington and said in a statement Wednesday that he had told Mitchell that Israel would not tolerate attacks on its citizens. Israeli military officials did not rule out more strikes in Gaza. "If Hamas escalates, we are ready to respond in a harsh manner. We don't want to return to where we were a month ago," said Maj. Avital Leibovich, an Israel Defense Forces spokeswoman.

Egypt is attempting to mediate between Israel and Hamas, seeking a truce of a year or more. Mitchell was in Cairo on Wednesday morning meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and said afterward that it is "of critical importance that the cease-fire be extended and consolidated, and we support Egypt's continuing efforts in that regard."

The United States has been working with Egypt to hammer out a system for halting the smuggling of weapons across the Egypt-Gaza border, and Mitchell said Wednesday that an end to smuggling will be essential for any cease-fire. He also said that the border crossings, the lifeline to the outside world for 1.5 million Palestinians, need to be opened. Israel has largely kept its crossings with Gaza shut since Hamas took control of the coastal territory in June 2007.

Mitchell, who is best known for his work to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland, is scheduled to meet with officials of the U.S.-backed Palestinian Authority in the West Bank on Thursday and to visit Jordan and Saudi Arabia later in his trip. He was not scheduled to meet with Hamas or visit Gaza.

Hamas foreign affairs adviser Ahmed Yousef called that a mistake, although he struck a conciliatory tone toward Mitchell and said he hoped that the Obama administration would be willing to engage with Hamas.

"I hope that with Mitchell's experience, his decency and his integrity, and with the desire of Mr. Obama to have a change in the region, we will be able to move things in a different direction," Yousef said, speaking in Gaza.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/28/AR2009012803900_pf.html

President Barack Obama's new Mideast envoy, George Mitchell, says his visit to the Mideast sends a clear signal that the U.S. is committed to pursuing peace and stability in the troubled region. (Jan. 28)
{youtube}IQCd7hbOmMQ{/youtube}

Gaza Crisis

Mitchell meets Olmert on Mid-East peace tour

28/01 16:45 CET

America's diplomatic efforts towards Middle East peace have seen President Obama's new peace envoy meet the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Senator George Mitchell is on a week long tour of the region – and the Israeli stop has meetings with other top security officials in Jerusalem.

In Tel Aviv, some Israelis urged their government to heed American advice on settlements. The leader of Peace Now, Yariv Oppenheimer, said: "We hope that the Israeli government will understand that building in the settlements is not only hurting Israel, but is also hurting the relationship between Israel and the American government."

The settlers had set up a small demonstration to express their opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of a two-state solution.

But for Senator Mitchell, the task has only just begun. His tour goes next to the West Bank for talks with the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, before going on to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, France and Britain. He has no plans for a direct meeting with Hamas.

<http://www.euronews.net/en/article/28/01/2009/mitchell-meets-olmert-on-mid-east-peace-tour/>

FM Livni meets with US envoy Senator Mitchell

28 Jan 2009

FM Livni: "Israel is striving to achieve a peace agreement that will represent its security and national interests."

(Communicated by the Foreign Minister's Bureau)

Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Tzipi Livni met on Wednesday (28 January) with US envoy Senator George Mitchell. During their meeting, Foreign Minister Livni discussed the Israeli strategy and the ways of advancing Israeli-American cooperation on all issues relating to the two countries' shared interests in the Middle East.

FM Livni said: "Israel is striving to achieve a peace agreement that will represent its security and national interests. Only such an arrangement will be accepted in Israel. In order for the peace negotiations to succeed, Israel must continue its war against terror wherever it exists and is directed against us.

Only a dual strategy of advancing the peace process side by side with a war against terror will succeed. Israel believes in the vision of two nation states, and Palestinian refugees will not enter the State of Israel.

Israel and the United States can and must translate their common interests into joint plans of action that will strengthen the moderates in the region and strike a blow at the extremist elements operating in our region - such as Iran and Hamas."

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/About+the+Ministry/MFA+Spokesman/>

[2009/Press+releases/FM_Livni_meets_US_Senator_Mitchell_28-Jan-2009.htm?DisplayMode=print](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/About+the+Ministry/MFA+Spokesman/2009/Press+releases/FM_Livni_meets_US_Senator_Mitchell_28-Jan-2009.htm?DisplayMode=print)

Netanyahu meeting to test Mitchell diplomacy

Josh Mitnick THE WASHINGTON TIMES

JERUSALEM | U.S. envoy George Mitchell has days of meetings scheduled with leaders in the Middle East, but likely faces his most critical round Friday when he is to see Benjamin Netanyahu.

The chairman of Israel's center-right Likud Party is the front-runner for prime minister in the Feb. 10 national elections, and many here speculate that his hawkish approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking could put him at loggerheads with the new U.S. administration.

Aides to Mr. Netanyahu said the former prime minister has a good personal relationship with President Obama stemming from two meetings when Mr. Obama was a U.S. senator.

They also emphasized at a conference Wednesday on U.S. Middle East diplomacy that Mr. Netanyahu would do his best to avoid friction that has arisen on occasion between Israeli leaders and U.S. presidents, including Mr. Netanyahu and President Clinton in the 1990s.

While Mr. Obama has spoken about the urgency of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Mr. Netanyahu's aides focused on the president's interview with the Al-Arabiya network earlier this week in which he said he did not expect the conflict to be solved in a matter of months.

Mr. Netanyahu doesn't think a near-term or a medium-term resolution is realistic, said Zalman Shoval, a former ambassador to Washington and a top foreign policy aide to the Likud leader.

"Achieving peace isn't going to happen any time soon," he said. "This is going to be a long process."

Mr. Shoval said Mr. Netanyahu will reiterate to Mr. Mitchell his priority for "economic peace" in the Palestinian territories that would raise the Palestinian standard of living and help prevent violence. Mr. Netanyahu is also skeptical about whether Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has the power to implement a peace deal, Mr. Shoval said.

U.S. officials have said that Mr. Mitchell is on a "listening tour" of the region and that his immediate focus is bolstering a tenuous Gaza cease-fire.

In a violation of the week-old truce, Palestinian militants fired a rocket into Israel on Wednesday.

Such actions intensify Israeli pressure to launch another painful retaliation against Hamas after a three-week war that killed more than 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis.

At the end of a meeting with outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Wednesday, Mr. Mitchell said the U.S. is pushing for an end to arms smuggling into Gaza, the reopening of borders and a cessation of violence.

By visiting the region soon after his appointment, Mr. Mitchell is signaling that the Obama administration will be active in trying to reach a two-state solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Mr. Mitchell began his Middle East tour in Egypt on Tuesday. He also is scheduled to visit the West Bank, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

<http://washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jan/29/netanyahu-meeting-to-test-mitchell-diplomacy/print/>

IDF Chief of Staff Meeting with the United States Envoy to the Middle East

IDF Spokesperson January 29th, 2009

IDF Chief of Staff Meeting with the United States Envoy to the Middle East

The IDF Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, met this morning in his chambers in Tel Aviv with the United States envoy to the Middle East, Mr. George Mitchell, who arrived in Israel as part of his current visit to the Middle East.

The Chief of Staff presented Mitchell with the main points of Israeli security operations regarding the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria and the goals of the recent Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip. In addition, they discussed the security challenges faced by the IDF and Israel, the strategic situation in the Middle East and the need to face the global threat of terror.

Lt. Gen. Ashkenazi praised the strategic and security cooperation and relationship between the United States and Israel and wished Mr. Mitchell luck in his mission to the region.

Quote by Senator George Mitchell

"In the negotiations which led to that agreement, we had 700 days of failure and one day of success," he said. "For most of the time, progress was nonexistent or very slow. So I understand the feelings of those who may be discouraged about..."

