

Blair named Middle East troubleshooter

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UNITED NATIONS - British former prime minister Tony Blair was Wednesday named special envoy of the diplomatic quartet pushing for Middle East peace and tasked with spearheading efforts to create a Palestinian state.

"Following discussions among the principals, today the quartet dealing with the Middle East is announcing the appointment of Tony Blair as the quartet representative," UN spokeswoman Michele Montas announced.

Blair's new role on the world stage was announced shortly after he stepped down as prime minister after a decade in power and was succeeded by his former finance minister, Gordon Brown.

The post of quartet representative had been vacant since former World Bank chairman John Wolfensohn left in frustration in May 2006.

President George W. Bush immediately welcomed the appointment of his close ally to the post.

"The president welcomes the appointment of Tony Blair. He's pleased that he will continue his work to help the Palestinian people," US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe said.

Representatives of the quartet -- the European Union, Russia, United Nations and United States -- had discussed naming Blair as their troubleshooter at talks in Jerusalem on Tuesday.

The quartet has been trying since 2003 to implement a "roadmap" for bringing about Israeli-Palestinian peace.

But the three-stage blueprint that should have led to the creation of a Palestinian state living side by side in peace with Israel by 2005 has since languished.

Montas said that as "quartet representative, Mr Blair will mobilize international assistance to the Palestinians, working closely with donors and existing coordinating bodies."

The 54-year-old former British premier will also "help identify and secure appropriate international support in addressing the institutional governance needs of the Palestinian state, focusing as a matter of urgency on the rule of law," a quartet statement said.

Blair was also tasked with developing plans to "promote Palestinian economic development, including private sector partnerships, building on previously agreed frameworks, especially concerning access and movement."

He was to be supported in his new job by a small team of experts based in Jerusalem and seconded by partner countries and institutions.

Speaking before parliament for the last time as prime minister, Blair said "the absolute priority is to try to give effect to what is now the consensus across the international community that the only way of bringing stability and peace in the Middle East is a two state solution."

He said this means "a state of Israel which is secure and confident in its security, and a Palestinian state that is not merely viable in terms of its territory but in terms of its institutions and governance."

"I believe it is possible to do that but it will require a huge intensity of focus and work," Blair added.

Blair's appointment was announced after Russia signaled it would not oppose the move.

"If the whole of the quartet is in favor, we are going to welcome Tony Blair's contribution to efforts to normalize the situation in the Palestinian territories," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reportedly said on a flight from Tel Aviv to Minsk earlier Wednesday.

Lavrov was earlier in Ramallah for talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

Blair, who lost political capital after sending British troops in support of the US-led invasion of Iraq, spent his last months in office stressing that a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was a priority for him.

There had been fears that Blair's close association with Bush's Iraq policy might hurt his credibility as Middle East envoy, particularly in the Arab world.

The former British premier on Wednesday also resigned as a member of parliament.

Meanwhile Saudi King Abdullah urged rival Palestinian factions to settle their differences or face serious repercussions, ahead of a visit Wednesday to Jordan where he is to meet Abbas.

"I appeal to the brothers in Palestine, who pledged to God in Mecca to shoulder their huge responsibilities, to settle their differences in order to avoid repercussions," he told Jordan's Al-Rai daily.

In February, Saudi Arabia brokered a power sharing deal signed in Mecca which paved the way for the formation of a Hamas-Fatah unity government designed to end deadly internecine fighting and win back Western aid.

But the unity government fell apart after the Islamists of Hamas seized Gaza from security forces loyal to Abbas's secular Fatah faction. -AFP