

U.S. to Focus on Getting Mideast Talks Started After Biden Flap

March 11, 2010

By Jonathan Ferziger and Gwen Ackerman

The U.S. will try to keep a new round of Middle East peace talks on track after containing a diplomatic flap over Israeli home construction in east Jerusalem that marred Vice President Joe Biden's trip to the region.

Wrapping up a four-day visit to Israel and the West Bank, Biden said yesterday he's counting on U.S. envoy George Mitchell to get Israeli-Palestinian talks started for the first time in 15 months, even if they are conducted indirectly.

"The most important thing is for these talks to go forward and go forward promptly and go forward in good faith," Biden said in a speech at Tel Aviv University before flying to Jordan. "We can't delay because when progress is postponed, extremists exploit our differences."

Mitchell, the former U.S. senator and peace mediator in Northern Ireland, will try to overcome the remaining barriers to new negotiations when he returns to the region next week. Palestinians say they will reconsider their participation in the talks because of an Israeli plan to build 1,600 homes in a disputed part of Jerusalem, and they scoffed at Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's explanation that bureaucrats were to blame for announcing the plan.

While the episode embarrassed Biden, President Barack Obama's administration and Netanyahu, Israeli political scientist Mark Heller said it shouldn't derail the talks.

"It was a good job of damage control by everybody," said Heller, principal research fellow at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies. "I think it is not going to have a disruptive effect on what passes for the peace process."

'Expressed Regret'

Netanyahu issued a statement just minutes before Biden's speech in which he "expressed regret over the unfortunate timing" of the announcement and said he had summoned Interior Minister Eli Yishai to convey his "displeasure" that it was disclosed during the vice president's visit. Netanyahu's spokesman, Mark Regev, said the premier ordered his Cabinet secretary to impose new "controls" on ministries to ensure that such episodes don't happen again.

The plans for Jerusalem were the second building project approved this week in areas sought by Palestinians for a future state, and came after the sides agreed on March 8 to U.S.-backed indirect negotiations intended to break a 15-month impasse.

“In light of the ongoing disagreement between Israel and the U.S. on building in Jerusalem, the prime minister said there was no need to advance the planning process this week,” an e- mailed statement from Netanyahu’s office said.

No Decision

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said no decision will be made about joining the talks until Mitchell returns to clarify the Israeli position on the housing project. Regarding Netanyahu’s statement, he said: “It’s not good enough because it talks about an error in timing and not the error in substance. This project must be revoked.”

Biden, who condemned the building plans when he found out about them March 9, said he accepted Netanyahu’s apology and explanation that the project won’t move ahead immediately.

“It gives the negotiations time to resolve this as well as other outstanding issues,” Biden said. “The beginning of actual construction on this particular project would likely take several years.”

This isn’t the first time the U.S. has found it difficult to arrange peace talks, said Daniel Kurtzer, the U.S. ambassador to Israel from 2001 to 2005. Two decades ago, when then- Secretary of State James Baker was trying to organize a Middle East peace conference, he “was greeted with a new settlement announcement each time he visited Israel,” Kurtzer said in a March 9 interview.

‘Bumps and Blips’

“There have been bumps and blips on screen for years and this is just another one,” Hebrew University political scientist Peter Medding said.

Biden, in a 37-minute speech on the Tel Aviv campus, said the aim of the indirect talks is to start direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians on a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict.

The vice president also tried to offer assurances that the U.S. would guarantee Israel’s security against threats ranging from the Islamic group Hamas, which the U.S. and Israel call a terrorist organization, to Iran and its nuclear development program.

“Every day Israel faces threats no country should have to endure,” Biden said. “America stands with you shoulder to shoulder facing these threats. The United States is determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Period.”