



Syria Refuses to Renew Talks With Israel

Syria refuses to renew its indirect negotiations with Israel until the latter responds to queries regarding plans for the disputed Golan Heights, the Arabic-language Al-Hayat daily reported on Thursday.



According to the report, Syria has given Turkish mediators its responses to Israel's security questions, but has asked that the document not be transferred until Beit-ul-Moqaddas delivers its responses to Damascus' own queries.

Turkey has recently urged a renewal of negotiations, particularly in light of Barack Obama's election to the US presidency. Both Turkey and Syria have expressed hope that the new US administration will enable an intensive advancement of contacts and perhaps even bring about direct negotiations.

The Bush administration has long had reservations about Israel's talks with Syria and refuses to play any active role in them.

Obama, however, favors American dialogue with Syria, and would presumably agree to take an active role in Israel.

Cuba Finds Obama Amenable

Fidel Castro said Thursday that President-elect Barack Obama is a man Cuba can talk with and indicated that officials would be willing to meet with him wherever he wants.

But the former Cuban leader expressed disappointment with some of Obama's Cabinet choices, including Hillary Rodham Clinton as secretary of state and Robert Gates as defense secretary, AP reported.

In his latest essay distributed to official media, the ailing 82-year-old former president wrote that with Obama "a conversation can be held wherever he wants," and that Cuban officials don't expect the new US administration to be marked by violence and war.

But he added that Obama must remember that a carrot-and-stick approach won't work with Cuba.

Castro and Cuban officials, in general, have said very little about Obama since he won the US presidential election. But he did describe him as intelligent in an earlier essay.

Fidel's younger brother, President Raul Castro, suggested in a recent interview with actor-director Sean Penn for *The Nation* magazine that he and Obama hold talks at the US military base in Guantanamo.

Ukraine Presses For NATO Entry

Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko said Thursday NATO membership is the most effective method of preserving the country's independence and territorial integrity.

"The best way to preserve our independence, maintain our territorial integrity is not an arms race, not joining a world competing for military conflict, but admission under the protection of a united collective security policy," Yushchenko said during celebrations devoted to the country's Armed Forces Day, RIA Novosti reported.

"This is the formula which is optimal for all European countries," he said.

After a NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels on Tuesday, Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said the alliance would "beef up" the NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia Commissions, to help speed up reforms needed for the countries' eventual membership of the alliance. However, European countries led by Germany derailed US plans to bring the two post-Soviet countries into the Membership Action Plan (MAP).

NATO refused at its April summit to let Georgia and Ukraine into MAP, a key step for membership in the 26-nation alliance, but pledged to review the decision in December. The countries had received strong US backing for their bids.



Dalai Lama Visits Upset China

The Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama arrived in Poland Friday for an eight-day tour during which he will meet visiting French President Nicolas Sarkozy on the anger of China.

"I'm very happy to be in the city where the historic Solidarity movement was born and where my friend Lech Walesa began his activities", the Dalai Lama said as he arrived at the airport in the Baltic port of Gdansk and was welcomed by the city's mayor, Pawel Adamowicz, AFP reported.

The Dalai Lama and other past recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize were invited to a ceremony in Gdansk marking 25 years since Lech Walesa received the honor for leading Poland's Solidarity movement in a peaceful struggle against the then communist regime.

Sarkozy, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the 27-nation European Union, has insisted he will meet the Dalai Lama in Poland on Saturday.

In response, China decided to scrap a summit with the EU which had been scheduled for December 1 in France and which Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao had been due to attend.

The Dalai Lama's trip to Poland is part of a wider European tour which has already seen him take in Prague and Brussels.

In Focus

Turkish Elites Apologize For 1915 Events

A group of Turkish intellectuals have apologized for the "great disaster that Ottoman Armenians suffered in 1915" but have fallen short of calling on the state to do the same.

The petition initiated by a group of intellectuals, including professors Baskin Oran and Ahmet Insel, journalists Ali Bayramoglu and Cengiz Aktar, personally apologizes for the events, *Today's Zaman* reported.

The group is asking other people to sign the petition, which reads as follows: "I cannot conscientiously accept the indifference to the great disaster that Ottoman Armenians suffered in 1915, and its denial. I reject this injustice and acting of my own will. I share the feelings and pains of my Armenian brothers and sisters, and I apologize to them."

The Lausanne Treaty, signed in 1923, set in motion a population exchange between Greek Orthodox citizens of the young Turkish Republic and Muslim citizens of Greece, which resulted in the displacement of approximately 2 million people. The Armenian population that was in Turkey before the establishment of Turkish Republic was forced to emigrate in 1915, and, according to some, the conditions of this expulsion are the basis of Armenian claims of genocide.



> Talks to Continue

Armenia and Turkey have agreed to continue talks on improving bilateral relations, the Armenian Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Friday.

According to RIA Novosti, Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandyan met with his Turkish counterpart Ali Babacan in Helsinki, Finland on Thursday. "Nalbandyan and Babacan agreed to continue talks," the ministry said.

The border between Turkey and ex-Soviet Armenia has been closed since 1993 on Ankara's initiative.

Odierno Proposes Shift in Iraq Pact

A security pact that sets a timetable for troops to leave Iraq requires a shift in how the US carries out combat missions during its remaining time in the country, the top US military commander Gen. Ray Odierno in Iraq said Friday.

Gen. Ray Odierno said in a written statement to troops that they would be receiving new rules of engagement but that there would be no change to their ability to protect themselves and the multinational force, AP reported.

The security pact, "though, will require a subtle shift in how we plan, coordinate and execute combat missions throughout Iraq," Odierno said, adding that under the new terms of agreement, US troops will coordinate and execute all operations with the approval of the Iraqi government and implement them through the Iraqi security forces.

Odierno also said US troops would continue to conduct operations in Iraq against Al-Qaida and other extremist groups.

NATO Kills Flock of Sheep

NATO aircraft killed a flock of sheep in the Afghan province of Laghman, in a botched attack on Taliban gunmen, according to sources in the governor's office, RIA Novosti reported.

Provincial police say the incident occurred on Wednesday night near the town of Mehtar Lam. Shots fired from NATO helicopters killed over 200 sheep belonging to local shepherds. The sources told reporters that NATO troops claim they were targeting Taliban warriors.



India, Russia Sign Landmark Deal

India and Russia on Friday signed an agreement covering the construction of a new nuclear plant in southern India and a cooperation accord on manned space flight, reported news channel Times Now.

Visiting Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the agreement with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi on Friday.

The new plant, including 4 nuclear energy reactors, is to be built at Kudankulam in south state Tamil Nadu, where Moscow is already building two 1,000-megawatt light water reactors, Xinhua reported.

Russia, after United States and France, becomes the third country to sign an atomic energy agreement with India after a decision in September by the Nuclear Suppliers Group to lift its ban on trade of nuclear technology with India.

The two sides also signed an accord that envisages Russia sending an Indian cosmonaut into space in 2013 and then launch a manned Indian spacecraft in 2015, officials said.

> Joint Declaration

India and Russia urged the international community to provide assistance to bring to justice the organizers of last week's terrorist attacks in Mumbai, that left over 170 people dead.

A joint statement called "on all countries to actively cooperate with the Indian authorities" to support efforts to find "the perpetrators, masterminds, sponsors...and everyone connected with these barbaric acts," the declaration adopted by the Indian prime minister and the Russian president said, RIA Novosti reported.

Terrorists swept through Mumbai on November 26, armed with submachine guns and grenades attacking hotels, the railroad station, a cinema, and a hospital.



Indian Premier Manmohan Singh (l), Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (c) and Indian President Pratibha Patil stand together during a welcoming ceremony at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi on December 5.

The three-day rampage killed 174 people, including more than 20 foreigners.

Singh told journalists after the meeting, "We expect the international community to recognize that terrorism anywhere and everywhere constitutes a threat to world peace," and added without naming Pakistan that the "territory of the neighboring country had been used" to commit the terrorist acts.

On Monday, India sent an official note to Pakistan's ambassador in New Delhi demanding the extradition of 20 people believed to be involved in terrorist activities, including three fugitives wanted in India.

Manmohan Singh and Dmitry Medvedev urged the international com-

mission to speed up the adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, a draft of which is currently under discussion by the UN General Assembly.

India and Russia also called for the development of a single approach to counter terrorist threats that would also cover the security problems in Afghanistan.

Harper Wins Suspension of Parliament

Prime Minister Stephen Harper won a rare suspension of parliament on Thursday, managing to avoid being ousted by opposition parties angry over the minority Conservative government's economic plans and an attempt to cut off party financing.

Governor General Michaëlle Jean—the representative of Queen Elizabeth, Canada's head of state—agreed to Harper's request to shut down parliament until Jan 26, Reuters reported.

Parliament was reconvened just weeks ago after the October 14 election.

Harper's request for suspension was unprecedented. No prime minister had asked for parliament to be suspended to avoid a confidence vote in the House of Commons.

Such a vote had been set for Monday and the Conservatives almost certainly would have lost it, and faced the possibility of being replaced by a coalition of opposition parties.

After a two-hour meeting with the governor general, Harper reaffirmed his promise to present a budget on Jan 27 and called on the opposition to work with the government over the next few weeks to tackle the effects of the global financial crisis.

"Today's decision will give us an opportunity—and I'm talking about all the parties—to focus on the economy and to work together," he told reporters.

The opposition Liberals, New Democrats and the separatist Bloc Quebecois—all to the left of the Conservatives—had signed a deal to defeat the Conservatives and put



forward a Liberal-New Democrat coalition to form a new government.

The Bloc, which wants to take French-speaking Quebec out of Canada, pledged to back the coalition's budgets and general policy direction.

The governor general's role in government, as representative of the Crown, is largely ceremonial, though she has the final word on constitutional matters.

Should the government be defeated in a confidence vote, she would decide whether to call a new election or allow the opposition to form a coalition government.