

Obama, Netanyahu meet on Mideast crisis

Washington, November 10: US efforts to revive the Middle East process floundered Tuesday with no progress reported after closed door talks between Obama and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu left the White House after spending an hour and forty minutes inside, without making the customary public appearance with the US president.

The president reaffirmed our strong commitment to Israel's security, and discussed security cooperation on a range of issues, the White House said in a brief statement.

The president and prime minister also discussed Iran and how to move forward on Middle East peace.

Ahead of the meeting, Netanyahu said he was ready to immediately engage in peace negotiations, but prospects of renewed talks appear dimmer than ever.

The summit was announced late Sunday only after Netanyahu had arrived in Washington, forcing officials on both sides to deny the last-minute invitation reflects US frustration with the hawkish premier.

Israeli prime ministers hardly ever go to Washington without meeting the US president, usually holding a high-profile press conference.

Israel's ties with the Obama administration had been strained over Netanyahu's refusal to heed the US demand for a full settlement freeze in the occupied West Bank ahead of a resumption of peace talks with the Palestinians.

The White House appeared wary not to present Monday's end-of-day meeting as a backing of Netanyahu's stance.

The policy of the United States government for many decades has been: no more settlements, that's not something that is new (with) this administration, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said hours before the talks.

Netanyahu on Monday urged moderate Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, who last week announced he would not run for re-election in January, to immediately renew peace negotiations.

I say today to Mahmud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority, let us seize the moment to reach an historic agreement. Let us begin talks immediately, he told a conference of North American Jewish leaders.

But Washington's efforts to relaunch Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, a goal the US administration has made the cornerstone of its Middle East policy, have recently encountered serious setbacks.

The first crisis came when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton praised Netanyahu's offer of a limited easing of settlement construction as unprecedented during a visit to the region last week, triggering Palestinian and Arab fury.

The declaration marked a stark break from months of US support of the Palestinian demand for a total Jewish settlement freeze ahead of renewed talks.

Clinton later backtracked, but her statements were widely interpreted as a U-turn by Washington which, after months of pressing Israel on settlements, appeared to back off and pile the pressure instead on the Palestinians to restart talks without preconditions.

The Obama-Netanyahu meeting a little more than a week after Clinton's remarks would likely reinforce that view among Palestinians and the Arab world, analysts said.

But Netanyahu insisted that "no Israeli government has been so willing to restrain settlement activities as part of our efforts to relaunch peace talks."

The Palestinian Authority warned ahead of the meeting that violence could once again convulse the region if Washington fails to get Israel to halt its settlement activity.

"Violence will rush in to fill the void left by the failure of efforts to relaunch the peace process if the US administration does not hurry up and exert pressure on the Israeli government," presidential spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina told .

Abbas's announcement that he would not seek re-election further complicated Obama's hopes to see Israelis and Palestinians return to the negotiation table.

Palestinian officials said the Palestinian leader's move came after he grew disappointed with the US stance on Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, which the international community considers illegal.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak was also in Washington for talks with his US counterpart Robert Gates and US special envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell, his office said.

Netanyahu earlier met lawmakers in Congress. On Wednesday, he will head to Paris to meet President Nicolas Sarkozy, Israeli officials said.

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