

Abbas urges Europe: Support Palestinian spring

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STRASBOURG, France (Ma'an) -- President Mahmoud Abbas told the Council of Europe on Thursday that security is created through peace, and not force.

Addressing the council's parliamentary assembly in Strasbourg, Abbas appealed to Europe to support Palestine's bid for full UN membership, which is under review by a Security Council standing committee.

"Today we are at the heart of the Arab spring: we say that the hour of the Palestinian spring has struck," he told European parliamentarians.

"You supported the Arab spring which was seeking democracy and freedom," he said.

"Now the Palestinian spring has arrived, asking for freedom and an end to the (Israeli) occupation. We deserve your support."

Urging European states to support Palestine's admission to the United Nations, the president said: "We went to the international community after the path to negotiations was shut off, and it was the only solution left."

Palestinians would not be driven to extremism, Abbas said.

"Though there were many attempts at provocation by the Israeli side, we will not let them drive us to extremism, we will not go that way."

International diplomats have urged the Palestinian leadership to return to negotiations with Israel, in a bid to avert a diplomatic showdown as the UN Security Council considers Palestine's UN membership.

Abbas told the Europeans that Palestinians were not against negotiations, but they must take place in a more constructive environment, with greater clarity about the conditions, and with a freeze on Israeli settlement building on Palestinian lands.

"We don't intend to isolate Israel or take its legitimacy but we want to gain our legitimacy and decide our future and our goals without occupation and settlements," the president said.

The president also called for the release of 6,000 Palestinians held in Israeli jails in contravention of international law, adding that 21 lawmakers were imprisoned in Israel.

Palestinians want the detainees freed in the same way that the parents of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit wants their son released, Abbas told the parliamentarians. Shalit has been held in Gaza since 2006.

The Council of Europe on Tuesday voted to grant "Partner for democracy" status to the Palestinian National Council, a decision hailed as "historic" by PNC Speaker Salim al-Zanoon.

Abbas met with EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton during his two-day visit to France.

Ashton said in a statement that she had "a long, open and frank discussion" with the president on Wednesday, and reiterated her goal "to find a way to bring the parties back to the negotiating table."

The EU, US, UN and Russia issued a Quartet statement calling on Israel and the PLO to meet within one month to agree on an agenda to resurrect stalled peace talks on Sept. 23.

The PLO executive committee criticized the proposal for failing to demand Israel halts illegal Jewish-only settlement building on occupied Palestinian land, an issue which quashed the last round of direct peace talks in September 2010.

From Europe, Abbas will continue his diplomatic charm offensive to secure Security Council votes in Latin America.

The president is expected to address parliament in the Dominican Republic on Friday before heading to El Salvador on Saturday and Columbia a day later.

Colombia, a close ally of Washington and a member of the Security Council, opposes the Palestinian bid for membership of the UN and has pledged to abstain in any Security Council vote.

Unlike most Latin American countries, Colombia has yet to recognize a Palestinian state, arguing that such an entity can emerge only through a negotiated solution with Israel.

The PLO needs the support of nine Security Council members to pass a resolution seeking admission to the world body, after which it would go to the 193-nation UN General Assembly for approval.

Six council members have publicly declared their support for the bid -- Brazil, China, India, Lebanon, Russia and South Africa.

Riyad Al-Malki, foreign minister in Ramallah, has said he is confident Palestine can get the requisite nine votes, but if the PLO secures a council majority, Washington has vowed to veto the resolution.