

'Let us make peace,' declares Netanyahu

Nov. 25, 2009

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The Palestinian Authority quickly rejected the security cabinet's decision Wednesday to suspend new West Bank housing starts for 10 months, even as the White House welcomed what Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu characterized as a "far-reaching and painful step" meant to "encourage resumption of peace talks with our Palestinian neighbors."

"Now is the time to begin negotiations," Netanyahu said, in a prepared text he read to reporters following the nearly four-hour security cabinet discussion.

"Now is time to move forward toward peace. There is no more time to waste. Israel has taken a far-reaching step toward peace, it is time for the Palestinians to do the same."

Netanyahu's statement came as he secured wide support in his government for the move, as 11 of the 15 members of the security cabinet voted to approve the moratorium, including right-wing Likud ministers Moshe Ya'alon and Bennie Begin, as well as Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman from Israel Beiteinu.

Only Israel Beiteinu's Uzi Landau voted against the move. Shas's two ministers absented themselves from the vote, and the Likud's Silvan Shalom was abroad.

In what will surely not satisfy the Palestinians, Netanyahu said that some 3,000 units currently under construction would continue, that there would be no moratorium on building synagogues, schools and kindergartens needed to ensure "normal life" for the 300,000 Israelis beyond the Green Line.

He also insisted that there would be no suspension of building in Jerusalem.

"Regarding Jerusalem, our sovereign capital, our position is well known," Netanyahu said. "We don't put any restrictions on building in our sovereign capital."

As to the exit strategy from the moratorium, an issue that was a key focus of talks with US envoy George Mitchell earlier in the summer, Netanyahu said,

"When the suspension ends, my government will revert to the policies of previous governments in relation to construction."

Underlining his sense that this move now squarely places the ball in the Palestinian's court and takes the onus for the impasse in the negotiations off of Israel, Netanyahu said, "We have been told by many of our friends that once Israel takes the first meaningful step toward peace, the Palestinians and the Arab world would respond in a positive cycle, that would be a cycle of good will.

"Well, the government of Israel took a very big step toward peace today, and I hope the Palestinians and the Arab world will seize this opportunity to forge a new beginning and future, for our children and theirs."

The idea of a moratorium is not new, and already in the beginning of September the Prime Minister's Office said that after approving some 500 new housing units, Netanyahu would be willing - if the Arab world made some gestures toward Israel - to temporarily suspend new housing starts.

One new element of Netanyahu's move on Wednesday was that he took the first step without any concrete gestures coming from the Palestinians or the Arab world.

Indeed, the PA immediately and strongly rejected Netanyahu's plan, and reiterated its refusal to return to the negotiating table with Israel.

Nabil Abu Rudaineh, a spokesman for PA President Mahmoud Abbas, announced that the Palestinians rejected the plan because it did not include Jerusalem.

"For the Palestinians and Arabs, Jerusalem is a red line that can't be crossed," Abu Rudaineh said. "We can't accept any settlement construction freeze that does not include Jerusalem."

Abu Rudaineh said that the Palestinians would resume peace talks with Israel only after Israel freezes construction work in the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem.

Chief PA negotiator Saeb Erekat also dismissed Netanyahu's plan as fraudulent.

"This is not a complete freeze of settlement construction because Israel will continue to build 3,000 housing units in the West Bank and won't stop the

work in Jerusalem," he was quoted by Agence France Press as saying. He spoke to AFP even before the security cabinet met to approve the plan.

Both Erekat and Abu Rudaineh are accompanying Abbas on a tour of a number of Latin American countries, including Brazil, Argentina and Chile.