

Middle East parties agree peace plan drive...



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By Don Duncan, Annapolis, Maryland

ISRAEL and the Palestinian Authority have committed to reaching a peace agreement before the end of next year.

Opening the conference on Middle East peace yesterday in Annapolis, Maryland, US President George W Bush said formal negotiations between the groups would begin on December 12, with meetings on a bi-weekly basis thereafter.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said the talks must include all “final status” issues, including Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state as well as an end to the occupation of lands seized by Israel in the six-day Arab-Israeli war of 1967.

Both President Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert invoked the pain and suffering their peoples have suffered at each other’s hands in the past, before committing to co-operate in a new drive for peace.

“We want peace. We demand an end to terror, incitement and hatred,” said Mr Olmert.

“We are willing to make a painful compromise, rife with risks, in order to realise these aspirations.”

Mr Bush stood behind Mr Olmert and Mr Abbas, who shook hands in front of the press before speaking to delegates of some 50 other countries and world organisations invited to the conference.

Mr Bush said the conference seeks to reinvigorate the “roadmap” drawn up by the quartet on the Middle East (US, Russia, UN and EU) in 2003, which has lost most of its momentum in the interim.

The conference is a bid not only to begin creating peace through a two-state solution, but also to create a bulwark against escalating extremism in the region.

“The absence of hope feeds extremism, so we must generate hope,” said Mr Abbas.

Mr Bush put the effort in similar terms: “The time is right [for the conference] because a battle is under way for the future of the Middle East — and we must not cede victory to the extremists.”

The conference takes place amid significant criticism. It is seen by many as untimely, unambitious and rushed and as a weak photo opportunity by a lame duck, outgoing president with an unpopular foreign policy legacy, notably an enduring, costly and divisive war in Iraq.

While both Mr Abbas and Mr Olmert expressed a willingness to negotiate and compromise, critics say neither leader has enough support among their respective people for their intentions to be diplomatically meaningful.

However, the presence of representatives from Arab neighbours, especially Syria and Saudi Arabia, has changed the scope of the conference, causing many to see the international engagement as a sign of hope.

Palestinian militant faction Hamas, which shares power with Mr Abbas’s Fatah movement, was not invited to the conference as it is on the US State Department’s terrorist organisation list.

The organisation launched rockets from the Gaza strip into southern Israel in protest at the Annapolis conference. Tens of thousands of Palestinians also protested in Gaza city

Peace pacts

THE following dates show key US-brokered negotiations between Israel, the Palestinians and Arab neighbours.

1978: Camp David Summit. Peace was made between Israel and its Arab neighbour Egypt.

1993: Negotiations held secretly between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in Oslo were crowned with a famous handshake between PLO leader Yassir Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in the presence of US President Bill Clinton.

2000: Clinton brought Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat together at Camp David. But Barak and Arafat could not reach agreement and the meeting is viewed as a failure.

2003: The Quartet on the Middle East (US, Russia, the EU and the UN) drew up a roadmap to peace in the Middle East which was due to be achieved by 2005. The document sought to reach “final status” solutions on Palestinian sovereignty, the re-establishment of pre-1967 borders, access to water for the Palestinians and the right of return for Palestinian refugees. It is this roadmap, says President Bush, that will serve as a guide moving forward post-Annapolis.

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