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Palestinians Say Talks With Israel Should Be Suspended

By ETHAN BRONNER

New York Times

RAMALLAH, West Bank — The Palestinian leadership said Saturday that four-week-old direct talks with Israel should be suspended as long as Jewish settlement housing was being built in the West Bank. It called on the international community to pressure Israel to stop the construction.

A statement issued after a meeting of about 35 Palestinian leaders — the executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the central committee of the main Fatah movement and a handful of others — held at the compound of the Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas, said that Israel was responsible for the deadlock.

“The leadership confirms that the resumption of talks requires tangible steps, the first of them a freeze on settlements,” Yasser Abed Rabbo, a senior P.L.O. official said after the three-hour meeting. “The Palestinian leadership holds Israel responsible for obstructing the negotiations.”

The Obama administration envoy to the region, George J. Mitchell, met repeatedly in recent days with Mr. Abbas and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel in hopes of keeping the new talks alive. But he left on Friday, having made no progress.

Mr. Mitchell remains in the region, talking with Arab leaders before an Arab League meeting planned for next Friday in Libya, where the issue of direct talks with Israel will be debated and where, Mr. Abbas has said, a final decision on the future of the talks will be made.

Barring a last-minute deal, the talks seemed to be in deep trouble.

Mr. Abbas was due to see King Hussein of Jordan on Sunday and then Hosni Mubarak, the president of Egypt, as efforts continue to find a solution.

Israel halted most settlement construction for 10 months last November, saying it viewed the politically difficult step as a gesture to lure the Palestinians into direct peace talks. Mr. Abbas consented to the talks nine months later but threatened to abandon them if the freeze was lifted.

Mr. Netanyahu argues that the future of the settlements should be part of a mix of issues to be discussed in the coming year of talks, not a precondition for talks. The Palestinians say the Israelis agreed to end settlement expansion in a 2003 road map for peace and have failed to live up to that commitment. They add that settlements violate international law and are eating up the land on which they plan to build their state.

Mr. Netanyahu told his close aides on Friday that he would not freeze settlements further but would limit the building, according to an official briefed on that meeting.

“Everyone knows that restrained and moderate building in Judea and Samaria in the coming year will not affect the peace map at all,” he said, according to the official, using the biblical term for the West Bank. “Therefore the international community must call on the Palestinians to stay in the peace talks. It is in the interest of the Palestinians, just as it is in ours.”

Since Mr. Abed Rabbo on Saturday also asked for assistance from the international community, it now appears that both sides, instead of talking to each other, have returned to making their cases to the world, hoping other governments will intercede on their behalf.

The Obama administration has offered Israel security guarantees and military hardware in exchange for a one-time 60-day extension of the building freeze. But so far Mr. Netanyahu has turned that down, saying that sticking to his word on a one-time freeze was more important than the elements of the American offer.

The Palestinians say they, too, have concerns about credibility if they return to talks while settlement building resumes.

Nabil Abu Rudeineh, a close aide to Mr. Abbas, said Saturday that Mr. Abbas had staked his credibility on ending negotiations if settlements began again. Asked how to assess the diplomacy of recent days, Mr. Abu Rudeineh said, “So far efforts have reached a dead end.”