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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
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Subject: Abbas says may step down if statehood achieved (Reuters)

MILAN, May 14 (Reuters) - Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said in an interview published on Saturday that he may step down this year if he achieves all his political goals, which include the establishment of a Palestinian state.

"When I was elected my programme was: greater security, economic and social development, achieving (Palestinian) reconciliation, and then independence of our state," he said. "This year there is the possibility of achieving all this. Then I will go into retirement."

In an interview with the Italian newspaper la Repubblica ahead of a trip to Italy, Abbas restated that in the absence of progress in peace negotiations with Israel, which have been frozen for months, the Palestinians will unilaterally seek statehood recognition from the United Nations in September.

"If there is no progress in the talks, our second choice is going in front of the United Nations," he said.

Abbas was elected president in 2005 and has said he will not seek another term in a ballot already years overdue.

Last week his Fatah faction signed a deal with the rival Islamist group Hamas that is meant to end a four-year-rift and reunite their now-divided administrations in the West Bank and Gaza, paving the way for new elections.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has condemned the unity pact "as a tremendous blow to peace".

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