

US EMBASSY JERUSALEM MOVE 'ASSAULT' ON MUSLIMS: MUFTI ABBAS SEEKS PUTIN'S INTERVENTION

JERUSALEM: Jerusalem's Grand Mufti yesterday branded plans by President-elect Donald Trump to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem an "assault" on Muslims across the globe. "The pledge to move the embassy is not just an assault against Palestinians but against Arabs and Muslims, who will not remain silent," Muhammad Hussein said in a sermon at Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem's Old City.

On Tuesday, Palestinian leaders called for Friday prayers at mosques across the Middle East this week to protest Trump's campaign pledge. There have been warnings that the move would constitute recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and could inflame tensions in the Middle East and possibly sink what remains of peace efforts.

"The transfer of the embassy violates international charters and norms which recognize Jerusalem as an occupied city," Hussein said in his sermon, avoiding mentioning Trump by name.

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Jerusalem as the capital of their future state, while Israel proclaims the entire city as its capital. The city's status is one of the thorniest issues of the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel occupied the West Bank and east Jerusalem in 1967. It later annexed east Jerusalem in a move never recognized by the international community.

Mohammad Shtayyeh, a senior Palestinian official and Fatah central committee member, said on Tuesday that the Palestinian leadership had been informed by diplomatic contacts that Trump could call for the move in his inauguration speech on Jan 20. The Palestinians have added the issue to the agenda of a meeting of foreign ministers from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on Jan 19 in Malaysia, he added.

Putin help sought

Meanwhile, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas has asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to help stop the United States moving its embassy to

Jerusalem, a top Palestinian official said yesterday.

Saeb Erekat said he had passed on the message from Abbas to Putin during a visit to Moscow during which he met Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. "The letter asks President Putin to do what he can about the information we have that President-elect Donald Trump will move the embassy to Jerusalem, which for us is a red line and dangerous," Erekat said.

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US WILL BE INVITED TO SYRIA TALKS: TURKEY

BEIRUT: Washington will be invited to fresh Syria peace talks being organized by Moscow and Ankara this month, Turkey's foreign minister said, but Russia declined to confirm the invitation yesterday. On the ground meanwhile, Syria accused Israel of bombing a key airbase near the capital Damascus before dawn, condemning the incident as a "desperate attempt to support terrorist organizations."

Despite backing opposite sides in the Syrian conflict, Russia and Turkey have worked closely in recent weeks to broker a nationwide ceasefire that is meant to pave the way for Jan 23 peace talks in the Kazakh capital Astana. In the past, Washington has played a key role in attempts to bring Syria's warring parties to the negotiating table, but it has been notably absent from the cooperation between Ankara and Moscow.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, whose country, like Washington, backs Syria's rebels, nonetheless insisted Thursday that US officials would be invited.

"The United States should be definitely invited, and that is what we agreed with Russia," he said.

"Nobody can ignore the role of the United States. And this is a principled position of Turkey," he added. But the Kremlin, a key ally of President Bashar al-Assad's government, declined to comment on Cavusoglu's statements.

"I cannot say anything about this for now," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. He added however that Russia is "interested in the broadest possible representation of the parties who have a

bearing on the prospects of a political settlement in Syria."

US to take back seat

Last month, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed hope that the next American administration would "join the efforts so that we can work in the same direction harmoniously and collectively."

The Astana talks are scheduled to begin just three days after president-elect Donald Trump is inaugurated. In recent months, Washington has been largely absent from international discussions about Syria, and experts say Trump is unlikely to focus on the conflict.

"For the new American administration, it's not a priority to play a role in

resolving the Syrian crisis," said Imad Salamey, head of the political science department at the Lebanese American University.

"I think that with Trump in the White House, leadership will stay in the hands of Russia, but they will demand guarantees, particularly on Israel's security and the reduction of Iran's role," he told AFP.

Invitations to the talks have yet to be sent out, and the format of the discussions remains unclear.

A source close to the Syrian government said it expected the meeting to open with a session including all the invited parties but most of the discussions would take place directly between the government and rebels under Russian and Turkish supervision. —AFP



DAMASCUS: This file frame grab from a video provided by a Syrian opposition media outlet shows smoke rise from the government forces shelling on Wadi Barada, northwest of Damascus. —AP

COLD AND ANGRY, GAZANS PROTEST IN TEST FOR HAMAS

GAZA CITY: Crippling shortages of electricity in the Gaza Strip and reports of children dying of cold have stoked anger in the Palestinian enclave where there are daily protests against Hamas leaders.

The main Palestinian factions are blaming each other and Israel for the crisis, which has left the territory with just four hours a day of power at best. In one of the largest demonstrations yet, thousands of protesters in northern Gaza on Thursday walked to the local headquarters of the electricity company run by Hamas, the Islamist movement that has ruled the Strip since 2007.

Security forces dispersed the protesters violently, with shots fired in the air and a number of journalists beaten up. A prominent comedian was also detained on Wednesday after he posted on social media a call for Hamas to give up power. UN envoy for the Middle East peace process Nickolay Mladenov expressed concern about the "tense situation" in Gaza and urged calm. "We are witnessing a lot of anger and resentment at the power outages on the Gazan streets," said Amjad Al Shawwa, director of the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network.

Normally Gazans receive power in alternating eight-hour cycles, with those able to afford it having private fuel generators for the down times.

But for two weeks they have received a maximum of four hours a day from the state energy supply. Ahmad Al-Soarka believes the shortage is the reason he had to bury his 12-day-old son. "My son died from frost and the extreme cold, according to what they told us in the hospital," Soarka said. The family's home was destroyed in the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas and so they have lived in a caravan for two years.

"Right now it is like a freezer," the 24-year-old told AFP. "We have been here for two years."

The health ministry has not confirmed the cause of death as yet, but Soarka's father Salama, 49, said he had no doubt. "If we had electricity we could protect ourselves and the children from the cold," he said. "The young can't tolerate it." More than two thirds of Gazans depend on aid, according to the United Nations, which has also estimated the enclave could become unliveable by 2020 if current trends continue.

No solution in sight

The two million residents of Gaza require around 450-500 megawatts of power per day but are receiving less than half of that. With cold winters, demand has spiked leading to the shortages.

Maher al-Tabaa, an economic expert, said the crippling electricity shortages "affect all economic activities and have led to the suspension of a number of factories and economic construction." "The economy cannot manage only on electricity generators." Sadly for Gazans, there is no immediate solution to the crisis a decade in the making.

Israel has maintained a blockade of the enclave for 10 years, limiting goods and crippling the economy. Israel argues such restrictions are necessary to contain Hamas, with which it has fought three wars since 2008. But the more immediate cause of the crisis seems to be split between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA), the internationally recognized Palestinian leadership which runs the West Bank.

Hamas seized control of Gaza from Fatah, which dominates the PA, in a near civil war in 2007.

The two factions have been unable to form a unity government and have been in dispute over tax bills on fuel imports. In 2015 Gaza's sole power plant, which itself was badly damaged in 2006 by Israel, shut down for several weeks over unpaid taxes.

Part of the reason energy authorities have so little funding is unpaid bills. Nearly 70 percent of households do not pay their electricity bills, either through poverty or lack of collection, the UN estimates. Fathi Sheikh Khalil, from Gaza's electricity company, told AFP "what is available is distributed," pointing to a shortage of funds.

Khalil Al-Hayya, a member of Hamas's political bureau, said the party was willing to "hand over the electricity file" if a solution could be found, while the PA government in Ramallah notes it pays millions of dollars annually for Gazan electricity. Celine Touboul, deputy director of the Economic Cooperation Foundation, an Israel-based think-tank, said it was a "recurrent" problem. — AFP