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President Obama enters the Mideast fray

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President Obama, exasperated by the disappointing course of Mideast peace efforts, urged Israelis and Palestinians on Tuesday to reapply themselves, even though eight months of intensive American engagement has failed to return the parties to the negotiating table.

Obama met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas at a New York hotel ahead of a United Nations session, stepping personally into the process and offering an unusually blunt message.

"Simply put, it is past time to stop talking about starting negotiations, and time to move forward," Obama said beforehand.

Coming a day before Obama's scheduled address to world leaders at the U.N. General Assembly, a successful first set of Mideast talks would have set a positive tone for a speech that is expected to focus on international cooperation.

But after the three-way meeting, U.S. envoy George J. Mitchell acknowledged that Obama's presence had not helped the Israelis and Palestinians bridge major issues, and others described the outcome as lackluster.

"We knew this wasn't going to be easy," said Mitchell, a former Senate majority leader who returned empty-handed last week from the latest of a long series of trips to the region.

In an effort to breathe vitality into the process, Obama announced that a new round of preliminary talks would take place in Washington, signaling how much his administration has riding on the effort.

"We cannot continue this same pattern of taking tentative steps forward and then stepping

back," Obama said. "It is absolutely critical that we get this issue resolved."

Obama provoked a wide reaction before Tuesday's meeting by using language that appeared to ease a long-standing administration demand that Israel halt the expansion of Jewish settlements on land Palestinians claim for a future state. Instead, Obama called on Israelis simply to "restrain" growth in the West Bank.

Administration officials insisted later that the U.S. position on Jewish settlements had not changed. But the shift in language was widely interpreted by Palestinians and Israelis as a sign the Obama administration was jettisoning a U.S. stance that had alienated many Israelis and their U.S. supporters.

Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian Authority prime minister, speaking of the altered wording, said, "It will be a problem not only from the point of view of the Palestinians, but from the point of view of the international community."

U.S. officials had hoped to spur talks through two key steps: a freeze on Jewish settlement growth and a decision by moderate Arab nations to begin normalizing relations with Israel.

Instead, the Israelis refused to fully halt settlement growth and Arab countries were willing to make only limited gestures toward normalization.

Ziad Asali, president of the American Task Force on Palestine, said that by bringing the talks to the United States, Obama has "pretty much upped the ante for [his] own success and failure" on the difficult issue of Middle East peace.

"He's taken a minor hit, but he's determined to move forward," Asali said.

The Palestinians now must decide whether they want to return to the negotiating table, even without the settlement freeze that they have insisted is a precondition for talks.

They also must determine whether they are willing to meet if the Israelis refuse to agree to resume talks at the point where Abbas and former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert left them last year.

Netanyahu, a conservative who came to power early this year, has argued that there should be no preconditions to talks. He insists on a Palestinian state that is demilitarized and has limited powers, but that recognizes Israel as a Jewish state.

Israeli officials have told Mitchell that they don't want to discuss the future status of Jerusalem, a disputed subject of concern to Palestinians.

Abbas said in a statement that Palestinian officials had stressed their insistence that Israelis live up to previous commitments, including halting all settlement growth.

"We believe the American administration will review the positions of the two sides in the coming weeks to make it possible for us to renew peace efforts based on our stated position," he said.

A person who spoke to Abbas on Tuesday after the three-way meeting said the Palestinian leader had described the meeting as difficult and had said he was left gloomy by its outcome.

Abbas had been urged by some advisors not to take part in the meeting, but ignored their

advice because of a personal request from Obama to attend, said this person, who requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the talks.

Netanyahu has resisted advance concessions, but said he is eager to resume talks, and was more upbeat. "We had two good meetings -- very good, I would say," he told reporters, referring to the three-party meeting and a separate one-on-one with Obama.

Mitchell, in a news conference after the three-party meeting, sought to play down the importance of the settlement freeze issue. He said the resumption of talks, not the opening concessions, was the important feature.

"The actions we've asked parties to take were not ends in themselves; they were means to an end," he said. "And that's the end we continue to seek."

Mitchell said his lengthy efforts had resulted in progress. "We have substantially and significantly progressed in reducing the number of issues on which there is disagreement," he said. "And we hope to complete that process in the near future."

Obama said he has asked Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to report to him by mid-October on the status of the talks.

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