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US official to brief PA on talks

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A senior US official will brief Palestinian leaders in Ramallah on Thursday about the latest developments in efforts to renew direct talks with Israel.

Chief negotiator Saeb Erekat told Israeli radio that David Hale, a deputy to US Mideast envoy George Mitchell, would deliver "details and suggestions" in his briefing.

He added that President Abbas would review Hale's suggestions with the PLO and Fatah, and with the leaders of Arab states.

The US is currently asking Israel to resume a partial moratorium on the construction of illegal West Bank settlements, in order to coax the Palestinian Authority back to the negotiating table.

One week earlier, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton offered Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a package of incentives, including military aid and promises to veto UN resolutions critical of Israel, in exchange for a 90-day extension of the freeze.

Netanyahu has promised to put the US proposal to his 15-member security cabinet -- but only after receiving written details of the offer.

"There are understandings between the US secretary of state and the prime minister but it takes time for them to be put in writing, and we have to wait," Nir Hefetz, a senior Netanyahu adviser, told Israel's army radio.

"No date has been set for the cabinet meeting because we have to wait for the written clarifications from the Americans," he said.

On Monday, Netanyahu said details of the proposal were still being hammered out, and a source close to the negotiations said the premier was "holding out" over a number of conditions.

But on Tuesday, another senior Israeli official accused the Palestinians of holding up the letter's arrival, saying their complaints about the generous US offers to Israel were the source of the delay.

"What is causing a delay in putting together the agreed formula in the US document are Palestinian objections to what Israel has managed to gain through the understandings," he said.

"Only when the guarantees document is received will the prime minister present it to the cabinet," he added.

Under the terms of the proposal, Israel would declare a one-off three-month moratorium on new construction in the West Bank excluding annexed Palestinian east Jerusalem.

In exchange, the United States would pledge not to ask for a further freeze, would deliver to Israel 20 F-35 fighter jets, worth three billion dollars, and would pledge to block any international efforts to force a political settlement on Israel.

Netanyahu is facing opposition from members of his own cabinet in extending the freeze. On Wednesday three cabinet ministers, all members of his Likud party, sent a letter to settler leaders declaring that they would oppose the deal.

According to the Israeli news site Ynet, Ministers Silvan Shalom, Moshe Ya'alon, and Benny Begin added their signatures to the letter which states "their objection to a construction freeze in Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria."

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