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Israelis, Palestinians headed toward U.N. showdown

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Reporting from Ramallah, West Bank? Rebuffing international pressure to soften their positions and return to the negotiating table, Israelis and Palestinians announced separately Thursday that they were moving forward with an expected diplomatic battle next week at the United Nations.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas will address the U.N. General Assembly on Sept. 23, after which he will submit a formal application to admit Palestine into the international body as a state, according to his foreign minister, Riad Malki.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he also will travel to New York next week to make his own appeal to the U.N. to reject the application.

"I know Israel doesn't get a fair hearing at the General Assembly," Netanyahu said during a news conference in Jerusalem, repeating a frequent Israeli criticism of the organization. "But I still decided to tell the truth to anyone who would like to hear it."

The announcements were the latest signs that a last-minute push by the Obama administration and European Union to forge a compromise had faltered.

Senior U.S. diplomats Dennis Ross and David Hale returned to the region this week, following a similar trip early this month. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, envoy for the Mideast Quartet comprised of the U.S., Russia, the European Union and the United Nations, has also been meeting with Abbas and Netanyahu.

But their efforts have been unable thus far to break through the deadlock that has stalled the latest round of peace talks for two years. Palestinians say they will only return to talks if Israel agrees to temporarily halt settlement construction in the West Bank and Jerusalem and to base border negotiations on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed territory swaps. Though the U.S. has endorsed both steps, Israel has rejected them.

Malki said Blair's latest proposal did not offer "anything new" and was essentially the same as one rejected a month ago.

"Until this moment we do not see any offer that requires us to look at it seriously," Malki said.

The Obama administration has said it will veto the Palestinian application in the Security Council, agreeing with Israel that the conflict should not be brought to the United Nations and can only be settled through direct negotiations.

Palestinians say direct talks have failed to deliver statehood for the nearly two decades since the 1993 Oslo accords that led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority, and they say it is time for the U.N. to take a more active role. They agree that only negotiations with Israel will resolve the conflict and bring them independence, but they believe U.N. membership will strengthen their hand and pressure Israel.

It remains unclear when the Security Council, which must approve all membership applications, will vote on the matter. It could take days or even weeks, Palestinians said.

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