

**Deadly Gaza rocket, air strikes cloud peace talks**  
**Malaysiakini.com**  
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International talks on the Middle East set for Friday took on new urgency after Israeli warplanes targeted the Gaza Strip in response to a fatal rocket attack.

In Israel itself meanwhile, thousands of police braced for the possibility of further unrest after imposing restrictions on Friday prayers at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound following unrest in the city.

Palestinian security officials and eyewitnesses said Israeli aircraft hit several targets across the coastal strip in pre-dawn strikes, but there were no reports of serious injuries.

A Palestinian group, the Al-Qaeda-inspired Ansar al-Sunna Brigade, claimed responsibility for Thursday's fatal rocket attack, which killed a Thai labourer working inside Israel near the Gaza border.

The group linked it to clashes between Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli police in Jerusalem earlier this week.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned the killing.

"All such acts of terror and violence against civilians are totally unacceptable and contrary to international law," his office said.

EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton visited the impoverished Gaza Strip and told journalists she was "extremely shocked" by the rocket attack.

She also made a plea for Palestinian-Israeli talks to get under way "as quickly as we can."

Both Ashton and Ban were due to take part in Friday's meeting of the international Quartet for the Middle East in Moscow, together with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Heightened religious and political tension

The increased diplomatic activity comes amid heightened religious and political tension that saw dozens injured in clashes between Palestinians and police in east Jerusalem on Tuesday.

As a result, an Israeli police spokesman said thousands of officers were being kept on alert in case of further unrest, on orders to bar men aged under 50 from attending weekly prayers at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound.

An already charged atmosphere intensified after a rebuilt 17th-century synagogue was opened this week in the Jewish quarter of the Old City, a few hundred metres (yards) from the Al-Aqsa mosque compound.

The Ansar al-Sunna Brigade said the rocket attack was "an answer to Zionist aggression against the Al-Aqsa mosque and holy sites and our people" in the Holy City.

Tensions have also flared between staunch allies Israel and the United States over US

complaints about Israeli settlement building in east Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said late Thursday that he had spoken by phone with Clinton.

In their conversation, Netanyahu raised "mutual confidence-building measures" that could be carried out by Israel and the Palestinians, but his office gave no details of the measures or whether he answered US concerns.

What particularly infuriated Washington was the timing of the settlement announcement, which came as Vice President Joe Biden was in Jerusalem promoting the peace talks.

'Special bond'

In a bid to defuse tension, President Barack Obama has insisted there is no crisis. Related article: US-Israel ties 'unassailably solid': ambassador

"We and the Israeli people have a special bond that's not going to go away," he told Fox News.

Yet prospects for swiftly resuming peace negotiations that broke down when Israel launched its devastating Gaza offensive in December 2008, appear dim. Related article: Peace with Israeli government 'impossible': Assad

Following the Moscow talks, Ban is to visit the Middle East, including Gaza, the West Bank and Israel, this weekend.

US Middle East envoy George Mitchell, who brokered a now uncertain deal for indirect talks between Israel and the Palestinians on a previous visit, also is due back in the region on Sunday, according to one senior Palestinian official.

He is expected to meet Netanyahu before the Israeli premier leaves on a US visit.

Mitchell's return, initially scheduled for last Tuesday, was postponed when a major row blew up between Washington and the Jewish state when Israel announced plans to build 1,600 new settler homes in annexed east Jerusalem.

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