

Obama seeks Medvedev talks as treaty moves ahead

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US President Barack Obama hopes to speak to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev within days, the White House said, amid strong indications a new nuclear arms deal could be signed early next month in Prague.

NONE "We are, I think, very close to having an agreement on a START treaty but won't have one until President Obama and his counterpart, Mr. Medvedev, have a chance to speak again," said Obama's spokesman Robert Gibbs.

A Kremlin source told AFP earlier the two former Cold War rivals have agreed "all the documents" for a successor to the landmark nuclear disarmament treaty and will likely sign it in the Czech capital.

"As of now, all the documents on the new START treaty have been agreed upon," said the source, who spoke on condition he not be named, suggesting an apparent breakthrough in the long-stalled talks.

The comments from both capitals indicated Moscow and Washington were finally set to agree a successor pact to the landmark 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), a key goal of the Obama administration.

Gibbs, however, was not yet ready to confirm a replacement had been agreed for START, which expired in December.

Replacing START

Obama has made talks on replacing START the central element of his efforts to "reset" strained US-Russian relations, but they had reportedly been bogged down by disagreements over US missile defense.

"There have been discussions with Czech allies as well as Russians about a signing in Prague when completed," Mark Toner, a State Department spokesman, confirmed to reporters.

NONE But he declined to say there had been a breakthrough, saying "technical details" were still being worked out by US arms control specialists Rose Gottemoeller and Ellen Tauscher with their Russian counterparts in Geneva.

"I would describe it as steady progress towards the end goal, which is an agreement that's in the best" interests of US national security, Toner said.

"We are extremely close. We're very close. But I'm not going to characterize it beyond that," he added.

Moscow's ambassador to the Czech Republic meanwhile also confirmed the treaty would be signed in Prague.

The Czech capital carries special symbolism for Obama, who in a major speech in Prague last April called for a world free of nuclear weapons, while acknowledging he may not live to see that goal achieved.

Moscow and Washington have held months of difficult negotiations aimed at replacing the treaty, a cornerstone of Cold War-era strategic arms control.

Signed in 1991, START led to huge reductions in the Russian and US nuclear arsenals and imposed verification measures to build trust between the two former Cold War foes.

Delays in the START talks and missed deadlines have cast a shadow over the Russian and US leaders' efforts to make good on their pledge to improve bilateral ties.

Nuclear security summit

The United States is set to host a nuclear security summit on April 12-13, and observers have said it is a matter of pride for Washington to have the new treaty in place before the summit.

The Czech TV network TV Nova, citing Russian diplomatic sources, said on its web site that the signing would take place on April 8.

NONEMikhail Margelov, the chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the upper house of Russia's parliament, confirmed Wednesday that the text of the new nuclear agreement was ready.

"The text is ready, we are starting to think how to conduct the ratification," he said on Echo of Moscow radio.

"We are preparing procedures related to the simultaneous ratification of this treaty which should take place after it is signed by the presidents of Russia and the United States."

Margelov expressed hope the treaty would pass ratification fairly quickly in Russia, while adding it may encounter difficulties in the US Senate.

To facilitate ratification in the two countries, a Russian parliamentary group would head to the United States for meetings with US senators in "mid-April, virtually right after the nuclear summit", he said.

He suggested the new treaty would contain a link between missile defense and reductions in strategic offensive weapons -- a position which Moscow has insisted upon.

-AFP