

# Middle East to dominate Abdullah-Bush talks

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LEBANON and Palestine are expected to feature prominently in a meeting today between the Prime Minister and US President George W. Bush, diplomats here said.

Both leaders will be in New York to attend the 66th Session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.

No particular agenda has been set for the meeting but diplomats here expect the fragile situation in West Asia to be high on Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's list.

Diplomats also said Abdullah may relay the sentiment of the Non Aligned Movement towards recent global developments.

Peace has returned to Lebanon while the state of Palestine is still in dire need of financial aid.

UN secretary-general Kofi Annan

in his Sept 15 report to the world body said in Lebanon, both Israel and the Hizbollah have "largely complied" the cessation of hostilities agreement which in mid-August ended more than a month of fighting. But much needs to be done, he said.

Malaysia had indicated its readiness to send troops under the UN banner to enforce peace in Lebanon, but the plan has been objected by the Tel Aviv government, which said it does not want soldiers of nations without diplomatic relations with Israel to serve in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

Palestine, meanwhile, remains an outstanding issue that UN diplomats say could still derail any efforts for lasting peace in West Asia, even if the UN is successful in Lebanon.



The UN World Food Programme in its most recent report said Gaza in Palestine is facing a major food security problem as its fishing industry has been crippled following continued conflict with Israel.

The broader Palestinian government itself is in a financial quagmire following suspension of aid by foreign donors after the Hamas faction won the state's last election to lead the government.

Although Hamas and the Fatah faction led by Palestinian President

Mahmoud Abbas have agreed to form a unity government, the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East — comprising the UN, the US, the European Union and Russia — have yet to come up with a concrete plan to provide financial assistance to Palestine.

The EU, Russia and the UN have shown a willingness to accept Palestine's unity government but Washington remains adamant that Hamas must first recognise the state of Israel and denounce violence against the Tel Aviv government.

Diplomats here expect Abdullah to relay to Bush the need to quickly resolve Palestine's financial woes or risk a huge social problem in the state, which could also eventually transform into more violence in the region.

Abdullah is also scheduled to meet former US President Bill Clinton tomorrow. No details are available about the planned meeting although Clinton is reported as planning to gather some of the who's who in the world to become part of his high-profile Global Initiative Conference on Poverty, AIDS and Global Warming.

On Wednesday, Abdullah will be meeting Annan at the UN before meeting later with Mongolian Prime Minister Enkhbold Miyegombo and President of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed.

He will also be meeting the UN director-general of Food and Agricultural Organisation, Jacques Diouf and later with members of the Asean-US Business Council.