

Israel Blasts UK Deputy PM Over Settlement Comment
Bernama
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By Adrian Croft

LONDON, Jan 18 (Reuters) - An Israeli minister called Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg irresponsible and ill-informed on Tuesday for condemning Israeli settlements as "deliberate vandalism" of efforts to establish a Palestinian state.

Visiting Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon said Clegg's comment gave the Palestinians an excuse to set pre-conditions for entering negotiations with Israel on a Middle East peace settlement.

"I think it was unfortunate, I think it was gratuitous, I think it was ill-informed, I think it was somewhat irresponsible," Ayalon said when asked about Clegg's comment during an event at Chatham House, a London thinktank.

Speaking during a visit by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to London on Monday, Clegg said expanding Jewish settlements was "an act of deliberate vandalism to the basic premise upon which negotiations have taken place for years".

Clegg leads the centre-left Liberal Democrats, the junior partner in the Conservative-led coalition.

Ayalon told Reuters in an interview that Clegg's comment was "far from the truth" and gave the Palestinians an excuse to set more pre-conditions for talks that would create obstacles to moving forward with negotiations.

Israelis and Palestinians have begun exploratory talks in Amman, Jordan, on resuming full negotiations on a peace accord.

Abbas suspended talks 15 months ago over Israel's expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, where Palestinians want to found a state.

The Palestinians have previously demanded a halt to Jewish settlement building in the West Bank before holding more talks.

IRANIAN CHARGE "BASELESS"

Ayalon said Israel would not halt settlement construction as a condition for resuming full negotiations.

"The settlement issue is but one of many core elements of the conflict. I don't think it is the major one ... All those elements are inter-related and you cannot cherry-pick one and try to solve it irrespective of the others. All these issues should be on the table without pre-conditions," he told Reuters.

Ayalon, in London for talks with the British government, said it was coincidence he was in

Britain at the same time as Abbas.

Ayalon said Iranian allegations of Israeli involvement in the killing of a nuclear scientist last week were "completely baseless".

The bomb attack that killed scientist Mostafa Ahmadi-Roshan was the fifth similar strike in two years and came as tensions rise between Iran and the West over Tehran's nuclear programme.

Western powers and Israel suspect Iran of working to develop a nuclear bomb, an accusation denied by Tehran.

Iran said on Saturday it had evidence Washington was behind the killing but a military spokesman has also blamed Israel and Britain. Britain and the United States have denied responsibility.

Ayalon said he would welcome Syrian President Bashar al-Assad leaving power after months of protests against his rule in Israel's neighbour.

"The carnage will stop and secondly the departure of Assad will be a real blow to Iran since Assad is their major ally," he told Reuters.

He said Iran was stepping up its nuclear programme to protect itself against the ramifications of Assad's departure.

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