Rubio heads to Saudi to gauge if Ukraine ready for peace talks

AFP- US Secretary of State Marco Rubio set off on Sunday to fly to Saudi Arabia for talks with Ukraine, as President Donald Trump decides whether to relent on a freeze in military and intelligence support.

Rubio will then travel on to Group of Seven (G7) talks in Canada, making him the first major US official to visit since Trump returned to office, launched a trade war the neighboring country and mocked its sovereignty.

In three days of talks in Jeddah, Rubio will discuss how to “advance the president’s goal to end the Russia-Ukraine war,” said State Department spokeswoman Tammy Bruce.

The talks in Jeddah on Tuesday are expected to involve Rubio and Trump’s national security advisor, Mike Waltz, with Zelensky’s national security advisor and foreign and defense ministers.

“The fact that they are coming here at senior levels is a good indication to us that they want to sit down and they’re ready to move forward,” a senior State Department official said.

Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky is also expected in Saudi Arabia, but to pay a visit to Riyadh and not to participate directly in the Jeddah talks.

Trump, asked separately about the hopes for a quick resolution, told reporters Sunday: “I think we’re going to have a good result in Saudi Arabia… we have a lot of good people going out there.

“And I think Ukraine’s going to do well, and I think Russia is going to do well. I think some very big things could happen this week. I hope so."

Trump suspended aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine after a disastrous February 28 meeting with Zelensky at the White House.

The Republican leader and his vice president, JD Vance, publicly dressed Zelensky down for alleged ingratitude over billions of dollars worth of previous US weapons shipments.

Zelensky left without signing an agreement demanded by Trump in which Ukraine would hand over much of its mineral wealth to the United States, which Trump argues will compensate US taxpayers for the assistance provided under former president Joe Biden.

Zelensky has since said he is ready to sign the minerals deal and has sent a conciliatory letter to Trump, who read it at his address to Congress on Tuesday.

– Frozen aid –

Keith Kellogg, the US special envoy on Russia and Ukraine, said Thursday he would support resuming assistance once Zelensky signs the deal – but that the decision was ultimately up to Trump.

NBC News, quoting unnamed sources, said Trump was unlikely to relent just with the minerals deal and would want to be assured that Zelensky is ready to make concessions to Russia.

Trump told reporters Sunday he did not think Ukraine had yet shown they "want peace."

"Right now they haven't shown it to the extent that they should… but I think they will be, and I think it's going to become evident over the next two or three days."

Stunned European leaders have been racing to find ways to make up for US aid, although Zelensky himself has said that there is no substitute for Washington's security guarantees in a deal with Russia.

Rubio last month met his Russian counterpart, breaking a Biden-era freeze on such high-level contacts, and spoke of future economic cooperation if the war ends.

Those talks also took place in Saudi Arabia, which has positioned itself as a key diplomatic partner for Trump.

Rubio will also meet in Jeddah with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's de facto ruler, the State Department said.

Trump is expected to push hard for Saudi Arabia to recognize Israel, a prospect that seems remote until a permanent end to the Gaza war — a priority for Witkoff as he travels the region.

Rubio will then head to Quebec for a meeting of the Group of Seven foreign ministers where his spokeswoman said he will work to "further US interests in peace and security, strategic cooperation, and global stability."

She made no mention of tensions with Canada, which Trump has mocked as the "51st state" as he unleashes tariffs, although he has partially backed off faced with a slide on stock markets.

AFP