

US envoys head to Pakistan for Iran war talks

AFP::US envoys headed to the Pakistani capital Saturday to kickstart a new round of peace negotiations with Iran, although Iranian state media said Tehran's envoys had no immediate plans to hold face-to-face talks.

As Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner set off for Islamabad, the White House said they would hold an "in-person conversation" with Iranian representatives.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi arrived in Islamabad on Friday and met Field Marshal Asim Munir, Pakistan's army chief and a key figure in the country's mediation efforts. The pair appeared together in a brief video posted by Tehran's embassy.

Sealing a deal to end the Middle East war remains a thorny proposition, even as urgency mounts to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, a vital conduit for the world's oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG).

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said Witkoff and Kushner would be in Pakistan "to engage in talks... with representatives from the Iranian delegation".

"The Iranians reached out, as the president called on them to do, and asked for this in-person conversation," Leavitt said, adding that the talks would "hopefully move the ball forward towards a deal".

Leavitt said Vice President JD Vance, who led a first round of negotiations in Islamabad two weeks ago, would not be joining for the time being, but was on "standby to fly to Pakistan if necessary".

It remained unclear whether the Iranian side would meet directly with the US envoys.

Iranian state television said Araghchi has no plans to meet with the Americans, and Islamabad would serve as a bridge to “convey” Iranian proposals.

Pakistan’s foreign ministry said Araghchi had arrived in Islamabad to discuss “ongoing efforts for regional peace and stability” with Pakistani officials, without directly referencing talks with Witkoff and Kushner.

An Iranian spokesman said Araghchi would later visit Oman and Russia to discuss efforts to end the war, which was launched against Iran by Israel and the United States on February 28.

Tehran’s defence ministry, in a statement carried by news agency ISNA, said “the enemy is looking for a face-saving way to escape the war quagmire it has become trapped in”.

– EU says opening Hormuz ‘vital’ –

Since the last round of talks, efforts to bring the two sides back to the table have hit an impasse, with Iran refusing to participate as long as a US naval blockade on its ports remains in place.

Iran has imposed a de facto blockade of its own on the Strait of Hormuz, allowing only a trickle of ships to pass through the vital waterway, throwing global energy markets into turmoil.

Oil prices slid on Friday amid hopes that fresh peace talks would see an end to Tehran’s disruption of trade through the strait.

European Council President Antonio Costa said the strait “must immediately reopen without restrictions and without tolling”.

“This is vital for the entire world,” Costa said.

– ‘Destroyed’ –

On Thursday, US President Donald Trump announced a three-week ceasefire extension in Lebanon and spoke in glowing terms of peace prospects for the country after meeting with Israeli and Lebanese envoys. He voiced hope for a three-way meeting with Lebanon and Israel's leaders.

The two countries have been officially at war for decades and until last week officials had not met directly since 1993.

But Mohammed Raad, the head of the parliamentary bloc for Iran-backed armed group Hezbollah, urged the Lebanese government to withdraw from direct talks with Israel and warned that a lasting peace deal of the kind sought by Trump "will in no way enjoy Lebanese national consensus".

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has vowed to destroy Hezbollah, said: "We have started a process to reach a historic peace between Israel and Lebanon, and it's clear to us that Hezbollah is trying to sabotage this."

Despite the ceasefire, Israeli strikes in the south of Lebanon killed six people on Friday, the Lebanese health ministry said.

In south Lebanon's Tyre, Mohamad Ali Hijazi was searching a mountain of rubble for mementos of family members killed in an Israeli airstrike minutes before the ceasefire took hold.

"I'm trying to find my mother's hairbrush... and a bottle of perfume that she loves," said Hijazi, 48.

"My life has been destroyed. I haven't slept for five days," he told AFP, fighting back tears.

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