



Photo by: Associated Press

Obama: Gaza situation unsustainable

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US looking to increase flow of goods to Gaza, pledges \$400m. PA aid.

WASHINGTON – The US is pressing for a new strategy for increasing the flow of goods to Gaza and is boosting aid to Palestinians there while seeking to portray the moves as achievements for the Palestinian Authority rather than Hamas.

US President Barack Obama said he was looking for a “new conceptual framework” for handling the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, at a press conference following his meeting with PA President Mahmoud Abbas Wednesday.

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Obama called the current situation “unsustainable” and indicated he would be consulting with Europe and Egypt, as well as the PA and Israel, to formulate the new approach.

“There should be ways of focusing narrowly on arms shipments, rather than focusing in a blanket way on stopping everything and then in a piecemeal way allowing things into Gaza,” he said, rejecting the current Israeli model for controlling trade and supplies into the Strip, even as he acknowledged Israel’s legitimate security concerns and stopped short of calling for the blockade to be lifted.

In implementing a new approach, he continued, “it seems to me that we should be able to take what has been a tragedy and turn it into an opportunity to create a situation where lives in Gaza are directly improved.”

To that end, the White House announced Wednesday that it was contributing an additional \$400 million to Palestinians. While the largest chunk is allocated for mortgage assistance in the West Bank, several smaller projects were dedicated to rebuilding schools, agriculture facilities and sewage systems in Gaza.

Aid groups there have said rebuilding from the December 2008/January 2009 war between Israel and Hamas is one of the most urgent needs.

The White House statement began by stressing that “these initiatives result directly from the advocacy and guidance of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, whose leadership is making a difference for the Palestinian people, in Gaza as well as the West Bank.”

To help Gaza without helping Hamas

There is concern in the US, as well as among Israelis and in the PA government, that any steps taken to ease conditions in Gaza in the wake of the deadly Israeli raid to stop a flotilla from breaking the blockade there would benefit Hamas.

The US and its partners are looking to carefully calibrate any changes in Gaza policy so they don’t boost the standing of the Islamist group.

Obama emphasized that the only true solution was the creation of a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel.

“We’re going to be dealing with these short-term problems, but we also have to keep our eye on the horizon and recognize that it’s the long-term issues that have to be focused on,” he said.

But the depth of that challenge was underscored by Wednesday’s meeting, whose top agenda item was supposed to be the nascent indirect talks between Israelis and Palestinians and an administration push to move to direct negotiations.

Instead, Gaza has dominated coverage surrounding the meeting and constituted a major issue in the conversations between Obama and Abbas, first in a one-on-one format and then including officials from both sides.

After the meeting, Abbas urged that the “Israeli siege of the Palestinian people” be lifted, and praised the additional aid as a “positive sign” that the US was concerned about Palestinians.

He also said that “what we care about is living in coexistence with Israel.”

Israel, however, has expressed frustration that while it has long agreed to move to direct talks, the Palestinians have refused.

In the press conference, Abbas denied that the Palestinians had placed any conditions on moving to direct negotiations, saying instead that “we agreed that should progress be achieved, then we would move on to direct talks. We are working in order to make progress.”

Obama said that in the meantime, Israelis and Palestinians have to do the work necessary to create the conditions for peace.

“Both sides have to create an environment, a climate that will be conducive to an actual breakthrough,” Obama said, adding that this meant the Israelis must curb settlement construction in disputed areas and the Palestinians must make progress toward security and ending incitement.

Ahead of the Abbas-Obama meeting, White House officials hosted an Orthodox Union leadership mission and assured them that the issue of Palestinian incitement would be addressed in Obama’s discussions with Abbas, both privately and publicly.

“They were very serious about it,” OU Washington director Nathan Diament said of the incitement issue, following the morning meetings. He said he was pleased by the response, given the importance of the issue.

Abbas was expected to hear from Jewish leaders directly as part of a private dinner being organized by the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace on Wednesday night.

Abbas’s visit was scheduled to follow a similar one from Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu last week, but the prime minister canceled his trip to deal with the aftermath of the flotilla raid, which occurred the day before the planned meeting.

Netanyahu is due to return to Washington at the end of the month, where he is expected to be pressed for progress on working out the new Gaza framework.

AP contributed to this report.