

Bush ends Israel, West Bank visit with hope for peace

US President George W. Bush wrapped up a three-day visit to Israel and the Palestinian areas with a tour of Christian holy sites near the northern Sea of Galilee.

Accompanied by Christian religious leaders, Bush - a devout, born-again Christian - visited Capernaum, the ruins of an ancient town believed to have been the home of some of Jesus' apostles and mentioned in the New Testament, as well as the Mount of Beatitudes, where tradition has it Jesus gave his notable Sermon on the Mount.

His Air Force-1 was then to take off in the early afternoon from Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion airport to Kuwait, for the next leg of his Middle East tour.

Bush earlier summed up his talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert by saying a 'peace agreement should happen, and can happen, by the end of this year.'

'There should be an end to the occupation that began in 1967,' he said in a statement at his Jerusalem King David hotel Thursday evening, adding both sides would have to make 'painful political concessions.'

He said the establishment of a Palestinian state was 'long overdue,' but also expressed support for Israeli security.

And he backed Israel's wish to keep its main settlement blocs in the West Bank when he said the peace deal should 'reflect current realities.' Any changes to borders should be 'mutually agreed,' he stressed however.

Both Israeli and Palestinian officials expressed satisfaction with the visit, and Olmert's spokesman, Mark Regev, said the sides would pick up long-delayed, actual peace negotiations next week.

Both leaders instructed their respective negotiators, Tzipi Livni and Ahmed Qureia, 'to immediately start talks on all the core issues,' Regev told journalists in Jerusalem.

Bush's statement 'is acceptable by the Israeli side. We view the statement positively,' Regev said.

'We believe it is possible to achieve by the end of this year, by the end of 2008, a historic agreement with the Palestinians,' he said.

Relating to Olmert's talks with Bush on Iran, he said 'we came out with the understanding that both the US and Israel are on the same page.'

'Both the US and Israel see the gravity of the threat a nuclear-armed Iran poses to both regional and global security,' he said. 'We cannot accept a nuclear-armed Iran.'

Accompanied by Olmert, President Shimon Peres and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Bush earlier toured Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, which he called a 'moving experience' and a 'sobering reminder that evil exists and a call that when we find evil we

must resist it.'

He also laid a wreath at the resting place of ashes collected from the gas chambers of six Nazi death camps in Yad Vashem's Hall of Remembrance.

Bush, who landed in Tel Aviv Wednesday for the first visit of a US president to Israel in nearly a decade, made a stopover in the West Bank Thursday for talks with Abbas in Ramallah and praying at Christian holy sites in Bethlehem.

Calling his visit to Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, believed to mark the site where Jesus was born, 'a moving moment,' he said, 'for those of us who practise the Christian faith, there's really no more holy site than the place where our Saviour was born.'

He also referred to Israel's security barrier, which in the area of Bethlehem is a seven-metre-high concrete wall separating it from southern Jerusalem, saying that 'some day I hope that as a result of a formation of a Palestinian state there won't be walls and checkpoints.'

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