

It is happening too often. Parochialism is rearing its ugly head in Mumbai too frequently. The Shiv Sena is threatening to throw out ...

TOKYO (New York Times) — Twice a week, Japan's new minister of financial services is forced to hold two back-to-back ...

Physicists returned to their future on Friday. About 10:00 P.M. outside Geneva, scientists at CERN, the European Center for ...

SALVADOR, Brazil (Agencies) — The U.S. is responsible for the crisis in the Middle East and shouldn't be coordinating peace talks for the region, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said, Bloomberg reported.

Negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians ought to be managed by the United Nations, Lula said in an interview with two local radio stations in Salvador, Bahia state, where he met Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. An audio file of his remarks appeared on the presidency's Web site.

"As long as the United States is trying to negotiate peace there won't be peace," Lula said. "The one who should oversee the negotiations is the United Nations, and that's why Brazil wants to reform the UN system."

Israeli settlement expansion on Palestinian territory must stop immediately, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said Friday as he seeks to position Brazil as a player in the Middle East.

"The expansion of West Bank settlements must be frozen," Lula said after meeting for two hours with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas.

"The borders of the future Palestinian state should be preserved, and freedom of movement needs to be guaranteed in the occupied territories."

For his part, Abbas blasted Israel's decision to pursue settlement activity as an "obstacle on the road to peace" in the Middle East.

He noted that under the U.S.-backed 2003 roadmap, a peace plan that calls for a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel, the Tel Aviv regime is required to freeze all settlement construction, AFP reported.

The roadmap also demands that Israel dismantle all settlement outposts, or dwellings the state itself considers illegal.

"Therefore if the Israeli government

Brazil: U.S. responsible for the crisis in the Middle East

◆ *Lula calls for Israel settlement freeze*



Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (R) shakes hands with his Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas at Mercy Museum in Salvador, Bahia State. Israeli settlement expansion on Palestinian territory must stop immediately, Lula said Friday after meeting Abbas.

continues to build, notably in occupied east obstacles along the road to peace," Abbas Beit-ul-Moqaddas, that will mean it is erecting said.

The Palestinian leader called on Lula, who met last week with visiting Israeli President Shimon Peres, to play a greater role in international efforts to reach an agreement on Middle East peace.

"We appreciate the efforts of Brazil," Abbas told reporters in the northeastern city of Salvador.

"With respect to you, President Lula, we would like you to have a role, and you're ready for it," he said, adding that "the world can benefit from" Brazil's influence in the region.

The two leaders discussed the long-stalled Middle East peace process and a way forward for the Palestinian territories.

"The peace process will benefit from the contribution of other countries other than those traditionally involved" in negotiation efforts, Lula said.

In recent weeks, Brazil has hinted at ambitions to play a role in Middle East affairs as the country seeks to boost its international profile to match its growing economic heft.

After Peres and Abbas, Lula is expected to meet Monday with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as part of a flurry of talks with Middle East leaders.

Abbas is to head to Argentina today to meet with President Cristina Kirchner.

Palestinians to set new date for elections

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Palestinian officials announced Friday that a new date for parliamentary and presidential elections will be set next month now that President Mahmoud Abbas has agreed to postpone the January vote, though the Gaza Strip's Hamas rulers maintain they will boycott the voting.

The elections were supposed to be a central component of an Egyptian-mediated effort to reconcile Abbas and his rivals in the Islamic group Hamas. Months of talks, however, have failed to produce a deal, and Abbas had decided to move ahead with elections anyway, angering Hamas.

The resistance fighters group has controlled the Gaza Strip since seizing power from forces loyal to Abbas in June 2007, leaving the president at the head of a Western-backed government that controls only the West Bank.

The Palestinian Election Commission said last week that the Jan. 24 voting should be put off, saying that Hamas' opposition made it impossible for voting to take place in Gaza.

Abbas said in an interview with BBC Arabic on Thursday that he has agreed to that recommendation.

He said he still hopes to reconcile with Hamas so that voting can go forward in Gaza, as well as the West Bank and Arab areas of Beit-ul-Moqaddas.

The Election Commission said Friday it would meet in December to set a new date.

Adding to uncertainty surrounding the voting, Abbas said in the BBC interview that he was standing by his decision not to seek another term as president. He announced at the beginning of the month that he planned to leave politics because he was frustrated over the 10-month stalemate in Israel-Palestinian peace efforts.

His departure would throw peace efforts into turmoil, particularly if a Hamas candidate were to be elected president.

"The decision not to run myself for elections is a final decision," Abbas said. "The issue doesn't depend on changing the circumstances that led me not to run for the upcoming elections, even if the circumstances changed or altered completely. As for me, I took my decision, I'm not running."

Israel minister headed to Turkey

BEIT-UL-MOQADDAS (AFP) — An Israeli minister said on Friday he was to travel to Turkey, in the first such visit since Israel's military offensive in Gaza at the turn of the year strained ties with Turkey.

"I hope my visit will contribute to improving relations between the two countries which are strategically crucial to Israel," Trade and Industry Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer told Israeli radio.

A spokesman said Ben-Eliezer travel to Turkey today at the head of a trade delegation and was expected to meet Turkish Defence Minister Vecdi Gonul on Monday.

Israel's relations with Turkey, a key regional ally, took a downturn in January when Ankara launched an unprecedented barrage of criticism of the Tel Aviv regime over its devastating Gaza war.

Iraq election official: Even if Kurdish boycott averted, January deadline impossible

A senior Kurdish leader on Friday moved to defuse the latest threat to Iraq's imperiled elections — a possible Kurdish boycott — saying ongoing discussions with Iraqi leaders and political party blocs were close to resolving their differences.

"I am cautiously optimistic there will be a resolution," says Barham Saleh, prime minister of the Kurdish regional government.

Also to be resolved is the opposition of Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, who on Wednesday vetoed the election law passed last week, arguing that it did not allow for enough participation by Iraqi expatriates — a majority of whom are Sunni Arab.

A vote on the law was scheduled for Saturday. But the country's top election official said that even if lawmakers resolved all their differences, it would be impossible to hold elections in January.

"We have already stopped all our work," says Faraj al-Haydari, the head of Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC). Both IHEC and United Nations officials have said they need at least 60 days to prepare for a credible election. The poll would have to be held before the last week in January — the start of some of the holiest days on the Shiite calendar.

While some political parties are happy to hold elections in February, U.S. and Iraqi political leaders have viewed the January deadline mandated by the Iraqi Constitution as sacrosanct. This election, which could impact the timing of the U.S. withdrawal, is considered particularly crucial in creating a more representative Iraqi government than the poll four years ago. That election was largely boycotted by Sunnis, resulting in a lack of political power that was seen as helping to fuel the insurgency.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, from the same Kurdish political party as Dr. Saleh, said this week that Kurds would boycott the parliamentary elections if they were not given more seats to



Kurdish regional President Massoud Barzani (l.), talks with Prime Minister of the Kurdish region Government of Iraq Barham Saleh in Arbil, Iraq. (Yahya Ahmed/AP/File Photo)

reflect the increased population in the Kurdish provinces. Elections would not be seen as credible without the participation of the Kurds.

Haydari says that while changing the number of seats is a political decision, the three Kurdish provinces do appear to have been shortchanged.

The number of seats in the new parliament has been determined by population figures provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Trade, which is responsible for distributing food rations. In the absence of a census, those figures are generally seen the most reliable gauge of Iraq's population.

Talabani's home district of Sulamanyah received no increase in the number of seats it is entitled to, while the two other Kurdish provinces received three between them.

"All the other governorates have increased from three or four or five and even 10" from the number of seats they were allocated in 2005 elections, says Haydari.

Saleh, speaking by telephone from Arbil, says a Kurdish veto is a last resort, but that the current representation is unacceptable.

"The Kurdish people have made clear they will not stand for it and the Kurdish leadership will not stand for it," says Saleh. "We all know for the last four years the consequences of a democratic process in Iraq were unbelievably damaging," he says, referring to the Sunni boycott. "We don't want to repeat this experience with the Kurds."

There had been fears that delayed elections could also delay the pace of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq. But the top U.S. general here, Gen. Ray Odierno, said on Wednesday that in the absence of any separate destabilizing developments, he planned to wait until next spring to decide whether the pullout should go as planned.

(Source: csmonitor.com)

Barghouti calls on PA to use popular resistance against Israel

Jailed Tanzim leader and Fatah Central Committee member Marwan Barghouti urged Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian factions to lead a 'popular resistance' to stop Israeli's settlement construction and 'Judeaizing' activities.

"I have always called for creatively combining negotiations with resistance and political, diplomatic and popular activism," Barghouti was quoted by Israel Radio Saturday as telling Palestinian Al Hayat Al Jadida newspaper.

"I warned against relying exclusively on negotiations, but some were late to discover this," he reportedly added.

In a message transmitted via his lawyer from the Israeli prison where he has been incarcerated for seven years, Barghouti claimed there was no Israeli peace partner.

Barghouti made similar remarks in October, when he warned that the circumstances that led to the second intifada still exist and called on the Palestinians to conduct a 'peaceful resistance'



campaign.

At the time, the Tanzim leader said "whoever thinks it's possible to make peace with the current Israeli government is being delusional."

Abbas, meanwhile, accused Israel of holding secret negotiations with Hamas in Switzerland and claimed Beit-ul-Moqaddas was not interested in achieving peace.

In an interview with the BBC-Arabic on Thursday, the PA president criticized the Obama administration, saying that "Washington is not doing enough to pressure Israel to advance the peace process."

Hamas senior official Mamhoud A-Zahar, however, denied that the group held talks with Israel in Geneva.

In an interview with London-based paper Asharq Alawsat, Zahar said Abbas's words were "entirely different" from what happened in reality, explaining that Hamas asked to meet with Europeans officials, and not with Israeli delegates.

(Source: jpost.com)

Al-Qaeda seizes Japan hostage in Yemen: tribal source

SANAA (AFP) — Al-Qaeda gunmen have seized a Japanese engineer from his tribal kidnappers in Yemen, a tribal source who has been seeking to negotiate his release said on Saturday.

"The hostage was seized by elements of Al-Qaeda, who took him to an unknown destination in the Maarib region," east of the capital, Sanaa, one of two tribal mediators told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The man, identified by Japanese media as 63-year-old Takeo Mashimo, was kidnapped last week in Arhab, northeast of Sanaa, by tribesmen seeking to exchange him for one of their relatives being held by police.

He was seized by Al-Qaeda on Friday night, with a second mediator saying Al-Qaeda became involved after being approached by someone close to the detained tribesman who was opposed to the Japanese hostage's release.

The 22-year-old man whose release was being sought by the tribesmen was imprisoned by U.S. forces for a year in Iraq, according to a source in Yemen.

He was later arrested in Syria before being held in Sanaa, where he was sentenced to two years in prison without charges, the same source said.

Meanwhile, authorities have been rounding up members of the Al-Hanaq and Al-Gub tribes responsible for the initial kidnapping, the first source said.

Sheikh Abdul Jalil, a tribal leader, announced on Tuesday that the hostage had been freed but backtracked the following day, admitting he had been mistaken.

"The abductors had said they would free the hostage and had left to get him but when they came back they said they had changed their mind," he said.

Jalil said they had agreed to release the hostage in exchange for their relative within 15 days.

"But at the last minute, they came back saying they want him liberated in three days," the sheikh said.

The kidnappers were distrustful because a previous promise by President Ali Abdullah Saleh to release a detainee was not fulfilled, sources close to them said.

Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama said on Wednesday that he was hopeful the hostage would be released soon.

He said there was no sign the engineer -- employed by a Tokyo-based consultancy working on construction of an elementary school funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency -- had been harmed in captivity.

Yemeni tribes habitually kidnap foreigners to put pressure on local authorities. More than 200 foreigners have been seized during the past 15 years, with most being freed unharmed.

But five Germans and a Briton who were taken captive in June in the north of the country are still missing and with no word on their fate.

They were among nine people seized in the northern Saada region, the stronghold of Shiite rebels at war with the Sanaa government. The three others in the group -- two Germans and a South Korean -- were killed.