

Beat: Politics

Kerry to return to Mideast to continue Israeli-Palestinian peace talks

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USPA News - U.S. Secretary of State will return to the Middle East next week to continue the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian peace process that resumed earlier this year, U.S. officials announced Saturday as Israel authorized the release of another group of Palestinian prisoners. Kerry is scheduled to travel to Jerusalem on Wednesday to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before traveling to the Palestinian city of Ramallah where he will meet with President Mahmoud Abbas.

"In these meetings, he will discuss the ongoing final status negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, among other issues," said Jen Psaki, a spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department. The visit was announced on the same day the Israeli government authorized the release of another 26 Palestinian prisoners as required by a deal designed to lead to an interim peace agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians by April. It will be the third release out of four, by which 104 Palestinians will be freed from Israeli jails. "All of the released prisoners perpetrated offenses prior to the Oslo accords and have served sentences of 19 to 28 years. The list of prisoners will be published tonight on the Prison Service website," said Mark Regev, Netanyahu's spokesman. "The release of the prisoners will be carried out at least 48 hours after the list is published." Regev emphasized that if any of those to be released are found to be carrying out hostile activities against Israel, they will be re-arrested to serve the remainder of their sentences. Opponents of the release staged a rally outside Netanyahu's home in Jerusalem on late Saturday, but the Israeli government has indicated it has no plans to revisit its previous commitment to free the prisoners. The prime minister's spokesman criticized Abbas last week for not condemning recent incidents in Israel, including a sniper attack from Gaza in which a Palestinian civilian was killed while working on a border fence. "We are disappointed that, so far, President Abbas has not condemned these acts of terrorism as one would expect from a partner in peace talks," he said.

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