

Int'l community should help boost peace process — FM

By Alia Shukri Hamzeh and Petra

BRUSSELS — Jordan has reiterated its call on parties involved in the Middle East conflict to build on the outcome of last month's Annapolis peace meeting to reach a peace settlement before the end of next year.

Foreign Minister Salah Bashir said on Friday in remarks at a meeting of Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) countries and NATO members at the level of foreign ministers that Jordan would remain concerned with the peace process until a Palestinian state is established.

He said Israel should take immediate trust-building steps, while the international community should provide all kinds of assistance to push forward the peace process.

Arab and Western Foreign ministers, who gathered here for NATO's annual meeting, called for serious efforts towards peace and criticised Israel's recent decision to expand a Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem as counterproductive.

"I've made very clear about seeking clarification on precisely what this means. I've made clear that we're at a time when the goal is to

build maximum confidence between the parties and this doesn't help build confidence," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told a press conference on Friday after her talks with counterparts from MD countries.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit also slammed Israel for launching a tender to build new housing units at a Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem, saying such measures contradict Israel's commitments in Annapolis.

Aboul Gheit told The Jordan Times that the Israeli move also violates the trust-building measures it pledged

to take in an attempt to create a suitable atmosphere for launching serious negotiations with the Palestinian side.

The Egyptian top diplomat said the attending MD Arab countries called on the international community, especially the US, to shoulder their responsibilities and press Israel to give up such a step.

"The Arab side urged seriousness over implementing the results of the Annapolis meeting. What we need now are serious measures, credibility and the halt of settlements," he said.

Israel announced last

week plans to invite bids to build more than 300 new housing units in Har Homa, a settlement in East Jerusalem. Palestinian officials blasted the expansion project as a "serious violation" and called on the US and UN Security Council to put pressure on Israel to halt the building of the settlement.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon had also said the move was "not helpful", adding that he would discuss the matter with his partners in the Quartet for Middle East peace.

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Israeli and Palestinian leaders had agreed in Annapolis to revive the frozen Middle East peace process and set the goal of a peace deal and a new Palestinian state by the end of 2008.

Both sides are expected to resume peace talks on Wednesday. "If we want to go to the meeting on December 17, then there must be a serious move towards the peace process or else, within a couple of months, we will find out that the process went to a halt and that the matter was nothing more than imaginations," Aboul Gheit warned. He said the Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who was attending the meeting, reiterated commitment to the achieved Annapolis agreement, but did not comment on the issue of settlements.

"It's not only halting the settlements that is needed,

but rather measures on the ground that will help facilitate the lives of Palēstinians and launch the Palestinian economy," he added upon exiting from the luncheon meeting between MD countries and NATO's 26 members.

On the MD working lunch, Aboul Gheit said: "It was a very positive meeting."

"We concentrated on the form of the relationship and focused on the results of the Annapolis meeting and after Annapolis," he added.

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer agreed saying the ministers welcomed the outcome of the Annapolis conference, and looked forward to the start of negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. "Even if this is not a NATO issue, we all share a desire to see lasting peace in that region," he said.

The working lunch between NATO foreign minis-

ters and their counterparts from Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia was the second in three years.

NATO officials have maintained that since the 2004 Istanbul summit, the dialogue enhanced on both the political and military dimensions and gained regularity and substance.

The first ever foreign ministers' meeting of the MD took place in Brussels in December 2004, while two defence ministers' meetings were organised in February 2006 and 2007 in Taormina and Seville respectively. Under military cooperation for the MD partnership, seven meetings of the MD chiefs of defence have taken place since 2004.

Since the June 2004 Istanbul summit, the annual MD action programme for practical cooperation has also gradually expanded from

more than 100 activities in 2004, to 200 activities in 2005, to 400 in 2006 and to more than 700 practical activities and events in the year 2007 — 660 of which are military activities.

According to NATO officials, an increasing number of officers from MD countries participate in courses, seminars and exercises, reaching 781 military officers in 2006, thus contributing to promoting interoperability between the armed forces of NATO and MD countries.

In its final communiqué, the alliance commended the level of advancement in dialogue into a "genuine partnership", and welcomed the conclusion of individual co-operation programmes with Egypt and Israel and the establishment of an MD trust fund to assist Jordan with the disposal of old and un-serviceable munitions.