

Israel rebuked for planning to build more homes in East Jerusalem

Recently declared indirect talks between Israel and Palestine already in jeopardy

By **GIDON BELMAKER**
Epoch Times Staff

JERUSALEM—Israel's announcement to approve 1,600 new housing units for construction in eastern Jerusalem has sparked a strong international response. The uproar over Israel's decision might hamper the newly declared round of peace negotiations.

On Tuesday, Israel's interior ministry announced an approved plan to build 1,600 new housing units in the Jerusalem neighbourhood of Ramat Shlomo. Ramat Shlomo is in the municipal boundary of Jerusalem, but it is located in territories captured after the 1967 Six-Day War, and is thus considered by most countries to be an Israeli "settlement."

The announcement of the plan came during U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's four-day trip to the region. The Israeli Ministry of the Interior claimed the timing of the announcement was not connected to Biden's visit.

"The Jerusalem District Planning Committee approved a plan, which has been in the works for over three years. This is a procedural stage in the framework of a long process that will continue for some time," said an official statement from the ministry.

In reaction to Israel's decision, Biden quickly responded with an official statement condemning the move.

"I condemn the decision by the government of Israel to advance planning for new housing units in East Jerusalem. The substance and timing of the announcement, particularly with the launching of proximity talks, is precisely the kind of step that undermines the trust we need right now and runs counter to the constructive



NEW HOMES, NEW CONTROVERSY: Israeli school children cross a street in Ramat Shlomo, a Jewish settlement in the mainly Arab eastern sector of Jerusalem. On March 9, Israel approved building 1,600 new settler homes in Ramat Shlomo, announcing the move as U.S. Vice President Joe Biden met top Israeli officials to boost renewed peace efforts. The controversial decision was condemned by Biden and others around the world. **MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES**

discussions that I've had here in Israel," said Biden, adding there is a need in the current situation to build an atmosphere of trust between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"This announcement underscores the need to get negotiations under way that can resolve all the outstanding issues of the

conflict. ... Unilateral action taken by either party cannot prejudice the outcome of negotiations on permanent status issues," he said.

Nabil Abu Rudeina, spokesperson for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, said in a statement that Israel's move shows it is not seeking peace. He called

the decision "dangerous" and said the step might hamper the recently announced proximity talks.

The president of the Palestinian Authority called the secretary-general of the League of Arab States and asked him to work toward a joint action from the League in response to the

construction announcement.

The Arab league agreed to Abbas's request. According to media reports, in a special session the league recommended to not hold indirect negotiations with Israel. It was with the approval of the Arab league two weeks ago that led to a Palestinian decision to accept indirect

talks. It is still unclear what the impact of this development will be on those negotiations.

Biden reiterated his position on the matter after his meeting with the Palestinian president on Wednesday.

"The decision by the Israeli government to advance planning for new housing units in East Jerusalem undermines that very trust—the trust that we need right now in order to begin as well as produce profitable negotiations."

Biden also said that the U.S. "will hold both sides accountable for any statements or actions that inflame tensions or prejudice the outcome of talks, as this decision did."

European Union Foreign Minister Catherine Ashton criticized Israel in a speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called the settlements illegal under international law. Ki-moon noted that settlement activity is contrary to Israel's obligations under the Road Map for Peace and undermines any movement toward a viable peace process.

The road map, proposed by President George Bush in 2002, had been adopted by both the Israelis and the Palestinians. It required the Palestinians to stop terrorist activities and Israel to stop the settlements, as a first step. Neither obligation was met and the plan missed its proposed deadlines.

The negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were stalled for more than a year. The last round of significant talks was the Annapolis process in Nov. 2007, which aimed at creating a Palestinian state by the end of 2008. Soon after those talks failed, elections were held in Israel.

New plans to tackle dangerous dogs

By **SIMON VEAZEY**
Epoch Times Staff

LONDON—Big brother may have the solution for Britain's big dog problem.

Microchipping, insurance, and registration of all dogs are to become compulsory under government plans to tackle the growing problem of dangerous "status" dogs increasingly used in gangs.

The compulsory microchip will entail inserting a device about the size of a grain of rice between the dog's shoulders. Dog wardens and vets can then use scanners to trace the dog's owners.

The number of complaints about dangerous dogs received by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) increased 12-fold in four years with dangerous and outlawed breeds being used by youths and gangs as weapons and status symbols. Illegal dog fighting is also on the rise in recent years.

"The vast majority of dog owners are responsible, but there is no doubt that some people breed and keep dogs for the sole purpose of intimidating others, in a sense using dogs as a weapon," said



DOG AS WEAPON: According to Britain's Home Secretary Alan Johnson, some people breed and keep dogs for the sole purpose of intimidating others. **WANG JIAYI/THE EPOCH TIMES**

Home Secretary Alan Johnson. "It is this sort of behaviour that we will not tolerate; it is this sort of behaviour that we are determined to stop."

It's estimated that there are

approximately 8 million dogs in the U.K.—about one for every eight people.

Under the proposal, every single dog in the U.K. would have to be registered and licensed. This

restriction currently only applies to the four designated breeds of dangerous dogs—pit bull terrier, the Japanese tosa, the dogo Argentino, and the fila Brasileiro—that are also required to be neutered.

The plans include an amendment to protect people who are attacked on private property, notably mail carriers, where the current law holds little sway.

The Home Office says it is already on the way to tackling the issue of dogs being used in gangs, with new powers that come into force later this year. The new gang injunction gives police the power to restrict gang members from certain actions, including being in charge of an animal in a public place.

The plans were broadly welcomed by the RSPCA, which emphasized the need for individual responsibility.

"There is a real need for updated legislation that enables enforcers to tackle the problem effectively and prevent serious incidents from occurring, rather than waiting till after a tragedy or penalizing certain dogs just because of their breed or type," said Claire Robison, RSPCA's government relations manager.



An aerial view of the Ukrainian Parliament. **ANDREY VOLKOV/THE EPOCH TIMES**

Ukraine's president amends constitution to allow non-party coalitions

By **ANDREY VOLKOV**
Epoch Times Staff

KYIV, Ukraine—Ukraine's new president, Victor Yanukovich, hopes to form a new ruling coalition this week, but first he tweaked the constitution to improve his chances for consolidating power.

But now lawmakers are questioning whether what he did was legal.

A parliamentary faction led by Yanukovich's Party of Regions passed a bill on Tuesday changing the rules for how the governing coalition is created. According to the constitutional amendment, deputies can now leave their parties to join coalitions as individuals. Traditionally, only factions of parties could join together to form a majority, or ruling, coalition.

Many lawmakers are criticizing Yanukovich, calling his move a "constitutional coup."

"This version which they have created is totally illegal and unconstitutional," said Vladimir Filenko, a deputy from the ruling coalition that fell last week after a vote of non-confidence. The coalition had been led by Yulia Tymoshenko, Yanukovich's rival in the recent presidential elections.

However, members of the president's faction deny that they violated

any laws. They claim that such changes are necessary to have a functioning state as soon as possible so that the country can emerge from both a political and economic crisis. Yanukovich has not yet signed the bill into law, but he is expected to soon do so.

The non-consenting majority in parliament plans to appeal to the constitutional court to decide whether the amendment is legal or not.

Political observers note that while this is a serious step, it was to be expected, given the political chaos in Ukraine.

"In Ukraine, there are a lot of laws that do not function, and neither does the constitution. You can watch on TV how lawmakers work: Each of them just votes for his neighbours," said Ilko Kucheriv, director of the Democratic Initiatives Foundation.

Tymoshenko, who narrowly lost to Yanukovich in a hard-fought election, was elected on Tuesday as leader of the democratic opposition, which includes many political parties and social groups. Their goals are to create a democratic country, move ahead with European integration, and keep a watch on the current authorities. They promise to be constructive but not aggressive.

U.S. States divided over soda tax

SODA CONTINUED FROM P1

"Carbonated beverages are a discretionary purchase," wrote Gregoire. "Their consumption leads to growing public health issues, including childhood obesity and diabetes."

On the other side of the country in New York state, Gov. David Paterson's proposed soda tax in his January budget proposal is meeting with opposition. According to the Center for Consumer Freedom, nine Democrats and two Republicans in the state senate are against his proposed soda tax.

The governors and others in favour of the tax have research to back up their claims that something needs to be done to curb the soda-

drinking habits of Americans.

In an October 2009 article in the New England Journal of Medicine, drinking sugar-sweetened beverages is linked to risks for obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. The article concludes that a "compelling case can be made for the need for reduced consumption of these beverages."

Sugar-sweetened beverages are defined as beverages that contain added natural sweeteners such as sucrose (table sugar), high-fructose corn syrup, or fruit-juice concentrates. They all have similar metabolic effects.

Many other proponents of a soda excise tax, who include Philadelphia

Mayor Michael Nutter and governor of Colorado Bill Ritter, say that drinking less soda would help fight obesity.

Opponents of the tax say there is not enough scientific evidence to prove health benefits claims. There are also possible downsides for businesses.

The former mayor of Philadelphia, John F. Street, has been a vocal critic of the tax, saying it would be a financial punishment to the less advantaged.

"I just don't know how you can put a 70 percent tax on a two-litre bottle of Coke," said Street in a March 7 Philadelphia Inquirer article. "It's the poor people who are going to pay the sugar tax. Then you put a trash tax on top. I think that is very problematic."

The Center for Consumer