

Can Hillary Clinton Bring Peace to the Middle East?

President Barack Obama dispatched Secretary of State **Hillary Rodham Clinton** to the Middle East on Tuesday as the U.S. urgently seeks to contain the bloody conflict between **Israel** and **Hamas**.

Clinton hastily departed for the region from Cambodia, where she had joined Obama for summit meetings with Asian leaders. The White House said she would make three stops, meeting with Israeli **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** in Jerusalem, Palestinian officials in Ramallah, in the West Bank, and Egyptian leaders in Cairo. Clinton was expected to arrive in Israel on Tuesday night and return to Washington late Wednesday or very early Thursday after making all three stops.

Clinton's trip marks the Obama administration's most forceful engagement in the weeklong conflict that has killed more than 100 Palestinians and three Israelis, with hundreds more wounded. While the U.S. has backed Israel's right to defend itself against rocket fire from Gaza, the Obama administration has warned its ally against pursuing a ground assault that would further escalate the violence and could dramatically increase casualties on both sides.

Still, Obama's deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes said the U.S. believes "Israel will make its own decisions about the military operations and decisions that it undertakes."

"At the same time, we believe that Israel, like the United States, like other countries, would prefer to see their interests met diplomatically and peacefully," Rhodes said. "It's in nobody's interest to see an escalation of the military conflict."

Obama and Clinton have consulted about the widening crisis throughout their three-day tour of Southeast Asia, their final joint trip before Clinton leaves her post as the top U.S. diplomat. They spoke again about the situation Tuesday morning, aides said, and made the decision for her to travel to the region.

Still, it was unclear what impact Clinton's presence would have on the spiraling violence or whether she was heading to the Mideast with any specific overtures from the U.S.

Rhodes said "there are a number of ideas that are in play," but offered no further details. And he insisted the ramped up U.S. involvement was "a matter of what's in everybody's best interests", not a matter of "leverage."

Obama and Clinton each have held multiple telephone calls with their counterparts in Israel and Egypt, which is at the center of negotiations to quell the violence. Because the U.S. considers Hamas a terrorist organization and prohibits contact between its members and American officials, it is relying on Egypt, as well as Turkey and Qatar, to deliver its message to the Hamas leadership in Gaza.

Israel and Hamas say they are open to diplomatic mediation efforts being led by Egypt, but they are far apart in their demands.

Hamas wants Israel to halt all attacks on Gaza and lift tight restrictions on trade and movement in and out of the territory that have been in place since Hamas seized Gaza by force in 2007. Israel demands an end to rocket fire from Gaza and a halt to weapons smuggling into Gaza through tunnels under the border with Egypt.

The widening conflict has threatened to overshadow Obama's three-country tour of Southeast Asia, his first overseas trip after winning re-election. The president, after a marathon day that took him from Thailand to Myanmar to Cambodia, worked the

phones with Mideast leaders into the early hours of Tuesday morning, aides said.

The White House said Obama would stay in contact with the key players in the conflict while Clinton was on the ground. The president is scheduled to depart Cambodia later Tuesday, arriving back in Washington before dawn Wednesday.

Associated Press writer Matthew Lee in Washington contributed to this report.

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