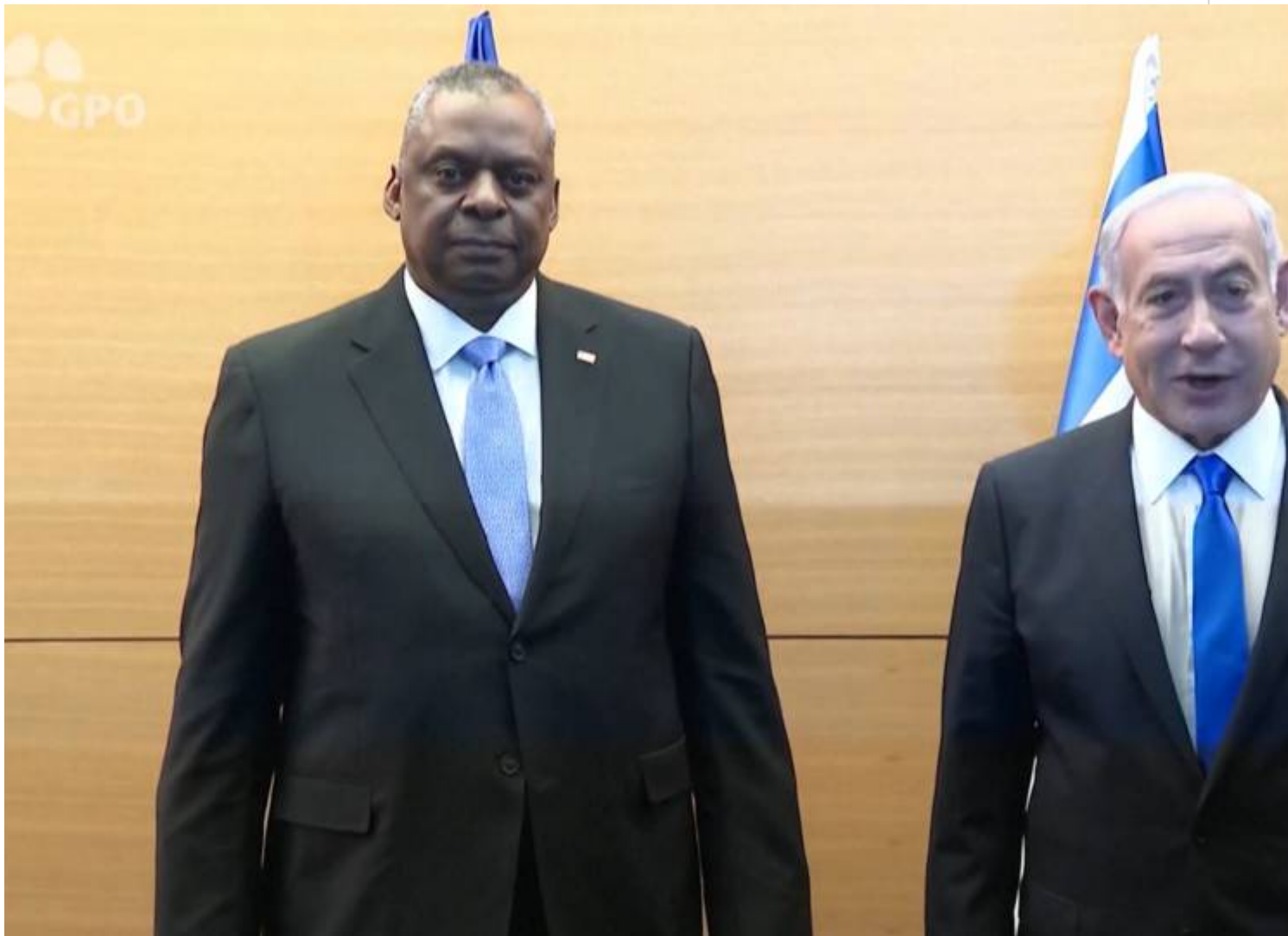


Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin meets Israeli prime minister amid escalating West Bank violence



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Tel Aviv, March 11 (RHC)-- U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other leaders in Israel, where he called for an independent judiciary and for deescalating tensions with Palestine, while reiterating the U.S.'s “deep commitment” to Israel's security.

In Tel Aviv, Austin told reporters: “But the United States also remains firmly opposed to any acts that could trigger more insecurity, including settlement expansion and inflammatory rhetoric. And we’re especially disturbed by violence by settlers against Palestinians.”

Secretary Austin also said he believed diplomacy was the best strategy when it comes to Iran and nuclear weapons. Israel has openly backed military action against Iran.

Austin’s visit comes against the backdrop of intensifying violence. Earlier, in the occupied West Bank, an Israeli settler shot dead a Palestinian man near an illegal settlement outside the city of Qalqilya.

Separately, Israeli forces raided the town of Ni’lin, near Ramallah, overnight, arresting relatives of a Hamas gunman and ordering the immediate destruction of his family’s home. Palestinians have condemned such demolitions as collective punishment.

At least 79 Palestinians have been killed so far this year by Israeli forces.

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