

France Says 72 Countries to Attend Middle East Summit in Paris



Paris, January 13 (RHC)-- Representatives from dozens of countries will attend an upcoming conference on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in Paris as France struggles to restore a stalled peace process in the Middle East. A spokesman for the French government said that 72 countries would be represented in the conference, which is due to be held on Sunday, January 15.

Stéphane Le Foll said Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would be absent in the main conference. He said the two had been invited to come to France after the meeting to be briefed about conclusions.

Netanyahu has censured the French initiative meant for the resumption of negotiations, saying he would only attend direct talks with Abbas, who has welcomed the general idea of restoring the peace process, although he has, on numerous occasions, accused Israel of deliberately resisting any settlement over the conflict.

Abbas is planning to visit the French capital at the end of the week on the sidelines of the conference. He has yet to make clear whether he would meet with French President François Hollande. Le Foll said U.S.

Secretary of State John Kerry would also attend the talks. He added that France hoped the summit could "restart the (negotiation) process at a moment when it has been largely abandoned."

The Palestinian Authority, which rules the occupied West Bank, has been involved in a series of talks with Israel over the past five decades. The initiative, which has been sponsored by the United States and other Western governments, has largely failed as Israelis have repeatedly hampered efforts meant for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

A major stumbling block is Israel's continued expansion of settlements in the West Bank including East Jerusalem. The United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution late last month, condemning the construction of settlements. Washington, Israel' main ally, abstained during the vote for the resolution, allowing it to pass.

The U.S. brokered the last round of talks between the Palestinians and Israelis in the summer of 2013, but negotiations collapsed over widening differences.

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