

Abbas spokesman rules out Hamas talks in Syria

AMMAN (AFP) - Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas does not plan to meet with rival leaders of Hamas or other Palestinian factions based in Damascus when he visits Syria on Sunday, his spokesman said.

"There are no arrangements for such any meeting with Hamas leaders or others," Nabil Abu Rudeina told reporters on Saturday.

"The president will travel tomorrow [Sunday] to Syria... to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian track of the Middle East peace process and other issues of common interest" with Syrian President Bashar Assad, he said.

Last month Abbas called for talks with Hamas, which ousted his Fateh loyalists from the Gaza Strip in bloody clashes in June 2007.

Abu Rudeina said the initiative "is still on the table.... We are ready if Hamas is ready. So far we didn't receive a clear 'yes' from Hamas." In June, Hamas supremo Khaled Mishaal said his movement was willing to hold reconciliation talks with Fatah.

Meanwhile, **the UN coordinator for the Middle East peace process, Robert Serry, met Abbas in Jordan and urged Palestinian reconciliation.**

"We very much hope the Palestinian reconciliation... will take place because the longer it doesn't take place the more difficult it becomes to bring the West Bank and Gaza together again under one legitimate Palestinian authority," said Serry.

"I think the president has taken some important steps, the UN is very supportive of it," he added.

Abbas and Mishaal last met in the holy city of Mecca in February 2007 when Saudi Arabia brokered an agreement between Fateh and Hamas that led to the formation of a Palestinian unity government which later collapsed.