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| Published 13:56 03.06.10 | Latest update 13:56 06/03/10

## U.S. envoy Mitchell: Gaza flotilla raid must not undermine Mideast talks

**Palestinian official says Abbas-Mitchell meeting on Wednesday dominated by issue, but Mitchell says it 'underscores' need to push negotiations forward.**

By News Agencies

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Special U.S. envoy George Mitchell said on Thursday that the Israel Navy's deadly raid on a Gaza-bound humanitarian aid ship earlier this must not undermine indirect negotiations he is mediating between Israel and the Palestinians.

Speaking in the West Bank town of Bethlehem, Mitchell said the incident – in which nine foreign activists were killed - showed the need for progress in the talks that got under way last month.

"This incident underscores to need to make progress in negotiations," said Mitchell, who held talks on Wednesday with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

A senior Palestinian official said, however, that the raid dominated Abbas' two-hour meeting with Mitchell. During those talks, Abbas also demanded an end to the Israeli blockade of Gaza, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said.

The Palestinians have previously said the Mitchell-mediated indirect talks, which got underway last month, would focus on the issues of security and the borders of a state the Palestinians hope to found on land captured by Israel.

But Erekat made no mention of either issue in his remarks to reporters after Abbas's meeting with Mitchell on Wednesday.

Instead, he said Abbas had demanded an international inquiry into Monday's raid which resulted in the deaths of nine activists on a Turkish-flagged boat. He also called for an end to the blockade of the Hamas-run territory.

"The current pattern of things cannot be maintained," Erekat said. As usual, Mitchell made no comment after the meeting.

Abbas is due to meet U.S. President Barack Obama in Washington on June 9.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was due to meet Obama this week in Washington but the meeting was postponed after Netanyahu curtailed his trip following the incident.

Reviving the two-decade old Middle East peace process has been one of Obama's foreign policy priorities, but expectations that Mitchell's indirect negotiations will achieve a breakthrough are low.