

Mashaal addresses Noam Schalit

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Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal said in a press conference on Friday that his faction will not budge from its position and blamed the United States for the failure of the international community to lift the crippling financial embargo on the Palestinians.

Mashaal also turned his comments to Noam Schalit, the father of kidnapped soldier Gilad Schalit, and urged him to pressure the government, saying his son's release was being delayed by Israel.

Asked whether the soldier would be released, Mashaal said that "efforts are still under way with our Egyptian brother [Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak] and I cannot say more than that at this stage. The ball is in the court of the Israeli leaders."

Mashaal, Hamas's political leader who lives in exile in Syria, expressed disappointment that the meeting of the Middle East peace negotiators, the US, UN, EU and Russia, in Berlin on Wednesday failed to lift the embargo.

The gathering searched for a way to advance the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts amid strong misgivings about the planned unity government between rival Palestinian factions.

Mashaal on Friday appeared in particular to criticize US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who in Berlin said that Washington will postpone any decisions about lifting the blockade, until the Hamas-Fatah power sharing government takes hold.

"The postponement ... is an evidence that the American position is not convincing," Mashaal told reporters at the end of his three-day visit to Egypt where discussed the accord brokered in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, earlier this month.

In Berlin, Rice had reiterated the Quartet's demand that any new Palestinian government agreed between militantly Islamic Hamas and the moderate Fatah movement of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas must recognize Israel, something Hamas has refused to do.

"We will not change our position whatever time it will take," Mashaal said, adding that the "international community should not press too hard on the Palestinian people."

"We will not bend to the American stick. The Americans should change their position, they should not freeze the international community's position," he said.

Mashaal has pushed for an immediate lift to the embargo despite the US and Israeli opposition.

"Unjust conditions have been imposed on us and they (the Quartet) are pouring more fuel on the fire," Mashaal also said. "The international community has no other option but to respect what the Palestinians have chosen."

Mashaal also urged all Arab countries to support the Mecca agreement as a means of quickly ending the embargo. He also said that "Arabs are capable of breaking the blockade, there is Arab money that we want to get into Palestine, the money is there, and we demand to get it in."

Mashaal is to fly this weekend to Moscow to seek Russian support for ending the embargo. Russia is believed to be the member of the Quartet most sympathetic to the Mecca deal as being sufficient for a resumption of aid.