

# Baker and Syrians hold extended talks

DAMASCUS, Syria - Secretary of State James Baker held extended talks Wednesday night with Syrian President Hafez Assad on a U.S. formula to bring peace to the Middle East by having Israel give up territory in exchange for Arab recognition.

Nearing the end of a five-nation trip to the Middle East, Baker also discussed with Assad a flurry of rumors regarding American hostages in Lebanon and a burgeoning plan to guard the Persian Gulf oil fields with an alliance of Egyptian, Syrian and American troops.

The session in Assad's office completed Baker's consultations with the key figures in the Arab-Israeli dispute.

He added Lebanese Foreign Minister Fares Bouez to his schedule on Thursday morning, before flying to Moscow to measure the situation in the restive Soviet Union.

The American and other Western hostages are believed to be held in Lebanon by Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed group, and Baker wants to get the latest word from the Beirut government on the situation.

He also appealed to Assad for help, but U.S.

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President Bush

officials said Syria's intervention may not be enough to gain the hostages' freedom. Iran, they said, holds the key.

The United States has no direct relations with Tehran and depends largely on intermediaries such as Assad on behalf of the hostages.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said they had no evidence of a break in the situation, but President Bush and Baker have vowed to persist, hoping the post-war climate in the region might produce results.

There was no immediate information on possible progress from the Baker-Assad meeting.

"I think that the secretary feels that the climate is now better than it has been in a long

time for making progress" in the region, Bush said in Ottawa, Canada, first stop on a diplomatic journey to discuss the postwar gulf with the leaders of Canada, France and Britain.

"I haven't seen anything pessimistic coming out of the Baker reports," Bush said. "There is some kind of change," he said, following the war in which the army of one of Israel's most threatening enemies was vanquished.

Bush said it was "impossible to have normalized relations" with Iraq as long as Saddam Hussein remained in power. Still, he said, he was concerned about instability in the region because of internal unrest in Iraq.

Bush also cautioned Iran against trying to take any Iraqi territory.

A day before Baker's arrival in Moscow,

Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Vitaly Churkin said that Gorbachev had sent messages to Arab leaders outlining Soviet views on security in the Persian Gulf and soliciting their views. Churkin said the messages were sent to "a wide range of Arab states," but he would not list them nor say whether Saddam was among them.

In other gulf developments Wednesday:

●In Iraq, demonstrators in the northern oil city of Mosul stormed two prisons and released 4,000 political prisoners, according to Kurdish leaders who claimed to control almost 75 percent of Iraqi Kurdistan. An opposition leader in London said Kurdish forces had surrounded Mosul.

●In New York, Kuwait's ambassador to the United Nations said Iraq's occupation and plunder of Kuwait may cost the emirate up to \$100 billion in damages.

●In Washington, the Army presented Purple Hearts and Prisoner of War medals to five former POWs, praising them for paying "a steep price in the name of freedom."

# Nay vote could shatter U.S.S.R., official says

MOSCOW - A resounding "nyet" on a referendum this weekend could shatter the Soviet Union and the political authority of President Mikhail Gorbachev, a top Communist Party official said Wednesday.

Yuri Prokofiev predicted the poll question would pass, and cited public opinion surveys that said 60 percent of the voters would cast ballots Sunday in the nonbinding vote on whether to preserve the Soviet Union. He said up to 70 percent of the participants would vote "yes" and about 25 percent "no."

The vote is to be counted by each republic, and not compiled as a national total in this land of 285 million residents. Six of the 15 Soviet republics, including the three secessionist Baltic states, are boycotting the referendum.

"If the majority says no, it will mean the collapse of the political prestige of Gorbachev," said Prokofiev, head of the Communist Party in Moscow.

The referendum has developed into a political contest between Gorbachev and Russian federation President Boris



Yeltsin, Prokofiev complained.

"It's not a question of Gorbachev or Yeltsin. It is a question of the destiny of the country," he said.

The conflict between the two men sharpened Wednesday as Yeltsin demanded state television give him 40 minutes of air time Friday night. Gorbachev, as president and head of state, will make a televised address Saturday night.

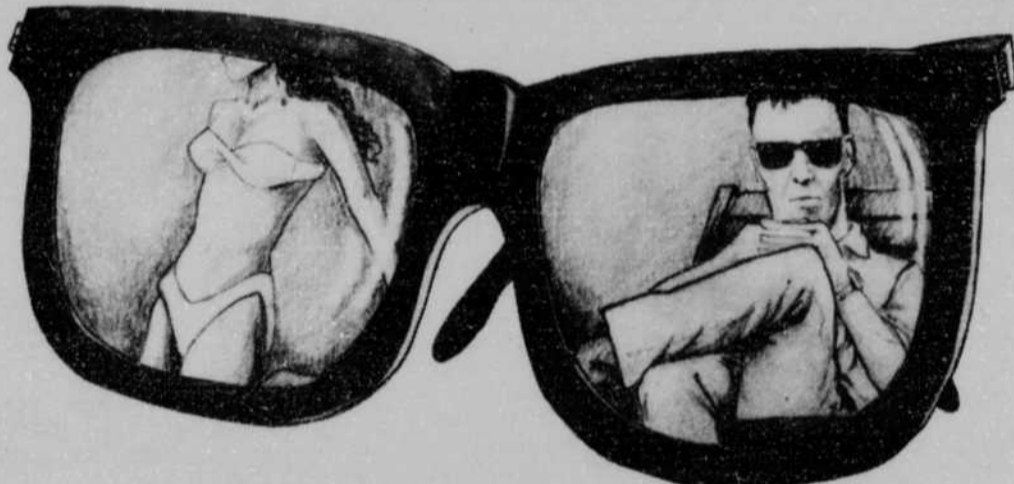
In a televised appearance Feb. 12, Yeltsin accused Gorbachev of leading the nation to the brink of dictatorship and demanded he resign.

Prokofiev said the referendum is intended to sound out the public on whether to keep the Soviet Union as it is or to conclude a new Union Treaty that Gorbachev is pushing to bolster central control over the republics.

"It's being carried out to learn the sentiments of the population," Prokofiev told a Moscow news conference.

But, he said, "We are very clear about the consequences that might ensue if the referendum answer is in the negative... the downfall of our union."

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# Exxon agrees to pay \$1 billion for oil spill

WASHINGTON - Exxon Wednesday settled government claims arising from the nation's worst oil spill by agreeing to pay a record \$100 million fine for four environmental crimes and to spend an additional \$900 million to finish cleaning up Alaska's coast.

Exxon already has spent \$2.5 billion on the cleanup.

The civil settlement and guilty pleas to the four misdemeanors will avert lengthy court fights over the March 24, 1989, grounding of the tanker Exxon Valdez, which spilled more than 10 million gallons of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound.

Attorney General Dick Thornburgh said the deal with the federal government and the state of Alaska "represents a clear and unmistakable signal to those engaged in environmental crime that their activities are not going to go unnoticed and unprosecuted."

The record criminal fine, involving one misdemeanor charged against Exxon and three others charged against its Exxon Shipping Co. subsidiary, shows that "answering for environ-

mental spoilage cannot be done simply by paying damages," the attorney general said.

Proceeds from the fine will be split 50-50 with the state of Alaska to help finance the cleanup. By law, the federal share must go into the general treasury.

"I think it's a good settlement for the state of Alaska, it's a good settlement for the federal government... it's a good settlement for the environment," said Alaska Gov. Walter Hickel, who was also governor 13 years ago when the discovery of Alaska oil was announced on this date.

Under the proposed consent decree, which must receive court approval after a 30-day public comment period, Exxon would pay \$900 million over the next 10 years to a trust fund administered by federal and state officials.

The fund would be used to pay for costs of the continued cleanup by Exxon, which has already spent \$2.5 billion to remove oil from the sound and its shores.

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