

WASHINGTON DATELINE

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Ford Still Reassessing

President Gerald Ford said last week that his administration's long-awaited "reassessment" in regard to the Middle East has not been concluded.

"We have met with a number of heads of government in the Middle East," he said. "We have discussed the alternatives and options with a number of other people, who are knowledgeable in this area, but I cannot give you a date as to when that reassessment will be concluded."

"Obviously, it is getting closer and closer because we must not permit, to the degree that we can affect it, a stalemate or stagnation, because the longer we have no movement toward peace in the Middle East, the more likely we are to have war, and all of its ill ramifications."

"I can only say we are working on the problem with countries in the Middle East and with others, and that the reassessment will be concluded in an appropriate time, and it will provide for movement, as far as we are concerned."

He declined to say whether the movement would be in the direction of the Geneva Conference; or additional shuttle diplomacy by Dr. Henry Kissinger.

He would only say: "The options are open." President Ford was responding to the second question -- asked by The Associated Press's



Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin hosts Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass) during his short visit to Israel on May 31.

Frank Cormier -- in a 30-minute press conference, held on the South Lawn of the White House.

A week before the press conference -- during an interview with columnist Richard Wilson -- Mr. Ford said that the situation in the Mideast is very volatile -- and "could erupt into a real tough conflict any time -- and the longer we drift with no prospect of action, the more potential the igniting becomes."

He added that this danger is the reason that the United States is still working with the Israelis and with the whole Arab complex "because another war out there will be worse than the Yom Kippur War of 1973."

"It would be blood year," he stated. "It would

be more costly and inevitably lead to an oil embargo. None of these things we want to happen, so we are forcing a program of progress.

"We think there has to be movement; there can't be stalemate and stagnation. I just hope we get cooperation from the parties involved."

Meanwhile, the new United States Ambassador to Israel, Malcolm Toon, visited briefly with President Ford before flying to Tel Aviv. Toon will succeed the late Kenneth B. Keating at the U.S. Embassy.

A career diplomat, Toon participated in the recent extensive discussions in Washington and New York when Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin met with President Ford, Dr. Kissinger, Joe Sisko and Defense Secretary Schlesinger, as well as other administration officials, Congressmen and Jewish leaders.

"I am hopeful, but not necessarily optimistic," Toon stated, when asked about any possible new interim agreement between Egypt and Israel.

However, Premier Rabin -- in an interview in Israel -- warned: "If an interim agreement with Egypt is not reached, the United States will make public its plan for a general peace agreement; and this plan will not be to Israel's liking...."

President Ford also met last week with eight members of the National Association of Arab Americans. The conference was held in the Cabinet Room of the White House. No details were given. However, sources revealed that the group talked to Mr. Ford about U.S. recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization as the representative of the Palestinians.

President Ford summoned Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz to the Oval Office on Friday for a short round-up on the Mideast situation.

Informed sources disclosed that -- in the 11 minute meeting, attended also by Dr. Kissinger and Joseph Sisco -- the President personally requested Israel to consider larger bilateral concessions so as to enable resumption of Mideast peace talks. Ford reportedly didn't pressure Dinitz -- he was cordial, but firm.

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