

Arab League chief says Mideast talks off



The proposed talks, the Palestinian chief negotiator said this week, were a "last chance" to keep the Middle East peace process alive. The decision came after Israel announced on Tuesday it would erect 1,600 settler homes in an area of the occupied West Bank it annexed to Jerusalem. Abbas had only agreed to the talks on condition that Israel imposed a Jewish settlement freeze. "The Palestinian side is not ready to negotiate under the present circumstances," Moussa told a news conference following an urgent meeting of Arab delegates at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo. No immediate comment was available from Israeli or Palestinian officials. U.S. Vice President Joe Biden publicly scolded Israel on Wednesday over the settlement plan, saying it was undermining peace efforts after Palestinians agreed to U.S.-mediated talks. Israel also this week approved construction of 112 new Jewish homes in the Beitar Illit settlement in the occupied West Bank, on land Israel captured in a 1967 war. Arab League delegates said the resumption of the talks hinged on Israel halting settlement expansion in East Jerusalem and occupied territories. Abbas formerly broke off peace talks with Israel after Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip in December 2008.