

Palestinians win UN recognition

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THE UN General Assembly has voted overwhelmingly -- **138 in favour, 9 against and 41 abstentions** -- to recognise Palestine as a non-member state, handing a major triumph to president Mahmud Abbas in the face of fierce US and Israeli opposition.



Mr Abbas demanded the United Nations give a “birth certificate” to a Palestinian state and was rewarded with the backing of 138 countries.

Only nine members heeded Israeli warnings that the move could lead to more violence and voted against.

Australia was among 41 countries which abstained, after opposition from Labor MPs forced Julia Gillard to abandon plans to vote against granting Palestine UN observer status.

The UN vote lifts the status of the Palestinian Authority from an observer entity to a “non-member observer state” with the same status as the Vatican.

Even though it is not a full member it can now join UN agencies and potentially join the International Criminal Court.

Israel immediately condemned Mr Abbas's speech to the General Assembly ahead of the vote as “defamatory and venomous.”

“The world watched a defamatory and venomous speech that was full of mendacious propaganda against the IDF (army) and the citizens of Israel,” said a statement issued by the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton slammed the UN vote as “unfortunate and counterproductive”, saying it “places further obstacles in the path to peace”.

But in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians fired in the air, whistled and embraced each other in celebration after the vote.

As the votes were cast, there was silence among the thousands gathered in the West Bank city of Ramallah, which erupted with cheers of joy and chants of “God is greatest” when the 138-9 approval was announced.

The Palestinian leadership says it wants to use the "historic" vote as a launchpad for talks with Israel which have been frozen for more than two years.

Mr Abbas, who embraced his foreign minister after the vote and was given repeated standing ovations, said the vote was "the last chance to save the two-state solution."

In a 22-minute speech laced with references to Israel's assault this month against rockets fired from Gaza, Mr Abbas said Palestinians would accept "no less than the independence of the state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital."

He added: "We must repeat here once again our warning: the window of opportunity is narrowing and time is quickly running out. The rope of patience is shortening and hope is withering."

Mr Abbas said UN members had to "issue a birth certificate of the reality of the state of Palestine."

US ambassador Susan Rice condemned the vote as "an obstacle to peace" because it would not lead to a return to direct talks between the Israelis and Palestinians.

"Today's grand pronouncements will soon fade and the Palestinian people will wake up tomorrow and find that little has changed," she told the assembly, in a grimly delivered statement.

"This resolution does not establish that Palestine is a state."

The United States blocked a Palestinian application for full membership of the United Nations that Mr Abbas made in September 2011.

"The UN resolution will not confer statehood on the Palestinian Authority," Israeli ambassador to the United Nations Ron Prosor said.

He added that making Palestine a non-member observer state at the UN "will place further obstacles and preconditions to negotiations and peace." He warned that it could lead to increased violence.

Major Muslim nations rallied behind Mr Abbas at the assembly.

"No longer can the world turn a blind eye to the long sufferings of the Palestinian people," said Marty Natalegawa, foreign minister of Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority state.

Mr Abbas was warned earlier by UN leader Ban Ki-moon that the Middle East peace process is on "life support" and Israel's Mr Netanyahu also said the UN General Assembly vote would not create a Palestinian state.

Mr Ban urged both sides to return to talks which currently look a distant prospect, diplomats said.

The Palestinian leader did not make any reference to the possibility of joining the International Criminal Court - a major worry for Israel.

But Mr Abbas said the Palestinian Authority would consult with other countries about new steps after its diplomatic status is bolstered.

"We will act responsibly and positively in our next steps, and we will to work to strengthen cooperation with the countries and peoples of the world for the sake of a just peace," he said.

Talks between the two have been suspended since September 2010, with the Palestinians blaming Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.

The vote comes 10 days after a ceasefire ended a brief but bloody conflict between Israel and Hamas, the Palestinian militant group that holds sway in the Gaza Strip and is a rival of Mr Abbas and his West Bank-based Fatah faction.

The landmark General Assembly meeting was held on the 65th anniversary of a UN resolution on the division of the Palestinian territories into a two-state solution that Mr Ban said “remains tragically unfulfilled.”

The Palestinians say 132 countries now recognize their state bilaterally and said the result was a boost. Several countries which do not recognise the Palestinian state, such as France, voted for the resolution.

But several European countries, including some backing the bid, believe the Palestinians should have waited until after US President Barack Obama installed his new administration and Israel held elections, diplomats said.

Success gives the Palestinians access to UN agencies and treaties but there are divided opinions over whether they will be able to automatically join the ICC.

Palestinian envoys have said Mr Abbas will not rush to join the court but could use it if Israel does not change its policies on settlements and other matters.

The Palestinian Authority and UN agencies that accept Palestinian participation could lose hundreds of millions of dollars in financing because of the vote.

US law prohibits funding for any international body recognizing a Palestinian state.

Washington has warned Mr Abbas he risks losing around \$200 million in aid, which is blocked in the US Congress.

Israel is considering freezing the transfer of tax and customs funds it collects for the Palestinians, while one Israeli foreign ministry policy paper even suggested “toppling” the Palestinian Authority.

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