

NATION/ WORLD

US Says Israel, Palestinians To Talk

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says Israel and the Palestinians have agreed to resume stalled direct peace negotiations in Washington early next month.

She made the announcement at the State Department on Friday with special Mideast peace envoy George Mitchell at her side.

The breakthrough marks a small but important step toward easing tensions in the Middle East.

Clinton said the talks are to begin Sept. 2, hosted by President Barack Obama. She said the hope is that a comprehensive peace agreement can be reached within one year. The leaders of Egypt and Jordan also have been invited to attend the first session.

Stocks Slide As Malaise Continues

NEW YORK (AP) — Stocks have closed moderately lower as investors' pessimistic view of the economy deepens.

Investors are finding little reason to buy. Friday has brought no new reports to offset the previous day's disappointing news that growth in the domestic economy continues to slow.

Oil prices have fallen again on worries that future demand will wane if economic growth remains tepid. Energy stocks were among the worst performers, including oil companies Chevron Corp. and ConocoPhillips.

The Dow Jones industrial average is down 57, or 0.6 percent, at 10,213. The Standard & Poor's 500 index is down 3, or 0.4 percent, at 1,071. The Nasdaq composite index is up less than a point at 2,179.

Losing stocks were ahead of gainers on the New York Stock Exchange by almost 3 to 2. Volume came to 1.1 billion shares.

Jordan Killer Believes He Will Go Free

LITTLETON, N.C. (AP) — A man convicted of killing Michael Jordan's father believes he will one day walk free, saying a report this week indicates evidence was wrongly withheld in his case.

Daniel Andre Green said in an interview Friday with The Associated Press that he has been working for the past 14 years to prove he's innocent of the killing. He sees hope in a report this week that found investigators mishandled evidence in his case and dozens of others.

Green insists he had nothing to do with the killing of James Jordan in 1993. He said that he was not present when Jordan was murdered and that he only worked to help cover up the crime because a close friend asked him for help.

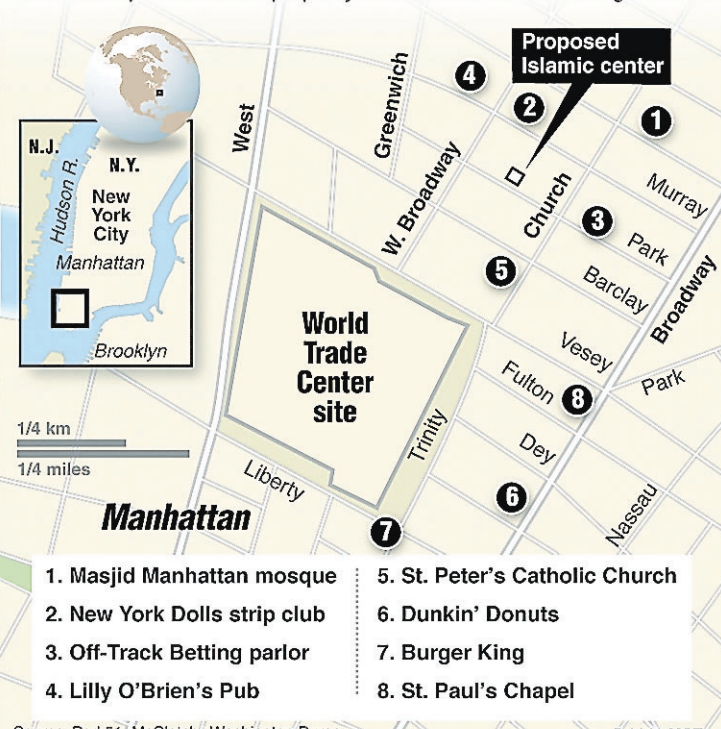
That friend, Larry Demery, testified against Green at the trial in 1996.

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Imam's Tour Comes Amid Mosque Furor

What's around ground zero

A plan to build an Islamic center near the former World Trade Center has created an uproar about its propriety. A look at what is in the neighborhood:



Source: Park51, McClatchy Washington Bureau

NEW YORK — The furor over the planned mosque and Islamic center near ground zero has put Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf in a curious position: At the same time he is being vilified in the U.S. for spearheading the project, he is traveling the Mideast on a State Department mission as a symbol of American religious freedom.

Some of the imam's American critics said they fear he is using the taxpayer-funded trip to raise money and rally support in the Muslim world for the mosque.

"I think there is no place for this," said the Rev. Franklin Graham, who is the son of evangelist Billy Graham and opposes the Islamic center and mosque. "Can you imagine if the State Department paid to send me on a trip anywhere? The separation of church and state — the critics would have been howling."

At his first event Friday in the Persian Gulf state of Bahrain, Rauf refused to discuss the uproar over plans for the community center two blocks from the World Trade Center site. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley has said Rauf understands that he cannot solicit funds for the project on his 15-day tour.

The \$100 million, 13-story project is modeled after the YMCA and Jewish Community Center. Rauf and his wife, Daisy Khan, a co-leader of the faith, have a long record of interfaith outreach and insist the center will promote moderate Islam.

Opponents have condemned the plan as an affront to families who lost loved ones on Sept. 11, 2001, and the sensibilities of a nation still dealing with the wounds of the attacks. Some critics have accused Rauf of quietly harboring extremist views.

The dispute has sparked a national debate on religious freedom and American values and is becoming an issue on the campaign trail ahead of the midterm elections.

In New York, Khan said organizers are sticking with their plan and

are not considering scaling it back or changing locations.

"Dropping the plan is definitely not an option at all," she told The Associated Press in a telephone interview Friday.

Rauf has not commented on the controversy since it erupted earlier this summer.

During his visit to Bahrain, he led Friday prayers at a neighborhood mosque near the capital city of Manama, then said that radical religious views pose a security threat in both the West and the Muslim world.

"This issue of extremism is something that has been a national security issue — not only for the United States but also for many countries and nations in the Muslim world," Rauf said. "This is why this particular trip has a great importance."

He also said he has been working on a way to "Americanize

Islam." He provided no specifics but noted that different interpretations of the faith have emerged over the religion's 1,400-year existence.

"The same principles and rituals were everywhere, but what happened in different regions was there were different interpretations," he said. "So we recognize that our heritage allows for re-expressing the internal principles of our religion in different cultural times and places."

This is Rauf's fourth U.S.-sponsored trip to the region, according to the State Department. He traveled twice to the Mideast in 2007 during the administration of President George W. Bush and once earlier this year. As part of his latest trip, Rauf will also visit Qatar and the United Arab Emirates during Ramadan to talk about Muslim life in America.

Nearly 50 Percent Leave Mortgage-Aid Program

BY MARTIN CRUTSINGER
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — Nearly half of the 1.3 million homeowners who enrolled in the Obama administration's flagship mortgage-relief program have fallen out.

The program is intended to help those at risk of foreclosure by lowering their monthly mortgage payments. Friday's report from the Treasury Department suggests the \$75 billion government effort is failing to slow the tide of foreclosures in the United States, economists say.

More than 2.3 million homes have been repossessed by lenders since the recession began in December 2007, according to foreclosure listing service RealtyTrac Inc. Economists expect the number of foreclosures to grow well into next year.

"The government program as currently structured is petering out. It is taking in fewer homeowners, more are dropping out and fewer people are ending up

in permanent modifications," said Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics.

Besides forcing people from their homes, foreclosures and distressed home sales have pushed down on home values and crippled the broader housing industry. They have made it difficult for homebuilders to compete with the depressed prices and discouraged potential sellers from putting their homes on the market.

Approximately 630,000 people who had tried to get their monthly mortgage payments lowered through the government program have been cut loose through July, according to the Treasury report. That's about 48 percent of the those who had enrolled since March 2009. And it is up from more than 40 percent through June.

Another 421,804, or roughly 32 percent of those who started the program, have received permanent loan modifications and are making their payments on time.

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