

Bush prefers phone diplomacy for Mideast

by UPI

WASHINGTON -- U.S. President George Bush said he can move the Mideast peace process along without traveling to the region, a White House spokeswoman said. Bush Tuesday announced at the Middle East peace conference at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., an "understanding" between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the immediate start of negotiations on a peace treaty. Bush scheduled meetings Wednesday with both leaders in the Oval Office although no specific issues were expected to be addressed. Asked whether Bush needed to travel to the Middle East to show he is fully engaged in the peace process, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said the president already has told Abbas and Olmert he is just "a phone call away." "Secretary (of State Condoleezza) Rice will be doing a lot of that heavy lifting, in terms of the travel to the region and helping them -- as she has been," Perino said, noting both Olmert and Abbas make frequent trips to the United States. Bush traveled to Israel when he was governor of Texas but hasn't visited the region as president. "Of course he would like to go again. If there can be an agreement and plans come together, then we'll let you know," Perino said.

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