

Abbas regrets failure to reach unity deal

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Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas on Wednesday expressed regret that his secular Fatah party and its Islamist Hamas rivals were unable to reach an Egypt-brokered unity agreement

"The president expresses his regret over not achieving an agreement to end the divide and restore unity in the sixth round of talks," the Western-backed Abbas's office said in a statement.

"At the same time he affirms the necessity of all powers and factions to adhere to higher national interests," it added.

The two main Palestinian movements had hoped to sign a national unity agreement in Cairo on July 7 but instead scheduled a seventh round of talks to be held on July 25.

The long-standing divisions between the two parties came to a head in July 2007, when Hamas seized power in Gaza after a week of deadly factional clashes, cleaving the Palestinian territories into hostile rival entities.

The two sides hope to reach a deal that would lay out an electoral law, define the make-up of security forces and set up a committee to liaise between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank ahead of an election in 2010.

One of the main stumbling blocks has been the issue of detainees, with each faction accusing its rival of carrying out waves of political arrests and mistreating prisoners in the territories under its control.

The two groups deny they make political arrests, saying the detentions are conducted on security grounds, but independent human rights groups have slammed the behaviour of security forces in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.