

Czech-US radar talks resume in aftermath of Gates bombshell



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Czech and US experts will start a third round of negotiations Tuesday over the siting of a US anti-missile radar on Czech soil, officials from both sides told AFP Monday.

"The talks will only deal with the legal framework for US soldiers being at the base, not at all with Russians," Czech defence ministry spokesman Jan Pesek told AFP. He referred to previous suggestions by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates that a Russian presence at the Czech base was possible.

Talks should end Thursday with an update expected on any progress.

Another session between top foreign ministry negotiators, covering "technical details" about the construction and operation of the radar base, follows next week.

Covered at both sessions will be Czech access to information gleaned from the radar and signalled by Prague as a priority, Pesek added.

Washington wants to use the Czech radar and interceptor missiles in Poland to guard against possible missile attacks from rogue states, such as Iran.

An angry Moscow argues the proposed system is rather aimed at Russia. President Vladimir Putin last week likened the latest Washington-Moscow rift to the Cuban missile crisis which brought the world to the verge of atomic war, in 1962.

Last week, Moscow rejected the idea of sending observers to the planned Czech base. Still, astonishment at the idea Prague might have allowed a Russian return -- nearly 40 years after Soviet-led forces invaded the country -- still reverberates locally.

A photo-montage on the front cover of Monday's edition of the current affairs weekly, Tyden, showed Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolaneck on all fours like a dog. The lead was held by US President George Bush, pictured chatting with his Russian counterpart.

"American treachery," proclaims the headline.

After initially making no comment on Gates' suggestion, Topolaneck quickly specified that only Russian observers, not soldiers, might be permitted at the facility.

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