Secretary of State Warren Christopher began his first mission to the Middle East Tuesday with a promise and a warning to Israel and Arab leaders: make peace now or suffer the consequences of a prolonged conflict.

"It's a big world, with lots of things to do," one senior official said. "We're not going to be the doormat. We've got problems in Bosnia, Russia and elsewhere."

This is, the official said, "a very high priority, but it can't continue to have that priority, if we're pushing against a closed door," the official warned.

Christopher launched much of his week-long trip through the Middle East investigating the attitudes of the region's leaders, and deciding whether the peace talks are worth a major investment of time, officials said.

"He's going to be listening very, very carefully to what he hears from the Arabs," the official said, "as to how serious they are in promoting meaningful negotiations that can move this peace process forward," another senior official offered.

"He will then come back with his own assessment that he will give to President Clinton. Based on that assessment of the seriousness of engagement the president will decide what I could call the "qualifying of engagement by the United States in these negotiations," he said.

Officials refused to describe further what they meant by the "qualifying of engagement" by the United States. But that appeared to imply that Christopher has little interest in investing a large part of his time in negotiations for little immediate results.

Former Secretary of State James A. Baker III launched the talks in 1991, but getting them under way required a large part of his time and a dozen grueling trips to the region. Baker, too, threatened several times to abandon his quest if the area's leaders did not show themselves ready to make compromises for peace. Even then, Baker was unable to bring the negotiations close to a conclusion before he left the State Department last August.

A round of talks between Israel and Syria last fall briefly raised the prospect of a possible peace between the area's two most implacable enemies, but the line of talk was small.

In December, the Arab delegations at the talks said they would suspend negotiations to protest Israel's expulsion of more than 400 Israeli settlers, whom the Israeli government believes are encroaching on the Lebanese border.

In recent weeks, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin has said his government wants to return to the table, but they have also pressed for the early return of the deportees.

Israel has offered to allow 100 of the deportees to return immediately, with the rest to follow by the end of the year. But the deportees themselves have rejected that offer.

Christopher Kicks Off Mideast Talks With Promise, Warning

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