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Contact Group on Kosovo meets in New York

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The six-member international Contact Group is scheduled to meet in New York on Thursday evening, setting the stage for the first direct talks between Serbia and Kosovo Albanians, which will be held on Friday in EU's Manhattan offices.

The participants will discuss the state of the troika-led process, the agenda of the Friday talks and the steps to follow.

The foreign ministers of the U.S., Russia, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy - Condoleezza Rice, Sergei Lavrov, David Milliband, Bernard Kouchner, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Massimo D'Alema – will be accompanied by the mediating troika, comprised of envoys of the EU, U.S. and Russia - Wolfgang Ischinger, Frank Wisner and Alexandr Botsan-Kharchenko.

Apart from the troika, the meeting will be attended by EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn and NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

Contrary to expectations, the Kosovo issue remained rather sidelined during the first two days of the annual gathering of world leaders in United Nations, and was marked by passionate statements by US Secretary of State Condi Rice and French President Nicholas Sarkozy.

Both Rice and Sarkozy described the independent Kosovo as the best solution for the lasting problem between Belgrade and Albanian-dominated province, but Serbian president Boris Tadic immediately cried foul, saying that undiplomatic statements undermine current diplomatic effort to solve this fragile issue.

On the other side, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov reminded the West of Moscow's position on the Kosovo status, saying that the final decision had to be made within the Security Council.