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From America without love

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Arab 'moderates' return empty-handed

WASHINGTON, March 15: Hosni Mubarak's Washington visit was a remarkable disgrace. He came hat in both hands looking for financial and political handouts. But other than reasonable arguments about the need for peace and the future of the region, he had little to bargain with. And so he left both hands empty, his stature greatly diminished, his prospects darkened.

Of course both President Mubarak and his senior advisers, especially Osama El-Baz, did all they could to put a positive face on their failures.

Mubarak spoke at the White House of a "golden opportunity for peace" which Reagan should not miss in his second term. El-Baz indicated that Egypt did not come with a formal proposal and was very flexible about how the peace process might go forward. He even went so far on one TV show as to indicate that since President Reagan enjoyed "great credibility" in the Arab world now was the time for him to push forward a peace process - this was spoken only a few moments after the newscaster told of possible plans to evacuate Americans from Lebanon.

Reagan did offer one gesture as a way of soothing hurt feelings. The President filled in for Vice-President Bush and Secretary of State Shultz - both in Moscow - and

hosted a dinner the evening before Mubarak left. In sum, Mubarak was offered food and smiles - no more.

And yet, the Mubarak visit - like King Fahd's before him last month was almost totally unproductive. There is no serious peace process in the Middle East, only clouds of obscuring smoke sent up by weak and frightened leaders themselves having no serious peace strategy.

Instead of results, Mubarak was greeted here with demonstrations and demands. Jewish organisations demonstrated against Mubarak outside his residence even while he pleaded with another delegation of Jewish leaders who usually invite themselves to meet any Arab leader who will have them, a ritual that has lost all meaning since the collapse of even the faint prospects for peace that arose at Camp David.

Then on Capitol Hill, Mubarak was greeted with Israeli-orchestrated demands that he return his ambassador to Tel Aviv before expecting any American aid increases. A letter signed by 98 members of Congress was presented to Mubarak, and most analysts here expect Egypt to comply in the coming few months.

For the first time Egyptian businessmen from the Egyptian-U.S. Chamber of Commerce came to lobby Congress for more assistance. But they found out that Israel is a

very potent enemy on Capitol Hill and her ambassador works overtime against better Egyptian-American relations.

Even American newspapers and TV seemed aware that the Mubarak visit was mostly cosmetics. In an unprecedented display of obliviousness, NBC Evening News did not run a story on the day of the Mubarak-Reagan meeting. The short Washington Post report was on P.16, the New York Times on P.11 with a headline "Reagan rejects Mubarak's plan for Mid-east talks".

And so, Mubarak left in far worse a shape than when he arrived. Even no matters of economic and military aid - Egypt believes it was promised parity with Israel by Jimmy Carter at Camp David - Mubarak has now been told not to expect much more. All this while in another corner aid to Israel continues to mount and the first ever "free trade zone" between U.S. and a foreign country has been implemented.

In short, Egypt has been treated as a distant friend but only so long as he remains satisfied with her current allowance, accepts occasional affection rather than love, doesn't complain, and does what is expected by her benefactor. Meanwhile the American marriage to Israel, after a long, long engagement, has been consummated.

There is no promise in Ronald Reagan's Middle East Policies.

Some analysts are telling the Egyptians this is what they had to expect after their decision at Camp David to divide the Arab world on the crucial issue of Israel. The Americans took what they could get, let their Israeli allies chart a new strategic course based on Egypt having been crippled and now Egypt is left with few good choices and considerably less dignity.

Other analysts in this Capital think we are headed for an inevitable collapse - either of the "moderate" (translated here as Pro-American) Arab regimes that have allowed this situation to come about, or of the relationships that have resulted between Riyadh, Cairo, Amman and Arabat toward Washington.

We may be witnessing the last throw of the dice of the Arab moderates as they plead and threaten Washington to do something to prevent the rise of militant and anti-Americanism in the Middle East.

But the truth must be told. It is not only that the Americans are not listening, they truly do not understand and worse yet they do not want to. It will take far more potent policies and leaders to change this situation.