

Arafat's death leaves little hope for U.S. involvement in Mideast peacemaking

By Warren P. Strobel
KRT WIRE SERVICE

WASHINGTON - Yasser Arafat's death opens a narrow window of opportunity for President Bush to engage decisively for the first time in making peace between Israel and the Palestinians, current and former U.S. officials said recently.

If history is any guide, the chance will be fleeting, extremists could sabotage any progress with violence and political caution could lead to missed opportunities.

Following the lead of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Bush refused to have any dealings with Arafat for more than two years because of the Palestinian leader's unwillingness to end terror attacks on Israelis. Bush instead called on Palestinians to choose leaders committed to peace.

In that time, the United States was essentially absent from what diplomats euphemistically call "the peace process." Sharon went his own way, building a security wall along the West Bank and planning Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip.

With Arafat's death, which came eight days after Bush's re-election, diplomats expect Bush and Sharon to come under sharply increased international pressure to work directly with the Palestinians. Bush recently met with his closest foreign ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who backs a new Mideast peacemaking push.

The key question is whether the Bush administra-

tion will intervene to promote an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue or hang back to see what kind of Palestinian leaders emerge.

"We need to get in there now ... and begin to have a three-way dialogue," said Dennis Ross, the U.S. Middle East envoy under the first President Bush and President Clinton.

Palestinians are supposed to hold elections for a new president within 60 days.

But the elections won't come off unless Israel eases restrictions on Palestinian life and the Palestinians don't take advantage of the easing to pursue terrorist attacks, said Ross, author of a recent book, "The Missing Peace," on previous attempts at Arab-Israeli rapprochement that fell short.

Bush and his top aides have reacted cautiously since Arafat fell seriously ill late last month.

The president reaffirmed his commitment to a Palestinian state, but he and retiring Secretary of State Colin Powell have put the onus on the Palestinians to take the first steps.

Powell said that the leaders who replace Arafat must pledge to fight terrorism and rally the Palestinians behind that course. "If that kind of leadership emerges that can do that, then we stand ready to work with them," he said.

Bush chose to send Assistant Secretary of State William Burns, a midlevel official, to Arafat's funeral Friday in Cairo. Most other countries are sending foreign ministers or, in some cases, their leaders.

Flynt Leverett, a former White House and CIA

official now at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, said Powell should have been dispatched and called it "a missed opportunity to move this process forward."

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the diplomatic sensitivities involved, said the choice of Burns "was the balance the government came up with" between showing respect for the Palestinians and the White House's aversion to Arafat.

Yet, the White House is keen to support Palestinian elections, precisely how hasn't been established, and has sent the message to its allies in Europe and elsewhere that "we're open-minded" about how to move forward, the same official said.

Two aides to national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, Daniel Fried and Elliott Abrams, met last week with European representatives to coordinate actions after Arafat's death, according to U.S. officials and others who follow the region.

They agreed to continue to support Sharon's plan to withdraw Israeli settlers and troops from the occupied Gaza Strip, according to one individual briefed on the meeting.

With Arafat dead, the most immediate concern is that Palestinian militant groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad could exploit the power vacuum and try to seize control. They might even put forward candidates for high office or form political arms, as other terrorist groups have done.

Extremists who oppose Israel's existence "will

sense an opportunity as well," said the U.S. official. Gaza-based Hamas, however, has been decimated by Israel's assassination of many of its top leaders.

Ross said concerns over a Palestinian civil war are overblown, at least in the short term.

"There's a really strong predisposition on the part of the Palestinians to try to hold it together," he said in a telephone interview. "They have a very pronounced fear of 'fitna' or civil war, he said.

Whether stability endures depends in part on whether and how elections are held, he said.

For now, the leading candidate to succeed Arafat is former Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, who was elected recently as head of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Abbas, who has little of Arafat's charisma, is a secular moderate who negotiated with Israelis to achieve the Oslo peace agreement and opposes violence to achieve Palestinian goals.

Many observers, including some U.S. and Israeli officials, believe Bush and Sharon missed a chance to help promote moderate Palestinian leadership when Abbas was prime minister for four months last year.

Abbas, who got little but rhetorical support from the United States and Israel, quit after failing to gain significant powers from Arafat.

Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, "needed to be empowered," said Jonathan Lincoln, a senior research associate at the private Council on Foreign Relations, adding that Israel holds the key. "They did then. They do now," he said.

Slow response to oil spill threatens environment and birds, officials say

By Tom Avril and Terry Bitman
KRT WIRE SERVICE

PHILADELPHIA - After the tanker Athos I was found to be leaking thousands of gallons of oil into the Delaware, it took more than five hours for contractors to start closing off the mouths of 12 tributaries, Coast Guard officials said recently.

As a result, an unknown portion of the 30,000 gallons of heavy Venezuelan crude made its way into tributaries, considered more ecologically sensitive than the main stem of the river.

New Jersey and Coast Guard officials said after the spill was first noticed, contractors and government personnel responded as quickly as possible, as dictated by spill, response rules set up after the far larger Exxon Valdez spill in 1989.

But it wasn't quickly enough, said environmental advocate Maya K. van Rossum, who is head of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network. She said she tramped along the Woodbury and Mantua creeks Sunday in New Jersey and found thick patches of oil.

"The effort to keep it out of the tributaries, from my observation, did not work," van Rossum said. "Up Woodbury Creek, it was horrible."

Petty officer Jaime Bigelow, a Coast Guard spokesman, said contractors began closing off tributaries at 3 a.m.

Saturday morning with floating plastic booms. More than half of the creeks were finished by 8 a.m., though some were not finished until the end of the day, he said.

"The process definitely takes time," Bigelow said.

Oil was spotted over a 29-mile stretch, from the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge to the Delaware Memorial Bridge.

Jonathan D. Sarubbi, captain of the Port of Philadelphia, said "overall the spill response has gone very well."

The effort has involved 557 government and private-sector employees, 66 boats, skimmers, rakes, shovels and 37,000 feet of booms. The booms included 33,000 feet of yellow booms used to block oil, and 4,000 feet of white, polypropylene material that is designed to absorb the viscous, black liquid.

Anywhere from 500 to 1,000 birds are believed to have been "oiled," said Bradley Campbell, commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. Most are common birds such as Canada geese, gulls and ducks, but there was a report that a pair of nesting bald eagles were injured, Campbell said.

"We expect to recover only a mere fraction of the birds that were affected," Campbell said. "Of those, only a fraction will survive."

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