

Arafat back in spotlight as crisis sinks Abbas

AFP, Ramallah

The breakdown of a truce organised by moderate prime minister Mahmud Abbas puts Yasser Arafat back in the driver's seat on the Palestinian side of the nearly three-year-old conflict with Israel.

Washington is overtly calling for Arafat's help after trying to sideline him from the peace process for more than a year. Arafat got phone calls from German and Egyptian leaders this week and a visit by a top Cairo official Friday.

Accused of sponsoring anti-Israeli attacks, he has been trapped in his battered West Bank compound for most of the past 20 months and relegated to second rank behind the US and Israeli-backed Abbas since April.

But with the truce dead and the US-sponsored peace roadmap in tatters, speculation is rife that Abbas might resign and the wily 74-year-old Palestinian leader is once again moving back into the limelight.

After Tuesday's deadly suicide bombing in Jerusalem and Thursday's assassination by Israel of senior Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab plunged the region back into bloodshed, even the United States turned back to Arafat.

Secretary of State Colin Powell called on him to work with Abbas "and to make available those security elements under his control so that they can allow progress to be made on the roadmap and terror



and end this violence."

German Foreign Minister Joscha Fischer telephoned the beleaguered leader on Thursday night, as well as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who also sent his top aide Osama al-Baz to hold talks with him Friday.

The Palestinian patriarch has remained silent since the latest spate of violence scuppered the plans of Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, who was co-founder of his Fatah movement.

But a Palestinian official close to Arafat predicted he would once again demonstrate his political nous.

"Abu Mazen does not have Arafat's patience. The first major problem he faces, he will resign and Arafat will still be there. Arafat knows how to play the game," the



official told AFP.

"This Palestinian government was a compromise between two trends in Palestinian society -- one which says nothing can be obtained from Israel in the current circumstances, represented by Arafat, and another movement led by Abbas, who believes in negotiations," analyst Khalil Shanin said.

"Now the government has failed, and Arafat's camp will keep gaining momentum, especially if the escalation on the ground continues," said Shanin, also an editor for the Palestinian daily Al-Ayyam.

Abbas drew his strength from his international allies, and the collapse of the peace efforts he was spearheading strips him of his only advantage on Arafat, who retained a great deal of domestic clout.

The moderate prime minister

and his government failed exactly where they were expected to fail, but Palestinian political analyst Hani al-Masri argued it also signalled the demise of Washington's policy towards the conflict.

"If the situation continues to go down this path, it won't be long before the government resigns," Masri said.

"And although Arafat cannot regain the level of recognition he had before, his influence is not diminishing and he remains the main Palestinian player," he said.

"I don't think the Americans will start talking to him directly again but they will have to be aware that for the Palestinians, Arafat is still the only symbol of their much-needed national unity."

Ali Jerbawi, a professor of political science at Bir Zeit University, argued that Israel and the United States will succeed in making Arafat irrelevant only when they start genuinely responding to Palestinian demands.

"It's a simple equation, if the US pushes for a political process which eventually puts an end to the occupation, it will no longer matter who they deal with, Abbas, Arafat or somebody else," he said.

"It is the United States, by its complete failure to secure the implementation of the roadmap that they themselves imposed on both sides, which is allowing Arafat to cling to power."

ASI submits final report on Ayodhya excavation

PTI, Lucknow

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which carried out excavation at the disputed site in Ayodhya to ascertain if a temple had existed beneath the Babri mosque, on Friday submitted its final report to the Allahabad High Court.

The ASI report, sealed in a cover and contained in two boxes, was submitted in the office of the Officer on Special Duty (OSD) Narendra Prasad, who is conducting a day-to-day hearing of the Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid title suits.

The ASI team leader Hari Mahji, accompanied by lawyers of contesting parties, arrived at Prasad's office at around 12.20 pm and submitted the report.

The report weighed about 574 kilograms, sources told PTI preferring anonymity in view of the High Court's explicit directions to maintain complete secrecy until it was opened in the court on August 25 when the Special Bench would hear the suits.

The Bench comprising Justice SR Alam, Justice Bhanwar Singh and Justice Khemkaran had directed the ASI to submit its final report by Friday.

The excavation work began on March 12 on the acquired land on the High Court's order and in its almost 160 days of digging work, which ended on August 7, the ASI team made over 1367 discoveries, ASI sources said.



PHOTO: AFP

The spiritual guide of the Palestinian Islamic Hamas movement Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (C) is wheeled along by bodyguards during the funeral of assassinated senior Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab, in Gaza City yesterday. The Palestinian militant groups Islamic Jihad and Hamas issued a joint statement calling off their seven-week-old truce because of an Israeli air strike that killed one of their top leaders, Shanab on Thursday and two of his bodyguards. Thousands of Palestinian jammed the streets of Gaza City for the funeral.

'Australia govt skewed Iraq intelligence'

AFP, Canberra

Prime Minister John Howard's office exaggerated intelligence reports on the threat posed by Iraq to justify going to war, a former government intelligence analyst told an Australian parliamentary inquiry Friday.

Andrew Wilkie -- who resigned from Australia's top intelligence assessment agency, the ONA, last March to protest the government's stance -- said Howard's office deliberately skewed the truth and misled the public over Iraq's weapons capabilities.

"It was sexed up," Wilkie told the inquiry into the accuracy of intelligence reports in the lead up to the war. "Sometimes the exaggeration was so great, it was clear dishonesty."

Wilkie's claims echo the allegation that led to British arms expert David Kelly's suicide last month and which is still causing shockwaves in British politics.

They drew a heated denial from Howard, who challenged Wilkie to substantiate his allegations.

"I don't know on what he bases those claims, if he has got evidence of that let him produce it, otherwise stop slandering decent people," Howard told reporters.

He said ONA had told him Wilkie had virtually no access to the relevant intelligence in the lead up to the Iraq war.

35 die in China fireworks

AFP, Beijing

Thirty-five people died and 103 were injured in a fireworks factory explosion last month, state press said Friday, revising earlier tolls.

The powerful blast at the plant in northern Hebei province on July 28 was caused by workers drying out gunpowder in violation of production safety rules, the Xinhua news agency said, citing an investigation team.

The incident occurred when the gunpowder being dried under the sun self-ignited, killing 35 people, injuring 103 others and destroying the main workshops of the Guoxi Firework Plant in Wangkou town.

Earlier reports said 32 workers died.

Experts cited safety breaches such as the production of fireworks in non-production areas, the stockpiling of fireworks outside warehouses without protective measures, and the lack of skills and awareness of safety issues by the plant owner and workers.

100 killed in Nigeria oil city: Red Cross

REUTERS, Lagos

Nearly 100 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured in ethnic warfare which has rocked the southern Nigerian oil city of Warri in the past week, the Nigerian Red Cross said on Friday.

Clashes between the Ijaw and Itsekiri groups are rooted in disputes over oil wealth and political power.

"We have reason to believe there were very nearly 100 (deaths)," Nigerian Red Cross President Emmanuel Ijewere told Reuters. "We believe there were over 1,000 injured."

It has been calm since Wednesday, when the state government said the leaders of the rival groups had declared a cease-fire.

Earlier, the Red Cross said it had confirmed eight dead and 54 wounded.

The violence between the two groups has been worse in the volatile Niger Delta since March, when an Ijaw revolt led to dozens of deaths and forced oil multinationals to halt 40 percent of Nigeria's output.

Rebels kill family of 5 in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

A family of five were gunned down in the northeastern state of Assam by suspected tribal separatists who want to drive out settlers hailing from other parts of India, police said Friday.

The gunmen late Thursday stormed the house of a government security guard, who was originally from the eastern Indian state of Bihar, in the village of Manja, 320 km east of Assam's capital Guwahati, police said.

"The militants dragged out the guard, his wife and three daughters from their home and shot them dead from close range with automatic weapons," a police spokesman said.



PHOTO: AFP

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (L) and US Secretary of State address members of the media after their meetings at the UN headquarters in New York on Thursday. Powell's meeting with Annan comes two days after the deadly bomb attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad that left at least 23 dead, including Annan's top envoy in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello.

Musharraf, Annan talk about force for Iraq

PTI, Islamabad

The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has spoken to Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf over the phone to discuss the prospects of the formation of a joint international force for the protection and security of UN set-up in Iraq in the backdrop of the massive bomb attack on UN Headquarters in Baghdad.

In his telephone talks with Musharraf on Thursday, Annan discussed the security of the UN Staff, its officers and its aid programme, Pakistan news agency NNI quoted officials of UN Headquarters as saying.

The Secretary General is said to have given details of the blast in Baghdad in which 23 people, including the top UN Representative to Iraq Sergio Vieira de Mello were killed.

Lanka slaps curfew in Muslim towns

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday slapped fresh curfews in Muslim towns in the island's east as sectarian tensions mounted after the abduction of two villagers by suspected Tamil Tiger rebels, officials said.

The night curfew which was eased at dawn in Kalmunai and Sannamatturai was being reimposed immediately after Friday prayers in the two Muslim-majority towns, police officials said.

They said tension had gripped the region following the abduction of two Muslim men on Tuesday by suspected members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The rebels have denied involvement and blamed forces "opposed to the peace process."

'Australia's image in Asia damaged by strike threat'

AFP, Melbourne

Australia's threat to launch pre-emptive strikes against Asian terrorist networks had damaged the country's reputation in a region already suspicious of its "US deputy sheriff" tag, Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda said Friday.

Wirajuda said Australia's involvement in East Timor's independence had also caused friction with Indonesia but he was confident "damaged bridges" could be repaired over time.

Speaking at an Asia Society function in Melbourne, Wirajuda said Prime Minister John Howard's 1999 comment about Australia being Washington's deputy sheriff in the region still resonated in Asian countries.

"That perception gained force in recent months when the Prime Minister was understood as having intimidated that Australia was considering pre-emptive strikes against terrorist networks in other countries," Wirajuda said.

Iraqi security guards at UN HQ implicated in blast

UN refuses US security

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi security guards at the United Nations' Baghdad headquarters aided the plotters of the suicide truck bombing which killed at least 23 people, a UN official told AFP yesterday.

"They clearly had support from Iraqi security guards inside who gave intelligence to the planners of the attack," the official said on condition of anonymity.

"It was a well prepared attack. The target was Sergio Vieira de Mello, that much is clear," he said, referring to the top UN envoy in Iraq killed in Tuesday's bombing.

"They knew where Vieira de Mello's office was and they knew they would find him in his office and they packed the vehicle with the maximum amount of explosives.

The vehicle was positioned in the spot where it would make that part of the building collapse," the official said.

He said some of the Iraqi guards at the Canal Hotel, the United Nations' headquarters in Baghdad, had been hired under the toppled regime of Saddam Hussein and had links with the fallen dictator's intelligence services.

At 3:45 pm (1145 GMT) Tuesday, an Eastern European flatbed truck came speeding into the UN compound, drove up to the section of the building where Vieira de Mello's office was located and exploded.

The bombing left at least 22 other people dead and more than 100 wounded.

The UN official's comments confirmed a report in Friday's New York Times that investigators from the US Federal Bureau of

Investigation, who are assisting Iraqi police with their inquiry into the blast, were focussing on the possibility that the bombers received inside help.

Meanwhile, the debate over responsibility for the breach of security that enabled the devastating bombing of the United Nations' Baghdad headquarters intensified Friday with claims that a UN official had spurned a US offer of increased protection.

The charge came as both UN and US officials acknowledged that investigators suspected that the bombers had inside assistance from Iraqi guards in carrying out Tuesday's attack which killed at least 23 people and wounded more than 100.

US General says Terrors in Iraq No 1 threat

AP, Washington

Terrorism has replaced hit-and-run attacks on American soldiers as the biggest threat to US-led efforts to stabilize Iraq, the commander of US forces in Iraq says.

Gen. John Abizaid, chief of US Central Command, told a Pentagon news conference Thursday that elements of the terrorist organization Ansar al-Islam have migrated south into the Baghdad area and that foreign extremists are infiltrating Iraq from Syria to further destabilize it.

Abizaid said terrorists are now firmly established in the Iraqi capital and pose a growing danger.

"Clearly, it is emerging as the number one security threat," he said. "And we are applying a lot of time, energy and resources to identify it, understand it and deal with it."

Abizaid also said he believes that increasing the size of the US military force in Iraq is not the answer to defeating either the terrorists or the remnants of the Saddam Hussein

regime. The best approach is getting Iraqis more involved in providing security, he said.

The US death toll in Iraq continued to climb. The Army said one 1st Armored Division soldier was killed and two were wounded by an improvised explosive in Baghdad shortly before midnight Wednesday. No identities or other details were provided.

As of Wednesday, the Pentagon counted 271 US dead since the war began, including 133 since May 1, when President Bush declared that major combat operations had ended.

US officials announced the capture of Ali Hassan al-Majid, who earned the nickname "Chemical Ali" for ordering poisonous gas attacks against Iraqi Kurds in 1988. He was No. 5 on the U.S. list of most-wanted Iraqis, although it was unclear what role he may have been playing in postwar Iraq.

Abizaid said al-Majid had been "influencing people in and around him," but he declined to elaborate.

Thus far 42 of the 55 most-wanted Iraqis have been captured or killed, by the Pentagon's count.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, who appeared with Abizaid, characterized the bombing Tuesday of the UN's Iraqi headquarters in Baghdad, which killed at least 23 people and wounded more than 100, as a terrorist act.

"Terrorist activity has been going on in our world for a long time," Rumsfeld said. "It is going on today. There is hardly a month that goes by where there's not some relatively significant terrorist act that occurs somewhere."

Asked whether he saw links or signs of cooperation between remnants of Saddam's former Baath Party and terrorist groups entering Iraq, Abizaid said they are organized in similar ways but are not allies.

"I believe that there are some indications of cooperation in specific areas," he added. "Of course, ideologically they are not at all compatible."

US faces uphill battle at UN to lure troops to Iraq

REUTERS, United Nations

Despite worldwide anguish over the bombing of the UN compound in Baghdad, the United States faces considerable resistance in its quest to recruit more troops, police and money to help rebuild Iraq.

France, Germany and Russia, all former opponents of the war, made clear on Thursday that the crisis did not change their positions on wanting a larger United Nations role in molding Iraq's future.

But Secretary of State Colin Powell gave no indication the Bush administration would relinquish military or other controls of the country's development.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who confers with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Friday on a Security Council resolution aimed at encouraging nations to help in Iraq, echoed Powell on the need for a unified military command

under control of the United States, which has 150,000 troops in Iraq.

But he also said potential troop contributors would be asked their views on language that would meet political needs.

Powell, after conferring with Annan, stressed that the US-led force in Iraq was already multinational, with 30 nations providing about 22,000 troops and more expected.

But 11,000 of these troops are from Britain alone. Countries such as India, Pakistan and Turkey are reluctant to send troops without another UN mandate and some have doubts about serving under a US command.

"Ceding authority is not an issue we have had to discuss," Powell told reporters. But he said that "perhaps additional language and a new resolution might encourage others."

Michel Duclos, the deputy French ambassador, took the lead

in criticizing the Bush administration, saying it had not even fulfilled its promise for an international board of advisors for a fund that would decide how to spend Iraqi oil monies.

"To share the burden and the responsibilities in a world of equal and sovereign nations, also means sharing information and authority," Duclos said.

At least 24 people perished on Tuesday when a truck bomb demolished UN headquarters in Baghdad, killing 23 staff members and injuring nearly 100 more. Brazilian Sergio Vieira de Mello, head of the mission, perished in his office.

Annan himself again turned down any suggestion of organizing a blue-helmeted peacekeeping force. But he said he could visualise a multinational force "that oversees the security arrangements with the United Nations."

France eyes UTA bombing deal with Libya soon

REUTERS, Paris

France said yesterday it believed a deal could soon be reached with Libya on compensation for the 1989 bombing of a French airliner that killed 170 people.

Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said representatives of the families' victims had left for Libya on Thursday to conduct talks to win a better compensation deal for the bombing of the UTA airliner over the West African state of Niger.

France's effort came after Britain pushed for a Security Council vote on lifting UN sanctions against Libya after Tripoli accepted responsibility for the

1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Tripoli agreed to pay \$2.7 billion compensation for the mid-air explosion, which killed 270 people and made Libya a pariah to much of the West.

But France threatened to veto the UN vote unless Tripoli agreed to increase its compensation for families of those killed in the UTA bombing. The original \$34 million deal was dwarfed by the Lockerbie settlement.

Libya warned France its insistence on winning more compensation could threaten the Lockerbie deal.

Britain had been pressing on a

quick vote for ending sanctions but has agreed to delay it until early next week to give France more time.

"We hope to find a solution," de Villepin said, adding that an initial sum handed over by Libya for the UTA bombing was unacceptable.

"It is obviously up to the Libyans to find the solution with the families of the victims. I think it is possible," he said on French RTL radio.

Libya said on Wednesday it was willing to find a compromise solution to France's demand for more money for victims of the UTA bombing, for which a Paris court found six Libyans guilty in absentia.



PHOTO: AFP

Weapons are destroyed by Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) military personnel in Honiara yesterday. Thousands of people marched to celebrate the end of the Gun Amnesty Day. During the three-week amnesty, around 3,000 weapons were collected by RAMSI. The march culminated at the Lawson Tama sports field where RAMSI military personnel destroyed over 200 weapons that were collected over the last days of the amnesty.