

Abbas to discuss power struggle with Arafat in secret

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas will hold a closed-door session with deputies on Saturday to discuss his power struggle with Yasser Arafat, MPs said.

Forty-nine deputies voted yesterday for the secret session to be held, while 10 were against the move.

Abbas largely skirted the power struggle in an address before the Palestinian Legislative Council yesterday, although he did call for a "healing" of divisions between his government and the Arafat presidency.

Marwan Kanafani, a member of the mainstream Fatah movement and an MP for Gaza, criticised the decision to hold a meeting in secret.

"Why should it be a secret session when all the Palestinians in the street know about the struggles between Arafat and Abu Mazen (Abbas)," he told AFP. "It should be an open session."

Abbas seeks stronger Palestinian mandate

BBC ONLINE, AFP, Ramallah

The power struggle appears to be coming to a head.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas has challenged his parliament to back him - or face his resignation.

In a speech to MPs, who are reviewing his first 100 days in office, Mr Abbas publicly admitted rifts with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat - and said they must be corrected.

"Either provide the possibility of strong support for carrying out [the mandate] or you can take it back," he said, while stopping short of demanding a formal vote of confidence.

Mr Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, called on the United States to lift its boycott of Mr Arafat - "the elected, legitimate, constitutional and historical president of the Palestinian people". Washington

has refused to negotiate with Arafat, whom it accuses of trying to undermine the roadmap for peace.

Mr Arafat was not present at the meeting - he remains isolated in his Ramallah headquarters.

But his supporters forced the prime minister to enter the parliament building through a back door.

Some tried to force their way into the building. Masked men carrying swords and clubs spray-painted a slogan on the wall, "We want Abu Mazen's government to fall" and signed: the Al-Aqsa Brigades - linked to Mr Arafat's Fatah movement.

Echoing a similar line by Mr Arafat, the prime minister blamed Israel for the collapse of the ceasefire declared by Palestinian militants at the end of June.

But he urged Palestinians not to give in to the "spiral of action and reaction" and not to take unilateral action that would undermine Palestinian national unity and further

isolate their case.

Leading Israeli Government ministers consider Mr Arafat to be a "major obstacle" for the Palestinian prime minister and for the whole political process.

The PA government's efforts to control militant groups which launch attacks on Israel have so far been largely confined to measures such as freezing the bank accounts of Islamic charities with alleged links to Hamas.

Mr Arafat largely still controls the PA's security services.

And Mr Abbas wants greater control of the Palestinian security forces to be able to tackle armed groups responsible for suicide attacks against Israelis.

Mr Abbas appointed Saeb Erekat as chief Palestinian negotiator in talks on the roadmap. Erekat said earlier that Abbas was expected to reappoint him.

He held the then newly created

negotiations portfolio for only two weeks when he called it quits after he was not invited to participate in a high-level meeting with Israel.

He previously led Palestinian teams in negotiations with Israel before the September 2000 outbreak of the uprising and is considered closer to Arafat, whom Israel and the United States are trying to sideline, than to Abbas.

But in a further reminder that Mr Abbas has failed to rein in Palestinian militants, an Israeli was shot dead in the West Bank on Thursday morning, Israeli security sources said.

The Israeli was shot near the West Bank town of Jenin and died en route to hospital, the Israeli daily Haaretz reported. It said the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and Islamic Jihad had admitted carrying out the attack.



Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) arrives under heavy protection for the Palestinian Legislative Council meeting yesterday in Ramallah, Abbas blamed the Israeli government for the crisis in the Middle East in a speech before the Palestinian parliament.



US Secretary of State Colin Powell (R) with South Korean Foreign Minister Yoon Young-Kwan (L) speak with reporters outside the State Department on Wednesday in Washington, DC. Yoon and Powell discussed the latest developments in multi-lateral talks with North Korea.

Blair overhauls his spin machine

AP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government announced an overhaul of its media operations on Wednesday in an effort to curb a damaging reputation for spin.

The announcement came less than a week after Alastair Campbell, who has directed Blair's information operation since the government took office in 1997, announced he was resigning.

The shake-up effectively dilutes Campbell's power over two posts. A politically neutral civil servant, yet to be named, will be in charge of communicating government policy. Meanwhile, Downing Street's political operation will be headed by Blair's new director of communications, former Labour Party chief press officer David Hill.

The reform created a new post of senior official spokesman for the PM, a politically neutral position answerable to the civil servant in charge of government communications.

The structural changes to the communications unit are viewed as an effort to repair relations

with the British media and bolster public confidence in the government. The shake-up effectively scales back the power held by Campbell and addresses concerns that the lines between politically appointed special advisers and impartial civil servants had become blurred.

The changes draw heavily on a review of government communications, carried out by senior journalists, media specialists and government advisers, and chaired by Bob Phillis, chief executive of Guardian Media Group, which owns The Guardian and The Observer.

Blair has frequently faced accusations that his Labour Party government is more concerned with presentation of policies than with substance.

"I think the government absolutely knows that it has to kill off the curse of spin once and for all and it is determined to do it and will set in place structures that are designed to achieve that end," said Labour lawmaker Tony Wright, chairman of the Public Administration Select Committee.

US troops under attack in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

US-led coalition troops were attacked yesterday as a massive offensive continued against suspected Taliban fighters holed up in the mountains of southeast Afghanistan, the US military said.

A coalition base in Gardez in Paktia province came under rocket attack but there were no reported casualties or damage, US military spokesman Major Ralph Marino told reporters.

Marino did not say who was behind the attacks but similar incidents have been blamed on remnants of the ousted Taliban regime, their al-Qaeda allies or extremists loyal to renegade former premier Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Up to 1,000 Afghan soldiers supported by US troops and aircraft have been engaged for more than a week in a major operation against suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda bases in the mountains of Daychopan district of Zabul province, 300km southwest of Kabul.

US-led coalition Special Operation Forces and 10th Mountain Division troops backed by aircraft launched a fresh offensive in the Daychopan area Saturday, dubbed Operation Mountain Viper.

"The operation is going on," Marino told reporters at the coalition's Bagram Air Base headquarters, 50km north of Kabul.

He refused to give any further details but said Operation Mountain Viper was not limited to Zabul.

"Operation Mountain Viper is not just limited to Zabul but this is an operation anywhere in Afghanistan there is a presence of enemy," he said.

Zabul governor Hafizullah Hashim said Wednesday the suspected Taliban were surrounded and being bombed by US aircraft.

"Taliban caves were bombed early this morning (Wednesday). There are no reports of fresh casualties on either side," he told AFP from the Zabul capital Qalat, 60 km south of Daychopan.

"Some fresh Afghan forces have moved towards the caves from Qalat," he said.



A couple anxious Liberians peep through the window of a warehouse stocked with relief materials in Monrovia. Humanitarian agencies have commenced in full swing distribution of relief materials to internally displaced persons scattered in different parts of the country including rebel-controlled Liberia.

Powell shows impatience with N Korean "threats"

AP, Washington

The US Secretary of State Colin Powell called on North Korea to refrain from making military threats and to take seriously US proposals for ending the impasse over the country's nuclear weapons programmes.

"We are looking for a diplomatic solution," Powell said. "We have no intention of invading North Korea or attacking North Korea."

In contrast, he said, North Korea has engaged in "threats and truculent statements that are designed to frighten us. We will not be frightened, nor will we be caused by such threats to take actions that we do not believe are in our interests or the interests of our partners."

He expressed hope that North Korea will respond in a serious way to the US proposals that were spelled out at the meeting in Beijing.

Powell showed his irritation toward North Korea after being asked to respond to a statement by Pyongyang's chief delegate in Beijing, Kim Yong Il, that North Korea planned to carry out a nuclear test.

'China willing to ratify CTBT'

PTI, Beijing

China on Thursday said that it supported the early coming into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) but did not specify a timeframe for its ratification which is pending for years with the country's Parliament.

"We hope, the National People's Congress (NPC), according to the relevant legal procedures, will ratify the treaty," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan told reporters when asked about a timeframe when China would ratify the CTBT which it signed in 1996.

When asked to comment on UN secretary general Kofi Annan's recent appeal to all states that have yet to sign or ratify the treaty to do so without delay, Kong said, "we hope for an early ratification and coming into force of the treaty".

'Britishness' test for immigrants

IANS, London

A British government advisory group has proposed that immigrants should pass a new "Britishness test", before they can receive a British passport.

The proposals prompted The Guardian newspaper to carry out a straw poll to find out how British citizens would fare if they appeared for the test.

The result of the poll said: "Most Britons would be handing back our passports to the Home Office if we had to pass a test to remain citizens."

Under the new proposals, would-be citizens would be assessed on their progress in English and would have to improve by at least one level on the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) scale.

The test is intended to make people feel more proud of becoming new British citizens. It is proposed

that applicants learn about British history.

Who is the prime minister? How do you pay a telephone bill? What do the main political parties stand for? When was Britain last invaded? When was the Act of Union? - are some of the possible suggested questions.

If immigrants failed the citizenship test, it would not affect their residence in this country but they would not be given a passport or be able to vote.

The proposals were drawn up by the Life in the United Kingdom Advisory Panel, chaired by Bernard Crick.

"With people who have English already, you could do a pretty quick machine-readable test of three passages. Passages would describe what the Conservative Party stands for or the Labour Party stands for," said Brenard.

He feels, "If school children can

answer these sorts of questions, I see no reason why adults shouldn't."

However, Home secretary David Blunkett said that being able to recite dates from British history by rote would not be a constructive addition to the exam.

"Knowing the six wives of Henry VIII doesn't constitute being a good citizen," he said. But understanding the structures of Britain would contribute to that goal, he added. "You would need to know about when Britain was last invaded, if you were touching on what happened in terms of consequent of 20th century wars," he said.

Blunkett said he wanted to encourage people who are permanently settled in this country to apply for citizenship here.

"In common with people in this country from many different cultural backgrounds, I think being British is something to be proud of," he said.

US recruiting former Saddam agents to battle old boss

AFP, Baghdad

The US-led coalition has hired former intelligence agents of Saddam Hussein as it seeks to get tough in the battle against foreign Islamists and loyalists of the ousted dictator, a pro-US faction said.

"They've started recruiting ex-Mukhabarat," said Ali Abdul Amir, spokesman for the Iraqi National Accord, a group with longstanding ties to the US defence establishment that counts Iraq's new interim interior minister Nuri Badran among its members.

"The coalition has been recruiting them. Iraqi parties have also been helping recruit," said Abdul Amir.

"Many of them are ex-intelligence officers who went into exile, but others are being tapped from the old regime, as long as it is clear they did not commit abuses against the Iraqi people."

In particular, the coalition has been signing up Mukhabarat who spied on Syria and Iran under Saddam, as it seeks to stem an influx of foreign militants it believes are making common cause with old regime loyalists to plot the spate of car bombings that have rocked Iraq in recent weeks, said Abdul Amir.

The move is certain to anger many Iraqis for whom Saddams intelligence network epitomized the barbarism and cruelty of life before the coalition toppled his police state.

The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) refused to confirm or deny it was recruiting former Saddam agents. "We do not comment on any intelligence matters," said spokeswoman Naheed Mehta.

The top field commander in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, vigorously denied that those under his command had been involved in the recruitment of former intelligence agents. However, he limited his comments strictly to the forces reporting directly to him and not other elements of the CPA or US government.



Demonstrators against the recall election in California protest outside a debate in Walnut Creek, California. Five of the 135 candidates for governor and Gov. Gray Davis were scheduled to participate in the debate. Republican front-runner Arnold Schwarzenegger declined to attend.