

Abbas to meet Sharon ahead of trip to US

Hamas, Islamic Jihad critical of trip to Washington

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas was set to resume dialogue with his Israeli counterpart Ariel Sharon next week ahead of his landmark visit to Washington, officials said Thursday.

The two prime ministers would meet "at the beginning of next week before Mahmud Abbas' trip to Washington", where he is due to hold talks with US President George W. Bush on July 25, a senior Israeli official told AFP.

A meeting scheduled for last Wednesday was called off after a row broke out between Abbas and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, centred around Abbas's failure so far to persuade Israel to release more than 350 of the estimated 6,000 Palestinians in its jails.

But Israeli army radio reported Thursday that Sharon would show "flexibility" on the prisoners issue and sanction the freeing of "administrative detainees" who belong to the radical Islamic groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad who have not been implicated in the killings of Israelis.

Abbas accepted late Wednesday an invitation to meet US President George W. Bush in Washington in a move designed to give momentum to the troubled peace process and

which is bound to boost the Palestinian prime minister's profile on the world stage.

Talks are expected to focus on the US-backed roadmap for peace which aims to create an independent Palestinian state by 2005, his office said in a statement Wednesday night.

"This visit will be centred on the commitments made by Israel to freeze settlements in the progress in the peace process," said the statement.

Palestinian foreign minister Nabil Shaath, minister of state for security affairs Mohammad Dahlan, parliament speaker Ahmad Qorei and finance minister Salam Fayad are all due to travel with Abbas to Washington.

It was thought that Abbas could not risk further damage to his poor popularity ratings by travelling to the United States while Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat remains trapped in his Ramallah office by the Israeli army.

But Palestinian negotiator and MP Saeb Erakat announced Wednesday that Arafat, who recently healed a rift with his prime minister, had approved the trip.

"President Arafat gave Abu Mazen his complete blessing," Erakat told AFP, using Abbas' nom-de-guerre.

Arafat's unexpected green light came as Sharon wrapped up a European tour to convince foreign diplomats to boycott the veteran leader, whom Israel accuses of being the main obstacle to peace by undermining Abbas' position and abetting violence.

But he failed to convince his Norwegian counterpart Kjell Magne Bondevik to sever ties with Arafat, his second rebuff in days after receiving a similar response from British officials on the previous leg of his trip.

Abbas' visit nevertheless raised hopes that the roadmap for peace - which is aimed at ending the violence and creating a Palestinian state by 2005 - will gather momentum in coming days.

The radical Palestinian groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad criticised Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas' decision to travel to Washington for talks with US President George W. Bush.

Leaders of the two organisations, which are currently observing a freeze on anti-Israeli attacks, said that Abbas (also known as Abu Mazen) should not have agreed to travel to the States for his first official visit while Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was still confined to his Ramallah headquarters.

They also said Abbas must resist any pressure from Washington to dismantle their organisations or confiscate their weapons.

"We demand that he does not comply or respond to the American pressure," the political leader of Hamas, Abdul Aziz al-Rantissi, told AFP.

Rantissi said that any attempt by the Palestinian Authority to dismantle his organisation or seize its weapons was doomed to failure like previous attempts by "the Zionist enemy ... during the occupation".

Both organisations warned on Sunday that their truce could be called off if the Palestinian Authority tried to confiscate their weapons.

Mohammed al-Hindi, a leader of Islamic Jihad, also criticised the July 25 trip and said that any pledges of funds secured by Abbas should be regarded as an unacceptable "bribe to stop the intifida", the Palestinian uprising.

"He is going to listen to people like (US National Security Adviser) Condoleezza Rice, (Secretary of State) Colin Powell and George Bush who will demand the dismantling of the Palestinian organisations and the confiscation of weapons," he told AFP.

US troops on high alert

'Troops facing guerrilla war in Iraq'

REUTERS, Washington/Abu Ghraib

The head of US forces in Iraq said on Wednesday troops faced a classic guerrilla war as a grenade attack killed a US soldier and attackers fired a surface-to-air missile at a military plane.

The latest US combat death brought the total to 147, equalling the toll in the 1991 Gulf War, and increased pressure on President Bush, who is under political fire over the spiralling cost of the war and accusations that he misled Americans into the war.

Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, a Democratic presidential contender, said on Wednesday the Bush administration had "trafficked in untruth" about Iraq trying to acquire uranium, one of the justifications given for the war to oust Saddam Hussein.

Bush said in his State of the Union speech in January that Baghdad sought uranium from Africa to make nuclear weapons. It has since been learned the intelligence reports were partly based on forged documents.

In a closed Senate hearing, lawmakers questioned CIA Director George Tenet about pre-war intelligence on Iraq. Tenet has accepted responsibility for the CIA approving Bush's speech.

In further violence in Iraq, the mayor of a town in a restive region west of Baghdad was shot dead along with his son, a military spokeswoman said.

Central Command chief Gen. John Abizaid said American forces were now engaged in guerrilla war in Iraq and must adapt their tactics to crush an increasingly organised, cell-based resistance spearheaded by Saddam loyalists.

His comments contradicted Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who said on June 30 that it was not "anything like a guerrilla war or an organised resistance."

Abizaid told a Pentagon briefing the Iraqis "are conducting what I would describe as a classical guerrilla-type campaign against us. It's low-intensity conflict in our doctrinal terms, but it's war however you describe it."

"The level of resistance ... is getting more organised and it is learning. It is adapting. ... And we've got to adapt to their tactics, techniques and procedures."

The US military had expected a surge of attacks this week to coincide with anniversaries linked to Saddam, the Baath Party and Iraqi nationalism.

Attacks have continued despite a crackdown by American troops in areas north of the capital, once a hotbed of Saddam loyalists.

Abizaid, who replaced the retiring Gen. Tommy Franks as head of Central Command earlier this month, said US troops should be prepared for yearlong deployments in Iraq, a staple of the Vietnam War but used only rarely since then.



PHOTO: AFP
A US soldier stands guard under the bridge leading to the airport in Baghdad July 17, on the 35th anniversary of the founding of the Iraqi Baath party. US troops confronted an increasingly cunning series of grenade and missile attacks which the top US general in the region admitted are a classic guerilla campaign.

Africa's bloodiest war coming to an end

BBC ONLINE

The leaders of the main rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo have been sworn in as vice-presidents in a new power-sharing government aimed at ending nearly five years of war.

The transitional administration composed of once bitterest enemies should pave the way for the country's first democratic elections in two years' time, if all goes according to plan.

The five-year war has been described as the worst conflict since World War II involving tens of thousands of foreign troops and resulting in the estimated deaths of at some three million people.

Residents in Kinshasa have mixed feelings about the deal, with one woman telling the BBC: "Most of the time we see politicians take

decisions today, then tomorrow they change."

Another said he was happy: "If the country is united then there's no problem, the government can go on."

The ceremony formally spells the end of the war, but the BBC's Ishbel Matheson says there are many obstacles to be overcome.

One possible problem for the new government is the absence so far of an agreement on how rebel and government forces might be integrated in a new national army.

Another is continuing conflict in eastern Ituri province which is in a state of anarchy with numerous ethnic militias committing terrible human rights abuses such as rape, murder and cannibalism, our correspondent says.

The latest accusation of a brutal attack comes from a local militia

leader in Bunia who accused government allied militias of launching a raid on a hospital in the village of Tchomia on Wednesday killing 47 people.

The leader of the largest rebel group arrived in Kinshasa on Wednesday, ending days of speculation about whether he would take up his seat in the transitional government, after disputes over security arrangements and the sharing of control of the DR Congo's military districts.

Speaking to reporters, Azarias Ruberwa, leader of the Rwanda-backed Congolese Rally for Democracy-Goma (RCD-Goma) said: "Our arrival marks the effective start of the transition."

"We have already announced the end of the war, now it's a reality."

'Tenet was unaware of uranium claim in Bush speech'

AFP, Washington

CIA director George Tenet told a Senate panel he was not personally informed that a speech by President George W. Bush contained disputed intelligence about Iraq's nuclear ambitions even though his agency took responsibility for it, The Washington Post said Thursday.

However, the embattled head of the Central Intelligence Agency in closed-door testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee said he took responsibility for Bush's controversial statement because a CIA official had

approved it, lawmakers told the daily.

Tenet on Wednesday was grilled for five hours by lawmakers probing Bush's claim, made in his January 28 State of the Union address to Congress, that Iraq had sought to buy uranium from Niger.

"Members were stunned because he said he basically wasn't aware of the sentence until recently," one Democratic senator who attended the briefing told the Post.

However, Tenet's testimony did not dispel the suspicions of some lawmakers that the real reason for the erroneous claim was the eager-

ness of the White House to provide justification for its war against Iraq.

Of special interest to the Senate panel, the Democratic senator told the daily, asking not to be named, was why the CIA authorized the dubious intelligence after Tenet had pressed the White House to remove a more detailed reference to the same claim from a Bush speech on October 7.

Tenet on Friday had admitted blame for Bush's allegation after White House officials said the reference, based on British intelligence claims, should have been omitted because it had not been corroborated by US intelligence.



Nelson Mandela, former South African president, speaks to journalists and dignitaries at the Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg on Thursday after being given a book to mark his 85 birthday. A beaming Mandela, who turns 85 today July 18, was presented with the thick volume titled "Nelson Mandela: From Freedom to the future" carrying his picture on the front cover and containing tributes by leaders such as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and former US President Bill Clinton as well as actor Bill Cosby. Mandela's birthday party in Sandton, Johannesburg, will be attended by the likes of former US President, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Super Model Naomi Campbell and TV personality Oprah Winfrey.

PHOTO: AFP