

Arafat still alive but

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 Cairo and burial at his West Bank headquarters, which would become a shrine to the icon of Palestinian nationalism.

Adding to the confusion, Sheikh Tayseer al-Tamimi, a leading West Bank cleric, told reporters on arrival in Paris: "There is no question of switching off the equipment. It is against Islamic law which bans this type of practice. As long as there is warmth and life in his body, we cannot switch off the equipment," he said on arriving at the Percy military clinic.

"He is alive. He is ill and his condition is very bad, but he is still alive." He repeated the assertion after the visit.

"I remained at Arafat's side for almost one hour and I asked God to relieve his suffering," Tamimi said.

"As long as there is a manifestation of life present, from movement to temperature in the body, then he is alive," he said before entering the hospital in a Paris suburb. "I will stay next to the president praying for his recovery and for mercy."

The grand mufti of Jerusalem, Sheikh Ekrima Sabri, said Arafat had to die naturally, telling reporters: "Even if it takes days, weeks or months, it doesn't matter. It's not a political question."

On Tuesday a series of contradictory claims about his death concluded with foreign minister Nabil Shaath affirming that Arafat was still alive though on life-support equipment, and yesterday the Palestinian representative in France Leila Shahid said there had been no change.

Arafat is still alive and in a deep coma," Shahid told reporters at 1300 GMT.

"Like yesterday he is in a deep coma with complications in the condition of all his vital organs, so he is in a very critical state. The reality is that he is in the hands of God," she earlier told France Info radio.

LEADERS RETURN HOME
 A delegation of three senior leaders—acting chief of PLO, Mahmud Abbas, prime minister, Ahmed Qurei, and speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Raweh Fattuh—returned to the West Bank from Paris early yesterday.

The Palestinian leadership will not announce Arafat's death before being officially informed by French authorities, PLO executive committee member Salah Rafat told AFP yesterday.

"There will be no statement from the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah before we are officially informed by French authorities of the death of Yasser Arafat," said Rafat.

At Arafat's battered Muqataa headquarters in the West Bank town of Ramallah, senior Palestinian officials paved the way for his success and finalised plans with Israel and Egypt for a Cairo funeral and Ramallah burial.

Top Palestinian officials agreed after an urgent meeting that parliament speaker Rawhi Fattuh would serve as acting head of the Palestinian Authority in the event of Arafat's death, in accordance with the basic Palestinian law.

He would likely serve as a caretaker administrator for 60 days, when new elections must be held.

EGYPT TO HOST FUNERAL
 Egypt was quietly preparing yesterday to hold the eventual funeral of Arafat, with a horde of Arab leaders and international dignitaries expected to show up for the event.

The Palestinian Authority also accepted an offer from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to hold an official funeral ceremony for Arafat in Cairo, to be followed by burial in Ramallah, as per an agreement reached with Israel.

"The PLO executive committee and the (Fatah) central committee agreed unanimously that the funeral would be in Cairo if Arafat dies and that he will be buried in Ramallah," the head of Arafat's office, Tayeb Abdelrahman, told AFP.

Egyptian presidential spokesman Maged Abdul Fattah said the Cairo ceremony would be "limited in scope and restricted to officials".

The decision to hold a funeral in Egypt for Arafat, who was born in Cairo in 1929 and studied engineering at Cairo university between 1950 and 1956, was followed earlier talks between Mubarak and top Palestinian officials.

BURIAL PREPARATION AT RAMALLAH
 The Palestinian Authority and Israel were preparing for Arafat's burial at Ramallah.

Two bulldozers, a mechanical digger and four heavy dump trucks were seen inside the Muqataa, clearing wrecked cars and some of the rubble strewn across the compound, an AFP correspondent reported.

Workers were planting saplings in the courtyard, the correspondent said.

"Israel made it known to us a few minutes ago that the Israeli government agrees to a Palestinian request to bury president Arafat in the Muqataa," said negotiations minister Saeb Erakat, confirming comments from Israeli officials.

Palestinian security services would be responsible for keeping order in the West Bank town, while Israeli forces would beef up security around Ramallah, according to Israeli officials.

Arafat has always wanted to be buried in Jerusalem, the city Palestinians yearn for as the capital of their promised future state, but Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has steadfastly refused to countenance the idea.

Israeli political sources said ministers decided to allow Arab leaders and other foreign dignitaries free access to Ramallah but would bar Palestinian militants waging a four-year-old uprising from entering the city. Much of the West Bank is under Israeli occupation.

"This is, after all, a very extraordinary and unique funeral, and we will have to conduct ourselves like a responsible government," Israeli Deputy Internal Security Minister Yaacov Edri told Army Radio. (AFP/Reuters)

two board members have relevant banking experience.

As for the Sonali Bank, the government aims to contain the biggest NCB's future losses by restricting the bank's lending activities and overhauling its operations to the point where a minority shareholding can be divested.

"Timelines for the divestment plan have been set, including for corporatisation, the appointment of sales advisors, the treatment of non-performing loans, feasible methods for recapitalisation and resolution of outstanding legal issues including those related to human resource policies and foreign ownership," the government told the IMF mission.

To reform the NBR, the government will complete the merged audits under the Large Taxpayers Unit (LTU) system for income tax and VAT for the 100 largest VAT filers by April 2005.

The government will also have to approve the operations manual of the LTU for VAT and merge the auditing function of the LTU for income tax and VAT in the ongoing Third Review of the PRGF Arrangement.

Boardrooms of the four NCBs will be reconstituted and the Bangladesh Bank's "fit and proper" test for board membership applied by June 2005, ensuring that at least

one or two members of the court by telephone.

Amir Hamza, brother of the victim, Amir Abdullah Shakil, expressed his displeasure with the verdict and said he will appeal with the High Court against the judgement. He said Moni was acquitted even though specific charges were brought against him in the first information report (FIR) and in the charge sheet. Moreover, Hamza said, Moni and other accused produced prosecution witnesses before court and the witnesses testified according to the wish of Moni and others.

Earlier, the prosecution and the defence completed their arguments and the court recorded statements of 23 prosecution witnesses.

Assaults gunned down Amir Abdullah Shakil, 26, former secretary of Jizjira Market Association and sports secretary of Jizjira Union Jatayatabadi Jubo Dal, and Sentu, 30, a lessee of a cattle market at Zinjira Bazar, on February 16, 2002.

Hamza filed a murder case with Keraniganj Police Station accusing Moni and nine others the same day. The investigation officer pressed charges against Moni and 22 others on November 20, 2002.

The court framed charges against Moni and 22 others on July 20 last year. Trial was completed in 130 workdays although it was stayed for more than nine months following a High Court order.

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