

Palestinians face test of statehood after pullout

Israel to build housing in WB despite US rejection

AFP, REUTERS, Gaza City

Palestinians may be celebrating Israel's pullout from the Gaza Strip, but as a test case for independence, the withdrawal from the lesser half of their promised state could turn into a poisoned chalice.

Under the eyes of the international community, Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas is well aware of the gargantuan task of transforming a poverty-stricken and violence-sodden territory into a model of good governance.

Calling for militant groups to hold fire during the historic pullout, Abbas could not have been more explicit.

"The responsibility of all our people (is) to maintain security in a civilised manner so we can reassure the world and send out a message that we deserve our state," he said last month.

US President George W. Bush put the onus on Abbas after the last

settlers left Gaza three weeks ago, saying the Palestinians "must show the world that they will fight terrorism and govern in a peaceful way."

Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos added in words that could come to haunt the Palestinian leadership: "It's a great opportunity for the Palestinian Authority to prove they can rule and ensure security".

As Israel's soldiers were packing up their 38-year presence in Gaza, the extent of the security chaos that Abbas must tackle was emphasised by the assassination of his military advisor Mussa Arafat.

Security forces were twice called into action last week alone to fend off economic riots in southern Gaza.

Although life is no bed of roses, living standards and levels of security are significantly higher for Palestinians in the West Bank who still largely place their faith in

Abbas's Fatah movement.

By contrast, unemployment soars at 45 percent in the Gaza Strip, one of the world's most densely populated slivers of land, where up to two-thirds of the population live in poverty.

Disillusionment with the Palestinian Authority runs so deep that the radical Islamist movement Hamas is expected to overtake Fatah in January's parliamentary elections in Gaza if not the Palestinian territories as a whole.

Palestinians have long blamed many of their problems on the pernicious effects of occupation. By leaving Gaza, Israel hopes to undercut that argument.

The Palestinians, however, maintain that the occupation will effectively continue as Israel still dictates the terms of their access in and out of the territory.

"If the withdrawal was from all of the occupied territories with proper

movement then that could be a valid test" of the Palestinians' ability to govern themselves, said planning minister Ghassan al-Khatib.

Meanwhile, Sharon said in a published interview yesterday that Israel would keep building in its large West Bank settlements after a Gaza pullout, despite expected US objections.

Sharon, speaking to the Washington Post newspaper on the eve of an army withdrawal from Gaza, reiterated his intention to retain large West Bank settlement blocs under any future peace deal and continue construction in them as Israel sees fit.

"The major (settlement) blocs will stay as part of Israel ... yes, we have small-scale construction within the lines. ... even now there is construction," he said in comments likely to anger Palestinians who want the West Bank and Gaza for a state.



PHOTO: AFP
Officials search a flooded home in New Orleans in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina Saturday.

Searches, cleanup go on in New Orleans

AP, New Orleans

Forensic workers and cadaver dogs searched the city in earnest for corpses as crews cleared away mounds of trash and debris left behind by residents fleeing Hurricane Katrina.

Officials working to identify remains processed bodies around the clock at a field morgue set up in St. Gabriel, a small community between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. A chain link fence covered in black plastic hid the operation from onlookers.

"The ability to capture useful information from that body diminishes from week to week, month to month," Terry Edwards, the morgue's director, said Saturday.

The confirmed death toll in Louisiana stood at 154 people, including some patients on life support who died when power went out, but the toll was expected to climb as crews collected bodies trapped in houses and floating in murky water.

Police and military officials have been marking the location of bodies with global positioning devices and paint on the outside of houses.

At the convention centre, the

chaotic site where thousands initially took refuge before being evacuated a week ago, bulldozers pushed heaps of chairs, sleeping bags and other discarded items into giant piles. Dump trucks were hauling the debris away.

Tow truck drivers started picking up scores of abandoned cars littering the streets while other workers unloaded food and supplies for employees working in Bell South's downtown office.

At the Parc St. Charles hotel, workers went floor to floor cleaning up: "There's a lot of spoiled meat, a lot of bacteria that needs to be cleaned up," said Bob Allen, who was supervising the job.

At the Superdome, where thousands first sought shelter only to be trapped inside by the floodwaters, water levels had dropped markedly. Water that once submerged cars parked around the dome had dropped to about a foot high.

A group of police, doctors and National Guardsmen inspected Charity Hospital, where doctors and patients had been stranded in rising flood waters.



PHOTO: AFP

A man stands while another plays a flute at Ground Zero on Saturday in New York City. New Yorkers commemorated the fourth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States that killed close to 3,000 people.

Sept 11 attack victims remembered in silence

AFP, AP, New York

The United States paused for a moment of silence yesterday, as the country recalled the horror of the September 11 terrorist attacks four years ago that claimed nearly 3,000 lives.

President George W. Bush observed the hushed tribute on the lawn of the White House at 8:46 am (1246 GMT) – the time the first hijacked plane smashed into the World Trade Centre.

At Ground Zero in New York, the focus of Sunday's commemorative events, friends and relatives of the victims, together with dignitaries, emergency workers and community leaders, also bowed their heads in remembrance.

"Again, we are a city that meets in sadness," said New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

"We come here to remember the names of those we lost four years ago. The greatest honour we can do them is to remember them, not just as they were in death, but as they were

in life," Bloomberg said.

After the minute's silence, the brothers and sisters of the victims began reading the 2,749 names of those who died in the trade centre's twin towers.

Ceremonies were also held at the Pentagon for the 184 people who died in the attack there, and in the field in Pennsylvania where a fourth airliner carrying 44 people crashed after passengers staged a rebellion against the hijackers.

America grieved the victims of Sept. 11, 2001, as the brothers and sisters of the dead gathered at ground zero yesterday to recite the names of those killed in the fiery attack.

The roll of the lost began with Gordon M. Aamoth Jr., an investment bank employee. Then, one after another, the names began to echo across the site where the World Trade Center towers collapsed four years ago in a nightmarish cloud of dust and debris.

Riots erupt over Belfast parade

AP, Belfast

Protestant extremists threw home-made grenades Saturday and seven police and two civilians were wounded in the latest fury over a restricted Belfast parade.

Protestants clashed with police, British troops and Catholic crowds in several parts of Belfast after authorities blocked the Orange Order the territory's major Protestant brotherhood from parading past the hard-line Catholic end of disputed Springfield Road.

At least three officers were injured by flames and shrapnel from home-made grenades and gasoline-filled bottles on the nearby North Circular Road. Four other officers were injured in separate incidents across the city.

Officers on the North Circular Road took cover behind their armoured vehicles after hearing bursts of automatic gunfire, although nobody was reported hit by bullets.

Katrina may cost US as much as 2 wars

AP, Washington

One storm could end up costing almost as much as two wars. Although estimates of Hurricane Katrina's staggering toll on the treasury are highly imprecise, costs are certain to climb to \$200 billion in the coming weeks. The final accounting could approach the more than \$300 billion spent in four years to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Analysts inside and outside government agree that the \$62 billion that Washington has spent so far was merely the first instalment of perhaps an unparalleled sum.

"I cannot put a cost figure on it," Vice President Dick Cheney said Thursday in a visit to the hard-hit states.

The government never has dealt with a disaster of this scale: 90,000 square miles of the Gulf Coast affected, with hundreds of thousands of people displaced and an entire metropolitan area under water.

In 1992, the devastation of Hurricane Andrew in Florida and Louisiana cost \$35 billion. The price for the 6.7-magnitude temblor in the Northridge area of Los Angeles in 1994 was \$15 billion to \$20 billion.

Members of the Louisiana congressional delegation say it could cost \$100 billion just in New Orleans.

As for the overall toll, G. William Hoagland, the top budget adviser to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., said: "We're obviously over \$100 billion. I just don't know how much over."

As the House approved President Bush's second spending request Thursday, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee predicted that lawmakers would repeat the effort in a few weeks. "It will be the greatest appropriations outlay for a disaster in the history of doing this," said Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-Calif.