

INTERNATIONAL

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat dies at 75

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) - Yasser Arafat, the guerrilla leader turned Nobel Peace Prize winner who forced his people's plight into the world spotlight, died Thursday at age 75 — still reviled by many as a terrorist.

Arafat died at 3:30 a.m. in a French military hospital. His last days were as murky and dramatic as his life. Arafat was flown to France on Oct. 29 after nearly three years of being penned in his West Bank headquarters by Israeli tanks.

He initially improved but then sharply deteriorated as rumors swirled about his illness. Neither doctors nor Palestinian leaders would say what killed Arafat.

Tens of thousands of Palestinians poured into the streets of the Gaza Strip in a spontaneous show of grief. Dozens of gunmen fired into the air, and marchers waved Palestinian flags.

Mosques blared Quranic verses and children burned tires on the main streets, covering the skies in black smoke. People pasted posters of Arafat on building walls.

Within hours of Arafat's death, Israel sealed the West Bank and Gaza Strip and increased security at Jewish settlements, fearing widespread Palestinian riots in the coming days.

"The Israeli Defense Forces are deploying to allow a dignified funeral ceremony for chairman Arafat," an army statement said.

The military said it would restrict access to the funeral, set for Saturday in the West Bank city of Ramallah, and only allow Palestinians with permits to attend. The mili-



A Palestinian woman mourns outside Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's 'Muqata' compound where he is expected to be buried in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

tary would allow processions in towns and refugee camps, officials said.

Palestinian Parliament Speaker Rauhi Fattouh was to be sworn in as Palestinian Authority president until elections are held in 60 days, according to Palestinian law.

Officials said they wanted to ensure a smooth transition, despite concern both at home and abroad that a behind-the-scenes power struggle to assume the Arafat mantle could result in chaos and violence.

Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia was expected remain in charge of day-to-day governing, while Mahmoud Abbas, the former prime minister, would take over running the Palestine Liberation Organization, which also represents Palestinians abroad.

President Bush issued a statement of condolence to the Palestinian people.

"We express our condolences to the Palestinian people. For the Palestinian

people, we hope that the future will bring peace and the fulfillment of their aspirations for an independent, democratic Palestine that is at peace with its neighbors," the president said.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Arafat and assassinated Israeli leader Yitzhak Rabin, said:

"The biggest mistake of Arafat was when he turned to terror. His greatest achievements were when he tried to build peace."

Palestinian flags at Arafat's battered Ramallah compound were lowered to half staff. Television broadcast excerpts from the Quran with a picture of Arafat in the background.

"He closed his eyes and his big heart stopped. He left for God but he is still among this great people," said senior Arafat aide Tayeb Abdel Rahim, who broke into tears as he announced Arafat's

death.

U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan said he was saddened by Arafat's passing. "President Arafat was one of those few leaders who could be instantly recognized by people in any walk of life all around the world. For nearly four decades, he expressed and symbolized in his person the national aspirations of the Palestinian people."

British Prime Minister Tony Blair sent condolences to the Palestinian people. "President Arafat came to symbolize the Palestinian national movement. ... (and) led his people to an historic acceptance and the need for a

two-state solution," Blair said. Top Palestinian officials flew in to check on their leader while Arafat's 41-year-old wife, Suha, publicly accused them of trying to usurp his powers. Ordinary Palestinians prayed for his well being, but expressed deep frustration over his failure to improve their lives.

Arafat's failure to groom a successor complicated his passing, raising the danger of factional conflict among Palestinians. A visual constant in his checkered keffiyeh head-dress, Arafat kept the Palestinians' cause at the center of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But he fell short of creating a Palestinian state, and, along with other secular Arab leaders of his generation, he saw his influence weakened by the rise of radical Islam in recent years.

Revered by his own people, Arafat was reviled by others. He was accused of secretly fomenting attacks on Israelis while proclaiming brotherhood and claiming to have put terrorism aside. Many Israelis felt the paunchy 5-foot, 2-inch Palestinian's real goal remained the destruction of the Jewish state.

Arafat became one of the world's most familiar faces after addressing the U.N. General Assembly in New York in 1974, when he entered the chamber wearing a

holster and carrying a sprig. "Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun," he said. "Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand."

Two decades later, he shook hand at the White House with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on a peace deal that formally recognized Israel's right to exist while granting the Palestinians limited self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The pact led to the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize for Arafat, Rabin and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

But the accord quickly unraveled amid mutual suspicions and accusations of treaty violations, and a new round of violence that erupted in the fall of 2000 has killed some 4,000 people, three-quarters of them Palestinian.

The Israeli and U.S. governments said Arafat deserved much of the blame for the derailing of the peace process. Even many of his own people began whispering against Arafat, expressing disgruntlement over corruption, lawlessness and a bad economy in the Palestinian areas.

A resilient survivor of war with Israel, assassination attempts and even a plane crash, Arafat was born Rahman Abdel-Raouf Arafat Al-Qudwa on Aug. 4, 1929, the fifth of seven children of a

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VIVA LE FRANCE

European nationals are evacuated by French soldiers outside Abidjan. The first of four flights evacuating French and other European nationals from violence-torn Ivory Coast left Abidjan for Paris with 270 people on board.

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