

Arafat mildly bruised from crash



TRIPOLI, Libya (AP) — Yasser Arafat, who has survived gun battles, air raids and assassination attempts as leader of the Palestinian cause, walked away Wednesday after his plane made a belly-landing during a desert sandstorm.

PLO officials said three of the five crew aboard were killed when the plane's nose plowed into a hill.

Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi made a bedside visit with Arafat on Wednesday night at a hospital in Misratah, 120 miles east of Tripoli. Libyan TV showed Arafat, lying with a bandaged right eye, smiling and chatting with Gadhafi, who embraced him.

"We have treated him fully and comprehensively," Dr. Muftah al-Shwayhidi said. "His health is excellent."

Bassam Abu Sharif, a close adviser, said Arafat should be healthy enough Thursday to preside over a session of the PLO's 80-member policy-making Central Council.

In a televised interview with a Libyan reporter, Arafat thanked Gadhafi for having "mobilized the whole state" to find him. He said the two pilots and engineer were killed and five others badly hurt. Others on the plane suffered minor injuries or escaped unhurt, he said.

Palestinians around the Arab world celebrated on hearing the news that Arafat was found at dawn, bruised but alive after being missing for 15 hours.

Arafat has been the Palestine Liberation Organization's undisputed leader for 23 years. His loss would have been a grievous blow to the organization and could have seriously undermined U.S.-sponsored Middle East peace talks.

"God has saved the Palestinians from a political disaster. ... Arafat is irreplaceable," said Zeid Wahbeh, Arafat's representative in southern Lebanon.

Arafat's two most important aides have been assassinated over the past four years, and no one else has the stature to step in as successor of the divided PLO.

"How can you put your life at risk and go out in such a small plane in such weather?" Gadhafi chided Arafat in the hospital. He added jokingly, "I will set up an investigation committee to question the people who allowed you to go out in such weather."

Saeed Kamal, the PLO representative in Cairo, Egypt, said Arafat's Soviet-built An-26 aircraft went down near a PLO training camp at as-Sarra on Tuesday. Wahbeh said Arafat was accompanied by 13 bodyguards.

The base is 150 miles from the Sudanese border and about 900 miles southeast of Tripoli.

Coffins bearing the bodies of the three dead crew were flown from Misratah Wednesday night to Tripoli, where they received a military salute by PLO officers. On one coffin a sign in Arabic identified the victim as a Romanian engineer.

PLO officials identified the dead pilots as Ghassan Yaseen, 32, and Mohammed Darwish, 35, the latter from Algeria.

Kamal said Egypt sent five planes, Libya sent 6,000 soldiers, and the Palestinians sent 850 fighters from as-Sarra to help in the search. He thanked France, Italy and the United States for the help he said they offered.

Capt. Adnan Beleidy of the Palestine Liberation Army, the PLO's military arm, said in Tripoli that a Libyan air force plane found the survivors at dawn near as-Sarra.

Abu Sharif said he had asked former President Jimmy Carter to intervene with the White House, where officials said they were in the process of seeing what they could do when Arafat was found. But Washington was not involved in the search, State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler said.

"The Palestinians are grateful to President Bush for expressing his will to ask the American satellite to spot that plane," Abu Sharif said.

Any U.S. help for the PLO would stir controversy with Israel, which considers the PLO a terror group dedicated to the Jewish state's destruction.

Some Palestinians expressed skepticism about the PLO's account because it coincided with a new wave of criticism of the charismatic guerrilla leader within his own hierarchy.

Some PLO officials contend Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War dangerously weakened the PLO by isolating it and angering Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states that provided much of the group's money.

Arab East Jerusalem exploded in celebration Wednesday at news that Arafat was alive.

Similar festivities broke out in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and at refugee camps in southern Lebanon.

In Tripoli, about 200 Palestinians waited in heat and dust at the airport for news of Arafat. The crowd included four or five children holding olive branches for Arafat.

Arafat founded Fatah, the first guerrilla resistance group opposed to Israel, in 1959 and has headed the PLO since February 1969.

In 1968, he survived an Israeli tank attack on a PLO base at Karameh, Jordan, a battle that encouraged thousands of young Palestinians to join the PLO.

Twice — in Beirut in 1982 and in Tunis in 1985 — he escaped Israeli air raids that targeted him and other PLO leaders.

Arafat also claims to have survived assassination plots by other PLO factions, as well as slaying attempts by several Arab governments.

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