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Bush calls for new Palestinian state, ousting of Yasser Arafat

By Jodi Enda
Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON (KRT) — In a dramatic shift of U.S. policy, President Bush on Monday called bluntly for the ouster of longtime Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat as essential to America's support for a Palestinian state.

"Peace requires a new and different Palestinian leadership so that a Palestinian state can be born," Bush said. "I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror."

The president abandoned his administration's previous position that Arafat, while unsavory and disappointing, is the Palestinians' legitimately elected leader. He placed the burden for creating a Palestinian state squarely on the Palestinian people themselves. He made few demands of Israel, and then only if progress is being made on his call for Palestinian reforms.

If Palestinians elect new leaders who work to abolish terrorism, establish a constitution and democratic institutions, and reform security forces, Bush said, the United States then would support creation of a "provisional" Palestinian state. Its borders would be determined in final negotiations with Israel.

"For the sake of all humanity, things must change in the Middle East," Bush said in a 15-minute address in the Rose Garden. "It is untenable for Israeli citizens to live in terror. It is untenable for

Palestinians to live in squalor and occupation. And the current situation offers no prospect that life will improve."

The president suggested a new state could be established within three years, and he appointed Secretary of State Colin Powell to coordinate U.S. efforts. He did not say, though, when Powell would travel to the Middle East.

A spokesman for the Palestinian Authority rejected the notion that Arafat must be removed.

"Palestinian leaders don't come from parachutes from Washington or from anywhere else," Cabinet minister and chief negotiator Saeb Erekat told CNN. "President Yasser Arafat was directly elected in a free and fair election."

Conversely, Israel welcomed Bush's announcement.

"I think he laid out a series of specific challenges to all parties. I believe our side will meet the challenge," said an Israeli spokesman, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "We can move forward in accordance with all the issues raised today, and we're interested to see if the Palestinian side and the Arab side can equally meet the challenges laid out in the speech."

Bush's lopsided demands stood in stark contrast to the approach taken by former President Bill Clinton, who strove to be an "honest broker" between Israel and the Palestinians.

"Today, Palestinian authorities are encouraging, not opposing, terrorism," Bush said. "This is unacceptable. And the United States will not support the establishment of a Palestinian state until its leaders engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure."

The president's widely anticipated speech followed several days of increased violence in the region and intense debate among his top foreign-policy advisers over what to do about it. The White House delayed the speech last week, heightening expecta-

tions about what it might deliver.

Bush also called on other nations in the region to stop supporting groups that engage in terrorism, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah. He called on Syria to close terrorist camps and expel terrorist organizations, and urged other countries to block the shipment of Iranian weapons to terrorist groups.

"And as we move toward a peaceful solution, Arab states will be expected to build closer ties of diplomacy and commerce with Israel, leading to full normalization of relations between Israel and the entire Arab world," Bush said.

The president said the United States would help Palestinians create a constitutional framework, and he pledged international support for economic reform and development and humanitarian assistance.

Bush did not criticize Israel or the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who has sent troops into the West Bank repeatedly this year in response to terrorist attacks. Instead, Bush tied Israel's role in the peace process to security guarantees.

Once progress is evident in better security, the president said, then Israel must withdraw its troops from the West Bank towns it reoccupied after the Palestinian uprising started in September 2000. Without placing any time restriction, he also said Israel must stop building Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories.

In addition, Bush said that as violence subsides, Israel should open its borders with the West Bank and Gaza to allow Palestinians to return to their jobs in Israel.

Ultimately, Bush said, Israelis and Palestinians would negotiate the most sensitive and elusive issues, including the borders of a Palestinian state, the status of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees.

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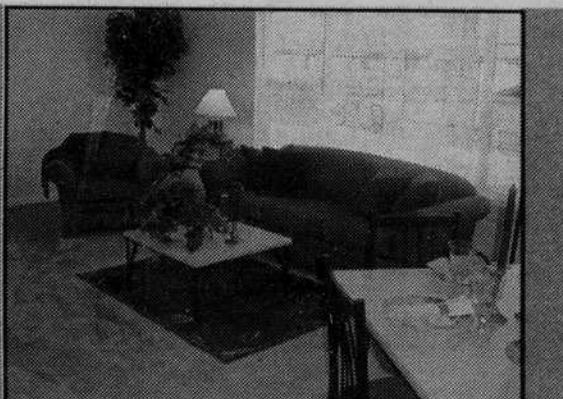
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