

Arafat cracks down on Palestinian protests

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Palestinian Authority police have brutally suppressed protests mounted by the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas against the US bombing of Afghanistan.

On Monday, pitched battles took place in and around the Islamic University in Gaza City, leaving two bystanders dead and at least 200 injured. 1,000 students from Islamic University had marched toward the centre of Gaza City, but were blocked by Palestinian Authority (PA) police, who fired tear gas, beating students with batons and firing live rounds into the air. Police drove the students back to the university. Dozens of protesters threw stones and firebombs and occasionally fired guns. Two people were killed—13-year-old Abdullah al-Franji, who was shot in the head, and Yusef Bakr, 21, shot in the chest. Another demonstrator was said to be in serious condition after being shot in the head, while a police officer was hit in the head by a bullet. It was the first time Palestinians have died at the hands of PA security forces since the renewal of the intifida against Israel last September.

Gaza's hospital said 15 people had been hit by bullets, with another 38 were tear-gassed. 18 policemen were among 52 who were hit by stones. Another 80 police were treated in a military hospital. Amnesty International condemned the "reckless and unlawful use of lethal force" against the protesters.

Fighting later spread to southern Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip, where 18 people were injured, including four hit by bullets. That night demonstrators attacked two Palestinian police stations with petrol bombs and stones.

PA police have since closed the Islamic University and neighbouring Al Azhar University for a week. PA officials blocked a BBC television correspondent from entering the Gaza Strip and confiscated the tape of a correspondent in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

In his televised address, broadcast within hours of the start of Sunday night's bombing of Kabul, Osama bin

Laden called for Muslims to support the Palestinian cause, hoping to exploit what he sees as the fatal flaw in US efforts to establish a coalition with the Arab regimes. He warned, "neither America nor the people who live in it will dream of security before we live it in Palestine." In response, however, Arafat and the PA have done everything possible to distance themselves from bin Laden's Al Qaeda organisation.

The PA has not yet given its official reaction to the bombing of Afghanistan, with Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo promising to "discuss it at the meeting of Arab and Muslim foreign ministers in Qatar" on Wednesday. But he said of bin Laden's statement, "We don't want crimes committed in the name of Palestine... We have emphasised our condemnation of the attacks in New York and Washington and they cannot be justified for any political or religious reason". Other top PA officials have also gone on record to condemn bin Laden. Samir Rantissi, a senior adviser to the Palestinian Information Ministry, said, "We have nothing to do with the man, and we absolutely do not condone anything that he has done." He sent a message to the US through diplomatic channels stating "full and outright" support for the US.

More importantly, the PA has instructed all Palestinian groups to observe the ceasefire reached with Israel on September 26, during talks between Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

Palestinian police have also detained several Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists, including two whose names were on a list of around 100 people accused of terrorism that Israel has insisted are handed over to its own security forces. The two arrested are Abbas Sayed, a senior member of Hamas in Tulkarm, and Anas Shrateh, an Islamic Jihad militant from Jenin. Police also attempted to arrest Hamas activist Deya Darwazeh, but he fled his home in Nablus. The PA has warned that it will take harsh measures against those who violate

the cease-fire order, accusing them of damaging the national interest. West Bank Preventive Security Service chief Colonel Jibril Rajoub warned, “We are not playing games.”

Arafat’s aim in suppressing anti-American protests is to seize what he views as an opportunity to establish a new relationship with the Republican administration of President George W. Bush. Washington sees neutralising widespread anger towards its previous treatment of the Palestinians as the key to building a stable alliance with the Arab regimes, under the banner of its anti-terror coalition. At the risk of alienating its traditional ally Israel, therefore, the Republicans have even held out the possibility of supporting the creation of a Palestinian state. Last week Bush said the creation of a Palestinian state had always been part of the United States’ vision for the Middle East. This is the first time that a Republican president has used such terminology and represents a marked shift from his administration’s previous position of lending tacit support for the Likud-led government’s efforts to militarily suppress the Palestinians.

According to reports deliberately leaked to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the White House claims to have had plans to mount a new Middle East initiative that it was forced to place on the back burner due to the September 11 terror attacks. The initiative is said to include support for the setting up of a Palestinian state, and was to be launched with a speech to the United Nations General Assembly by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.



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