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Arafat doctors 'told to delay' brain death tests

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Crucial tests to establish whether Yasser Arafat is brain dead have not been carried out by a Paris hospital, a French newspaper reported yesterday, leading to claims that doctors are under pressure to delay tests to determine his condition.

Amid conflicting reports of the Palestinian leader's health, there were rumours on the West Bank that he was being kept alive in order to buy time for a political deal on his succession to be hammered out.

Mr Arafat allegedly has no blood-flow to the brain

In France, a patient can be declared brain dead only after a series of strict clinical tests.

They include two brain scans - either two EEGs performed four hours apart or an EEG and an artery scan showing no blood flowing to the brain.

According to the newspaper, Liberation, Mr Arafat, 75, underwent only one brain scan on Thursday, which showed a blood-flow failure. The required second scan was reportedly not carried out.

Earlier last week, unidentified French medical officials said that Mr Arafat was brain dead but being kept alive on life-support machines.

The Percy military hospital, where the ailing leader was taken from the West Bank on October 29, did not respond yesterday to queries from the Telegraph about the second scan. But a senior Palestinian adviser, Nabil Abu Rudeina, denied that Mr Arafat was beyond recovery, saying that his condition remained critical but not hopeless.

As confusion over Mr Arafat's condition grew, a Palestinian legislator last night called for his financial adviser, Mohammed Rashid, who controls a multi-billion dollar network of Palestine Liberation Organisation accounts, to be investigated.

Over the past 40 years, Mr Arafat's PLO has built up a global empire of investments, worth an estimated \$4.2 billion to \$6.5 billion. (£2.3-£3.5 billion). Meanwhile the Palestinian Authority, which administers the territories, is virtually bankrupt.

Abdul Jawwad Saleh, a leading independent member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, wants Mr Rashid to be questioned at the organisation's Ramallah headquarters. His demand reflects concern that very few people will know the whereabouts of more than £2 billion of PLO funds if Mr Arafat dies. Mr Rashid left Ramallah some months ago, and is currently in Paris. Hassan Khreishe, another legislative council member, said Mr Rashid would be held to account. "We will follow him, don't worry," he said.

Mr Saleh is also calling for Mr Arafat's wife, Suha, who is said to be a business partner of Mr Rashid, to be questioned. "Mr Arafat's situation has presented a chance for us to question Mohammed Rashid," he said. "He knows better than anyone else the whereabouts of all the money, all the secret accounts. This is the people's money."

A confidential report last month by the Palestinian finance ministry shows that the Palestinian Authority is running a deficit of about £73 million a month.

Last year, the International Monetary Fund said Mr Arafat had diverted \$1 billion or more of Palestinian Authority funds from 1995 to 2000.

A Palestinian lawyer who has investigated PLO corruption, and who wished to remain anonymous, said he knew of three or four Arafat loyalists who held secret bank accounts. "He paid a lot of this money to buy loyalty, squandering millions of dollars," he said.

"The corruption was huge. The PLO had monopolies on cement, petrol, construction, taxes and cigarettes. It has investments everywhere. Nobody knows what has happened to all these assets."

Conflicting reports about Mr Arafat's condition have fuelled rumours that he was poisoned by Israeli agents.

Dr Hisham Ahmed, a member of Mr Arafat's Fatah faction, said a bodyguard told him that the Palestinian leader had whispered to him: "This time they got me."

"The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind." -- William James