

Leaders pledged to peace installed

Sharon forms coalition in Israel

Abbas confirmed in Palestinian Authority

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JERUSALEM - New leadership took charge yesterday in Israel and the Palestinian territories, as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon won parliamentary approval for a new coalition that includes the center-left Labor party, and Mahmoud Abbas was confirmed as president of the Palestinian Authority.

In a first sign of cooperation between the two sides, Shimon Peres, newly sworn in as vice premier in Israel, telephoned Abbas to promise to help him now that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority officially favor reviving peace negotiations.

"A moderate man was elected, an intelligent man, an experienced man," Peres said on Israel Radio. "Let's give him a chance. There is a new legitimate Palestinian leadership whose leaders definitely are against terror and war."

Abbas, after meeting with international observers who monitored the presidential election, said, "We extend our hands to our neighbors. We are ready for peace, peace based on justice. We hope that their response will be positive."

Earlier yesterday, the Palestinians' Central Election Commission pronounced Abbas the official winner of the election Sunday with 62.3 percent of the vote. His closest rival, physician Mustafa Barghouti, received just under 20 percent.

Israeli officials said Sharon would meet soon with Abbas, 69, who succeeds the late Yasser Arafat as president of the Palestinian Authority. Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, was the long-time No. 2 man to Arafat in the Palestinian Liberation Organization and served a brief, contentious term as Arafat's prime minister.

In Washington, President Bush offered congratulations to Abbas and indirectly invited him to Washington. "I look forward to talking with him at the appropriate time," Bush told reporters. "I look forward to welcoming him here to Washington if he chooses to come here."

Bush called on both Palestinians and Israelis to build mutual trust and for each party to meet goals it has announced for itself.

"I think it's going to be very important for Israel to fulfill its obligation on the withdrawal from the territories that they have pledged to withdraw from," he said. "It is essential that Israel keep a vision of two states, living side by side in peace."

He urged Palestinian leaders to "consolidate security forces, so that they can fight off those few who still have the desire to destroy Israel as a part of their philosophy and those few who fear there to be a free vote amongst the Palestinian people."

Sharon's new government includes the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party as well as Labor; it was formed only after weeks of wrangling over Cabinet assignments.

Sharon had lost his parliamentary majority after right-wing parties withdrew or were ousted for opposing his plan to withdraw from all 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and four settlements in the West Bank.

By gaining Labor as a partner, Sharon seems to assure passage of his Gaza disengagement plan.

Parliament's approval of the new government came last night after a heated debate among lawmakers and a protest by thousands outside. Sharon declared that anyone who voted against the new coalition would bring a "disaster" onto the country.

The new government was approved by a vote of 58-56. Thirteen members of Sharon's Likud party voted against the new coalition; the coalition survived thanks to leftist opposition parties abstaining from the vote.

Sharon, speaking to his Likud faction before the vote, said, "Whoever wants to bring about another disaster on Israel, whoever wants to split the Likud, whoever wants to go to elections or to another, less good coalition, should vote no-confidence in our government."

One of the Likud rebels, Yehiel Hazan, told Israel Radio that he could not support disengagement from Gaza. "This is a bad government for the state of Israel, a government that expels Jews," he said. "It is a government that is essentially bringing a disaster upon us, and this is only the beginning."

Another dissenting Likud minister, Uzi Landau, criticized Sharon for having to rely on opposition parties, such as Arab factions, which abstained to help Sharon get his agenda passed. "It is a legal government," Landau said. "But it is not legitimate."

Sharon had proposed disengagement as a unilateral move, over the objections of the Palestinian Authority, which supports Israel's withdrawal but wanted a role in planning

for the withdrawal to prevent militant groups from seizing control of the vacated settlements.

With the election of Abbas as Palestinian president, Sharon has hinted that he will discuss the pullout with the Palestinian Authority, a move supported by Peres. That would require cooperation between Israel's and the Palestinians' security agencies, which Israeli officials say is dependent on Abbas preventing militant attacks.

Two alerts for suicide bombers Sunday and yesterday prompted Israeli police to shut roads around Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Army officials said warnings of attacks have increased and militant groups are trying to undermine Abbas. Extremist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad boycotted the Palestinian election.

"There might be a change of atmosphere," said Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist at Birzeit University in Ramallah. "But quite frankly, we are not sure that tomorrow will bring something new."