

Peres Goes Ballistic Over Bush Speech

1. Israeli press criticises Bush statement

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LINDA MOTTRAM: Flawed, naïve, unbalanced and a demonstration of an inability to grasp the Middle East, that's been some of the newspaper reaction from the Middle East to US President George W. Bush's much touted blueprint yesterday for solving the Israel/Palestinian conflict.

What's surprising is that the criticism comes not from the Arab press but from Israel's most senior correspondents who say that while the Sharon government may have scored a political coup, Israelis and Palestinians have nothing to look forward to.

Middle East correspondent Tim Palmer reports from Jerusalem.

TIM PALMER: Business as usual for Yasser Arafat, still meeting world leaders in Ramallah, in this case the French Foreign Minister, despite the use by label George W. Bush attached to him yesterday.

"Definitely not," Yasser Arafat said when asked if President Bush had been talking about him when he called for a change in the Palestinian government.

Certainly there's been no clamour from Palestinians to take to the streets and seize on Mr Bush's somewhat vague promise of a provisional Palestinian state years from now if they do install new leaders. Perhaps because, in the West Bank at least, more than half a million of them live behind closed doors under curfew.

Hebron, the latest city reinvaded by Israeli troops and tanks sent by a government which knows there's no sniff of a demand from the White House now that they leave the territories.

Palestinian political scientist, Hisham Ahmed, said the Palestinian people have no incentive to pursue the distant Bush vision.

HISHAM AHMED: I find it to be most disappointing for all other American Presidential speeches since the beginning of the question of Palestine and I tend to believe that it was preferred in the corridors of the Israeli government rather than in the corridors of the White House.

I believe rather than achieving peace, this speech sets the stage for further bloodshed unfortunately in the region.

TIM PALMER: Clearly the President's intention was to provide some incentive for Palestinians to rise up and change their government, he holds forward the vision of a Palestinian state somewhere in the future. Don't you think Palestinians are now going to seize this opportunity?

HISHAM AHMED: There is really no promise of Palestinian statehood as such. Quite frankly if you talk to people, almost every Palestinian, the degree of anger and frustration with regard to Bush's speech is something I have not seen, I have not heard before.

TIM PALMER: Criticism from the Palestinian side might have been expected. What's surprising is that it was echoed by most of Israel's most senior newspaper columnists. Most felt that while Sharon government ministers could cheer that they'd won a victory against Yasser Arafat, there was nothing in the Bush plan that suggested Israelis could look forward to a life without conflict.

The senior writer at the daily Yedioth Aharonot, Nahan Baneya, [phonetic] said of the Bush plan "without a timeframe, it's like a soufflé – maybe it will rise and maybe it won't," saying the speech buried the Oslo accords and commenting that President Bush just wasn't built to handle Middle Eastern despair.

"The speech was unbalanced and would complicate the situation" said Hemi Shalev in the Ma'ariv newspaper, "one would have to be naïve to think it would make the Palestinians change course" and possibly most telling of all of the reactions, Israel's Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

During President Bush's speech, he became angry. "He's making a fatal mistake" Mr Peres said. "Making the creation of a Palestinian state dependent on a change in leadership. You can't just brush Yasser Arafat aside with one speech."

Mr Peres became so angry that he turned the television off even before President Bush had finished the long awaited speech and before Mr Peres left the room he said "the abyss into which the region will now plunge will be as deep as expectations of this speech were high. There will be a blood bath".

In Jerusalem, this is Tim Palmer for AM.

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