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Bush administration 'fed up' with Arafat, senior official says

WASHINGTON (CNN) --A senior Bush administration official involved with the Middle East said Monday that Israeli attacks on Palestinian Authority facilities were a "clear message to Arafat that not only is Israel fed up, we are fed up as well."

"[Palestinian Authority President Yasser] Arafat is not working for the aspirations of the Palestinian people, he is working against them," the official said. "He needs to get his act together."

The official said that the United States is "not urging restraint" in Israel's response to this weekend's suicide bombings in Jerusalem and Haifa that killed 25 Israelis but is merely cautioning the Israelis to "avoid civilian casualties and think of the day after."

The line was echoed Monday afternoon at the White House as press secretary Ari Fleischer deflected reporters' questions on the Middle East by urging Arafat to prove himself as a leader.

"The president believes very strongly that this is a moment for Chairman Arafat to stand strongly and demonstrate that he is with those who seek peace," Fleischer said. "This is a chance for Arafat to demonstrate real leadership."

Fleischer added, "Israel is a sovereign government and has a right to defend herself."

The senior administration official said the Bush White House was not notified in advance of the Israeli attacks Monday in Gaza and Jenin but would not condemn the action because Israel "did not strike at facilities Arafat's security forces would use to carry out arrests."

"These were symbolic locations," this official said. "The point here is to tell Arafat, 'You have a choice. It can either be the PIJ [Palestinian Islamic Jihad]- Hamas way or your way. But you can't have two heads leading the Palestinian people. If you choose the PIJ-Hamas way, this is what you get.' This double leadership cannot continue."

The official said that while Monday's airstrikes by Israel "were not self-defense in the classical sense of going after those responsible, the step was made clearly to tell the Palestinians that there is a heavy price to pay for these policies."

"We are not going to continue to be involved while Arafat has one foot in his camp and one foot in the other camp of PIJ and Hamas," he said. "He needs to wake up and make up his mind how best to achieve the aspirations of the Palestinian people, and he knows it is through arresting those responsible."

Deputy State Department spokesman Philip Reeker called on Arafat to "bring violence and terrorism to an end through immediate, comprehensive and sustained action by the Palestinian Authority against both the individuals responsible and the infrastructure of the groups that support them."

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He added, "They need to bring them to justice, but they also need to take action against the infrastructure of those groups that supports those individuals. And there's absolutely no excuse for failure to take immediate and thorough action."

Powell confers with Arafat

Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke with Arafat over the weekend about the need to find and arrest those responsible for the suicide attacks and those who may be planning others. The conversation was described by the senior official as "pretty tough."

The official said that Arafat's statements so far on terrorist acts against Israel were "not forceful enough."

He said that the recent arrests Arafat made over the weekend and the state of emergency he imposed in the Palestinian territories were only the first steps in a huge task the Palestinian leader faces in controlling extremists.

"All right, he unleashed his security boys and made some arrests," the official said. "We don't know if those who needed to be arrested were arrested. Were these 75 or so responsible for the planning and execution of the terrorist attacks? It is too early to assess."

Another senior administration official directly involved in Middle East policymaking said Monday that the Bush administration was watching Arafat's promised crackdown on Palestinian militant groups with a "fair dose of skepticism."

Arafat was "picking up the right people" but there were serious doubts "it will be done on a sustained basis," this official said.

At the same time, the official raised doubts that Arafat could survive in power if he "really did what it takes to root out these people," a reference to members of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other groups.

"The guessing is that if he truly tries, he is not going to be successful," the senior official said, making clear that others in the administration disagree with his analysis.

Part of keeping some of the most dangerous Islamic militants in check, Fleischer insisted would be Arafat's demonstration he is willing to keep them incarcerated.

"Palestinian jails have bars in the front but should no longer have revolving doors in the back," the White House spokesman said.

Powell, appearing Sunday on CNN's "Late Edition," said the United States urged Israel to consider the long-term implications of any response.

As previously scheduled, Powell will meet Tuesday with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres on the sidelines of an OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) in Bucharest, Romania.

The administration's new Mideast envoy, retired Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, remains in the region, and is in touch with the Israelis and Palestinians, one U.S. official noted.

Bush held a lengthy midmorning meeting with his National Security Council, including the secretaries of state and defense. Aides said the meeting included a detailed discussion on the Middle East.

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