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FROM WND'S JERUSALEM BUREAU

WorldNetDaily Exclusive

Fearing Olmert collapse, Palestinians rush for deal

Asking U.S. to guarantee independent state if prime minister forced from office

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By Aaron Klein

WorldNetDaily

JERUSALEM – Fearing the collapse of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government, the Palestinian Authority asked the U.S. government for backing to rush a deal regarding the establishment of a Palestinian state, WND has learned.

According to a top PA negotiator, the Palestinians expect Olmert will be forced from office before the end of the year. They fear some of the negotiations led by Olmert's government will be fruitless unless an understanding is reached before the Israeli leader vacates office.

"What we are seeking is to quickly reach certain understandings, put those understandings on paper and have them guaranteed by the U.S. so the understandings can be used as a starting point in negotiations with the next Israeli prime minister," the top PA negotiator told WND.

Olmert's government has been conducting intense negotiations with the PA started at last November's U.S.-backed Annapolis summit, which sought to create a Palestinian state before Bush leaves office in January. Israel is highly expected to offer the Palestinians most of the West Bank and sections of Jerusalem.

(Story continues below)



Olmert faces a bribery and corruption investigation that has been described by police officials here as "very serious." The Israeli leader has said he would resign if he is indicted.

Earlier this week, Morris Talansky, a U.S. businessman, testified in court he provided about \$150,000 in cash to Olmert over the years and that he didn't know exactly what the Israeli leader did with the money.

According to sources close to the investigation, the charges against Olmert extend far beyond possible cash transfers by Talansky and involve other foreign businessmen allegedly passing on money in exchange for political and business favors.

In a major blow to Olmert's future leadership, his defense minister and senior coalition partner, Ehud Barak, yesterday called on him to step down.

"I do not think the prime minister can simultaneously run the government and deal with his own personal affair," Barak said at a nationally televised news conference after conferring with other members of his Labor party.

Barak maintained his position today, telling the Knesset that early elections appear inevitable in light of the corruption probe.

Olmert, though, continues to insist he will not resign unless he is indicted. He told the Knesset he was certain that once his side of the story is aired, no charges would be brought against him.

"I have been done an injustice, and it is illogical that a prime minister should be brought down because of something like this," Olmert said.

"Some people think that every investigation requires a resignation. I do not agree, and I do not intend to resign," Olmert said.

The prime minister has faced five previous investigations into accusations of corruption or accepting bribes.

Immediately after Barak's statements yesterday, three members of his party, which is in a governing coalition with Olmert's Kadima party, submitted motions to the Knesset to dissolve the Olmert government. By Israeli law, if the majority of the Knesset votes for the downfall of the prime minister,

new elections must be held within 90 days.

Barak has made no secret of his desire to become prime minister. But his calls for Olmert to step down were also echoed across the political spectrum.

Legally, Olmert can remain in office until 2010 unless he is either convicted or the Knesset votes for new elections.

If he resigns, Olmert could appoint a member of his Kadima party as prime minister to avoid early elections and ensure his party remains in power. He could also take a 90-day leave of absence during which time his deputy prime minister, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, would temporarily govern.

Olmert, though, is said to oppose placing Livni in power. According to top political sources in Jerusalem, Olmert is attempting to coordinate the future leadership of Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz, a former defense minister and close Olmert confidant.

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