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ISRAEL: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL DELEGATION DISCUSSES HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES WITH PRESIDENT ARAFAT

JERUSALEM -- In a meeting with Amnesty International yesterday, President Yasser Arafat said human rights would be a high priority for the Palestinian Authority and that international human rights standards will be incorporated into new legislation.

“As the newly elected President of the Palestinian Authority, we expect him to take clear and concrete steps to prevent human rights violations and not to sacrifice human rights in the drive for peace,” said Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

“In the course of a two hour meeting, Amnesty International insisted that the opportunity to build human rights protection from the outset should not be missed.”

President Arafat did not commit himself directly on bringing an end to the impunity of members of the security forces who carry out human rights violations such as torture and unlawful killings but when asked whether he would hold the security forces accountable he said that “no-one is above the law including the security forces”.

He confirmed that an investigation would be carried out into the killing of two alleged members of Islamic Jihad last week, and that the security force officers would be disciplined if the shooting was found to be unlawful.

As well, the delegation raised the case of Khaled Wahba, who had been detained for two months without access to his family, and President Arafat gave assurances that his mother would be allowed to visit him.

On the issue of the protection of the rights of Palestinian human rights organizations, Mr Sané stressed the important role they have played in the past and the need to guarantee their freedom of expression.

“Their contribution to the building of new institutional safeguards is essential in this period of transition,” Mr Sané said.

“However, we fear their legitimate role in monitoring human rights developments and contributing to the human rights debate may be at risk, as seen by the detentions of three human rights activists over the past year.”

President Arafat expressed appreciation for the role Palestinian human rights organizations have played in the past, but he gave no guarantee to Amnesty International’s delegation that the work of human rights defenders will not be hindered in future.

Amnesty International will continue to convey its concerns about human rights violations directly to the Palestinian Authority. ENDS\