

# **Yasser Arafat – Palestinian Hero (1929-2004)**

by Janet Jagan

The death of Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian Authority and head of the PLO came last week as he lingered on his death bed in a Paris hospital.

This was the first time in some four years that Arafat left his austere headquarters in Ramallah where the Israeli government had him penned up in the very small area on the West Bank that belongs to the Palestinian Authority.

Arafat was the symbol of the Palestinian struggle for its own homeland. At most levels, it is believed that were it not for Arafat, the issue of a homeland for the Palestinian people would not have reached the position it is today – that the world now accepts that there is a need and a justification for a Palestinian state, which can exist side by side with the Israeli state.

This acceptance, which some years ago was almost inconceivable, has been recognized by almost every country, including the USA. We can look in awe at the man who achieved this, a charismatic, strong, complex person who has stood on the world stage along with the Nelson Mandelas, Nehrus, Gandhis, Cheddi Jagans and others who led their people to freedom.

I watched with fascination the spectacle of Arafat's funeral, the third part of the Paris, Cairo and then Ramallah burial. The masses of Palestinians who came to say goodbye to Arafat were a stunning reminder to the world of the high esteem in which he was held, not by the critics who analyzed and discussed his faults, but the grassroot Palestinians who loved the leader who guided them in their longing for a place of their own, a piece of land they could call Palestine.

The TV reporters and the press referred to the "chaotic scenes in West Bank." But fortunately, CNN, for example, called on its senior reporter Christiane Amanpoor to describe the "chaos" she was viewing from Paris and she understood what it was in fact – the way in which the tens of thousands of Palestinian mourners were reacting to the loss of their leader, their hero, the man who led them in their struggle for a free Palestinian state. She explained that it was not chaos or rioting, but the expression of extreme grief and the wish to see his coffin, touch it for the last time. No one was hurt!

Then, in another inspired moment, the TV station brought on another woman, the Palestinian Parliamentarian Hanan Ashwari, who in the most passionate and well articulated comments, explained what was happening in Ramallah, and what Yasser Arafat stood for. Surprisingly, another woman, former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright was also interviewed and she rose high above US politics to place Arafat in his deserving place in world history.

It made me wonder why that brilliant Palestinian politician, Hanan Ashwari, is not where she belongs, in the hierarchy of the Palestinian leadership. She has more charisma, is more articulate and her graceful loyalty outshines those in the male leadership, now that Arafat has gone.

We can only hope that the next stage of the Palestinian struggle will result in a free Palestine state where the homeless, the refugees and the younger generation of Palestinians will have a home of their own.