

ARGENTINE REPORT FAILS TO IDENTIFY THOSE WHO ATTACKED ISRAELI EMBASSY

By Victoria Verlichak

BUENOS AIRES, May 12 (JTA) -- The Argentine government's official report on the March 17 bombing of the Israeli Embassy here was unable to identify the perpetrators of the attack.

But the report ruled out a claim by the Islamic Jihad that the attack was a suicide mission carried out on its behalf by an Argentine converted to Islam.

The pro-Iranian fundamentalist group had taken credit for the bombing, which killed 29 people, injured more than 400 and turned the embassy building into rubble.

The government report said the 12 pounds of plastic explosives -- made from a material not available in Argentina -- were concealed in a pickup truck outside the embassy and were set off either by a simple fuse or an electronic timing device.

The person or persons who parked the truck probably walked away, the report said. It noted that at the time of the blast, about 2:45 p.m., security cameras in the embassy picked up the image of a man quickly walking away from the building.

The report, prepared by the National Guard, was published May 7 and submitted to the Supreme Court, which was in charge of the investigation.

Conflicting Reports

From the start, there have been conflicting reports from different federal agencies handling the case. The Federal Police reported to the Minister of Interior that this was in fact a suicide attack. The police said a car parked in front of the booby-trapped truck diverted the blast, saving many lives.

None of Argentina's investigative agencies has been able to identify either the members or the name of the group responsible for the attack. Sources close to foreign investigators who have already left Argentina say the perpetrators are probably safely back in the Middle East.

The U.S. State Department has charged that there are strong "indications" that Iran was involved in the bombing, although it does not have conclusive proof of this.

Israeli Deputy Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in Jerusalem that if an Iranian connection is confirmed, Israel will ask the international community to impose sanctions on Iran, similar to the ones imposed by the United Nations last month on Libya for its alleged role in the bombing of a Pan American jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988.

The Israeli embassy here, meanwhile, is having difficulties finding a new home. According to the newspaper Clarin, since the bomb tragedy nobody wants to be its neighbor.

Until Jerusalem decides where and when to build a new embassy here, the diplomats plan to rent three floors of a 28-story steel-and-glass office tower in downtown Buenos Aires which also houses the Netherlands Embassy.

But Clarin reported that a number of tenants of the high-rise are threatening to move and the

owners of several small shops nearby have complained.

Inhabitants of the posh residential neighborhood where the embassy once stood do not want it back. Most of the bomb fatalities and injuries were suffered by neighbors and passersby. Only nine of the dead -- four Israelis and five Argentines -- were killed inside the building.

There was also tremendous property damage in the neighborhood. The neighbors have asked that the city leave the site of the former embassy as a plaza in memory of the victims.

The response of an Israeli Embassy spokesman has been to ask "everyone kindly not to be afraid" and "not to give in to the terrorists."

Operating Under Cramped Conditions

For the time being, the embassy is operating under severely cramped conditions at the Argentine-Israeli Cultural Center.

"We've received enormous solidarity through thousands of letters and telephone calls," an embassy official told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

"It's only natural that people are afraid after the losses they've also suffered," the official said. He added, however, that "there are always those who would like to finish what the terrorists started -- to eliminate the Israeli presence."

The news magazine *Tiempo* reported last week that the Mossad, the Israeli secret service, suspects that convicted Syrian drug-trafficker Monzer Al-Kassar, who has been linked to the Pan Am bombing, may have been involved in the attack on the embassy in Buenos Aires.

Local newspapers have picked up that speculation because Al-Kassar was mysteriously granted Argentine citizenship last month, only to have it immediately revoked.

According to press reports, he has close contacts with other Argentine Arabs, including the sister-in-law of President Carlos Menem, who is himself of Syrian ancestry.

ACTIVISTS URGE CAUTION DESPITE ARRIVAL IN N.Y. OF SYRIAN JEWS

By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, May 12 (JTA) -- Cautious optimism, not euphoria, continues to be the predominant emotion among activists working for the release of the 4,500 Jews of Syria.

This despite the arrival Sunday night in New York of nine Syrian Jews, two weeks after Syria announced it was lifting travel restrictions on its Jewish population.

"I think things might be heading in the right direction," said Alice Harary, president of the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews. "But we don't want to settle for divided families."

The group that came this week included two divided families, as well as someone coming for medical treatment. Syrian Jews in these categories have quietly arrived in the United States over the years.

"While we're very happy divided families are coming in a trickle, this is not living up to the (April 27) White House press statement regarding eliminating restrictions on travel," said Harary.

The White House statement was the first official word of the new Syrian policy, which was later confirmed in Damascus.

Travel is generally seen as a euphemism for emigration, which remains prohibited.

Activists say that the lack of clear evidence of a changed Syrian policy may indicate bureaucratic delays rather than any malevolence on the part of Syrian President Hafez Assad.

"It's only two weeks" since the Syrians announced their new policy, said Seymour Reich, chairman of the Task Force on Syrian Jewry of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "We're biding our time, and monitoring it carefully."

Activists say the true indicator of the lowering of Syria's barriers against Jewish travel would be the arrival of a complete family unit. Until now, Syria has insisted that Jews traveling abroad leave behind a family member to serve, in effect, as a hostage for their return. This was the case as well for some of those who arrived Sunday.

Such an indication may come as early as this week, say activists. They say that a full family unit is reportedly among a group of 24 more Jews who received permission to travel in the past few weeks.

But as recently as last week, as three children were about to board a plane to be reunited with relatives in the West, Syrians required one to stay behind.

"That was distressing, and not in accord with the anticipated free travel," said Reich.

While the arrival Sunday night in New York of the nine Jews may not have been proof that Syria has changed its policies, for those involved "it was very emotional," said Harary.

"It was a divided family, with children, that hadn't been together in four years. There was another who hadn't been with his family in many years. But it wasn't new. These divided families had been seeking reunification for years," she said.

She said one promised reform had been implemented. The group was not required to leave a sizable deposit with the Syrian government, as required until now.

"That is a significant change," Harary said.

But on other issues, the jury is still out.

One deterrent to Jews leaving Syria has been a ban on selling their homes and businesses without official permission. The promised change in that policy "so far has not trickled down" to the bureaucracy, said Harary, who noted that requests to sell businesses were recently denied.

The U.S. State Department has been advising patience, saying that it will take a while for new procedures to be put into place, said Reich.

The Syrians will "do it at their own good time, and seek their own rewards," he said.

SHARON SAYS COMPTROLLER'S CENSURE AMOUNTS TO ELECTION INTERFERING

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, May 12 (JTA) -- Housing Minister Ariel Sharon has locked horns with State Comptroller Miriam Ben-Porat over her report sharply critical of the way his ministry conducts its business.

He accused Ben-Porat of intervening in the election campaign. He said the timing of the April 28 report, which has triggered a criminal investigation, is evidence of its political intent.

Ben-Porat issued a statement rejecting Sharon's complaints. Her annual report contained allegations of corruption, maladministration and professional incompetence in the ministry charged with the task of providing housing for thousands of new immigrants.

Ben-Porat, a former member of the High Court of Justice, asked Attorney General Yosef Harish to consider criminal action on the basis of its findings. The police are currently pursuing several lines of inquiry to determine if there are grounds for prosecution.

Specifically, the comptroller alleged irregularities in handing out building contracts. She was especially critical of Uri Shani, one of Sharon's closest associates, who is director general of Amidar, the national housing company that provides dwellings for new immigrants and the poor.

Interviewed on Israel Television's nightly newscast on Monday, Sharon said, "It is a mistake and first-rate impertinence to charge that there was corruption in the ministry."

He urged Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to demand that the police complete their investigation "within a month" in order "to spare further agony from the families whose lives have turned into hell since the report was released."

He blasted the State Comptroller's Office for not turning over the alleged incriminating evidence months ago instead of just before the election campaign.

Ben-Porat replied that her office conducted its investigation without regard to the elections, which were originally scheduled to be held in November but advanced to June when the Likud government lost its parliamentary majority.

The comptroller, the state's official watchdog, traditionally exercises broad autonomy and is non-partisan.

Shani said in a radio interview Monday that he had not pocketed a penny. He said all of his company's activities were approved by its board of directors.

FAMILY OF MISSING ISRAELI NAVIGATOR TAKES ITS CASE TO WORLD LEADERS

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, May 12 (JTA) -- Dissatisfied with the lack of results to date, the wife and brother of missing Israeli air force navigator Ron Arad have gone abroad to appeal to various world leaders to renew efforts on his behalf.

Arad, shot down over Lebanon in 1986, is believed to be held by the Hamadei clan, Islamic fundamentalists who have seized hostages to secure the release of Abbas and Mohammed Hamadei, both serving long prison terms in Germany for international terrorism.

Arad's wife, Tami, said she would appeal to the United Nations and other officials who negotiated the release of British and American hostages in Lebanon late last year, and had promised that they would turn their attention to her husband's plight.

Of seven Israel Defense Force personnel still missing in Lebanon since 1982, he is the only one presumed to be alive.

Tami Arad and her brother-in-law visited Defense Minister Moshe Arens last week to see how they could refocus national attention on Arad's situation. They reportedly suggested that Israel field a new team of hostage negotiators since the present one has accomplished little.

CATHOLIC-JEWISH CONFERENCE MARRED BY DISAPPOINTMENT ON CATHOLIC SIDE

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, May 12 (JTA) -- On the surface, last week's meeting between high-ranking Catholic officials and Jewish leaders in Baltimore was harmonious.

But behind the scenes, say participants, there was widespread disappointment and dissatisfaction, which could damage future Catholic-Jewish dialogue.

The International Liaison Committee, a joint body of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and IJCIC, the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, meets roughly every 18 months.

This time, the conference was held May 4-7 in suburban Baltimore -- the first time in its quarter-century history that it's been held in North America.

Much of the unhappiness was attributed to the conduct of the leadership of the Jewish delegation.

The group of 25 Catholic delegates was headed by Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, and included theologians and Vatican officials from around the world.

They discussed their concerns about the conference at a hastily-called, Catholics-only caucus on the final morning.

"There was dissatisfaction with the (Jewish delegation's) lack of commitment to the process. Many of the Jewish delegates arrived late and left early," said one Catholic scholar who participated.

No Papers Of Substance

"There were virtually no papers of real substance or discussion, due in part to the fact that speakers were not given adequate preparation time," said the scholar.

The Jewish delegation, which also numbered about 25 people, was led by IJCIC's chairman, Edgar Bronfman, who is also president of the World Jewish Congress. Bronfman was absent from the meeting's closing banquet, noted participants.

"When the principals don't even attend the closing dinner, it says there's a collapse of understanding the importance of the dialogue. You don't build relationships on that basis," said one veteran Jewish member.

Other criticism included the fact that Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel was initially scheduled to give a keynote address that was instead given by former Israeli Minister of Religious Affairs Dr. Joseph Burg.

Wiesel told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that "I told them (the Jewish organizers) almost from the beginning that I couldn't come. I don't understand why they put it on the schedule."

And one of the ground rules -- that the Liaison Committee meetings are closed to the press, except for public sessions -- was broken by the head of the Jewish delegation, whose staff invited a reporter and said that they cleared it with both Catholic and Jewish participants.

In fact, they had not, according to both Catholic and Jewish delegates. "They breached an explicit rule," said Dr. Eugene Fisher, director of Catholic-Jewish relations for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"There were many positive aspects to the meeting, but there are also a number of things that need to be quietly talked about at the level

of the steering committee, seriously looked at, and improved organizationally," said Fisher.

When asked for comment, Bronfman spokesman Elan Steinberg said: "I've never been to a meeting that didn't have organizational problems, and the bottom line is that the organization was not in the hands of the World Jewish Congress."

The Baltimore conference's problems go deeper than this one meeting, and are related to the nature and leadership of IJCIC, the Jewish group, said some participants.

"On the Catholic side we're dealing with one organizing group, and IJCIC is a very loose association of myriad members who have all sorts of different agendas for the dialogue," said Rev. John Pawlikowski, a professor of Social Ethics at Chicago's Catholic Theological Union.

"There are internal problems within IJCIC that have to be ironed out, and fast," said Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, director of interreligious affairs for the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, an IJCIC member. "IJCIC hasn't been running by its bylaws, and very little effort has been made to promote the consultative process. There has been very poor planning of late," he said.

The experience at this gathering of the Liaison Committee may have an impact on future dialogue efforts, participants said.

"The Vatican may find it difficult to attract people of sufficiently high quality to such an event if they feel it won't be substantive," said the Catholic delegation's Pawlikowski.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the Vatican leadership has second thoughts about a meeting of this kind in the future. And I cannot blame them," said Rabbi Leon Klenicki, director of interreligious affairs for the Anti-Defamation League, an IJCIC member.

GAUCHE GAFFE CAUSES FRENCH BRASS TO SHUN ISRAEL INDEPENDENCE DAY

By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, May 12 (JTA) -- The Israeli Embassy's Independence Day reception was snubbed last week by French officials, apparently because the new Israeli envoy committed what the host government considered a breach of protocol.

No senior member of the French government showed up, nor did anyone from the opposition.

Ambassador Yehuda Lancry, who replaced eight-year veteran Ambassador Ovadia Soffer, apparently got off on the wrong foot.

Lancry arrived in Paris in February but still has not been able to present his credentials to President Francois Mitterrand. That is because French protocol requires that at least five newly appointed envoys must be on hand before they are introduced to the president, an Israeli official explained to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

The convergence of new ambassadors had not materialized and the embassy meanwhile had to send out its Yom Ha'atzmaut invitations, which were signed by "Ambassador of Israel Y. Lancry and Mrs. Lancry."

The French Foreign Ministry was horrified and promptly telephoned the embassy. "How could Mr. Lancry invite French officials before he even has an official existence?" the Israelis were asked.

At the celebration on May 7, it was the charges d'affaires, Yitzhak Eldan, who was official host, shaking hands with the guests while Lancry hovered in the background, behind an Israeli flag.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES:

WHILE PITCHING IN TO HELP NEIGHBORS,

L.A. JEWS REDISCOVER COMMUNAL SPIRIT

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES, May 12 (JTA) -- A week after the riots that destroyed much of South Central Los Angeles, and with National Guardsmen still on patrol, the Jewish community seemed to be rediscovering a sense of shared fate with its multiethnic neighbors that most Jews have not felt since the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s.

Jews have stepped up their aid efforts to the riot-torn sections. At the same time, rough estimates of the damage to Jewish-owned businesses indicate the losses were heavier than originally believed.

The Refugee Acculturation Program of the Jewish Federation Council found that 45 businesses owned by Iranian Jews and six owned by former Soviet Jews were burned or looted. These included electronics and furniture stores, pawn shops and dental offices.

Sources in the local Israeli community estimated that between 10 and 20 stores owned by Israelis were hit. They were mainly electronic appliances and retail clothing outlets. Stories are circulating about how Israelis, armed with Uzis and shotguns, scared off would-be looters.

No one yet has totaled up the losses suffered by American Jewish businessmen, but it seems likely the figure will be in the tens of millions of dollars, if not higher. Insurance companies will likely cover a major portion of the damage.

One of the victims was Richard Giesberg, whose attitude and experience seem typical of Jews affected by the riots.

Helps Out After Being Wiped Out

Giesberg, a Jewish community leader long active in black-Jewish relations, held the men's clothing concession at the large Fedco discount store. On April 30, the first full day of rioting, looters cleaned him out to the tune of about 500 suits, 300 sport coats, 300 jackets and 8,000 slacks and jeans.

He was able to save one delivery truck, and two days later he stocked it with donated food and, with a rabbi at his side, drove to a black church in the inner city.

At latest count, 30 synagogues and campus Hill centers are collecting clothing and food which are being delivered mainly to black churches for distribution.

Reforms temples predominate in the aid drive, followed by Conservative congregations.

But even the Orthodox community, traditionally little involved with non-Jewish groups, is supporting a job-training and employment program in minority areas.

Mazon, a Jewish anti-hunger organization, is the community's coordinator to channel financial aid to relief programs in the black, Hispanic and Korean areas.

So far, \$35,000 has come in through donations averaging \$85 apiece, said Mazon director Irving Cramer.

About 300,000 pounds of fresh produce have been delivered to a dozen churches through the efforts of philanthropist Mickey Weiss.

But Jewish groups realize that material assistance, while an immediate need, may not be the most important response to the Los Angeles crisis.

The Anti-Defamation League has scheduled

two seminars for public school teachers, as part of its long-standing prejudice-reduction training program, "A World of Difference."

All segments of the Jewish community are represented in an emergency committee, which has appointed two task forces -- one to connect with other ethnic groups, the other to evaluate the impact of the civic upheaval on the Jewish community.

Rabbi Harvey Fields, president of the Southern California Board of Rabbis, heads the "outside" committee. He reported Monday that working ties have been established with black and Korean political, business and religious leaders.

Relations with the Hispanic community is somewhat lagging, said Fields, because it lacks an organized central body.

Learning from previous mistakes, Fields said that "we're very careful not to come in offering our wisdom, but we're asking them in what ways we can be the most helpful."

Warm Welcome From Koreans

Fields said that he received an especially warm welcome from the 300,000-strong Korean community. Korean businessmen, who have largely taken over the inner city stores once owned by Jews, were hit hardest during the rampage and see themselves as its principal victims.

The Koreans "want to learn how the Jewish community is organized, how it functions and raises funds," Fields said.

The second task force, focusing on the Jewish community itself, is headed by Harold Schulweis, a leading Conservative rabbi, and Rabbi Laura Geller of the American Jewish Congress.

Schulweis said in an interview that the aftermath of the riots presents an opportunity to reverse the insular and inward-looking preoccupation of American Jews with just their own interests and to recapture "our noble tradition of compassion for the stranger."

A return to the concepts of universalism and humanitarianism is crucial, if only to retain the allegiance of idealistic young Jews, Schulweis said.

To that end, he hopes to break down the barriers between Orthodox, Conservative and Reform youth movements by forming a non-ideological group that would put into practical terms the biblical injunction to love your neighbor as yourself.

There is also an opportunity for the Jewish community to serve as a "mediating force" between the often hostile black, Hispanic and Korean communities in Los Angeles, said Schulweis.

Hispanic Students Learn 'Dayenu'

Many anecdotes are making the rounds. One relates to the visit here of eight Ethiopian-born high school students from Israel.

On the first evening of riots, the youngsters attended a seder with 100 black and Hispanic students from local public schools, who were instructed in Passover rituals and songs by Rabbi Fields.

When the seder ended, the bus driver for a group of Hispanic students had heard about the violence and instructed the youngsters to sit on the floor of the bus. He turned off the lights and drove off.

As the darkened bus crossed the violent city, the students, still full of the seder spirit, burst into a song they had just learned: Dayenu (Enough).