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**ISRAEL MIGHT RECOGNIZE THE PLO
AS PART OF DEAL WITH PALESTINIANS**

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, Aug. 29 (JTA) -- Israel may formally recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization as part of a preliminary agreement on interim Palestinian self-rule in the administered territories.

In turn, the PLO would formally renounce terrorism as a means of accomplishing its goals and rescind articles in the Palestine National Covenant that call for the destruction of Israel.

These elements are being proposed as part of an agreement that would give limited self-rule to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho.

The proposed agreement, apparently hammered out during the last few weeks in a series of secret meetings between high-level Israeli and PLO officials, was expected to be discussed Monday at a special meeting of the Cabinet convened by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

If the proposed agreement is approved, it would herald a historic turning point in the negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, which have dragged on for 22 months and been repeatedly sidetracked by an array of procedural rather than substantive issues.

Many of the details of the agreement must still be worked out, and this was expected to be the focus of what could be difficult negotiations between the Israeli and Palestinian delegations to the bilateral peace talks, which were scheduled to resume in Washington on Tuesday.

But in an indication that serious progress toward reaching an agreement had already been made, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres flew to California for a surprise meeting last Friday with U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher.

Peres himself apparently played a key personal role in working out the understanding with the Palestinians. Although the foreign minister denies it, he is reported by four Israeli newspapers to have met with a senior PLO official in Stockholm on Aug. 20, during a trip to Scandinavia.

Several other highly placed members of the Israeli government have met recently with PLO representatives, despite Jerusalem's official policy that it will not negotiate with the Tunis-based organization.

Likud Blasts The Plan

Peres was believed to have explained to Christopher the nature of the direct contacts between Israel and the PLO, since U.S. policy still bars direct contacts with the PLO.

The United States was believed to have given its full blessing to the latest developments.

Here in Israel, while many hailed the plan for Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and Jericho as a historic breakthrough, the proposal also drew some strong negative reactions, including warnings of civil war.

Benjamin Netanyahu, chairman of the opposition Likud party, blasted the plan and vowed to bring down the government over the issue.

He charged the Israeli government was throwing a lifeline to the PLO, which he said is

bankrupt and remains committed to Israel's destruction.

Likud favors holding an election before going forward with a Gaza-Jericho First proposal.

The head of the Likud caucus in the Knesset, Moshe Katsav, said the proposal paves the way for a Palestinian state.

"We are afraid this policy has only one significance: to put the cornerstone of the Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria," he told Israel Television, using the West Bank's biblical name.

He added: "And we believe that in a Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria there is only one meaning: the destruction of Israel."

Settlers in the territories have roundly condemned the proposal and warned that deep divisions over it could erupt into a full-blown campaign of civil disobedience.

Within the government, Cabinet Secretary Elyakim Rubinstein, who heads the Israeli team negotiating with the Palestinians in Washington, was reported by Israel Television to be threatening to resign. Rubinstein is a holdover from the Likud government.

Rabin Has Concerns, Too

Prime Minister Rabin, too, has been cautious about the proposed agreement, many of whose specific terms must still be worked out.

Among other things, he is concerned that the Palestinians will seek to have a full withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and Jericho, a move he is unprepared to make.

Rabin also wants to keep control of the strategically important Allenby Bridge, a crossing point into Jordan that is located near Jericho.

Another point of concern is the status of Jewish settlers in Gaza, whose safety must be guaranteed.

The prime minister was expected to discuss these reservations, as well as the proposal to grant full recognition to the PLO, at Monday's special Cabinet session.

The proposal for mutual recognition by Israel and the PLO was the subject of comments by several PLO officials.

PLO leader Yasir Arafat reportedly told the PLO executive committee in Tunis that he would insist that any agreement on Palestinian self-rule must be signed by Israel and the PLO. Without mutual recognition, he said, no agreement would be possible.

Yasir Abed Rabbo, head of the information department of the PLO, said Sunday that the organization was interested in turning "a new leaf" in its relations with Israel.

Without mentioning specifically the idea of mutual recognition, he said that the PLO would support any measure that would serve that cause.

Asked if direct contacts between the PLO and Israel should be expected within the next few days, Abed Rabbo said: "We are on the verge of an historic change in the Middle East."

He did not rule out a possible meeting between Rabin and Arafat.

Such sweeping statements of optimism were also sounded in Israel, where there was talk that an Israeli-Palestinian declaration of principles could be signed as early as this week, in which case Peres might show up in Washington.

NEWS ANALYSIS:**ISRAELI PUBLIC LARGELY UNRUFFLED
BY SWEEPING MOVES IN PEACE PROCESS**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Aug. 29 (JTA) -- Developments in the Middle East peace process that only months ago would have been condemned as anathema, or dismissed as fantasy, are taking place in staggering succession.

And yet the Israeli public is going about its daily business largely undisturbed.

The government is considering full recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization, an agreement with the Palestinians for interim self-rule and total withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

Yet many Israelis, especially of the younger generation, seem to be at least as preoccupied with news about pop singer Michael Jackson, due to perform here soon, as with Foreign Minister Shimon Peres' secret meetings with PLO officials and U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher.

The one public manifestation of concern over the peace process is a nationwide rash of huge, hand-painted placards asserting, "The People are with the Golan."

The slogans are everywhere -- on billboards, balconies and trees. The Public Works Department labors to remove them, on the grounds that such advertising requires a license, but they go up more quickly than they can be taken down.

But the impact of these posters is largely unknown. While they assert the people's solidarity with the Golan, they also raise the question -- unthinkable until not long ago -- that Israel may be able to do without the strategic plateau overlooking Galilee.

It would be simplistic to attribute the relative passivity of the public to the atmosphere of hedonism represented by the preoccupation with Michael Jackson.

For, as has been well documented in the past, these same young hedonists can quickly rise up to defend a cause -- or the state itself -- when moved to do so.

'Weariness With War'

The societal forces that brought Labor to power after more than a decade of Likud primacy, and that have led to a widespread acceptance of Labor's far-reaching peace moves, reach deeper than hedonism.

Some scholars have detected a "weariness with war" on both sides of the Middle East conflict.

Others link the current mood to the sense of relief that swept the world with the end of the Cold War.

But perhaps the leading influence on the present Israeli mood is the trauma caused by the Iraqi Scud missile attacks on Tel Aviv during the Persian Gulf War.

The fleeing citizenry felt in the most direct and personal way that neither the Golan nor the Gaza Strip served as any defense for their homes and lives.

The behavior of the Palestinians -- who cheered as Scuds landed in Tel Aviv -- further served to persuade many Israelis of the impossibility of coexisting with the Palestinians as members of the same country.

If many Israelis seem far from bowled over by the latest developments in the peace talks, it is perhaps because they have already made up their minds that these steps are necessary.

**COURT REJECTS PEACE NOW PETITION
TO OUTLAW BUILDING OF SETTLEMENTS**

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Aug. 29 (JTA) -- Israel's High Court of Justice has refused to rule whether settlements in the administered territories violate international law.

A petition filed two years ago by Peace Now, a coalition of peace activists in Israel, argued that any settlement not needed for security represents a clear violation of international law.

The petition also claimed that the settlements violate Israel's democratic principles because of the inequitable treatment of Jewish settlers and their Arab neighbors in the territories.

But the court ruled last week that the petition "relates to matters of policy which are the province of the other branches of a democratic regime."

Chief Justice Meir Shamgar indicated in his written opinion that if the petition had addressed the impact or injury of a specific settlement, that would have been a different case.

In rejecting Peace Now's petition, Shamgar cited a 1975 U.S. Supreme Court opinion that courts should refrain from addressing issues of governmental policy.

Peace Now issued a statement saying it may request a second hearing.

"The political decisions should be left to the voters, but the courts are entrusted with deciding the legality of a political policy," the statement said.

**THE 9 IDF SOLDIERS KILLED IN LEBANON
WERE ON MISSION TO RETRIEVE MATERIEL**

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Aug. 29 (JTA) -- The Israeli soldiers killed in southern Lebanon on Aug. 19 were on a mission to retrieve expensive Israeli military equipment that had been left in the field and was apparently later booby-trapped by Hezbollah forces.

According to a Jerusalem Post report Sunday, Israel Defense Force officials had previously denied speculation that the Hezbollah mines had been laid near military equipment apparently forgotten or abandoned in the field.

But it has since been confirmed that some two weeks before the deadly incident, a group of Israeli officers on a mission in the Shihin area of southern Lebanon had left a few pieces of very expensive equipment in the field.

An intelligence source is quoted by the Post as saying that on the night of Aug. 14 a group of Hezbollah guerrillas had found the devices.

But rather than stealing the equipment, the guerrillas used it as bait for the IDF soldiers, who were certain to return for it. The guerrillas surrounded the equipment with mines, which they connected to tripwires.

Five days later, the IDF patrol that lost seven men was sent to pick up the devices.

It is not known why the unit waited so long to retrieve the missing equipment.

The dispatch later that day of the second patrol, which lost two additional men, has been criticized by senior military officers.

They maintain the area should have been cleared of any more mines with a special explosive device before the second group was sent out.

CLINTON PLEDGES TO CONSIDER REQUEST FOR POLLARD CLEMENCY

By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, Aug. 29 (JTA) -- President Clinton has renewed his campaign pledge to consider the case of Jonathan Pollard, the former U.S. Navy analyst now serving a life sentence for passing military secrets to Israel.

Responding to a letter requesting clemency for Pollard, sent by Abe Plotkin of Scranton, Pa., Clinton wrote that he was waiting for the Justice Department to review the case and recommend a course of action.

"Once I receive their recommendation, I will give consideration to all the relevant facts in order to make a fair and just determination," the president wrote.

Pollard, who is currently serving time at a federal penitentiary in Butner, N.C., first filed for commutation of his sentence in December 1992. Outgoing President Bush turned down the request the day before Clinton took office.

A new petition was quickly filed, well before the new administration began the slow process of naming a new attorney general.

His choice, Janet Reno, is regarded as sympathetic to many Jewish concerns. But she is also a strong believer in law and order, and it is not known how she would come down on the Pollard case.

POSTERS REJECTING ANTI-SEMITISM QUICKLY TORN DOWN IN SWITZERLAND

By Tamar Levy

GENEVA, Aug. 29 (JTA) -- Some 200 posters rejecting fascism and anti-Semitism were recently put up by a group of young people in the eastern Swiss town of Brunnen -- and quickly torn down.

The posters display a man throwing a swastika into a garbage can and slogans such as "Keep Your Surroundings Clean." The 20-year-old woman who created the posters told the Zurich Jewish weekly *Israeleitische Wochenblatt* that the second series of posters would be affixed with stronger glue.

The artist said she had been watching with trepidation the growth of neo-Nazi groups whose members dress like skinheads in leather vests and boots.

"I decided it was enough for now and that something had to be done, rather than wait until things got as bad as in Germany," she said.

She also wanted to awake her region, which is the German-speaking part of Switzerland, to what is going on and prevent a recurrence of what happened 50 years ago.

The *Israeleitische Wochenblatt* writes that a few members of the anti-fascist group have received threatening letters.

However, they have not been deterred. They say they are delighted with the positive reaction they have received from the media and much of the population, which exceeded their expectations.

In Brunnen on Aug. 1, a Tamil from Sri Lanka was beaten up and about 40 neo-Nazis demonstrated, bearing emblems proclaiming, "I am proud to be Swiss."

Local citizens wrote letters to their newspaper condemning the neo-Nazis.

Commenting on this, the creator of the anti-fascist posters said, "We shall not give up. Our next step will be to talk with the racists about their ideas."

VIOLENT RACIST ATTACKS UP THIS SUMMER IN ITALY

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, Aug. 29 (JTA) -- A series of violent attacks this summer against homeless people and Third World immigrants is raising concern in Italy about a rise in racism and intolerance at a time when Italy is going through difficult political, social and economic changes.

The incidents have included attacks by groups of youths on individual persons as well as mob actions against communities of immigrants.

There have been at least two minor incidents of anti-Semitism, in which swastikas and slogans were scrawled on a few Jewish shops in Rome and at the Jewish cemetery in the northern town of Merano, but otherwise Jews have not been targets of attacks.

Two Israeli students were beaten by a group of youths in July, but their attackers apparently believed they were North Africans.

The number of attacks does not approach the level of racist assaults in Germany. But the upsurge has raised particular concern here because, in addition to attacks by skinheads, the recent incidents have included assaults by people considered to be respectable citizens carrying out in vigilante fashion actions they considered to be in legitimate self-defense.

The latest attacks took place Aug. 23, in two widely separated places in Italy.

In the Adriatic beach resort town of Riccione, seven skinheads shouting racist slogans beat up a 25-year-old prostitute from Cameroon.

The same night in a small town in Sardinia, three youths shouting similar statements beat a 24-year-old Moroccan man.

A few days earlier, a group of youths attacked a Moroccan family at their home in Rome. And in Milan, a group of six youths described as being from "good families" and calling themselves the "Anti-Bum Squad" brutally beat up a homeless man.

Youths Taking Matters Into Own Hands

Two youths staged a copycat attack on a homeless man in Rome a few days later.

"Milan has become unlivable for a series of reasons," one of the Milan youths, a teen-ager not identified by name, was quoted by the newspaper *La Stampa* as saying.

The youth blamed immigrants for all sorts of woes and said, "Seeing that no one has ever been concerned to clean things up, we are doing it ourselves."

This attitude took on a more worrisome form earlier this summer in cities in the north and south of the country.

Last month in the northern city of Genoa, there were several days of large-scale street fighting between Italian citizens and immigrants.

In the southern town of Stornara the night of Aug. 15, local citizens described as acting like a "lynch mob" rose up against hundreds of Africans based there as seasonal migrant agriculture workers for the tomato harvest.

Experts say the highly unstable social, political and economic crisis is a key contributor to this type of intolerance and racism.

Hard hit by economic recession, which has taken unemployment nationwide up to more than 12 percent, Italy is undergoing a tumultuous season of political change, including a corruption scandal involving more than 2,000 top leaders.

TIGHTENING OF CONVERSION CRITERIA IN ISRAEL COULD IMPACT IMMIGRANTS

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Aug. 29 (JTA) -- Israel's Chief Rabbinate is seeking to tighten standards for conversion to Judaism, which will make the process more difficult for thousands of recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Among the measures reportedly ordered by Sephardic Chief Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi-Doron is the closing, at least temporarily, of a number of special conversion courts located throughout the country.

The clampdown on conversions signals that Israel's religious establishment will continue to move toward the right under the recently installed new chief rabbi.

Haredi, or fervently Orthodox, circles have long attacked the more moderate rabbinate for allowing conversions seen as insincere by the critics, since they did not result in full observance of biblical commandments and Jewish law.

At the same time, the rabbinate has often come under attack for putting hurdles in the way of immigrants, particularly Russians with Jewish spouses, who wish to join Israel's non-Orthodox Jewish majority.

According to press reports, Bakshi-Doron is insisting that judges on religious courts require longer Judaism courses for prospective converts and seek from them a firmer commitment to lead observant lives after conversion.

He also reportedly wants converts to send their children to the state's religious school system or to one of the fervently Orthodox systems, instead of to the secular schools.

According to some reports, Bakshi-Doron has also ordered all conversion cases to be sent to his own office for approval.

Old Religious Establishment Loses Ground

The move by the recently installed chief rabbi could affect the conversion plans of thousands of recent olim from the former Soviet Union.

According to reports in the media, Bakshi-Doron specifically cited volunteers on kibbutzim as requiring stiffer rabbinic criteria for conversion. The Israeli collective farms are seen as bastions of secularism.

Regarding olim, Bakshi-Doron is said to support the ongoing, low-profile conversion of thousands of members of mixed Jewish-Gentile families.

But he reportedly looks with less favor upon the conversion of immigrants whose family members are all Gentile.

Considerable numbers of such immigrants have settled in Israel, some with the aid of forged documents. The Israeli immigration authorities, whose work begins at the consulates in the states of the former Soviet Union, try to weed out such applicants but do not always succeed.

The Ashkenazic chief rabbi, Israel Meir Lau, is keeping his distance from the potentially stormy issue of conversions.

He can do so on purely formal grounds, since Bakshi-Doron is president of the Supreme Rabbinical Court and therefore bears prime responsibility for issuing instructions to the dayan-im, or religious court judges.

Under Israeli law, the two chief rabbis, who are elected for 10-year terms, rotate their two roles: One serves as chairman of the Chief Rab-

binat Council and the other as president of the Supreme Rabbinical Court.

The special conversion courts closed by Bakshi-Doron were set up in recent years to contend with the swelling numbers of conversion candidates.

Among the conversion courts Bakshi-Doron has reportedly singled out for criticism is that of Rabbi Haim Druckman, a former Knesset member for the National Religious Party.

Druckman, a yeshiva dean, exemplifies the old-time religious establishment that has lost ground in recent years to the stricter Orthodoxy of the Shas party, with which Bakshi-Doron is associated.

FRAUDULENT LETTER TO STUDENT PAPER AT SYDNEY UNIVERSITY LIBELS TALMUD By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY, Australia, Aug. 29 (JTA) -- Students at the University of Sydney are outraged at the publication of a fraudulent letter in the student newspaper that makes a mockery of the Talmud and portrays Jews in a dangerously inaccurate light bordering on blood libel.

The letter, signed with the name of a non-existent person, contains a series of mythical extracts from the Talmud in an attempt to discredit Jewish sources in debates on issues of morality.

Published last week, the letter charges that a Jew is permitted to "violate" 3-year-old non-Jewish children; treat "a non-Jewess" as "a piece of meat"; and "rape, cheat and perjure himself."

In all, there are nine such libelous quotations in the letter, harking back to Medieval times when virulently false theological charges were regularly raised against Jews and which Jews in those times were forced to answer.

Shosh Simons, the president of the university's section of the Australian Union of Jewish Students, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency she was "shocked and surprised at the newspaper" for publishing the letter.

"The publication of the letter violates every policy of the Students' Representative Council and breaches New South Wales' state anti-racist legislation," she said.

She said she was expecting a full apology for the publication of the letter to be printed in the next issue of the newspaper. Failing this, she said, the matter would be pursued further.

Anna Davis, president of the Students' Representative Council at the university, said she was aware of the anti-Semitism in the letter as soon as she read the paper.

She told JTA that the paper could not publish anything which is racist, sexist or in any other way offensive, but this policy does not apply to the letters page, where anything received is generally published.

She said she firmly believes this letter should not have been published and that the editors had failed to even check whether the signator existed.

The national president of the Australian Union of Jewish Students, Melanie Landau, said she was "sickened by the maliciousness of the author of the letter and the irresponsibility of the newspaper in publishing it.

"There is a disturbing resurgence of anti-Jewish activity in Australia today. This sort of letter emphasizes the need for vigilance by opponents of racism," she said.