

**STATE DEPARTMENT REPORT ON PLO
SPARKS CRITICISM AND CONTROVERSY**
By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, Dec. 4 (JTA) -- A second State Department report certifying Palestine Liberation Organization compliance with its peace agreements with Israel has drawn sharp criticism from members of Congress and some pro-Israel activists.

While citing PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat's failure to root out terrorism, confiscate weapons, prosecute Palestinian terrorists and amend the PLO covenant calling for the destruction of Israel, the report rules that the PLO's "good faith" effort warrants the determination.

The report, mandated every six months according to legislation passed by Congress, paves the way for President Clinton to authorize financial assistance to the Palestinians.

White House officials say President Clinton plans to adopt the report's recommendation and ask Congress for an allocation of up to \$150 million for the Palestinian Authority, which governs the autonomous areas of Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho.

The administration has pledged a total of \$500 million over five years to the Palestinians.

At the same time, however, the report--and the reaction it has elicited -- is expected to become a weapon in the ongoing battle on Capitol Hill over continuing U.S. aid to the Palestinians.

The 13-page State Department report, released last Friday, details dozens of incidents of PLO actions that contradict its peace accord signed with Israel last year. But it also seeks to explain some of the PLO actions.

For example, the report cites PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat's Nov. 15 comments at a Gaza rally, during which he called Israel "the Zionist enemy."

Mild Language And Conciliatory Approach

"While this remark is reminiscent of an earlier era before the PLO acknowledged Israel's right to exist, the broader pattern of Arafat's actions and statements demonstrates his acceptance of Israel and commitment to the negotiations," the report states.

The report also praised Arafat for turning over to Israeli forces a murder suspect hiding in Gaza.

The report's mild language and conciliatory approach toward the Palestinians prompted a flurry of criticism, with some activists accusing the State Department of adhering to a low standard and a minimalist definition of compliance.

Expressing "disappointment" with the findings, Steve Grossman, president of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, said, "The time has come for Arafat to ratchet up his compliance with his commitments."

"If the Israeli people, the American people and Congress are going to have full faith in Arafat, then he needs to be more assiduous and steadfast in his efforts," Grossman said.

Although critical of the report and of some

of Arafat's actions, Grossman said that AIPAC continues to support American aid to the Palestinian Authority.

In contrast, the Zionist Organization of America was not only sharply critical of the report, but also plans to challenge continued aid to the Palestinians.

"The State Department has ignored, minimized and whitewashed the PLO's numerous and serious violations," said ZOA President Morton Klein.

"The report is simply a farce that refuses to look truth in the eye," Klein said.

State Department officials have defended the report's findings and its purpose.

"We need to weigh the need for aid to the Palestinians against a higher standard of compliance," a State Department official said, referring to the report in a recent interview.

"Any cutoff of American aid or a perceived weakening of American support for the Palestinian Authority could have catastrophic effects for the Palestinians, Israelis and the entire peace process," the official said.

Concern About PLO Aid

Israeli officials, from Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on down, have expressed similar views, strongly lobbying in favor of U.S. aid to the Palestinians, despite reservations about compliance.

During a recent interview here, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin said, "The peace process would surely fail without American aid to the Palestinian Authority."

Because of this concern about aid, Israeli officials reportedly have attacked AIPAC's offensive against the State Department report.

According to reports in the Israeli media over the weekend, Israeli officials expressed concern that opponents of aid to the PLO will try to capitalize on the pre-eminent pro-Israel lobby's criticism of the report.

In an apparent effort to prevent an anti-aid backlash in the American Jewish community as a result of reaction to the report, Israeli Ambassador Itamar Rabinovich called leaders of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations to reiterate Israel's official position, according to Malcolm Hoenlein, the group's executive vice chairman.

Americans for Peace Now, which expressed support for the sense of the report, also feared that opponents of the PLO-Israel agreement would "seize on this report as a way to disrupt aid," said Linda Heller Kamm, the group's co-president.

While Kamm said that the Palestinians have not lived up to all of their agreements, she is "encouraged by their progress."

Klein said he plans to do exactly what Israeli officials and others fear opponents of aid and the accord might do.

Klein said that as he takes his case to the 104th Congress, he plans to use the report and AIPAC's criticism of it as a rallying cry against aid to the Palestinians.

Controversy over the State Department

report adds another layer to what is expected to become a major battle in the new Congress over aid to the Palestinians.

With incoming Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) opposed to foreign aid and hostile to the peace process, which he has labeled a "fraud," advocates of the process and of ongoing aid to the Palestinians say they will have their hands full.

Klein has led the charge on Capitol Hill to keep Arafat's "feet to the fire" in complying with the accords through Peace Accord Monitoring groups.

The PAM groups currently boast 45 returning members in both the House and Senate. Klein plans to continue recruiting new members. Rep. Jon Fox (R-Pa.), the only new Jewish member of Congress, recently signed on, Klein said.

The co-chairman of the House PAM group, Rep. Jim Saxton (R-N.J.) echoed the expressions of "disappointment" in the report.

"In essence, we are giving the Palestinian National Authority an enormous amount of foreign aid with no strings attached," Saxton said.

CONVICTION OF BROOKLYN BRIDGE GUNMAN BRINGS RELIEF TO LUBAVITCH COMMUNITY By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, Dec. 4 (JTA) -- The conviction of Rashid Baz for the murder of Ari Halberstam and the attempted murder of 14 other Lubavitch boys has been greeted with relief by those whose lives were most touched by the violence, as well as by others in the Jewish community.

The verdict "was a big relief," said Chana Kalmenson, the older sister of Nachum Sosonkin, who was seriously injured when Baz opened fire on a van full of Lubavitch teens traveling across the Brooklyn Bridge on March 1.

"We're not getting back what we lost, and we don't have the death penalty in New York, but at least we're getting as much as we can," she said.

Next to Halberstam, the 16-year-old who was killed by Baz's bullets, Sosonkin, 18, was the most seriously wounded in the attack. He still has a 9-mm bullet lodged in his brain and is undergoing medical tests related to his brain damage.

After the verdict was announced Dec. 1, Halberstam's father, Rabbi David Halberstam, told New York Newsday that Baz "has no remorse. His only remorse is that he didn't kill every boy on that van."

Baz, a Lebanese immigrant who has said he was traumatized by his war-torn childhood, could face up to 146 years in prison when he is sentenced on Jan. 18.

Baz, 28, showed no emotion in court as the verdicts were read. He was also convicted of weapons possession charges in the shooting of the van full of Lubavitch boys.

The boys had been returning to Brooklyn after taking part in a prayer vigil for the late Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Schneerson, who had just undergone eye surgery in a Manhattan hospital.

Two Jordanian men, charged with hindering prosecution and with weapons possession, will be tried separately next year.

According to Rabbi Shea Hecht, a cousin of Ari Halberstam's mother, the guilty verdict

brought "a tremendous sigh of relief and a tremendous thanks to God" in the Lubavitch community.

"We hope that the judge will be very, very strict. Baz was successful in killing one, but his intention was to kill 15, and we hope the judge is as strict with all 15 counts" as he is with the murder conviction, said Hecht, who is also chairman of the board of the Crown Heights-based National Committee for the Furtherance of Jewish Education.

In other parts of the Jewish community, the verdict was met with similar reaction.

"Let this be a message that bias crimes and acts of violence motivated by racism and anti-Semitism will not be tolerated and will meet with swift and harsh punishment," said Anita Sher, director of the New York regional office of the Anti-Defamation League.

"The decision unfortunately will not bring back Ari Halberstam, but we hope that it provides a small degree of peace and consolation to his parents and the community," she said.

Meanwhile, Sosonkin is slowly recovering from his wounds. He was recently released from a Philadelphia rehabilitation hospital and now lives with his sister's family in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, where the Lubavitch movement is headquartered.

The Israeli-born youth's parents reside in Israel.

Kalmenson, who has five children under the age of 8, takes her brother to his doctors and therapy appointments several times a week, helps him with his thrice-daily exercises and with his eating.

Sosonkin still cannot swallow and must be tube-fed. Because his balance is also still affected by the injury, he cannot be left alone.

"We have our hands full, but we thank God for all his miracles and hope for more," said the 28-year-old Kalmenson.

INVESTIGATION LAUNCHED INTO OXYGEN CUTOFF AT TEL AVIV HOSPITAL By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV (JTA) -- The Israeli Health Ministry has launched an investigation into an incident that took place recently at Tel Aviv's Ichilov Hospital, where an oxygen line running from a central supply point was briefly disconnected, cutting off the delivery of oxygen to the hospital's wards.

According to the daily Ma'ariv, which first reported the incident, patients attached to respirators were without oxygen for at least 12 minutes and that within an hour of the stoppage three elderly and chronically ill patients had died.

Hospital officials countered that the oxygen flow had been halted for only a few seconds.

They said it was impossible to establish a connection between the very brief halt in the oxygen supply and the number of deaths, which they maintained was not above normal.

The break was caused by work on the oxygen pipe network being carried out by an outside contractor.

Hospital management officials said they had not reported the incident to the Ministry of Health because they wanted to gather all relevant information before making a formal report.

OFFICIALS OFFER GRIM ASSESSMENT OF SITUATION IN SELF-RULE ZONES

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Dec. 4 (JTA) -- Senior army and intelligence officials have offered the Israeli Cabinet a grim assessment of Yasser Arafat's leadership in the Gaza Strip.

The Sunday Cabinet session, which focused on security issues in Gaza and the West Bank, took place a day before Israeli and Palestinian negotiators were to begin talks in Cairo aimed at developing a timetable for the next phase of Palestinian self-rule.

As though timed to highlight the difficult security issues facing them, the Cabinet meeting took place the same day that a Palestinian terrorist was foiled in his attempt to launch a suicide bombing at the Erez checkpoint separating Israel from Gaza.

Israeli security officials fired at the terrorist when he refused their orders to stop before reaching the checkpoint. A bomb strapped to his body exploded, but there were no casualties. The bomber himself was lightly wounded.

During the Cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin reportedly complained that Arafat has not met Israel's expectations on security issues and that as a result, forthcoming negotiations with the Palestinians will be complicated.

The next stage of negotiations are scheduled to focus on an Israeli army withdrawal from the West Bank and the concurrent holding of Palestinian elections.

In briefing the Cabinet, the Israel Defense Force chief of intelligence, Maj. Gen. Uri Saguy, warned of a "Lebanonization" of Gaza. He noted that armed militias, including the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas movement and the Palestine Liberation Organization's Fatah Hawks militia, were operating freely without regard for the Palestinian Authority.

Saguy said Arafat has not lived up to earlier pledges to disarm Hamas, nor has he cracked down on Islamic fundamentalists launching terrorist attacks on Israelis.

Low Grades For Finance And Administration

Saguy also gave Arafat low grades for his financial and administrative handling of Gaza, which became autonomous in May.

The head of the General Security Services discussed the problem of preventing terrorist attacks in the West Bank, where Jewish settlements are interspersed among Palestinian population centers more extensively than in Gaza, and as a result will make an army withdrawal in the West Bank a complicated affair.

Some government ministers said after the meeting that Israel should renegotiate the Palestinian self-rule accord in order to avoid any army withdrawal from the West Bank. They said that such a withdrawal would lead to a security nightmare when it came to protecting Jewish settlements.

But the Palestinian Authority has demanded that Israel implement the autonomy accord, including redeployment of troops in the West Bank, as originally stipulated in the self-rule accord.

At its weekly meeting on Saturday, the Palestinian Authority came out strongly against renegotiating the accord.

"Israel must implement everything it has agreed upon with the Palestinians," Yasser Abed-Rabbo, the Palestinian Authority official in charge of information, told reporters.

"Redeployment and holding elections are at the top of the Palestinian agenda," he said.

FRIGID WEATHER CLAIMS A LIFE, FOCUSES ATTENTION ON HOMELESS

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Dec. 4 (JTA) -- With frigid weather here claiming the life of at least one homeless person over the weekend, attention has once again focused on the plight of the homeless in Israel.

As temperatures plunged and snow, hail and rain fell around the country, the body of a homeless man was found in the backyard of an apartment building in Bnei Brak, near Tel Aviv.

Police believed the man, whose name was not released, died of exposure.

Sarah Ashkenazi, the official in charge of homelessness at the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, said an estimated 900 people are homeless in Israel.

She told Army Radio that local authorities are responsible for finding shelter for homeless people in their local communities during the harsh winter months.

She said the homeless population is composed primarily of the mentally ill, but that it also includes immigrants from the former Soviet Union who have encountered difficulties with absorption into Israeli society.

Referring to the mentally ill segment of the homeless population, Ashkenazi said the Basic Law for an individual's right to liberty prevents the government from taking people off the street against their will.

"We have no law to force them to receive treatment," Ashkenazi told Army Radio. "We can't force them off the street." Ashkenazi said her ministry has set up six centers for the homeless in cities throughout the country.

The weekend's unusual winter weather affected communities throughout Israel.

Snow fell Saturday on the Golan Heights, Mount Hermon and in the West Bank town of Hebron, while the rest of the country experienced hail, heavy rain and thunderstorms, which were often accompanied by strong gusts of wind.

Flooding was reported in several places, especially in the Negev and Arava, where several roads were closed.

In Jerusalem, snow fell briefly on Saturday, but did not accumulate. Just the same, Jerusalem's municipal officials warned residents to avoid driving Sunday morning because of subzero temperatures that were expected to freeze over wet roads.

The cold weather even took a toll on some who were not homeless.

A 60-year-old man from Ramla died of suffocation as a result of a leak in a gas heater. And in Jerusalem, four people were injured, two seriously, by fires caused by electric heaters.

In neighboring Jordan, heavy snow was also reported. According to Israel Television, a group of some 50 Israeli tourists was stranded at a hotel near the tourist site of Petra because of snow accumulations that were as high as 3 feet.

FUROR ERUPTS OVER RABBI'S LETTER CLAIMING RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Dec. 4 (JTA) -- Uri Regev, a civil rights activist and Reform rabbi, has come under fire for a letter he wrote a year ago to a Canadian lawyer attesting to instances of alleged religious discrimination against intermarried couples in Israel.

The letter was solicited from Regev to help determine whether a particular family of immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union could be granted refugee status in Canada on grounds of religious discrimination in Israel.

The incident follows headline news last summer that hundreds of Israeli immigrants from the former Soviet Union had been admitted to Canada as refugees based on claims of religious discrimination here.

Canadian government officials have since responded to Israeli diplomatic protests by claiming powerlessness. They say the board governing immigration and refugees is an independent body.

In his letter of November 1993 on behalf of the Grosman family, who had applied for refugee status in Canada, Regev concluded, "The situation of the family in Israel would be truly undesirable and demeaning and would deprive them of basic civil and human rights."

The husband, Yuri Grosman, is Jewish and his wife, Olga, is not.

Regev is the director of the Religious Action Center in Israel, which, among other things, runs advocacy centers throughout the country for new immigrants.

He is also an attorney and key legal combatant, working through the High Court of Justice, against the monopoly of the Orthodox establishment over religious affairs in Israel.

The letter has laid Regev open to charges that he is hurting Israel, Zionism and the Reform movement.

Letter Being Used To Support Other Cases

The furor arose last week after the Israeli daily Ha'aretz obtained a copy of Regev's letter with the names of the individual family deleted. The letter was apparently being used as a form letter by other Israeli immigrants attempting to gain refugee status in Canada.

Regev, who has been aware for several months that the letter was being reissued without his authorization, said he had no idea who made such "unauthorized and improper use" of it. He protested its misuse in a letter to the Grosman's attorney in Canada several months ago and called for its "immediate cessation."

Despite his concern that the letter was being misused, Regev said he stands by the original letter, which was written Nov. 15, 1993, to an Ontario lawyer in response to an inquiry about possible religious discrimination in Israel against the Grosmans and their daughter, Alissa.

In that letter, Regev wrote that "harassment" against mixed marriages, "especially in particularly Jewish neighborhoods, is quite prevalent."

"Beyond the fact of intolerance," he wrote, "those in mixed marriages and their children face 'serious civil rights problems.'"

"The difficulties for the family would follow

them from birth to death," he said. Such difficulties would range from the refusal of the Orthodox "to perform a ritual circumcision on a son," to the inability of the children to marry Jews in Israel, to the impossibility of burial together, "because the cemeteries are run by Orthodox authorities who do not permit burial of a non-Jew next to a Jew and there is no civil burial alternative."

Regev said that in answering other periodic inquiries from research coordinators for the Canadian refugee board, he was careful to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate claims of religious discrimination.

"Several times I was very clear in countering arguments that had no basis in fact," Regev said in an interview in his office last week.

"On the other hand, when asked about issues confronting mixed families, I saw no reason and no way in which I could close my eyes, my ears, my mouth, and refuse, in a professional way, to clarify what the facts were," he said.

Despite Regev's distinctions, he has come under attack from government officials as well as from officials in his own Reform movement.

Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin said in an interview in Ha'aretz that he regretted that Regev had lent his stamp of authority to what he termed "an insane situation. I don't believe there's a person in Israel who deserves to be a refugee."

Dissociating Reform From Regev's Words

Rabbi Richard Hirsch, head of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, the international umbrella of the Reform movement, said Regev's actions were aimed against "Zionism, the state, Judaism and the Reform movement," according to Ha'aretz.

Hirsch took pains to dissociate the Reform movement from Regev's statements.

"There is a whole debate about religion and state in Israel," said Yehiel Leket, acting chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, which is responsible for bringing immigrants to Israel and also helps fund the Religious Action Center.

"Many secular and non-Orthodox groups feel uncomfortable with the status quo, and there is a political struggle to change it," he said, referring to an arrangement which gives the Orthodox establishment exclusive authority over religious matters.

"But it is ridiculous to define someone as a refugee because of this," said Leket, who has protested to Canadian officials the practice of granting refugee status to Israeli immigrants.

Leket has also asked Canadian Jewish leaders to intervene with their government.

Not everyone had harsh words for Regev. One of his defenders is Hebrew University Professor Hillel Shual, chairman of Hemdat, the Council for Freedom of Science, Culture and Religion.

"The facts presented by Rabbi Regev concerning serious deprivation of civil rights to couples of mixed marriages in Israel are all basically correct," he said.

Shual said that people like Regev, who are fighting to end the Orthodox monopoly, are "no less patriotic and Zionist" than those "who pretend serious civil rights problems do not exist."