

**PALESTINIAN OFFICIALS APOLOGIZE
IN WAKE OF POLICE SHOOTING INCIDENT**

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Dec. 18 (JTA) -- Palestinian officials have apologized to Israel for the weekend shooting of an Israeli soldier by a Palestinian police officer in the Gaza Strip.

According to local reports, the Palestinian policeman approached a group of Israeli soldiers Saturday at a roadblock in southern Gaza and began shouting abuse at them. After telling them to leave their post, the policeman opened fire.

An Israeli soldier was wounded in the leg. Other Israeli troops opened fire on the Palestinian, wounding him. Both the soldier and the police officer required hospital treatment.

Israel complained about the incident at a meeting of the joint Israeli-Palestinian security committee on Sunday.

Officials with the Palestinian police later apologized in the name of Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat and said the police officer would be severely punished once he recovered from his wounds.

The incident was not the first clash between Israeli troops and the Palestinian police in Gaza since Palestinian self-rule went into effect in May.

In recent weeks, there have been heated encounters between the two sides, usually over procedures for monitoring traffic through their respective checkpoints.

In an unrelated incident, an Israeli reserve officer was wounded last Friday when a gunman shot at him as he was driving from his home near the West Bank town of Ramallah to Jerusalem.

The Damascus-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which militantly opposes the Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative, claimed responsibility for the shooting.

The incident took place less than a mile from the site where another Israeli reservist, Sgt. Shmuel Meiri, was attacked in his car by a mob on Dec. 14 after he took a wrong turn and ended up in the middle of a Palestinian demonstration in Ramallah.

The Israel Defense Force chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Ehud Barak, announced on Sunday that no disciplinary measures would be taken against Meiri. The soldier was criticized last week by some army and political leaders for not using his weapon to defend himself during the attack. Meiri, who instead asked for mercy from his attackers, later said he was certain he would have been killed had he fired on the mob.

**TEN JEWISH FAMILIES FLEE CHECHNYA
AS DARK WAR CLOUDS THREATEN REGION**

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Dec. 18 (JTA) -- Ten Jewish families have escaped the battle zones of the breakaway Caucasus republic of Chechnya, where the threat of a Russian civil war is looming, according to officials with the Jewish Agency for Israel.

The agency is providing housing and additional aid to the families, totaling 30 individuals, who fled the troubled region for the northern Caucasus cities of Nalchik and Pyatigorsk.

Some 40 Jewish families still remain in Chechnya, according to Baruch Gur, head of the Jewish Agency's unit for Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

The agency is also helping some 50 other Jewish refugees who managed in recent weeks to flee the area torn by fighting between Russian and separatist Chechen forces.

Russian troops and tanks stormed the republic last week, and President Boris Yeltsin has been threatening an all-out war on Chechnya, which declared independence from Russia three years ago.

Amid fears of a violent military confrontation, Jewish leaders here and abroad are worrying about how to protect and evacuate the few remaining Jews in the highly volatile region.

According to Gur, the agency is attempting to provide the refugees with the proper documents, so they can leave on direct flights to Israel.

Several families from Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, were brought by the agency to Israel in recent weeks after they fled to safety in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, Gur said.

About 1,500 Jews previously lived in Chechnya, but most left for Israel during the past five years.

Those still in Chechnya, according to Gur, have decided to remain because of old age, or because they do not want to abandon their property. Gur said that many of them have said they have no interest in leaving and reported last week that they were not in danger.

**MIRRED IN REMARKS ABOUT KING DAVID,
COALITION FACES NO-CONFIDENCE VOTE**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Dec. 18 (JTA) -- The governing coalition of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is bracing itself for a no-confidence motion in the wake of controversial remarks that Foreign Minister Shimon Peres made in the Knesset last week regarding King David.

The motion, which was introduced by furious Orthodox Knesset members, threatened to be particularly awkward for the ruling Labor Party and its coalition ally, the secularist Meretz bloc.

The government has long been courting the fervently Orthodox Shas Party in efforts to get it to rejoin the coalition. Shas' inclusion in the government would give the coalition an outright parliamentary majority as it continues with its attempts to forge a peace with the country's Arab neighbors.

But Shas, which has been fence-sitting for months, was under intense pressure to join with the other Orthodox parties in the no-confidence vote.

Girding up for the vote, which was scheduled to be held this week, Labor and Meretz

officials have summoned home all their Knesset members from overseas trips. They have also appealed to the Arab Israeli members of the Knesset to vote against the no-confidence measure.

At the same time, the chairman of the governing coalition, Labor Knesset member Eli Dayan, who is himself Orthodox, has been trying vigorously to persuade Orthodox Knesset members and their rabbinical mentors to make do with a letter of apology already written by Peres and withdraw the no-confidence motion.

The furor erupted on Dec. 14, when Peres addressed the Knesset during a passionate debate about the peace process.

Condemning Israeli occupation as contrary to the heritage of Judaism, the foreign minister was challenged by a rightist Knesset member with the Biblical fact that King David had conducted wars of occupation.

"Not everything that King David did on the ground or on the rooftops is Jewish in my eyes," Peres shot back.

His reference was to a passage in II Samuel 11, in which King David watched from a rooftop as Bathsheba was bathing.

Smitten with her beauty, David sent her husband, Uriah, off to his death in battle and subsequently married her.

Peres' remark triggered a vociferous and sustained chorus of protest from Orthodox members.

One parliamentarian, Avraham Verdiger of the United Torah Judaism bloc, became so overwrought that he passed out and required medical attention at the Knesset infirmary.

The Orthodox Knesset members later cited Talmudic passages that put David's actions in a much better light than the literal scriptural account would indicate.

They, along with incensed writers in the Orthodox press, accused Peres of gross disrespect for King David.

For his part, Peres sent a letter last Friday to Israel's chief rabbis and other religious leaders in which he disclaimed "any intention of insulting the 'Sweet Psalmist of Israel' " -- the traditional title of King David.

But in a declaration published on Sunday, the Chasidic Rebbe of Gur, Rabbi Pinchas Menachem Alter, rejected Peres' letter as falling far short of a genuine apology.

Alter referred to the foreign minister as "one of those far removed from Torah and mitzvot" and declared that it was his duty to protest loudly against Peres' conduct.

While the government was expected to squeak past this latest test of its strength in the Knesset, the episode was widely seen as dooming any hopes that Labor would be able to woo Shas back into the coalition.

FIVE MONTHS AFTER BUENOS AIRES ATTACK, TERRORISM MEETING SHEDS LITTLE LIGHT

By Grace Donati

BUENOS AIRES, Dec. 18 (JTA) -- Five months after a bomb ripped through the heart of the Jewish community here, Argentine officials still have few clues about who was responsible for the attack.

"The investigation has not reached any

concrete results, I am ashamed to say," Foreign Minister Guido di Tella said last week.

The revelation came during a three-day seminar on international terrorism, which was sponsored by the target of the July 18 attack, the Argentine Jewish Mutual Association, known as AMIA.

Argentine officials, intelligence officers from Israel, the United States and Germany and terrorism experts joined some 500 members of the community at AMIA's new offices in the garment district of Once, home to many of the country's Chasidic Jews.

AMIA's former office building, some five blocks away, was razed the morning of July 18 when a bomb exploded through its half-dozen floors as the 100-year-old social service agency opened its doors to the public.

Some 99 individuals were killed in the bombing, and more than 200 were wounded.

Members of the community who attended the conference learned that the Argentine government has made little progress in its investigations into both the July attack and the March 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy here that killed 30 and injured 250 others.

There are no suspects in the 1992 attack, and only one suspect is currently in jail for this year's terrorist massacre. He is an Argentine citizen of Arab ancestry who allegedly sold the bomb-laden van that was used in the July attack.

'We Want Answers'

"We want to create an awareness in society, so it takes the necessary means to stop a third attack," AMIA spokesman Ariel Sujarchuk said, explaining the reason for the conference. "And we want answers."

While there were few answers regarding the two bombing incidents, the standing-room only audience learned about steps being taken to prevent future attacks and about the roots of fundamentalist terrorism.

In addition to di Tella, Argentine officials who addressed the conference included Hugo Anzorreguy, the director of SIDE, Argentina's equivalent of the FBI, and Interior Minister Carlos Ruckauf, a late replacement for Argentine President Carlos Menem, who was supposed to have addressed the conference.

Menem has been criticized by the Jewish community in the past for not making more progress in the investigations of the two bombings.

Di Tella said that Argentine security agents have increased information-sharing with the intelligence agencies of other countries, particularly Brazil, to prevent further attacks.

He said that government security officials are focusing on the so-called "triangle" where Argentina's northeastern border meets Brazil and Paraguay -- a region where militant Shi'ite Muslim fundamentalists are rumored to have established a base.

Anzorreguy admitted that a lack of funding and resources have hindered the bombing investigations. But he and Ruckauf said the Menem administration is seeking to implement measures that will speed the investigation and facilitate efforts to monitor potential terrorists.

Among those measures is the creation of a witness-protection program.

TRIMMING ITS SAILS, AIPAC CUTS ITS STAFF AND RESTRUCTURES

By Sam Skolnik
Washington Jewish Week

WASHINGTON, Dec. 18 (JTA) -- Carrying the weight of unrestrained growth from the past decade and feeling the sting of a \$1 million drop in fund-raising collections over the last year, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee has laid off 18 employees amid a major restructuring effort.

The move resulted in the recent dismissal of 12 employees from the organization's Capitol Hill headquarters and six others from its satellite offices.

The move also is considered by many close to AIPAC -- Washington's premier pro-Israel lobby -- to be the first real assertion of strength by Neal Sher, the executive director who took over the organization from Tom Dine eight months ago.

As with other pro-Israel advocacy groups, AIPAC has been hard hit by a downturn in collections over the last year.

The uncertain U.S. economy and the ascendant Middle East peace process both helped contribute to declining donations. After more than a dozen years in which AIPAC tripled in size from a small but important lobbying group into a foreign policy behemoth with \$15 million in fund-raising contributions, the time for reckoning had come, say many observers.

A number of departments within AIPAC were hit by the layoffs, including its grass-roots lobbying, political and legislative arms.

But Sher, asked if there were any more layoffs or major restructuring moves pending, said "the answer is no." He also added that pledges for the coming year are up.

Although this month's shakedown hit many AIPAC staffers hard, the consequences for AIPAC on the whole, many said, would not be damaging.

Lobbying Efforts Will Not Be Affected

Staff size, while reduced by an aggregate 14 percent, will remain at roughly 110 people -- more than a dozen positions stronger than it was five years ago. Last year, AIPAC's staff reached its peak, at about 140 employees.

In all probability, AIPAC's raison d'etre -- lobbying Congress on issues of concern to Israel -- will not be adversely affected. Although the legislative staff did lose support personnel, it has gained some stature.

Ester Kurz, a respected strategist, will return from a part-time to a full-time position, joining day-to-day organizer Arne Christenson, who heads the legislative shop.

Sher, well-known to many in Congress from his Nazi-hunting days as head of the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, also said that he personally will be "devoting a considerable amount of effort on Capitol Hill" during the coming term.

As part of the lobby's restructuring, some field activities, such as grass-roots work on state political party platforms and other issues, will be farmed out to regional offices. A few of the nine regional offices will also assume the duties of AIPAC satellite offices. The satellites are being reduced in number from six to four.

The Near East Report, AIPAC's mass-circulation newsletter, will move from a weekly to a biweekly distribution schedule. Officials say NER will now provide more in-depth, analytical articles. The size of the publication, however, is expected to remain the same, four to eight pages.

Perhaps as another sign that direction will not change greatly at AIPAC, no department heads were laid off in the recent shuffle; only mid-and lower-level staffers and clerical support were affected by the downsizing.

Jess Hordes, Washington representative of the Anti-Defamation League, interpreted the layoffs at AIPAC as a "general attempt to refocus on fundamentals."

The economic situation for AIPAC was bolstered recently when Sher convinced Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Congress and chairman of The Seagram Company Ltd., to become a major player at the lobby. Bronfman, one of the Jewish community's largest benefactors, has recently pledged \$130,000 to AIPAC, he said.

GERMANY'S SUPREME COURT OVERTURNS LENIENT SENTENCE FOR HOLOCAUST DENIER
By Gil Sedan

BONN, Dec. 18 (JTA) -- Germany's highest court has overturned a lenient sentence imposed on an extreme right-wing leader charged with denying the Holocaust.

"Closing one's eyes to the historic truth and denying the extermination of millions of Jews in the gas chambers does not deserve a lenient sentence," the Supreme Court said last week as it ordered a new trial for Gunter Deckert, chairman of the right-wing National Democratic Party.

In June, a state court in the southwestern German city of Mannheim found Deckert guilty on charges of inciting racial hatred.

Deckert had served as the translator at a rally in 1991 for Fred Leuchter, an American Holocaust denier. Deckert had said that he supported Leuchter's theories, including statements that the Holocaust never took place.

Publicly expressing Holocaust-denial views is a crime under German law.

Though finding him guilty, the Mannheim court praised the defendant as a "highly intelligent person" of "strong character" and imposed a one-year suspended sentence.

The sentence was sharply criticized both in Germany and abroad as being too lenient.

The Central Council of Jews in Germany welcomed last week's decision, describing it as "an important signal" to those who propagate Holocaust-denial theories.

Meanwhile, the leader of another German right-wing party has decided to resign.

Franz Schonhuber, the 71-year-old chairman of the far-right Republican Party, made the announcement Saturday night at a party rally held near the southwestern German city of Stuttgart.

Schonhuber, a former Waffen SS officer who founded the party in 1983, had earlier this year angered some of his more moderate followers when he attempted to forge an alliance with Gerhard Frey, the leader of the neo-Nazi German People's Union.

(JTA correspondent Miriam Widman in Berlin contributed to this report.)

**BEHIND THE HEADLINES:
AMID SEA OF MUSLIM NEIGHBORS,
TUNISIA'S JEWS OBSERVE TRADITIONS**

By Miriam Widman

JERBA, Tunisia (JTA) -- A late model Volkswagen Golf comes to a halt near a tiny store off one of this island's numerous dirt paths. Out jumps a tall, dark-haired man carrying globs of dough on a tray.

He ducks into the store, which turns out to be the town's kosher bakery. He drops off the dough, saying he will return shortly to pick up his bread for Shabbat.

Welcome to Friday afternoon, Erev Shabbat, in the community of Hara Kebira, a small village on this island off the coast of the North African nation of Tunisia.

Of the village's approximately 1,800 residents, half are Jewish. It is a Jewish community where Orthodox Judaism is almost universally observed, and where some locals refer to their home as the "Jerusalem of Africa."

According to some in the predominantly Muslim nation, the Jews of this ancient village represent the best hope for the future of Tunisian Jewry.

In many ways, Jerba has the feel of a European shtetl -- with a distinctly Sephardic flavor. It actually has two Jewish communities, Hara Kebira (the large village) and Hara Sghira (the small village).

To visitors from the West, Hara Kebira seems very poor. There is not a paved street in town. Goats lie chained up to posts, and ever-present flies flit around pieces of meat at a nearby butcher.

A Long And Proud History

The Jews of Hara Kebira are proud of their history, which, according to legend, stretches back many centuries.

The first Jews are believed to have arrived on the island after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem over 2,500 years ago. A group of Kohanim, or priests, were believed to have arrived in Jerba carrying a door and some stones from the Temple's sanctuary. Upon their arrival, they erected a synagogue, El Ghriba ("the marvelous"), which over the generations has become a site of annual pilgrimage for Jews of North African descent.

The next large influx of Jews came in the wake of the Spanish Inquisition in the late 15th century.

The community grew again during the time Tunisia was a French protectorate from 1881 to 1956, when the country gained its independence.

The community reached its peak in the 1940s, when the Jewish community throughout Tunisia numbered 100,000, or 15 percent of the total population.

But with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jews started to leave. This trend accelerated during the 1967 Six-Day War, when anti-Jewish rioting broke out around the country, and again in the early 1980s, during the Lebanon War.

Tunisia's Jewish community has dwindled to some 2,100 out of a population of about 8.5 million. About 1,200 Jews live in the capital of Tunis.

But many Jews from Tunis believe their community will die out, given the mass exodus of young people over the years to France or Israel.

For many, the future of Tunisian Jewry lies with Jerba. Even the grand rabbi of Tunisia, Haim Madar, comes from Jerba.

"The Jerbans are holding the flame for the community," says Simone Berrebi, a prominent member of the Tunis Jewish community.

While Tunisia as a whole has witnessed a mass exodus of its Jewish community, the Jewish population of Hara Kebira has actually been growing.

A few years ago it had about 700 Jews; now the number is close to 900, due in part to the traditional character of the community, where women stay at home and have many children.

The Jews of Jerba are, as a whole, more religious than the largely assimilated Jews of Tunis, and therefore keep their distance from their counterparts in the capital, even avoiding marriage with them.

A Strong Attachment To Tradition

In the Jerban community of Hara Kebira, a strong attachment to tradition in the face of pressures to assimilate and modernize is a leading factor in its stability and growth.

Its ties to the past have had a strong effect on people like Ezekiel Haddad, who decided to return to the small community after living in Paris. "This is my home and where I have my family," he says.

Many of Jerba's men work in the local jewelry industry, which caters to the thousands of tourists, mainly German, who flock to Jerba's pristine beaches and western-style hotels. Those not involved in jewelry are employed as tailors or in handicrafts.

Given their close links with Jewish tradition, the community here strictly observes Shabbat.

As the sun descends on Friday afternoon, the jewelers close their stores and gather in one of several local synagogues for Shabbat services.

In a kindly gesture, the men make room at the services for a few visiting women from the United States. This is a big concession for the local community, since women simply do not go to services here. Instead, they are at home preparing dinner, which often centers around couscous, a grain prevalent in North African cooking.

Four miles away from Hara Kebira is the smaller Jewish community of Hara Sghira, which has only about 60 members.

The two Jewish communities on the island of Jerba have a relationship which has been described as "competitive rapport."

While the distance separating the two towns is short enough to enable them to foster economic cooperation, it is just far enough to keep traditions separate.

The towns have for a long time maintained two distinct sets of institutions -- separate Jewish schools, mohels, butchers and courts. Marriage between the two groups is frowned upon. But in recent years, mostly because of the small size of Hara Sghira, there has been more cooperation between the communities.

(Miriam Widman, JTA's Berlin-based correspondent, recently visited Tunisia as a guest of TunisUSA, a travel company specializing in Jewish heritage tours to Tunisia.)