

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **The Jewish Agency Assembly opened its annual meeting in Jerusalem.** On the agenda of the five-day conference are the elections of Avraham Burg as chairman of the Agency and Charles "Corky" Goodman of Chicago as chairman of its Board of Governors. Israeli President Ezer Weizman and Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert addressed the opening session.

■ **The U.S. Senate approved a 45-day extension of the Middle East Peace Facilitation Act.** The controversial legislation, which enables the U.S. to continue providing financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority, is due to expire June 30.

■ **One Palestinian student was shot dead and dozens were wounded in a major clash with Israeli soldiers in Nablus.** The violent protest erupted in support of a hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Despite the violence, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres met in Gaza in an effort to advance negotiations. [Page 1]

■ **A terror disaster was narrowly avoided in the Gaza Strip when a suicide bomber blew himself up just after an Israeli army vehicle had passed.** Three Israeli soldiers were hurt. Security sources linked the bombing to a warning issued by Islamic Jihad in the wake of the fatal shooting of one of its ranking commanders.

■ **An Illinois appeals court ruled that the state can not close schools on religious holidays.** The decision declared a state statute that directed schools to close on Good Friday unconstitutional. [Page 3]

■ **Jewish groups called on President Clinton to urge Polish President Lech Walesa to denounce anti-Semitic statements made by his priest.** Clinton is scheduled to meet with Walesa Monday.

■ **Jewish organizations welcomed singer Michael Jackson's decision to record a new version of a song that included anti-Semitic lyrics.** Jackson had apologized for his song, "They Don't Care About Us," which had included the phrases "Jew me" and "kike me."

Violent clashes in West Bank threaten Israeli-PLO accords

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, June 25 (JTA) — With only days left before a July 1 target date for Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to conclude an agreement on the next phase of Palestinian self-rule, violent clashes are threatening to torpedo the process.

But Israeli and Palestinian leaders are persisting in their efforts not to let the violence block their negotiations.

One Palestinian student was shot dead, two others were seriously wounded and dozens more were slightly hurt in a major clash with Israeli soldiers and police in Nablus Sunday.

The violent protest erupted in support of an ongoing hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Similar clashes, though without reported fatalities, broke out in Ramallah and eastern Jerusalem over the weekend.

The soldiers opened fire with rubber bullets and live ammunition when the students, from Nablus' al-Najah University, marched on the town's main prison and refused orders to disperse.

Also Sunday, a suicide bomber blew himself up in the Gaza Strip just after an Israeli army vehicle had passed him. The three soldiers on the vehicle were slightly injured.

Despite the weekend violence, Israel and the Palestinian Authority continued negotiations.

With the prisoners' hunger strike spreading from jail to jail over the past week, the prisoner issue was believed to have topped the agenda of talks Sunday between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in Gaza.

The meeting took place just hours after the violent clashes in Nablus.

The Palestinian Authority is demanding a large-scale release of prisoners in the context of the second-phase agreement now under negotiation.

Peres said after the meeting with Arafat that the Israeli ministerial committee on prisoner releases would convene before the end of the week to discuss the issue. The only specific commitment Peres gave was that 10 women prisoners would be freed shortly.

Thousands still jailed in Israel, West Bank

Under the terms of the Cairo Agreement signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in May 1994, Israel released about 5,000 of the 10,000 prisoners it held at the time.

An estimated 6,000 prisoners remain in jails in Israel and the West Bank. Some 3,000 prisoners belong to the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas movement; about 2,500 belong to Al Fatah, the PLO's mainstream group; and the rest belong to smaller factions.

About 2,000 prisoners are reportedly participating in the hunger strike, which is entering its second week.

On Sunday, a member of the ministerial committee, Police Minister Moshe Shahal, said each prisoner case would be reviewed — with the goal of releasing prisoners — "without blood on their hands" — who were sick, old or had served most of their sentence.

Political observers here predicted that many hundreds of prisoners would be freed if the second phase of the self-rule agreement were concluded.

Negotiators are struggling to reach agreement on this next phase, which is supposed to include a redeployment of Israeli troops in the West Bank, which would be followed by Palestinian elections.

Peres and Arafat shared little information with the media after their meeting Sunday. Peres called the session "positive," and Arafat dubbed it "constructive." Both said some progress had been made, and some issues remained unresolved.

Among the unresolved issues, according to Palestinian sources, is the extent of the proposed Israel Defense Force redeployment out of major Palestinian population centers in the West Bank.

Israel is still proposing an initial pullout from four towns: Nablus, Kalkilya, Jenin and Tulkarm, according to these sources.

The Palestinians, however, are still demanding that Ramallah and

Bethlehem be included. But Israel says its alternative infrastructure of roads is not yet in place around these two key cities, which are located north and south, respectively, of Jerusalem.

Israeli officials say Ramallah and Bethlehem would be part of a "further redeployment," which would take place after the elections, targeted for November.

The Palestinian Authority is demanding that Israel commit to a timetable for such further redeployment.

Israeli sources said Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is likely to meet with Arafat before the July 1 target date in an effort to bridge the gaps enough to enable the signing of an agreement on or about the target date. □

Escalating violence in Lebanon could top Syrian-Israeli agenda

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, June 25 (JTA) — When Israeli and Syrian officials begin their talks in Washington this week, the worsening security situation in southern Lebanon is certain to be on the agenda.

The situation escalated last Friday morning when the fundamentalist Hezbollah terrorist group launched a Katyusha rocket attack on northern Israel.

The attack landed at a Club Med resort in the western Galilee town of Achziv, killing a French cook and wounding eight others — four Spanish tourists and three Israelis, including an 8-year-old boy.

In response, Israeli air force planes bombed suspected positions of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin has made it clear to Syria — via the United States — that there is a limit beyond which the Israel Defense Force would not be able to remain passive if the situation in the north continues to deteriorate. Rabin reportedly believes that the escalation in violence is attributed in part to the Syrians' desire to "heat up" the border in advance of the negotiations.

At the very least, Israeli sources say, Syria could act to prevent some of the Katyusha attacks by the rejectionist Hezbollah, but there is no evidence that Damascus is doing so.

Rabin is also apparently dissatisfied with the level of control that the IDF is exercising over its South Lebanon Army allies.

Last Friday's attack, which included the firing of 13 Katyusha rockets on northern Israel, was trumpeted by Hezbollah as a response to an artillery barrage by the SLA the day before that killed a woman in the southern Lebanon village of Shakra.

Israeli sources said the SLA's barrage was not coordinated with Israel, or even with the senior command of the SLA itself. Rabin was quoted as saying the SLA was "getting Israel involved with Lebanon villages — and the Hezbollah hits back with rockets."

As a result, Rabin, who also serves as Israel's defense minister, has ordered the IDF to take steps to attach its own liaison personnel to all artillery positions of the SLA.

Parallel to this move on the ground, the prime minister has instructed the IDF chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, to take up the worsening situation on the Lebanese border with his Syrian counterpart, Gen. Hikmat Shihabi, when the two begin a round of meetings Tuesday in Washington.

The two commanders' three days of talks mark a long-awaited resumption of high-level Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

Shahak's predecessor, Ehud Barak, met with Shihabi in December for a truncated round of unsuccessful

talks. The process has been in virtual abeyance since then. Although the new talks are intended to focus primarily on possible security arrangements for the Golan Heights as part of a peace deal with Syria, the situation in Lebanon has taken on increasing urgency in recent days.

In Jerusalem, meanwhile, members of the Likud opposition have bitterly criticized the government for what they have labeled "weakness" in the face of deliberate provocation by Syria and its dupe, Hezbollah.

A senior Likud Knesset member, Eliahu Ben-Elissar, demanded Sunday that the government order Shahak to confine his talks with Shihabi to the Lebanese border situation and to insist that Syria take action against Hezbollah before entering into negotiations regarding security arrangements on the Golan.

On a more basic level, the Likud is accusing the Rabin government of illegitimately involving the IDF, through Shahak, in its policy-making on the controversial matter of the Golan. The Likud argues that as long as the question of the final border itself has not been resolved, Shahak cannot conduct meaningful talks on "security arrangements."

As a result, the opposition contends, Shahak has been brought into the process in order to smooth the government's way toward ceding the whole of the Golan to Syria.

Briefings about 'no major breakthroughs'

Meanwhile, political commentators both in Jerusalem and in Damascus were briefed over the weekend by their respective governments not to expect a major breakthrough in this week's round of talks.

In Washington, Israel's ambassador to the United States, Itamar Rabinovich, said even though "this is an important meeting, it should not be billed beyond the proper proportions. There cannot be an agreement reached on security arrangements within these three days."

The Washington talks are scheduled to be followed by further rounds, involving lower-ranking officers, in July.

Relatedly, the Syrian vice president, Abdel Halim Khaddam, visiting Iran this weekend, reportedly declined his Iranian hosts' urgings that Syria refuse to sign a peace treaty with Israel.

The fact that reports to this effect emanated from Damascus gave Israeli officials some guarded optimism.

Khaddam was quoted as saying that Syria demands a full Israeli withdrawal to the border of June 4, 1967, when Israel captured the Golan Heights during the 1967 Six-Day War.

"Neither side can attain security at the expense of the other," said the Syrian official. □

Israel continues search for infiltrator from Jordan

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, June 25 (JTA) — Israeli soldiers continued their search Sunday in the Jordan Valley for a suspected terrorist infiltrator from Jordan who was believed to have escaped in an armed clash the day before.

A group of infiltrators, believed to number three men, crossed near the settlement of Argaman. One was quickly captured by an Israel Defense Force patrol. A second was tracked down and shot dead two hours later in a brief firefight.

Military sources said both the dead man and the captured man were former residents of the West Bank who had crossed to Jordan, obtained weapons there and crossed back, intent on carrying out an armed attack on a Jewish target as an expression of their opposition to the peace process. □

Illinois court: School closings for religious holidays not legal

By Jennifer Batog

WASHINGTON, June 25 (JTA) — In a precedent-setting case, an Illinois appeals court has ruled that the state cannot close schools on religious holidays.

In a 2-1 decision, a panel of 7th District Court of Appeals judges declared a state statute that directed schools to close on Good Friday unconstitutional.

“The First Amendment does not allow a state to make it easier for adherents of one faith to practice their religion than for adherents of another faith to practice their religion unless there is a secular justification for the difference in treatment,” according to the ruling, which was issued June 19.

Schools can continue to voluntarily close for religious holidays if a significant number of students and teachers will be absent.

Some major metropolitan areas, such as New York and Philadelphia, close for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, for this reason.

The case, *Metzl vs. Leininger*, challenged a 1941 state ordinance mandating that schools close on Good Friday. Until 1989, the entire state shut down.

Chicago schoolteacher Andrea Metzl sued the state through school Superintendent Robert Leininger, saying the statute was unconstitutional because one religion's holiday was marked by a day off.

The school tried to show a secular reason for the holiday, but the court rejected the argument.

Jewish groups and legal observers praised the decision banning the state from closing schools as a victory for church-state separation. They also said it set several precedents.

“The state of Illinois is well-served by the action of the Court of Appeals,” said David Kahn, president of the American Jewish Congress, which assisted Metzl in finding an attorney in her case.

“We are encouraged by the court's strong adherence to the First Amendment principles that protect us all,” Kahn said in a statement.

In deciding to eliminate Illinois' Good Friday holiday, the court has said “even if the [religious] preference is mild, it is still illegal and unconstitutional,” said Marc Stern, co-director of legal affairs at AJCongress.

By requiring the state to prove a secular reason for the school holiday, the court shifted the burden of proof from the plaintiff to the government, he said.

When a state enacts a law that prefers one religion over another, “they need justification,” Stern said, adding, “The burden is on the state to prove a secular reason” for the law.

In many states, individual schools can choose to close on religious holidays if a significant number of students and teachers would be absent.

Such a decision does not violate church-state separation, said Sam Rabinove, the American Jewish Committee's legal director.

The schools must make up the missed days, he added.

“It's a matter of practicality, not law,” Rabinove said.

The court's decision conflicted with an earlier ruling in a Hawaii case. In that case, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals allowed the Good Friday statute.

A number of states have Good Friday measures, Stern said.

Although there are no other cases challenging these measures, this month's decision in Illinois will “undoubtedly stir up further ones,” he said. □

Austria, Germany cooperate to quell anti-Semitic bombings

By Marta S. Halpert

VIENNA, June 25 (JTA) — A new wave of letter bombs has terrorized Austrians and Germans, baffling police officials in both nations.

Authorities believe that the devastating acts are the work of neo-Nazis and other extremists who are specifically motivated by anti-Semitism.

To better investigate this line of speculation, cooperation between German and Austrian investigative forces has intensified, though separate efforts also exist.

German investigators have already looked at possible links between Palestinian splinter groups and rightist organizations in Austria and Germany, the German weekly *Welt am Sonntag* reported Sunday.

The new twist in the police investigation, the paper said, is that authorities believe that the latest letter bombs were not motivated by a general animosity toward aliens, but by a specific animosity toward people who supported Jewish causes. However, people who do not support rightist ideology are being targeted as well.

In Germany, a letter bomb recently exploded at the city hall in the northern city of Lubeck. Officials think that the bomb may have been connected to last year's arson attempt at the local synagogue.

The bomb had been addressed to the city's deputy mayor, Dieter Szameit, who had called for stern action against neo-Nazi groups after the March 1994 Lubeck synagogue firebombing, the first such attack on a Jewish house of worship in Germany since the Third Reich.

The letter bomb was opened by party official Thomas Roter because Szameit was away on vacation. Roter suffered severe wounds to his hands.

The Lubeck synagogue was also the target of a failed arson attempt in May.

Two Austrian extremist organizations, the Bavarian Liberation Army and the Salzburg Veterans, have claimed responsibility for a series of 18 letter-bomb attacks in the past 17 months.

Vienna native Arabella Kiesbauer, who works in television, received a letter bomb from Austria addressed to her office at the private television station PRO 7 in Munich. The bomb was camouflaged as a fan letter to Kiesbauer, whose father is from Ghana and whose mother is from Germany. It was opened by a secretary, whose face was injured slightly.

Ten letter bombs sent in three days

Austria has suffered an increase in bombings since December 1993. Within three days, 10 letter bombs were sent to various politicians and clergymen, all of whom supported the integration of foreigners into the country's general population.

One such letter reached Vienna's former mayor, Helmut Zilk, whose left hand was torn to pieces.

In February of this year, four Gypsies were killed near Austria's border with Hungary when a bomb exploded in their hands. They unsuccessfully tried to deactivate the bomb, which was deposited next to a sign stating, “Go back to India!”

In Linz, Austria, the Hungarian-born 27-year-old Eva Kulmer lost three fingers of her left hand when she opened her mail in the office. Her company, Intercontact, arranges friendships and marriages between men from Austria and women from Asia.

The right-wing terrorists have said they do not want “the Austrian male race to mingle with Asians.” □

(JTA correspondent Gil Sedan in Bonn contributed to this report.)

Seeking safety on Israeli roads, Conservatives offer new prayer

By Uriel Masad

TEL AVIV, June 25 (JTA) — “Our God and God of our ancestors ... Help me to drive with care, to keep a proper distance ... to yield the right of way; with awareness, to stop in time.”

This prayer is part of an effort by the Masorti, or Conservative, movement in Israel to compile a new prayer book that will better reflect the realities of daily life in Israel.

And when it comes to life — and death — on Israeli roads, those realities can be grim.

According to figures recently released by the Central Bureau of Statistics, someone is injured in a traffic accident in Israel every 14.5 minutes.

The bureau also provided some additional, sobering statistics: Every two hours, a pedestrian is hit by a car; every two hours, a child is hurt in a traffic accident; every 16 hours, a person dies in a traffic accident.

Over longer periods of time, these statistics create a particularly troubling picture.

The death toll on Israeli roads nearly equals the number of dead from all of Israel's wars: more than 18,000.

“Most of us go out on the road in cars, and the roads in Israel are dangerous,” said Conservative Rabbi Michael Graetz, who composed the driver's prayer.

Graetz said he did not see his new prayer as a replacement for the traditional “Prayer for the Road,” but rather as a relevant addition.

Israel places human life above all else, and goes into mourning over every victim of terrorist attacks and military conflicts. But the rising death toll caused by traffic accidents seems to be accepted as a fact of life.

It is true that every year or so, a new traffic safety campaign is launched with big fanfare. Nevertheless, the number of road accidents keeps increasing, and with it, the number of dead, maimed and injured.

Theories about Israel's driving statistics

Explanations for this tragic situation vary, yet there seems to be a consensus that the growing number of cars and the dismal conditions of most Israeli roads are the leading causes of traffic accidents.

Experts speak about the suicidal risk-taking tendencies of many Israeli drivers, a situation the experts blame on a number of disparate factors, including the effects of Holocaust memories, wars and terrorist attacks.

A number of rabbis have even gone so far as to suggest that the rising toll of road accidents is due to the lack of proper religious observances among secular Israelis.

Past safety campaigns have stationed badly wrecked cars alongside roads as a warning to drivers. But it did not work.

“Singing for Life,” a national safety campaign, yielded similarly disappointing results.

Recently the police tried a new measure: the use of speed traps. The traps deterred few Israelis from speeding, and the approach failed to lessen accident statistics.

Another widely publicized recent measure called on back seat passengers to fasten their safety belts. Despite this measure, one commonly sees passengers, as well as drivers, riding along with unbuckled seat belts.

Legislative attempts aimed at improving road safety have fared equally poorly. A recent bill calling for a national campaign against road accidents did not pass its first legislative hurdle in the Knesset.

The bill, with support that crossed party lines, was signed by 89 Knesset members. Yet despite its parliamen-

tary popularity, the bill was strongly opposed by the Finance Ministry, by non-governmental experts and by a ministerial committee on legislation.

The bill called for a beefing up of the national traffic police force, periodic tests for advanced drivers and expanding the responsibilities of the Transportation Ministry's Road Safety Administration.

Finance Ministry officials, explaining their opposition, said enacting the measures would cost Israeli taxpayers \$400 million annually.

Knesset member Tzachi Hanegbi said during debate over the bill, “This was supposed to be a day of celebration, a day of unity, in which the entire Knesset stands together to save the life of one Israeli citizen. The war on road accidents is not a political issue.”

Labor Knesset member Raanan Cohen, chairman of a group opposing the bill, countered: “Human life is the supreme value for all of us. And yet, the bill proposed is only increasing the bureaucracy and offers another white elephant that will serve as a stage for personal struggles, and will not help in the war against road accidents.”

In the end, a compromise was reached under which parts of the bill — such as a requirement calling for young drivers to be accompanied by more experienced motorists — would be passed in the near future.

The more controversial parts of the bill, particularly those that require considerable government funding, will be put before the Knesset economics committee with the recommendation that some compromise be found.

B. Michael, a well-known columnist and political satirist who often wields his pen against the Road Safety Administration, opined in a recent article in the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot that most remedies proposed by Israeli authorities are nothing more than “voodoo.”

Michael said the Israeli police force is already overworked and should not have to ensure road safety.

Instead, he suggested, the task should be assigned to three authorities: the Ministry of Construction, which will have the responsibility for improving road and safety conditions; the Ministry of Transportation, which should establish different curricula for the education of drivers; and the Ministry of Education, which would instill even in young schoolchildren an awareness of road safety.

Michael concluded that even with the implementation of these measures, it would take many years before any positive results would begin to appear.

Until then, Israelis may do well to heed the words of the new Conservative prayer:

“Give me the courage to control my impulses of jealousy, competition, anger and greed. Let there be no accident because of me, and let me not encounter disaster.” □

AMEX available in Israel under franchise agreement

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, June 25 (JTA) — American Express is now available in Israel under a franchise deal that has been signed with Bank Hapoalim.

It is believed to be the company's first such franchise deal outside the United States. The bank said in a statement last week that cardholders would be able to draw on Israeli currency worldwide. In addition, a billing and support system has been established locally.

In most countries, the U.S.-based American Express Co. issues the cards. The Israeli franchise will be a test case for similar deals in other countries, American Express officials said.

Bank Hapoalim is Israel's largest bank, with almost \$40 billion in assets. □