

NEWS AT A GLANCE

- Israeli and Syrian negotiators resumed their peace negotiations at a site in eastern Maryland, with American officials serving as mediators. The secluded Wye Plantation was chosen for the talks to provide a tranquil setting far from the reach of reporters. [Page 2]
- Israeli troops withdrew from Ramallah a day ahead of schedule. Palestinians from the West Bank town of 30,000 residents threw rocks and bottles as Israeli forces drove away. [Page 4]
- A federal judge in New York reportedly demanded that Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat file a deposition in a case linked to the 1985 hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship. Without the deposition, the PLO could be held liable in the case brought by a New Jersey travel agency.
- Turkey turned to Israel for guidance on how to form a national unity government. The request came as Turkey's two leading secular parties are attempting to form a governing coalition after placing behind a pro-Islamic party in the country's parliamentary elections. [Page 3]
- A 72-year-old Palestinian activist challenging Palestine Liberation Organization head Yasser Arafat for the presidency of the Palestinian Council announced that if elected, she would cancel the agreements reached with Israel. [Page 4]
- The president of the International Committee of the Red Cross said he would like to find a way to bring Israel's Magen David Adom into the worldwide organization. [Page 4]
- Most Israeli government ministers will reportedly no longer have bodyguards due to a security service assessment that no attacks on government members were imminent. Bodyguards will continue to be assigned to the prime minister, foreign minister and several other top officials.
- Israel's 1996 budget was engulfed in debate, with the opposition Likud Party refusing to end the marathon discussions.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**'Green Line' still in place, but everything else has shifted***By Gil Sedan*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — For Israelis living along the Green Line, the geography has not changed, but political reality has.

In recent weeks, Israeli troops withdrew from several West Bank towns, leaving these Arab population centers under the control of the Palestinian Authority.

This means that Israel's security grip on these Palestinian towns has loosened considerably.

It is therefore no surprise that Jewish residents of neighboring settlements and towns are nervous.

As long as these West Bank towns were in Israeli hands, it seemed as if the Arab neighbors were far away, a remote entity with which Israeli security forces could deal.

But now that the Palestinians have taken control, some feel that the towns and their Arab residents have moved dangerously closer.

"I have 50,000 residents in the Gilo neighborhood," Shmuel Meir, deputy mayor of Jerusalem, said in voicing a general concern.

Gilo, a neighborhood in southern Jerusalem, is situated close to such Palestinian-controlled areas as Beit Jala and Bethlehem, across the Green Line.

Prior to the 1967 Six-Day War, the Green Line marked the border between Israel and Jordan. Now it separates the West Bank from Israel.

"I would like to know what's going to happen to them," Meir said of Gilo's residents. "Do I need to put more guards in the schools? Do I have to open emergency centers?"

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert chose his words more carefully, but seemed just as concerned.

"Undoubtedly, the new arrangements turn Jerusalem into a corner city, in the same sense as it had been until '67," he said, referring to Jerusalem's position adjoining the West Bank.

In Gilo, residents are fearfully confronting the new facts on the ground.

In the past, they knew that Israeli soldiers and border police were patrolling the streets of Bethlehem and Beit Jala.

But now, people are wondering how long it will take before a Palestinian sniper takes a position atop a hill in Beit Jala and chooses living targets in the adjacent Jewish neighborhood.

Changes on the ground

Their fears are not merely a case of mass hysteria.

There have been real changes on the ground — and with them, real dangers. Israeli residents along the Green Line are acutely aware that in the event any hostilities take place, the Israeli military's hands are tied.

Theoretically, under the terms of Israel's agreements with the Palestinians, Israeli security forces can chase Palestinian perpetrators into areas within the autonomy. But in practice, such a scenario is unlikely.

As a general rule, the army wants to stay out of areas it has evacuated — including Jenin, Tulkarm, Nablus, Kalkilya and Bethlehem. The sixth and final withdrawal for the year occurred Wednesday from Ramallah.

For the time being, at least, the main problems confronting Israelis from over the Green Line are criminal acts, not terrorism.

The Islamic fundamentalist movements, engaged in intensive negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization about the upcoming Palestinian elections in late January, have taken time out from their terrorist activities.

But criminal acts affecting Israeli property have been running high. Since Israeli troops withdrew from Jenin a month ago, some 90 cars owned by Israelis were stolen and taken there.

According to recent statistics, one car is stolen in Israel every 10 minutes.

Not all of them are taken from Israelis living along the Green Line, of course, but this is where the problem is centered. Thieves drive the cars

across the Green Line into the West Bank, where the cars are professionally dismantled and their parts sold on the local market for a good profit.

And cars are not the only items being looted.

Everything that can be stolen from Israeli homes along the new front, from chickens to television sets, finds its way to the other side of the Green Line.

In a recent television interview, a resident of the Alfei Menashe settlement, located just more than a mile inside the West Bank from the Green Line, recalled how she had seen a Palestinian youth coming out of her house with a television set.

As she yelled at him to return the television, the boy teased her: "Come and get me. Why don't you come and get me?" and disappeared toward a neighboring Arab village.

This new source of tension along the Green Line does as much damage to the Palestinians as to their Israeli neighbors — if not more.

More and more Israeli farmers are using Thai farm laborers to replace Palestinians.

And Israeli shoppers are wary of crossing the Green Line to visit markets in Palestinian towns.

Palestinian merchants in the town of Kalkilya, located a short distance east of the Israeli town of Kfar Sava, went out of their way last week to prove that the hesitancy on the part of Israelis to come visit — and shop — was groundless.

They invited journalists to visit the "liberated" town to prove that Israelis could move freely there.

Their actions had good reason. If Israelis come to shop from neighboring Kfar Sava — as they often did before the Palestinian uprising — there would be an economic boom.

In contrast, the absence of Israelis means continuing hard economic times.

To help ensure security for Jews living on the West Bank, a network of new bypass roads was completed hastily in recent weeks.

'No insurance policies'

But Israeli cars traveling the new road from Jerusalem to Hebron, bypassing Bethlehem, were stoned in recent days — a sharp reminder of the Palestinian stone-throwing from the days of the Palestinian uprising.

"The bypasses will cut down potential confrontation," said Zvi Katzover, mayor of Kiryat Arba, located near Hebron.

"But they are no insurance policies. The roads are not fenced, and they are also open for the use of the Palestinian population."

Reflecting the fear of Jews living or traveling in the West Bank, Pinchas Wallerstein, mayor of the regional council of Matte Binyamin, said he was considering purchasing a helicopter to evacuate Israeli victims of terrorist attacks.

This, he said, would be better than sending ambulances, which would have to cross Palestinian checkpoints as they rush victims to the hospital.

But are the prospects for Israeli-West Bank relations really so gloomy?

With public attention so preoccupied with the new realities along the Green Line, Gaza City has long been forgotten.

The city that used to be — and may still be — the heart of Palestinian terrorism is surprisingly quiet.

True, it is easier to patrol the line between the Gaza Strip and Israel than the Jewish state's border with the West Bank, which can be crossed at hundreds of points.

But a strong case can be made, using Gaza as an

example, that security arrangements, albeit complicated and not foolproof, can be effective.

More than a few would argue that if the price of normalization with the Palestinians is more car thefts and less terrorism, it may not be such a bad deal after all. □

Israel, Syria return to table far from reach of reporters

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli and Syrian negotiators have resumed their peace negotiations, with American officials mediating the process.

The two sides are meeting at the secluded Wye Plantation in eastern Maryland, which is operated by the Aspen Institute and was chosen to provide a tranquil setting far from the reach of reporters.

Diplomatic sources in Washington were quoted as saying that the Syrians preferred to have an American mediator in the room at all times during the talks.

The sources said the Syrians rejected the idea of drawing up a declaration of principles, as Israel and the Palestinians did in 1993, which served as the framework for their historic agreement.

At the same time, the Syrian delegation was said to be coming to the talks with a full mandate from Syrian President Hafez Assad to negotiate and to be flexible about Israeli proposals. Among the ideas Israel brought with it to the talks were economic development projects, addressing such issues as water resources.

Regarding the highly contentious issue of the scope of a potential Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, Israel's deputy foreign minister said Wednesday that Israel would not agree to a key Syrian demand that it withdraw to the June 4, 1967, border that was in effect before Israel took control of the Golan in the Six-Day War.

"That is not an internationally recognized border," Deputy Foreign Minister Eli Dayan told Israel Radio. "In the peace between Israel and Egypt, we based negotiations on the internationally recognized border. I'm not saying that Sinai is the same as the Golan, but there has to be some basis for talks."

Israel and Syria last held talks in June, when Syria broke off the negotiations because of an Israeli demand for early-warning ground stations on the Golan if its troops withdrew from the region under the terms of a peace deal.

Under a new approach being implemented this week, the two sides agreed to address a number of issues at the same time to prevent the negotiations from becoming deadlocked over any one particular issue. □

Court bars force in interrogation

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's High Court of Justice has temporarily barred agents with the country's domestic security service from using physical force when interrogating a Palestinian suspect.

The temporary injunction was issued by the court in response to a petition submitted by Abed Al-Balbisi, a resident of the Gaza Strip who is a suspected activist with the fundamentalist Islamic Jihad movement.

The court ordered the state representative to explain within seven days why using physical force against Al-Balbisi was necessary.

The Israeli government previously gave the security service special permission to use moderate physical force when interrogating suspected Islamic militants. The interrogation methods were justified as a necessary part of Israel's ongoing battle against terrorists. □

Argentine officials give up on probe of embassy attack*By Sergio Kiernan*

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Israeli diplomatic officials will do “their utmost” to prevent the Argentine Supreme Court from closing its investigation of the March 17, 1992, bombing that destroyed the Israeli Embassy here, according to highly placed diplomatic sources.

Twenty-nine people were killed and more than 100 were injured in the embassy blast.

After more than three years of fruitless inquiries, the Supreme Court justice in charge of the case, Ricardo Levene, resigned in mid-November from the court, which took over the investigation.

Last week, the court announced that “unless the parties involved or the attorney general of Argentina come up with new information,” the investigation will be closed in March.

Although the Israeli Embassy did not comment on the decision, diplomatic sources said Jerusalem found the court’s decision to close the case “preposterous” and that it would “do everything to keep the case open.”

Israel recently criticized Argentina for the lack of results in the investigation.

In November, Israeli Ambassador Itzhak Aviran said the Argentine Supreme Court “couldn’t handle a case like this.”

Jewish officials here and abroad have also been critical of the investigation of the July 18, 1994, bombing that destroyed the headquarters of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association, or AMIA, leaving 86 dead and more than 300 wounded.

This week, the official in charge of that investigation, Judge Juan Jose Galeano, asked for “more legal resources” to solve the case.

In a long resolution ordering the prosecution of 12 former and active military personnel on charges of selling illegal weapons and explosives, Galeano asked to have a witness-protection program and requested the use of “covert agents to infiltrate terrorist groups.”

Earlier this month, Argentine police arrested 15 people, including at least eight members of the army, in an attempt to establish the source of the explosives used in the AMIA bombing.

Under Argentine law, a judge can offer little protection to a key witness, prosecutors cannot make deals with alleged criminals and it is illegal to use covert agents as infiltrators.

This week’s request by Galeano was considered “highly unusual” by judicial sources, who saw it as “a sign of frustration.” After 17 months, Galeano’s investigating team has been unable to solve the AMIA case. □

French court agrees to consider war crimes charges facing Papon*By Lee Yanowitch*

PARIS (JTA) — A French court is set to hear arguments in March on whether former Cabinet minister Maurice Papon will stand trial for crimes against humanity.

Papon, 84, is accused of sending nearly 1,700 Jews to Nazi concentration camps.

The court, in the southwestern city of Bordeaux, where Papon was a senior official for the Vichy collaborationist regime during World War II, will hear a French state prosecutor’s report requesting that Papon face trial.

The debate, which will include defense motions, is scheduled for March 6-8. The court is expected to make a decision a few weeks later.

Papon stands accused of signing orders to arrest

and deport 1,690 Jews — 223 of them children — from 1942 to 1944. Most of the deportees never returned from the Nazi death camps.

Papon has denied the charges against him, saying that he used his position in the Resistance to save Jews. Papon reportedly joined the Resistance movement near the end of 1943.

After the liberation, he went on to an illustrious postwar career, serving as police chief of Paris between 1958 and 1967, then as budget minister in the French Cabinet during the 1970s.

Jewish groups, lawyers and former Resistance members have long felt that successive French governments were obstructing the judicial process, hoping that Papon would die before a trial took place that would recall a period many French people would rather forget.

Relatives of the deportees accuse Papon of organizing 10 convoys that took Jews to the death camps.

But the prosecutor, relying on documents bearing Papon’s signature, said in his report that Papon had authorized only four of the convoys and that he was apparently unaware of the deportees’ fate.

The announcement of a date for the court hearing gave relatives of the victims a glimmer of hope that Papon might finally be brought to trial.

“This request fulfills a wish of the civil plaintiffs and constitutes a decisive turning point in a case which has lasted more than 13 years,” Arno Klarsfeld, a lawyer in the case who is the son of famed Nazi hunters Serge and Beate Klarsfeld, said in an interview.

Papon was first sued in 1981 for crimes against humanity. He was charged again in 1983 and 1984, but the charges were thrown out on technicalities.

If he goes to trial, Papon will be the second French citizen to face charges of committing crimes against humanity.

The first was Paul Touvier, intelligence chief of the Lyon militia, who was convicted last year and jailed for life after more than 40 years on the run. □

Turkish officials turn to Israel for advice on unity government

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In the aftermath of Turkey’s parliamentary elections, some Turkish officials have turned to Israel for advice on how to form a coalition government.

The officials asked Israel for the 1984 understanding reached between Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir that formed the basis of the national unity government between Labor and Likud.

The request came from Turkey’s two leading secular parties — the True Path and Motherland parties — which are attempting to form a governing coalition after placing second and third behind a pro-Islamic party in the country’s parliamentary elections Sunday.

Although the religious-based Welfare Party won the elections, the True Path and Motherland parties announced Tuesday that they would attempt to create a coalition in order to preserve the secular character of Turkey’s government.

Within 24 hours, however, a top official from True Path rejected a leftist party chosen by the Motherland Party to serve as a third coalition partner, leaving it unclear whether a secularist coalition could indeed be formed.

Also Wednesday, Prime Minister Shimon Peres voiced concern about the electoral success of Turkey’s Welfare Party. “There is no doubt we are following with concern the rise of the fundamentalist party in Turkey,” Peres told Israel Radio. “At the same time, we hope Turkey remains a secular state,” he said. □

One day ahead of schedule, IDF withdraws from Ramallah

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli army withdrew Wednesday from the West Bank town of Ramallah as Palestinians cheered, waved flags and hurled stones at the departing troops.

The pullout was carried out a day ahead of schedule and less than a month before the Palestinian elections, scheduled for Jan. 20.

The withdrawal from the town of 30,000 took place in the afternoon, when six Israeli jeeps drove away from the police station in the center of town.

Thousands of Palestinians converged on the site, waving Palestinian flags and chanting, "Soldiers, go away."

Dozens of boys ran after the jeeps, throwing stones.

The withdrawal from Ramallah completed a two-month process in which Israel — fulfilling the terms of an accord signed September in Washington for extending West Bank autonomy — handed over six towns and more than 400 Arab villages in the area to Palestinian control.

Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat told reporters in the Gaza Strip that he hoped to make Ramallah, some seven miles north of Jerusalem, the new center of the Palestinian Authority's activities.

Jewish settlers living nearby expressed concern about their future safety, despite a bypass road completed earlier this week that was built for their security needs.

Under the Israeli-PLO accords, the 144 Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza will remain in place during the five-year interim-phase agreement that ends in May 1999.

The future of the settlements, as well as the highly sensitive issue of Jerusalem, is to be discussed in the final-status negotiations, slated to begin in the spring.

An adviser to Arafat said that the rock-throwing during the Ramallah redeployment was not an indication of the kind of regard the Palestinians held for the peace process.

"People felt much pain" during the 28-year period of Israeli rule over the West Bank, Dr. Ahmed Tibi told Israel Radio.

He added, "But you must also remember that during the redeployment from Jenin and Bethlehem, people gave the [Israeli] troops flowers.

"Those are the kinds of scenes I like to remember, from Jenin and Bethlehem." □

Sole challenger to Arafat says she would nix accords

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The sole person challenging Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat for the leadership of the Palestinian Council has announced that if elected, she would cancel all the agreements reached with Israel.

Samiha Khalil, a 72-year-old Palestinian activist who will be going head-to-head with Arafat in the January elections, said the accords with Israel did not come close to achieving Palestinian national aspirations.

She further criticized the agreements, saying that they enabled Israel to have continued overall control of Palestinian residents in the territories.

In a separate development, Palestinian security forces have arrested an editor at the eastern Jerusalem paper Al-Quds for not printing a report about Arafat on the front page, officials said Wednesday.

News reports said Maher Al-Alami was summoned to the West Bank Jericho enclave by security officials, but had not returned to Jerusalem.

Palestinian officials confirmed that he had been arrested, but gave no further details.

Officials from Arafat's office had reportedly called Al-Alami earlier this week and asked him to publish on the newspaper's front page a story about a meeting between Arafat and the Greek Orthodox patriarch.

Instead, the story reportedly appeared on an inside page because the front page was already filled with stories about Arafat. □

International Red Cross head wants to include Israeli group

By Tamar Levy

GENEVA (JTA) — The president of the International Committee of the Red Cross has indicated that he wants to welcome Israel's Magen David Adom into the worldwide organization.

Magen David Adom, or Red Star of David, the Israeli version of the international organization, has fought for years to be recognized by the worldwide movement.

ICRC President Cornelio Sommaruga said in an interview here that he is personally committed to Israel and that he would like to "bring the disputed issue to a satisfactory solution."

Earlier this month, a worldwide conference here of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement brought together its components: the League of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; the individual national Red Cross or Red Crescent societies; and the ICRC, a private operation that is considered the most influential component of the movement.

In 1986, the International Red Cross Movement and the League of the Red Cross Societies both changed their names to incorporate the red crescent to accommodate Muslim nations.

The issue of admitting Magen David Adom is a political one, Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress, said in a telephone interview last week in New York.

Some chapters "can't agree to admit Israel," he said.

The WJC was represented at the conference by the chairman of its Geneva-based U.N. Watch project, Ambassador Morris Abram.

Abram has proposed three alternative solutions to the ICRC:

- Include Magen David Adom on an equal footing with the other symbols;
- Return to the pre-1986 condition, with the red cross serving as the universally recognized symbol; or
- Adopt a neutral, nonreligious-based universal symbol.

Advocates for the movement have pointed out that the original red cross symbol did not have a religious connotation but represented the locale of its founding, Switzerland, whose flag — a red cross on a white field — was reversed.

In 1986, with the inclusion of the red crescent to symbolize Islam, a religious connotation became explicit, according to the World Jewish Congress.

Apparently, a special committee has been established to bring up new proposals during the next two years.

But Sommaruga is now seeking a way within the current structure to allow for the admission of Magen David Adom, Steinberg said. □

(JTA staff writer Alissa Kaplan in New York contributed to this report.)