

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The Jewish Agency for Israel air lifted a group of Chechen Jews to Israel. The 31 refugees arrived as the Russian-Chechen war escalated. [Page 3]

■ Palestinian gunmen shot and killed two Israelis in Hebron. The incident came as Palestinian police arrested three people in connection with the gunshot wounding of an Israeli in the West Bank city of Bethlehem a day earlier. [Page 4]

■ U.S. Vice President Al Gore reaffirmed American support for peace between Israel and Syria, telling Israel that "the United States will stand by you." Gore's remarks came as he held talks with Israeli leaders in Jerusalem on the second leg of a Middle East tour. [Page 2]

■ Israeli President Ezer Weizman's visit to Germany broke a deadlock over financing \$137.2 million in annual pensions for Jews from Eastern Europe. [Page 3]

■ Yasser Arafat pledged to two U.S. senators that the Palestine Liberation Organization would amend its covenant within 60 days of Palestinian elections. [Page 2]

■ U.S. assistance to the Palestinian Authority was not diverted to any illegal projects, according to a report by the General Accounting Office. Concerns arose after letters were found that the Palestine Liberation Organization claimed to divert \$138 million to finance land purchases in Jerusalem.

■ The chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, Avraham Burg, asked the government of France to assist in efforts to secure the return of Jewish property confiscated in Eastern Europe. Burg also asked for France's support in attempts to retrieve funds deposited by Jews in Swiss banks before World War II.

■ A plaque honoring the victims of anti-fascist partisans from the Second World War was displayed on the Roman street where a partisan commando killed 33 German soldiers on March 23, 1944. [Page 3]

NEWS ANALYSIS**In Palestinian election campaign, confrontations with Israelis help**

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Hanan Ashrawi, the former spokeswoman for the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks, was furious.

For Ashrawi, now a candidate for the Palestinian Council, it was an outrage that Israeli border police would bar her election motorcade from entering Jerusalem.

But in the aftermath of the confrontation, Ashrawi could laugh all the way to the polls.

A dispute Sunday with Israeli police at a checkpoint on the northern border of Jerusalem won Ashrawi precious airtime on radio and television less than a week before the elections.

Elections for the 88-seat Palestinian Council are scheduled for Jan. 20.

Indeed, for Ashrawi, the confrontation at the entrance to Jerusalem was a "m'tseaa," Hebrew for a "bargain."

The Israelis were justified in stopping her motorcade.

Palestinian motorcades decorated with election posters are not allowed in the capital of Israel, according to the agreement with the Palestinians.

A second candidate — Samir Krish — reportedly was prevented from entering Jerusalem at another checkpoint for similar reasons.

Although the Palestinians do not recognize Israeli sovereignty over the eastern part of Jerusalem, Ashrawi probably knew that the Israelis could stop her motorcade.

But in the heat of the first-ever Palestinian election campaign, that fact seemed much less important when one could view on television the respectable Ashrawi practically wrestling with an Israeli police officer.

With a limited election campaign period — only two weeks — every gimmick was necessary and every exposure was an asset.

Although the faces of the 700 candidates for the council filled the West Bank papers for weeks, the official election campaign began only at the beginning of the month. Only in the last two weeks of the campaign did the Voice of Palestine give each candidate two to three minutes of radio airtime to make a presentation to the voters.

An impressive team of international observers, including former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former Jordanian Prime Minister Abdul Salam al-Majali, was set to be on hand to supervise the elections.

Complaints of illegal and unfair interference

Nevertheless, in advance of election day, complaints were mounting of illegal and unfair interference by the Palestinian leadership.

Candidates complained that they came under pressure from the leadership not to run in the elections.

Palestine Liberation Organization head Yasser Arafat was criticized for manipulating lists of candidates in an effort to secure the election of supporters. The criticism included charges that Arafat personally removed from the list of candidates recommended by his Al Fatah Party some of those who had won placement on the list through primaries.

A Palestinian journalist and a Palestinian human rights activist were arrested by Palestinian police after they had allegedly criticized the fairness of the election process. They were later released.

Surprisingly, the Jan. 5 killing of Hamas terrorist Yehiya Ayash had no immediate effect on the election campaign.

And despite calls by Islamic fundamentalists to boycott the elections, the assumption in Israel was that the Muslim radicals would eventually take part in the elections, though very few of them presented their candidacies to the council. However, groups on the left opposed to the peace process remained determined to boycott the elections.

Brig. Gen. David Shahaf, the Israeli liaison officer to the elections, said over the weekend that the elections would be tested by two criteria — the rate of participation and the number of independent candidates elected.

Two other questions remained open: By what percentage would Arafat be elected as president of the Palestinian Council? And how would the

seats in the council be divided between activists in the intifada — the bitter 1987-1993 uprising against Israeli rule in the territories — and the PLO activists who came only recently from Tunis, the former PLO headquarters?

Answers to these questions could reveal much about the future course of Palestinian governance in the self-rule areas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. □

Arafat to U.S. senators: Covenant will be changed

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Two of Yasser Arafat's loudest critics in Congress traveled to Gaza earlier this month to elicit a renewed pledge from the Palestinian leader to remove language from the Palestine Liberation Organization Covenant, which calls for the destruction of Israel.

"Arafat said eyeball-to-eyeball that it would be out within two months of the [Palestinian] elections," Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) said in a telephone interview Tuesday.

Palestinian elections are set for Saturday, at which time Arafat is widely expected to be chosen president of the Palestinian Council.

Specter and Sen. Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) stopped off to meet with Arafat, and met separately with Prime Minister Shimon Peres and other senior Israeli officials during a recent eight-day junket to Africa and Israel.

An inveterate critic of the Palestinian leader, Specter, who is Jewish, stressed the importance of using such meetings to keep pressure on Arafat to do his part to combat terrorism. Specter and Shelby are the co-authors of legislation that ties U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority to its compliance with the accords Arafat has signed.

Under the measure, which is a provision of legislation known as the Middle East Peace Facilitation Act, Arafat would forfeit U.S. aid until the covenant is changed. Arafat promised to amend the covenant within 60 days of the Palestinian election.

"I'm skeptical, but now we'll see if he'll produce," Specter said of Arafat's pledge to alter the covenant. "We've got a specific promise with a specific date."

While many in Congress continue to focus on amending the covenant, Palestinian officials in Gaza and the West Bank have hinted in recent weeks that it could prove easier to win approval of an entirely new covenant.

Specter and Shelby — the only senators believed to have traveled overseas during the U.S. government shutdown — drew substantial criticism upon their return.

The senators apparently deemed the trip essential because Specter heads the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and Shelby serves as a committee member.

In the interview, Specter defended the trip as "time-sensitive," particularly in light of the upcoming Palestinian elections. But, he added, with "20-20 hindsight, it would have been preferable to defer it, in the face of the media criticism." □

Gore pledges U.S. commitment as Israel 'takes risks' for peace

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Vice President Al Gore, here on a 24-hour whirlwind visit, has pledged the American government's "ironclad commitment to Israel's security and well-being as Israel takes risks for peace."

Gore arrived Monday night in Israel after a brief visit to Egypt, where he discussed the Syrian peace track with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Less than three hours after touching down at Ben-

Gurion Airport, the vice president was feted at a state dinner at the Knesset.

On Tuesday, Gore's packed schedule included a working session with Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Foreign Minister Ehud Barak, a visit to the grave of slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and a meeting in Jericho with Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat and leading Palestinian businessmen.

Although it did not appear on the official White House news release spelling out Gore's itinerary, the vice president also paid a condolence call to Leah Rabin and met with the families of Israel's missing soldiers.

During a joint news conference after their session, a smiling Peres said, "We discussed everything dry or wet — we discussed irrigation as well [as water rights]. For us it was a highly encouraging meeting."

Gore said he had come to Israel to "again affirm the unswerving commitment of the American people and of President Clinton to work with you to achieve peace between Israel and Syria, and between Israel and Lebanon; and to achieve a comprehensive peace that will end Arab-Israeli conflict."

In an obvious allusion to upcoming national elections in both Israel and the United States, Gore said, "Although time is short, I am convinced that with courage, creativity and commitment we can achieve a breakthrough this year."

In addition to the peace process, Gore also fielded questions on American ties with Tunisia, the U.S. budget standoff and Jonathan Pollard, the American Jew serving a life sentence for spying for Israel.

Asked to confirm or deny rumors that President Clinton has turned down Pollard's request for clemency, Gore said the issue "has not reached the president's desk."

"The process now under way has not yet produced a recommendation," he said. "When that process has been concluded, he will examine it. At this point it is premature."

In addition, the vice president denied that he had canceled a planned stopover in Tunisia after that country failed to open an interest section in Israel.

"I have had a very productive and constructive dialogue with the Tunisian leadership," Gore said, adding that he would have flown Tuesday to Tunisia, but that he needed to return to Washington for budget talks.

With a laugh, Gore continued, "You know our government runs out of money again the 26th of this month. It's embarrassing."

Taking his cues from the vice president, Peres chimed in, "You can use some foreign aid." □

Pilot gets unusual 'treatment'

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Jordanian pilot at Tel Aviv's Ichilov Hospital this week was "treated" to an aerial view of the city — and parts of the rest of the country.

Mohammed Atout, who was paralyzed from the waist down during a training accident in a Cobra helicopter, was a guest passenger in the Israel Radio plane that provides commuters with traffic reports.

During the flight, Atout spoke to a fellow squadron member in Amman, as well as his mother, to whom he excitedly described the sites below.

Atout and another Jordanian soldier, who was wounded while on a peacekeeping mission in Bosnia, were visited by Jordan's King Hussein last week.

The king was at the hospital to dedicate a trauma unit to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who died at the unit after he was shot Nov. 4 by an assassin. □

Chechen Jews land in Israel as regional fighting escalates

By Alissa Kaplan

NEW YORK (JTA) — As the borders of the Chechen war expanded this week, Jews from the area continued to find safety in Israel.

A Jewish Agency for Israel refugee camp in the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya closed its gates when its occupants left for Israel.

At the same time, in nearby Dagestan, another crisis was under way, with at least one Jew reported to be victimized by the new round of fighting.

Russian troops this week bombarded areas of Dagestan, a republic within the Russian federation just across the border from Chechnya.

The bombing came after Chechen separatist rebels refused to surrender dozens of hostages.

The crisis erupted Jan. 9 when a band led by a Chechen secessionist leader took over a hospital with 2,000 people in it in the town of Kizlyar.

Chaim Chesler, the head of the Jewish Agency office in the former Soviet Union, confirmed that at least one hostage was Jewish.

Additional information about the ongoing battle was not available.

In Chechnya itself, separatists have fought Russian forces since December 1994.

As the situation escalated this week, Russian artillery continued to assault positions this week in southern Chechnya.

But the Chechen aliyah continued.

After Chesler "locked by key the gate" of the P'atigorsk refugee camp Tuesday morning, officially closing the site, he boarded an airplane — along with 31 Chechen refugees — bound for Israel.

He spoke via telephone from Herzliya, Israel, just two hours after the plane landed outside Tel Aviv. The new immigrants had already gone to absorption centers.

"It was a very emotional departure," said Chesler, who, with the Jewish Agency, has helped 330 Jewish refugees from the Chechen capital of Grozny immigrate to Israel during the past 14 months.

He said he would return to the region in two days.

Some Jews are still in the area. Between 20 and 40 elderly and sick people remain in Grozny, Chesler said. And about 40 people — who are waiting for needed documents — are with family members in other towns. They will be flown out to Israel next month, Chesler said.

"That will leave very few Jews," said Chesler, adding, "It's almost the end of the story."

At one time, Grozny had 5,000 to 6,000 Jews, most of them living there for generations. □

Weizman visit to Germany breaks deadlock over pensions

By Miriam Widman

BERLIN (JTA) — Israeli President Ezer Weizman, on a four-day visit this week to Germany, said it was difficult for him to be here, where he heard "voices crying to me from the earth" from the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

The trip is the Israeli president's first to the reunited Germany.

The visit broke a deadlock over financing the \$137.2 million in annual pensions for Jews from formerly Nazi-occupied Eastern European countries that has lasted since German Chancellor Helmut Kohl promised both Israel and Washington in 1989 to pay them.

Under pressure because of the visit, Kohl's coal-

ition Tuesday reportedly made it possible for Parliament to approve payment of German pensions to 35,000 aging Jews, most of whom now reside in the United States or Israel.

When Weizman spoke before the German Parliament, also on Tuesday, he thanked Germany for helping Israel and for fostering the peace process.

But he also said in his remarks, which were in Hebrew, that he could not forgive Germany for the crimes of the Third Reich.

He added that as president of Israel, he could mourn and commemorate the Jewish victims of the Nazis, "but I cannot forgive in their name."

"It is not easy for me to stand here and speak to you, my friends in this house," he said.

In his speech, Weizman also called on Germans to combat neo-Nazism and movements of the radical right and said Israel and Germany needed to "find common ground" to improve ties.

The call to combat extremism was echoed by parliamentary speaker Ruth Sussmuth, who also said to Weizman in her welcoming speech, "You are visiting a different, a democratic, a European Germany that has learned its lesson from hate and genocide, war and expulsion, and is aware of its responsibility."

Earlier, Weizman provoked the German Jewish community and its leaders when he said soon after arriving here that he could not "understand how 40,000 Jews could live" in the land of the Holocaust.

Weizman, who was speaking at a round-table discussion with young Germans, also said that "the only place where a Jew can be a Jew is Israel."

Ignatz Bubis, chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, defended Jews' rights to live here.

"The Germany of today is not the Germany of the Nazi times," Bubis reportedly said.

Michel Friedman, a member of the council, said Weizman's comments "were a cause of irritation in the Jewish community."

The Germany of today is based on democratic principles, Friedman added.

Weizman began his visit by paying homage to Jews who died at hands of the Nazis at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp outside Berlin.

Also on the visit, which ends Wednesday, Weizman met with surviving members of the German wartime resistance against Adolf Hitler. □

Victims of WWII anti-fascists honored

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — A plaque honoring the victims of anti-fascist partisans from World War II was displayed this week on the Roman street where a partisan commando killed 33 German soldiers on March 23, 1944.

But police removed the plaque after an anonymous caller told an Italian news agency that an extreme right-wing group — known as the Political Movement — had put it up Monday night.

The plaque, which called the World War II partisans "vile assassins," was dedicated to "the fallen civilian and military victims of the anti-fascist partisan slaughter."

The March 23 attack led to the Nazi mass execution the next day of 335 men and boys, including 75 Jews, at the Ardeatine Caves south of Rome.

The reprisal mass killing is considered Italy's worst World War II atrocity.

Former SS Capt. Erich Priebke was extradited from Argentina to Rome in November and is awaiting trial for his part in the massacre. □

Confessed assassin says plan was not to kill prime minister*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In a new twist in the investigation into Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, the student who confessed to the murder told investigators this week that he had only intended to cripple Rabin in an effort to remove him from the political arena.

Yigal Amir made the statement Tuesday during an interview conducted in his jail cell by two investigators who were gathering information for the Shamgar Commission, the state panel of inquiry into the Nov. 4 assassination.

"I am incapable of killing innocent people. My intention was not to kill" Rabin, Amir reportedly said.

"Paralyzing him also would have been good. That's why I did not shoot him in the head and aimed for the spine."

The 25-year-old law student also told the investigators that even on the night of the Nov. 4 peace rally in Tel Aviv, he had not known whether he would be able to carry out his plan to shoot Rabin.

Amir's trial on charges of slaying Rabin is scheduled to resume Jan. 23.

He has not yet entered a plea to the charges against him.

Amir is also being tried — along with his brother Hagai and friend Dror Adani — on charges of conspiring to assassinate Rabin, of planning attacks against Arabs and of illegal possession of weapons.

At a hearing Monday in Tel Aviv, the three were formally charged.

The judges in the case postponed the date for that trial until April 17.

The three defendants have until Feb. 26 to enter their pleas.

The judges also ordered that Hagai Amir and Adani be held in custody until the conclusion of the legal proceedings against them.

During Monday's hearing, the attorney for Hagai Amir charged that a well-known political activist in the territories had acted as a go-between for Yigal Amir to obtain rabbinic approval for the assassination.

The lawyer refused to name the alleged go-between. The judges dismissed the charge after reading the materials presented by the lawyer.

Libel suit considered

The Israeli media reported that the person was Benny Katzover, a leading activist in the Yesha Council, which represents Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Katzover strongly denied the claim, saying that he had met Yigal Amir a few times during protests in the territories, but that he had never been any kind of mediator.

Katzover said he was considering bringing a libel suit against Hagai Amir's attorney over the matter.

In another development, Internal Security Minister Moshe Shahal, in his first appearance before the Shamgar Commission, told the panel that police had no prior knowledge of any assassination plot by right-wing Jewish extremists.

He said that the police had received what was termed a "vague intelligence report" about the possibility that Jewish right-wing elements might try to attack government figures, but that there was no more specific information.

In the period since Rabin's assassination, police and domestic security service officials have traded accusa-

tions over who bore the blame for the security breakdown that made the prime minister's murder possible.

Carmi Gilon, the head of the Shin Bet, resigned last week over alleged security failures at the domestic intelligence agency.

On Sunday, the Cabinet confirmed the appointment of his successor, Rear Adm. Ami Ayalon, the outgoing commander of the navy. □

2 Israelis killed in ambush in West Bank town of Hebron*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Days before Palestinian elections were scheduled to be held, two Israelis were shot and killed in an ambush in the West Bank town of Hebron.

In Tuesday's attack, an Israeli army doctor and his driver died after being fired upon in their vehicle by unknown assailants at a junction on the route to the settlement of Kiryat Arba.

Hebron is the only Palestinian population center in the West Bank that will have Israeli troops in the area when voting takes place Saturday for the Palestinian Council.

No group claimed responsibility for the incident.

The army reportedly closed off the area shortly after the ambush, which took place one day after an Israeli was moderately wounded in a shooting attack on the outskirts of the West Bank town of Bethlehem.

The wounded man, a religious Jew, was shot and wounded in a ceramics shop near Rachel's Tomb in an area patrolled by Palestinian police.

He was taken to a hospital in Jerusalem, where he underwent surgery.

The Israeli army declared Bethlehem, which was handed over to the Palestinians on Dec. 21, a closed military zone and barred Israelis from traveling through it.

By Tuesday, Palestinian security forces had arrested three suspects in connection with the attack near Bethlehem.

The three suspects, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which opposes the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, were arrested near the Dehaishe refugee camp in Bethlehem.

Meanwhile, security procedures for the voting in Hebron provoked differences between Israeli and Palestinian officials.

Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian official in charge of the elections, told Israeli officials Tuesday that he had expected Israeli troops to withdraw temporarily from Hebron while the voting was being conducted.

An army redeployment from parts of Hebron is not scheduled until March.

But Maj. Gen. Ilan Biran, the commander in charge of an area that includes the West Bank, reportedly told Erekat that there would be no temporary redeployment.

He also called on the Palestinians to locate the polling stations away from the town's Jewish enclaves, where some 400 Jewish settlers live among about 100,000 Palestinians.

In another development, Jerusalem Police Chief Aryeh Amit said he had received information that Jewish right-wing activists were planning to disrupt the voting at poll stations located in post offices in eastern Jerusalem.

Amit said several thousand police would be stationed in the city to prevent any clashes. "My working assumption is that right-wing activists and opposition Palestinians will try to disrupt the voting," Amit said.

The Yesha Council, which represents Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, denied that any violent disruptions were planned. □