



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The U.S. administration registered its concern with the Russian government over threats to the operation in Russia of the Jewish Agency for Israel. [Page 3]

■ Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat met with President Bill Clinton, claiming an American trophy for delivering on his pledge to amend the Palestinian covenant. [Page 2]

■ An elderly rabbi from Kiryat Arba was seriously wounded in a stabbing attack in Hebron's market. Jewish residents retaliated by overturning stalls in the market. [Page 4]

■ Several prominent Jews joined a group of Russia's most powerful businessmen in warning that the country's hotly contested June presidential elections could lead to civil war. [Page 3]

■ Representatives of the Swiss Bankers Association and the World Jewish Restitution Organization are scheduled to sign an agreement Thursday to establish a commission to investigate the Swiss bank accounts of Holocaust victims. The agreement allows for "unfettered" access to all files related to the accounts, according to an official close to the process.

■ The federal government of Poland indicated that it would administer the former Auschwitz-Birkenau death complex, which has been under local and provincial control, said Kalman Sultanik, vice president of the World Jewish Congress. Sultanik made the remarks after the Auschwitz Museum Council, the body charged with protecting the integrity of the Auschwitz grounds, met at the death camp.

■ Angola's foreign minister visited Israel, the first minister from that country to do so. He asked Israel to help his country neutralize land mines, which are left over from the country's civil war.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Arafat, Peres reap benefits of Palestinian covenant vote

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's visit to the White House this week is proof — if proof is still needed — of the historic significance of the Palestine National Council's vote to remove the anti-Israel clauses from its charter.

The vote has bolstered Arafat's political standing as Israel and the Palestinians prepare to enter into what are certain to be difficult final-status negotiations.

The overwhelming vote of the PNC last week could also do much for Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who is entering the final weeks of a tough election campaign.

The Israeli opposition parties, upset by the April 24 PNC vote, contended at first that the decision reached at the council session was equivocal.

In addition to approving a resolution that in effect canceled the anti-Israel clauses in the charter, the PNC also approved a second resolution calling on a legal committee to draft a new charter "within six months."

This meant, Likud spokesmen argued, that the offensive clauses calling for the destruction of the "Zionist entity" could yet resurface.

The opposition voices questioned why the council had not voted on a new charter at once.

But Arafat's aides, buoyed by the overwhelming support their leader had received at the council, moved quickly to counter this attack.

They assured reporters that while an earlier draft of the resolution might have seemed ambivalent, the final wording was straightforward and wholehearted.

Moreover, the Palestinian media in Gaza and eastern Jerusalem, briefed by the Palestinian leadership, reported the decision in those terms to the Palestinian population at large.

In addition, the United States and other key countries were officially informed that the charter, or Palestine National Covenant, was no longer a valid document.

At an Israeli Independence Day garden party at the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv on the day of the PNC vote, Israeli and foreign guests broke into spontaneous applause when Peres announced the Palestinian council's decision and praised it as the most important change in thinking in this region in 100 years.

President Clinton's invitation to Arafat, sought so long by the Palestinian leader and refused so long by this and previous administrations, put an American stamp of approval on the Palestinians' action.

Behind the scenes, Palestinian officials explained that no new covenant had been drafted because their Israeli counterparts had requested, informally, that this be delayed.

New covenant may never be written

Peres' aides apparently were concerned that a new charter could in itself be politically explosive. While such a charter would recognize Israel, it would also most likely repeat the Palestinian goal of sovereign statehood with Jerusalem as the capital.

Informed sources say, moreover, that a new covenant will probably never be written.

With the permanent-status negotiations set to start Sunday in Taba, Egypt, at least with a ceremonial opening session, the Palestinian national movement sees itself well on the way to realizing concrete political goals.

It therefore no longer sees the need for a concrete set of dogma.

Political observers in Israel say the prime minister benefited twice from the PNC's action.

First, the vote removed an explosive mine that threatened to derail Labor's election campaign.

The Likud was preparing a major offensive on the chance that the covenant was not amended. The theme would have been that Arafat, Peres' peace partner, had proved himself unreliable on the very issue that the late

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Friday, May 3.

Yitzhak Rabin himself had determined to be the litmus test of the peace process.

Indeed, Rabin had vowed shortly before his assassination to halt the process unless the Palestinians honored their commitment to amend the charter. Peres had repeated similar vows.

Second, the PNC's decision provides Peres and his party with a desperately needed platform to win back the support of the Israeli Arab community. The Israeli Arab vote, which accounts for 10 percent of the electorate, is considered potentially critical for Peres to win on May 29.

Deeply disturbed by the civilian casualties and wide-scale suffering in Lebanon caused by Operation Grapes of Wrath — Israel's recent military campaign against the fundamentalist Hezbollah — Arab voters have threatened large-scale defections from Peres.

A poll published Tuesday in the Israeli daily *Yediot Achronot* found that barely a majority of Israeli Arab voters said they would vote for Peres in the battle for the prime ministership.

While only 2.5 percent said they would choose Likud rival Benjamin Netanyahu, nearly 30 percent said they would not vote, with an additional 20 percent maintaining that they had not decided.

Israeli experts say that with no serious shift in support to Netanyahu, Peres can still win the Arabs back.

Although the prime minister clearly won over some Jewish middle-of-the-road voters by his tough stance in Lebanon, his edge among Jewish voters is marginal.

Although Arafat himself is not universally popular among Israeli Arabs, especially among the more religious elements of the community, there is widespread gratification that the peace process has moved forward.

Peres must now persuade the Arab community that this is the most important consideration for them, and that Operation Grapes of Wrath was a painful, unavoidable interlude, not a lasting retreat from his vision of a new Middle East. And he can count on Arafat — as well as on Clinton — to do everything possible to help him in this task. □

Congress less welcoming to Arafat than White House

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — While President Clinton welcomed Yasser Arafat to Washington with open arms this week, members of Congress continued to cast a skeptical gaze at the Palestinian Authority president.

Arafat claimed his American trophy for amending the Palestine National Council covenant in the form of a bilateral meeting Wednesday morning with Clinton.

The council voted overwhelmingly last week to amend those parts of its covenant that call for Israel's destruction.

But the night before the meeting with Clinton, 99 senators took a swipe at Arafat by calling for the extradition of Abul Abbas, the mastermind of the 1985 Achille Lauro hijacking. Israel had allowed Abbas to enter Gaza for last week's PNC meeting.

During his visit, Arafat rejected the call for extradition. Instead, he praised Abbas during a brief exchange with reporters in the Oval Office.

"We should not forget that Abul Abbas came and attended the PNC and voted to change the covenant of the PLO, and to support the peace process," Arafat said.

The response drew a sharp retort from Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), who sponsored the Senate bill calling for Abbas' extradition to stand trial for the murder of Leon Klinghoffer, the American Jew killed during the hijacking of the cruise ship. □

"We cannot build peace on a foundation of terrorism," D'Amato said, adding that Abbas "murdered a man confined to a wheelchair. Justice demands he be turned over to the United States for this crime."

The Senate move appears to be largely symbolic, however. Clinton administration officials said there would be no request for Abbas' extradition.

The statute of limitations under which Abbas would have been prosecuted expired "before the Clinton administration came into office," said David Johnson, a spokesman for the National Security Council.

Clinton and Arafat did not discuss Abbas during their 45-minute session, which included Vice President Al Gore, in the Oval Office.

The conversation focused on the peace process, with the president congratulating Arafat on amending the covenant. "Under difficult circumstances," Arafat kept his commitment to amend the covenant, Clinton said. "I think that was applauded by all Americans."

When asked later in the day at a National Press Club luncheon how he persuaded the Palestinians to amend the covenant, Arafat said, "You think it was easy?"

"It took me months of negotiations," he said. "We're not talking about five or six hours, but of more than 200 hours of negotiations."

But not everyone in Washington believes that the PLO has satisfied its commitment on the covenant, as called for under its peace accords with Israel.

Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.) said the vote does not satisfy the PLO's pledge to amend the covenant, because a new covenant has not yet been written.

With this in mind, Gilman has continued to hold up \$13 million of U.S. aid slated to go to the Palestinians. As chairman of the House International Relations Committee, Gilman has prevented the State Department from releasing the payment. White House officials recently turned up the heat on Gilman, but so far have been unsuccessful in freeing the money.

"I hope" that Gilman releases the money, Arafat said at the press club.

Much of the attention focused on Arafat's visit centered on the opening of final-status talks with Israel, which are set to begin Sunday in Taba, Egypt.

When asked whether the United States would now support the Palestinian call for statehood, Clinton said, "I do not believe the United States can serve any useful purpose by getting in the middle of decisions which have to be resolved by the parties themselves."

In fact, the White House continues to substitute the word "Palestinian" for "Palestine" on all official documents. For example, the PLO is referred to as the "Palestinian Liberation Organization," rather than the official "Palestine Liberation Organization," on all White House communications.

Comfortable in the spotlight

Arafat appeared comfortable in the spotlight of his official visit and even shaved his characteristic stubble for the White House meeting.

Arafat used the visit to elicit public support for his call on Israel to lift the closure on the Palestinian areas imposed after the first in a string of suicide bombings in February and March.

"How can you have peace and live comfortably when your neighbor faces starvation?" Arafat said at the press club. "This will reflect negatively on the peace process."

Arafat also met with U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher during his visit and was scheduled to address a town hall meeting of Arab Americans on Wednesday night. □

**U.S. officials to Russia:
Emigration must continue***By Cynthia Mann*

NEW YORK (JTA) — The U.S. government has told Russian officials that it is concerned about threats to the operation in Russia of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the possible impact on Jewish emigration.

"We've raised our concerns about this at senior levels of the Russian government," said Glyn Davies, spokesman at the State Department's daily news briefing on Wednesday. "Our embassy in Moscow continues as well to pursue it."

"One of the most important aspects of political reform in Russia from the standpoint of the United States has, of course, been freedom for Russian citizens to emigrate," Davies said.

"We expect that Russian citizens will continue to be able to exercise that right," he said.

The Jewish Agency, which in recent years has brought hundreds of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel, suddenly was informed last month that it had lost the accreditation that enabled it to operate in Russia.

Until this week, agency officials downplayed this as a technical matter. Others thought that it might signal a political trend that could threaten Jewish emigration.

The agency, which is the primary recipient in Israel of funds raised by the United Jewish Appeal in concert with federations, sounded an alarm Tuesday after Russian authorities broke up an immigration seminar it was sponsoring.

The agency then acknowledged that this was part of a troubling pattern in Russia, including the closure of another agency office and a spate of vandalism.

Agency Chairman Avraham Burg planned to meet with Jewish leaders in the United States this week to discuss how to resolve the problem.

In an interview from Jerusalem, he said it would be addressed as a world Jewish issue and not as a bilateral diplomatic problem between Russia and Israel.

Meanwhile, the U.S. administration was sounding concerned, but cautious. "Up until now we've seen no indication that the Russian government is restricting the right to emigrate," said the State Department's Davies, calling this "a bottom-line consideration."

At the same time, three members of Congress penned a letter to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, expressing their "deep concern" over the cancellation of the Jewish Agency's license to operate in Russia. "It is imperative we make clear to President Boris Yeltsin that a return to the restricted emigration policy of its past is completely unacceptable," wrote Reps. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), Jim Saxton (R-N.J.) and Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.).

The push for U.S. financial aid to Russia, they wrote, was based in part on the "assumption that Russian Jews would be free to emigrate and free of strong-arm tactics in Russia."

The news reports, they said, "shake our faith and those assumptions and cause us to re-evaluate our position on aid to Russia." □

**Russian Jews join power group
warning about election climate***By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — Several prominent Jews have joined a group of Russia's most powerful businessmen in warning that the country's hotly contested June presidential elections could lead to civil war.

The group of businessmen released a statement last

Friday saying that Russian society is deeply divided and calling for a compromise between the country's competing political forces.

The statement, published in newspapers across the political spectrum, was signed by 13 top people in the Russian business and financial community, including six Jews, two of whom are leaders of the recently created Russian Jewish Congress.

The vague appeal did not offer specific recommendations about how the compromise could be carried out, but it strongly implied that President Boris Yeltsin and his main rival, Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, should work out an agreement on major policies before the June 16 election to prevent Russia from falling into chaos.

The businessmen warned that if the Communists win the election, they may try to demand "ideological revenge," reflecting their fears that a Communist victory could lead to a rollback of the country's economic and political reformist policies.

But the signatories, who have been known for their unconditional support of Yeltsin, also criticized the Kremlin for the ongoing war in Chechnya and for the adverse social impact of some of the government's economic reforms during the past four years.

Among those signing the appeal were Vladimir Goussinsky, president of the Russian Jewish Congress, and Mikhail Fridman, the organization's vice president. They, along with the others signing the statement, had amassed huge fortunes since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Yevgeny Satanovsky, a member of the RJC's presidium, said he was surprised to see the list of signatories, which he said included representatives of financial and industrial groups that "had always been at odds with each other."

"These are leading representatives of the financial community, automobile, gas, oil and munitions industries," Satanovsky said.

He said he could not imagine these figures signing a joint statement under any other circumstance.

'Road toward civil war'

Yeltsin and Zyuganov have been running neck and neck in the polls.

In the statement, without referring directly to either Yeltsin or Zyuganov, the authors warned that regardless of who wins the election, he will be a minority president. Without some sort of compromise, they wrote, the "spirit of violence and discord" will be the only victor in the elections. "The acrimony of opposing political forces is so great" that either Yeltsin or Zyuganov "can rule only by embarking on the road toward civil war and the disintegration of Russia," the statement said.

The authors of the appeal referred to Russian nationalism as one of the most serious problems confronting society. "Over one-half of Russian kids are children of mixed marriages. We all are Russians, and any attempt to divide us into pure-blooded [Russians] and non-Russians contradicts the very idea of the state, which is to bring together the peoples of Russia," the statement said.

The authors warned that Russian businessmen "have the necessary resources and will to influence excessively unprincipled and uncompromising politicians."

One of the signatories, Boris Berezovsky, said in a television interview that he and his counterparts had just one tool to carry out their compromise plan, but this tool was "of no small importance — money."

On Tuesday, Zyuganov met with the 13 businessmen to discuss their concerns. No details of the meeting were released, but Zyuganov told reporters afterward, "I understand their concern, their worries about the fate of the country's economy." □

Arab attacks rabbi in Hebron; date of redeployment unclear*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As the spotlight moved this week to Israel's plans for an army redeployment in Hebron, a 72-year-old rabbi was seriously wounded in a stabbing attack in the West Bank town.

The attack sparked additional questions about the safety of Jewish residents there after an army pullback.

The incident occurred Wednesday as the Knesset convened for a special session called by opposition members to discuss the wisdom of the redeployment.

Rabbi Nissim Gudai, who is from Kiryat Arba, was in Hebron's Arab vegetable market when he was stabbed in the back by a Palestinian assailant who then fled.

Gudai, with the knife still protruding from his back, was taken to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, where his condition was described as serious, but not life-threatening.

Israeli security forces closed the area after the incident and detained several Palestinians.

A number of angry Jewish settlers overturned vegetable carts in protest of the attack.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres has promised to go ahead with the handover of about 85 percent of Hebron to Palestinian self-rule, with the Israeli army staying in the Jewish settlements.

The Israeli army also plans to remain stationed at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a site holy to Jews and Arabs alike.

The redeployment was to have taken place in late March, but was delayed by Israel after a series of Hamas suicide bombings earlier that month and in late February.

Peres has yet to announce a date for the redeployment, saying Wednesday that the issue would be taken up by Israeli and Palestinian negotiators.

"They will have to discuss the stages and the dates to carry out this decision," Peres told reporters in Paris, where he was holding talks with French President Jacques Chirac on his return from a four-day trip to the United States.

Cold water on reports

Peres' comments in Paris and in Washington, where he also spoke of a phased redeployment, appeared to throw cold water on recent reports in the Israeli media that the move could take place as early as this weekend.

In the Knesset on Wednesday, Likud members accused the government of trying to push through the redeployment before the May 29 general elections.

"This issue was not an issue in the previous election campaign," said Moshe Katsav, Likud faction chairman. "The best thing is to give the Israeli population the right to decide in this crucial issue."

Internal Security Minister Moshe Shahal countered that Israel was obliged to honor its agreements with the Palestinians.

Outside the Knesset, several hundred Kiryat Arba and Hebron residents protested the planned redeployment.

Earlier in the day, several dozen supporters of the dovish Meretz Party demonstrated, demanding an immediate redeployment in Hebron.

Visiting Hebron on Tuesday, hardline Likud Knesset member Ariel Sharon said the town should be allowed some level of self-rule, but that Israel should have overall responsibility for security there.

On Monday, the Jewish community of Hebron held a day of fasting and prayer, calling for the redeployment not to take place.

Settlers warned that the troop pullback from the

town, where Jewish and Arab residents live in close proximity to each other, would end in a bloodbath.

The fervently religious party Agudat Yisrael voiced its support for the settlers and called on Peres to consider delaying the redeployment or canceling it altogether.

But Peres was unlikely to do so, having already rejected a similar request from the spiritual leader of the fervently Orthodox Sephardi Shas Party, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

Hebron is the seventh and final town to come under Palestinian self-rule under the terms of the Interim Agreement signed in September in Washington. With some 400 settlers living among 120,000 Palestinians, Hebron presents the most formidable security challenge of all the West Bank Arab population centers. □

New study finds Jerusalem one of poorest Israeli cities*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Jerusalem's population is becoming poorer, as well as more fervently Orthodox, according to a report on the capital released this week.

The report, prepared by the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, found that 33.9 percent of the children in Jerusalem lived below the poverty line in 1994, compared with the 22.8 percent national figure.

The report also described Jerusalem as one of the poorest cities in the country, with the 1993 average monthly wage totaling about \$1,200, compared with \$1,400 in Tel Aviv and \$1,470 in Haifa.

The study found that during the past five years, some 26,000 residents left Jerusalem, many of them young, educated professionals; the trend contributed to the growing fervently Orthodox character of the city, it found.

Of the 24,300 Jerusalem 11th- and 12th-graders, the report said, 28 percent study in fervently Orthodox schools, which also served 45 percent of those in the first through sixth grades.

The report described Jerusalem as having one of the country's youngest populations, with a mean age of 23. In Tel Aviv, by comparison, the mean age is 35.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert said Tuesday that the way to keep Jerusalem's young, secular population from moving elsewhere was to bring more industry and jobs to the city. □

Israeli army leader talks of possible terror attacks*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Echoing warnings from other Israeli officials, the head of army intelligence this week addressed the possibility that Islamic militants would launch attacks in the coming days against Jewish targets in Israel and abroad.

Appearing before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday, Maj. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon said an infrastructure of terrorist organizations remains active in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He said the militant groups Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah would possibly launch terror attacks in the near future.

Ya'alon had praise for the crackdown on terrorists conducted by the Palestinian Authority, which he said had recently confiscated more than 2,000 pounds of explosives, hundreds of hand grenades and large quantities of materials used to make bombs.

Earlier this week, Police Commissioner Assaf Hefetz warned that terrorist groups might launch attacks in order to change the course of Israel's May 29 national elections. □