



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israeli security was heightened against a possible terrorist attack after the police disclosed that a Hezbollah terrorist had slipped into Israel with high-powered explosives. The man, identified as Lebanese citizen Hussein Mikdad, was seriously wounded last month when a bomb he was assembling prematurely detonated in an eastern Jerusalem hotel.

■ Secretary of State Warren Christopher told a congressional subcommittee that he would endorse a 1-year extension of the Lautenberg Amendment, which affords special refugee status to Jews from the former Soviet Union.

■ The State Department formally declared that Yasser Arafat "fulfilled his commitment" when the Palestine National Council voted last month to amend its covenant. In its semi-annual report on the Palestine Liberation Organization's compliance with its commitments, the report also hailed what it called a "comprehensive" campaign against terrorism by the Palestinian Authority.

■ Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat delayed announcing portfolio assignments in his self-rule government amid indications that he was negotiating with Islamic fundamentalist leaders to join his administration. [Page 4]

■ Israeli diplomatic and Jewish Agency for Israel officials living outside the Jewish state cast absentee ballots for the next prime minister and Knesset. Among the 3,600 Israelis eligible to vote were Israel's ambassador to Jordan, Shimon Shamir.

■ Israel's first communications satellite, the Amos-1, was launched successfully aboard a European Ariane rocket from French Guiana in northeastern South America. After Amos-1 becomes operational, Israel will be among a group of only seven other nations that operate communications satellites.

■ Czech president Vaclav Havel joined Leah Rabin at the opening of a photo exhibit at the Prague Castle commemorating the life of her slain husband. Elie Wiesel also attended the opening.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Uncertainty abounds as Israel tries new system of elections

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — If opinion polls are to be believed, this month's Israeli elections could create a profound irony.

The balloting will be held under a new electoral system that was strongly opposed by the predicted winner of the race for prime minister, Shimon Peres, and strongly supported by the predicted loser, Benjamin Netanyahu.

Had the previous electoral system remained in force — again, according to the latest polls — Netanyahu would have won.

On May 29, Israelis will for the first time vote directly for the next prime minister, where the race is between Peres and Netanyahu.

With the direct election of the next premier, the reformed Israeli system will more closely resemble an American-type presidential election than the British-style parliamentary system, which until now has been the foundation of Israel's democratic edifice.

Each voter will cast a separate ballot to choose a party in the Knesset contest.

Twenty-one parties are vying for the 120 parliamentary seats, though only 10 or so are expected to garner enough votes to win representation.

Until now, Israelis only voted for the incoming Knesset, casting one vote for a party. The candidate heading that party's list was in effect the voter's choice for prime minister, though in practice only the leaders of Labor and Likud ever seriously aspired to the post.

Because no party ever attained a majority under the old rules, the parties would vie after the election, with the top vote-getter appointed by the president to form a governing coalition.

To that end, they would often become embroiled in weeks, sometimes even months, of haggling between themselves over who would take over the prime ministership and form the new government.

Small parties would maneuver between Labor and Likud, seeking the best deal they could get as potential coalition members and constantly upping the ante to advance their own party's goals.

As a result, the smaller parties could often win political influence that far exceeded their mandate from the voters.

Under the new system — and this is the key reform — only the winner of the contest for prime minister can become prime minister.

And no one but the elected prime minister can form a government.

If he fails to form a government that wins the approval of a Knesset majority within 45 days, a new election for prime minister will take place.

If he fails a second time around, his party must put forward an alternative candidate, who then would run in a third election.

Under the new system, the small parties will lose much of their bargaining power: They can join in the proposed coalition, or they can opt to stay out.

But because only the elected prime minister is capable of forming the government, they can no longer threaten to switch allegiance to another major party to form a government.

Peres' grave reservations

The chief purpose of the reformers was to whittle down the inordinate power wielded by the small parties under the old system and to enhance that of the prime minister.

No longer will the prime minister have to feel himself subject to a small Knesset faction whose secession from his coalition could spell a change of government.

Now, a secession leading to the governing coalition's loss of its Knesset majority would automatically bring about the fall of the government and the dissolution of the Knesset — and, therefore, new elections.

Knesset members would presumably think long and hard before precipitating a coalition crisis — because their own continued tenure in the legislature would immediately be jeopardized.

Despite these considerations, Peres never concealed his grave

reservations about the reforms. He believed, as did many in the political community, that a break with the British system should be made only if the chosen alternative were equally solid and proven.

In Israel's case, the new system, blending elements of the American, European and British traditions, is a merger — critics say a mishmash — that has never been tried anywhere.

As long as Yitzhak Rabin lived, Peres kept his opposition to the reforms low-key. Rabin, an ardent enthusiast of direct elections, was an "Americophile" ever since serving as ambassador to Washington in the early 1970s. He insisted that the Labor Party unite in support of the proposed reforms and rammed it through the Knesset in 1992.

Netanyahu, for his part, defied his party's parliamentary discipline to stand alone among Likud Knesset members in consistent support of the new reforms.

He believed in direct voting as a matter of principle, and he believed in it in practice as the means to elevate him to the premiership.

Political observers here agree that the enactment of the new system helped him to reach the pinnacle of the Likud Party.

Likud loyalists, who voted for Netanyahu after Yitzhak Shamir's retirement from the leadership, were acutely aware of their new leader's attributes as a mass communicator.

But now the Likud candidate must have mixed feelings. For while Peres, according to all the polls, is faring better in the race for the premiership than his Labor Party and its close allies are doing in the separate Knesset race, Netanyahu is doing worse than Likud and its allies.

Under the old system, Netanyahu's prospects for winning the premiership would have been much brighter than they are now.

According to the polls, the Likud and the religious parties, which formed the basis of Menachem Begin's and Yitzhak Shamir's coalitions during the 1970s and 1980s, have a marked edge over the Labor-Meretz alliance that formed the outgoing government with the parliamentary backing of the Arab factions.

Granted, neither bloc has sufficient seats to form a majority in the Knesset, and forces have entered the fray that may well end up holding the key middle ground.

But political observers strongly believe that under the new electoral rules, the centrist parties, such as Natan Sharansky's immigrant rights party, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, or The Third Way, which opposes an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, will back whichever candidate wins the race for prime minister.

Under the old system — in what may prove a bitter irony for Netanyahu — the Likud-led bloc would have been likelier than the Labor-Meretz alliance of winning those centrist parties' support.

Whatever the outcome of the elections, advocates of the new system are already bracing for criticism and parliamentary attacks once the newly elected Knesset gets down to work. Many politicians and outside observers say openly that the reform, though clearly intended to rectify glaring weaknesses in the old system, was too hastily legislated and harbors problems of its own. □

Court rejects plea to revoke citizenship of Rabin's assassin

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's High Court of Justice has ruled that Yitzhak Rabin's assassin can vote in the May 29 national elections, saying there was no clear law that calls for revoking this right.

Yigal Amir is serving a life sentence for fatally shooting the prime minister at a Nov. 4 peace rally in Tel Aviv.

Tel Aviv resident Hila Alroy had petitioned the court to revoke Amir's Israeli citizenship and his right to vote. Alroy said Amir had tried to undermine Israeli democracy by shooting Rabin.

But the court, led by Justice Aharon Barak, said the Knesset failed to set detailed criteria for denying the vote to an Israeli citizen and that removal of citizenship should be carried out only in extreme cases, such as treason.

Meanwhile, a public committee commissioned by Bar-Ilan University, where Amir was a student, concluded that the educational institution did not allow for an atmosphere that contributed to Amir's decision to kill the prime minister.

The university commissioned the independent panel after it was portrayed in the wake of the assassination as a hotbed of right-wing extremist activity.

In its report, the panel said it found no basis in claims that the school permitted an atmosphere of political extremism on campus, describing it instead as "cultured, quiet and relaxed." The committee did recommend, however, that the university enforce regulations barring political activity on campus.

In a fund-raising pamphlet dedicated to the memory of Rabin and prepared by the American Friends of Bar-Ilan, Yigal Amir's photograph appeared several times.

In connection with that blunder, the committee said the school administration must take practical steps to prevent such occurrences in the future. □

Observers arrive to monitor Israeli redeployment in Hebron

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An initial contingent of 32 international observers have taken up their posts in Hebron in preparation for an Israeli troop redeployment from parts of the West Bank town.

The Norwegian observers arriving Tuesday in Hebron were the first of a group of 200 members of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron, an international observer force that has been given an initial three-month mandate to monitor the scheduled redeployment of Israeli troops in the often tense town.

The unarmed observers, driving white cars and wearing blue caps and jackets, are expected to be joined soon by observers from other countries.

Hebron is the last of seven West Bank Palestinian population centers to be handed over to Palestinian self-rule under the terms of the Interim Agreement signed in September in Washington.

The redeployment was originally to take place in late March, but Israel postponed the move after a series of Hamas suicide bombings in Israel in late February and early March. The redeployment is now expected to take place after Israel's May 29 national elections.

Under the planned transfer of authority to the Palestinians, Israeli troops will withdraw from 85 percent of Hebron. But they will remain stationed in the Jewish precincts to provide security for some 400 Jewish settlers who live among approximately 100,000 Palestinians.

An international observer force last arrived in Hebron in May 1994.

The force remained there for six months in an effort to restore calm to the town after Kiryat Arba settler Dr. Baruch Goldstein carried out the February 1994 Hebron massacre, killing 29 Palestinian worshippers in a mosque at the Tomb of the Patriarchs. □

Illinois anti-terrorism bill ready for governor's signature

By Jeffrey Weill
JUF News

CHICAGO (JTA) — A bill to combat fundraising in Illinois to support terrorist activities abroad — the first bill of its kind in the nation — is heading to Gov. Jim Edgar's desk.

The measure, which unanimously passed both the state Senate and House this month, was initiated by the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago in response to reports that the militant Islamic group Hamas was receiving support in the Chicago area.

"The General Assembly is to be praised for passing this extremely important piece of legislation," said Edward Fox, chairman of the JCRC. "Governor Edgar has already expressed support for the bill, so we look forward to this measure's becoming law and helping to combat the scourge of international terrorism."

Illinois, and in particular the Chicago area, has frequently been cited as a center of fundraising for Hamas, which has carried out numerous terrorist attacks in Israel.

On May 8, in the decision to extradite suspected Hamas leader Abu Marzook to Israel, a federal judge cited evidence describing the collection of "an enormous amount of money" in Chicago for Hamas.

"This measure empowers Illinois law enforcement to counter support for terrorist activities," said Michael Kotzin, director of the JCRC.

The JCRC has established a Terrorism Awareness Project, which creates educational programming on international terrorism. Other states, including Maryland and Wisconsin, have used the Illinois bill as a model for their own legislative initiatives, but those state legislatures have not yet acted.

"The bill complements the recently-enacted federal counter-terrorism legislation," Kotzin said.

"It provides an effective way for state authorities to confront a problem that, though international in scope, is manifest locally." □

AJCommittee severs ties to Polish American group

By Emily D. Soloff
Chicago Jewish News

CHICAGO — The American Jewish Committee has publicly severed a 17-year relationship with the Chicago-based Polish American Congress, throwing into question the future of the country's oldest Polish-Jewish dialogue group.

AJCommittee decided to "terminate" its joint sponsorship of the National Polish American-Jewish American Council after the publication of a letter by the PAC's president, Edward Moskal, to Alexander Kwasniewski, the president of Poland.

In that letter, Moskal — who also heads the Polish National Alliance, an insurance company and fraternal organization representing 250,000 Polish Americans — expressed his concern "regarding the submissiveness of the Polish authorities with respect to demands raised by Jews."

David Harris, the AJCommittee's executive director, said his organization was angered by the letter's "highly bigoted tenor and style. This has the unmistakable ring of old-style anti-Semitism."

The PAC is a national umbrella organization representing 1 million Polish Americans, and is a co-founder with the AJCommittee of the Polish-Jewish dialogue group.

"We've been involved with AJCommittee to build bridges and to build better understanding within our communities," said Les Kuczynski, national executive director of the PAC. "We would like to continue that dialogue, whether officially or unofficially, so that our mutual concerns can be better understood."

It was the first official statement to come from the PAC after the AJCommittee faxed a letter to Moskal expressing dismay with the "harsh, insensitive tone and outrageously distorted contents" of his letter to Kwasniewski.

Specifically, Moskal criticized what he called "preferential treatment given to Jews who are seeking the return of their property in Poland."

He also reproached the government for its decision to ban commercial development of an area outside Auschwitz, in apparent response to Jewish protests.

According to an official translation of his letter provided by the PAC, Moskal wrote that many people coming from other countries to visit Auschwitz "would like to purchase a token of remembrance. This is even permitted on the grounds of the Holocaust Museum in Washington."

Moskal also criticized Dariusz Rosati, Polish minister of foreign affairs, for his "unfortunate and unnecessary" apology for the Kielce pogrom of 1946.

"It was a private letter never meant to be published, as a follow-up to a very private conversation between Mr. Moskal and President Kwasniewski," said the PAC's Kuczynski, who also serves as general counsel for the Polish National Alliance.

'Doesn't speak for all Polish Americans'

But the letter was published May 10 in a Polish-language newspaper owned by the PNA after a Polish official reportedly announced Monday that the Polish president rejected Moskal's criticism and said Poland stands by its current policies.

"There should be no place for harmful stereotypes, xenophobia, religious, racial or ethnic prejudices," Kwasniewski wrote to Moskal.

"I don't believe the method he chose to express his concerns was in any way constructive," said the Rev. John Pawlikowski, co-president of the Polish-Jewish dialogue group.

"I can understand how AJCommittee, given the intemperate nature of the letter, found it difficult to continue a relationship which publicly linked them with the PAC," he said.

"Many of us would have trouble with Mr. Moskal's claim that he speaks for Polish Americans. He certainly doesn't speak for all Polish Americans," the priest said.

Pawlikowski said only dialogue could address the issues raised in Moskal's letter, but "dialogue requires moderation of language."

Although much of the dialogue group's funding came from AJCommittee grants, its leaders are "firmly committed" to have the group continue, Pawlikowski said. They will meet next month in Chicago to consider how the group can be sustained, he added.

Jonathan Levine, Midwest regional director of the AJCommittee, said, "We have and will continue to meet with leaders in the Polish community. There is more to the Polish community than the PAC in our view."

AJCommittee has developed "close and honest ties with some of the younger people" in the Polish American community, and those ties "will clearly continue," said Levine. "It is that older generation that, for whatever reason, finds it more difficult to hold a genuine dialogue, to talk to us and to listen to us." □

Swiss shoe company seeks guidance about damaging files*By Alissa Kaplan*

NEW YORK (JTA) — Bally has asked the World Jewish Congress for "general guidance" after the Swiss shoe company was recently accused of taking over Jewish companies during World War II, said Elan Steinberg, WJC executive director.

The Jewish organization will send Bally, a division of Oerlikon-Buehrle Holding AG, information that surfaced as a result of newly declassified U.S. intelligence reports from 1945 and 1946, Steinberg said in an interview Tuesday.

The just-unearthed files from 1945 include charges that Bally had received "millions of square feet of booty leather" in Switzerland.

Steinberg said his advice to Bally would include that the company admit and recognize the "wrongs that happened" and seek to "make reparations to those who have been harmed."

The Oerlikon-Buehrle chairman, Hans Widmer, reportedly said, "Our archives are fundamentally open for professional historians."

SonntagsZeitung, Switzerland's largest newspaper, has run a series since April claiming that Swiss firms took over Jewish companies seized by the Nazis and that Swiss banks handled Nazi cash and gold.

The WJC and the Jewish Agency for Israel have been at the forefront of efforts to compel Switzerland to return the bank accounts of Holocaust victims to their rightful heirs.

Earlier this month, Swiss banking officials and Jewish leaders penned a historic agreement in New York to create a committee to oversee the "unfettered" search for the World War II accounts. □

Delegates convene in Tunis for multilateral talks on water*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Some 150 delegates from the Middle East and elsewhere met this week in Tunisia to discuss regional water problems in the framework of the Madrid peace talks.

The working group, which last met in June 1995 in Jordan, gathered Wednesday to discuss such issues as water management, conservation, data exchange and regional cooperation.

It is one of five multilateral working groups established after the 1991 Madrid peace conference to discuss regional development in the Middle East as well as issues relating to Israel and its Arab neighbors.

One of the projects discussed this week in Tunisia is a regional water data bank. The project, which has a \$12 million budget, involves Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians.

In a separate development, three Tunisian officials arrived Wednesday in Israel to pave the way for the opening of their economic interest office in Tel Aviv, Shalom Cohen, head of the Israeli interest office in Tunis, said in an interview.

It remains unclear when the Tunisian office will open in the Jewish state.

The Israeli interest office, which opened last month in Tunis, is not proceeding with projects until the Tunisians open a Tel Aviv office, Cohen said.

But he said of the Tunisians' visit, "It shows that they're quite serious about the interest office." □

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

Arafat delays portfolio assignments*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has delayed announcing his ministerial portfolio assignments amid reports that he was negotiating with Islamic fundamentalist leaders to join the self-rule authority.

Arafat last week named 23 members to the Executive Authority, which will have the functions of a Cabinet, but he did not assign portfolios, saying that he might make more appointments.

On Wednesday, Arafat told the Palestinian Council that it might take another week or so before he finalizes the list of portfolio assignments.

According to the terms of the Interim Agreement signed in September in Washington, the Executive Authority is made up of council members and a small number of appointed officials. The 82-member Palestinian Council, elected in January, has legislative responsibilities for the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arafat was elected at the time to serve as head of both the legislative and executive branches of the self-rule government. □

IDF soldier wounded in Lebanon*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israel Defense Force soldier was wounded in an attack launched Wednesday by Hezbollah gunmen in the southern Lebanon security zone.

After the attack, IDF artillery and tanks shelled a main Hezbollah stronghold in the region.

The fighting came on the fourth straight day of hostilities between the two groups.

It took place as diplomats from Israel, the United States, France, Syria and Lebanon resumed meetings in Washington on how to implement a 3-week-old cease-fire that halted recent fighting across the Israeli-Lebanese border. Six Israeli soldiers have been wounded since the U.S.-brokered cease-fire took effect in late April. □

Experts: Missile system will be up and running by decade's end*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Scientists and defense experts involved in the production of a missile intended to destroy incoming rockets said this week that they expect a preliminary version of the system to be operational within two years.

They added that the Arrow anti-missile missile system will be fully operational by the end of the decade, offering Israel a "significant defense capability" at that time. Speaking at a briefing this week for military reporters, Defense Ministry officials estimated the total cost of the program through the year 2005 to be \$1.1 billion.

The Arrow system is being co-funded by the United States, which has to date provided more than \$450 million of the project's cost. Israel, which began developing the Arrow in 1988 with the United States, will reportedly assume the bulk of the project's future costs.

The first tests of the prototype Arrow missile were performed in August 1990. Since then, there have been eight more tests, including two with the latest Arrow-2 model.

Israeli military experts have cited the country's need for a dependable anti-missile system. Their arguments found added strength after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when Iraqi Scuds struck Israeli cities. The American-built Patriot missiles used at the time have been widely criticized as flawed and ineffective. □