



## NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israeli and Palestinian negotiators continued intensive efforts to wrap up an agreement on a Hebron redeployment. News of an impending agreement angered Jewish residents of Hebron, where some allegedly opened fire near Palestinian homes. [Page 2]

■ Two Israeli soldiers killed in southern Lebanon in an attack by the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah were laid to rest. Meanwhile, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said he did not believe that Syria was planning a military operation against Israel in the near future. [Page 3]

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lifted the freeze on selling 3,000 apartments in the West Bank. [Page 3]

■ A Jerusalem court ordered the continued detention of four Israelis accused of entering the Palestinian-ruled town of Jericho and praying at a restaurant. Six other Israelis involved in the incident were released on bail. [Page 3]

■ The foreign minister of the Czech Republic admitted that it was possible that the Swiss and Czechoslovakian governments signed an agreement after World War II enabling Swiss citizens whose property was confiscated by the Communist regime to be compensated with money from the Swiss bank accounts of Jews murdered in the Holocaust. [Page 4]

■ Four suspects arrested in a recent attack on a Jewish cemetery in Argentina had floor plans of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, which was razed by a bomb in 1994. The suspects also possessed maps showing how many Jews live in each Argentine province.

■ Jewish groups expressed outrage after a decision by Croatian officials to bury the remains of about 100 soldiers from Croatia's World War II fascist army alongside anti-Nazi partisan fighters. Croatia's Nazi puppet regime massacred thousands of Jews and Serbs during the war, and the current Croatian government has been accused of whitewashing its fascist past.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

### Chirac's quest in the Mideast: A role for Europe or just France?

By Lee Yanowitch

PARIS (JTA) — French President Jacques Chirac used his visit to the Middle East last week to campaign for European co-sponsorship of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

But it appeared questionable whether Chirac's Mideast quest was in the name of Europe or was aimed instead at bolstering France's role as an ally of the Arab states.

Already deeply distrusted by Israel for France's pro-Arab policies, Chirac returned home after a six-day tour as nothing less than a hero of the Arab world.

In Beirut, a street was named after him, and a Palestinian couple called their first-born son "Jacques Chirac Jibril" in his honor.

While Chirac's trip may have boosted France's lucrative trade prospects with the Arab world, it appeared that Chirac shot himself in the foot in his drive to install the European Union along with the United States as a negotiating partner in the peace process, an idea firmly rejected by Jerusalem and Washington.

During his visit to the Middle East, Chirac called on Israel to back the creation of a Palestinian state and to return the Golan Heights to Syria, stances firmly rejected by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. And while he addressed the Palestinian legislative council, he refused to address the Israeli Knesset.

By appearing during his trip more openly pro-Arab than ever before, Chirac clearly alienated Israel, which would have to accept European co-sponsorship of the peace process.

During a joint news conference with Chirac last week, Netanyahu made it clear that he did not support a European role.

And in Washington, State Department officials were asking European foreign ministers to let the United States continue its role as sole mediator in the Middle East.

But Arab leaders, particularly Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat, feel that Europe would counterbalance what they see as U.S. partiality toward Israel.

In a clear bid for increased European involvement, Arafat was scheduled to visit Norway this week, after which he was set to travel to Ireland, which holds the rotating presidency of the European Union.

But analysts here question whether Europe, the biggest financial donor to the Palestinian Authority, really has the stomach for a beefed-up role in the Middle East — not to mention the ability.

Further clouding the picture, Great Britain and Germany, which are the most powerful E.U. members along with France, back the U.S. role in the Middle East.

"I think that deep in their hearts, certain European partners are not really convinced that Europe should seek the role of mediator," Alain Dieckhoff, a Middle East specialist at the Paris-based Center for International Relations Studies, said in an interview.

"There is a difference in approach between Chirac and the others — Britain because of very old, traditional bonds to the United States, and Germany, for historical reasons," he said.

### Difficult to reach E.U. consensus

Daniel Vernet, a European specialist for the French daily Le Monde, said the difficulty of bringing 15 countries to a consensus would undercut Europe's ability to have an effective role as mediator.

"Europe is not in a position to play a role. On the basic principles — everyone should make an effort to push the peace process forward and land must be traded for peace — they agree," Vernet said.

"The idea that divides them is what kind of political action to take. That's why their initiatives never amount to much."

Leon Brittan, vice president of the European Commission, the European Union's executive body, said during a visit last week to Paris that Europe could not play an effective diplomatic role in the Middle East because

it lacked a unified stance. "The conditions aren't there yet" for an enhanced European role, he said.

"If we work together and abstain from independent action, we will be able to work with the United States in this region. Without that we won't succeed," Brittan added.

Europe's inability to overcome internal divisions were evident in its mixed reaction to the Israeli-Palestinian violence that erupted in late September, leaving 76 people from both sides dead and hundreds more wounded.

The European Union responded by first issuing a tough statement rebuking Netanyahu's government for failing to meet its obligations in the peace process.

But then Irish Foreign Minister Dick Spring traveled to Israel — at France's insistence — with a letter that turned out to contain a much watered-down European position.

Chirac has closely modeled his Middle East policy after that of his mentor, President Charles de Gaulle, who reasserted France's influence in the Arab world and, after the 1967 Six-Day War, imposed an anti-Israel embargo that dogged relations between the two countries for years.

Like de Gaulle, Chirac is determined to extend Europe's influence in world affairs.

But coming in the wake of years of U.S. diplomatic activity in the region, the French leader's statements and actions last week may well be compared to a bull in a china shop.

Chirac's headline-making run-in last week with Israeli security guards during a tour of Jerusalem's Old City played well with the Arabs, as well as with the French, who like to see their leaders stand up to foreign powers — particularly the United States and Israel.

#### **'Cavalier, spectacular methods'**

But his proclamations about a Palestinian state and the Golan Heights may not only toughen U.S. and Israeli opposition to E.U. involvement in the negotiations. It may also have hurt France's position within the European Union.

Dominique Moisi, director of the Paris-based French Institute for International Relations, said Chirac's "cavalier, spectacular methods" might have isolated France from its E.U. partners.

"As much as Europe is frustrated at paying for the peace process while being excluded politically, the Europeans don't include themselves in what Chirac has just done," Moisi said.

"In the end, most [European leaders] will go with their loyalty to America."

For his part, Philippe Moreau Defarges, a European affairs specialist with the French Institute for International Relations, sees Chirac's drive for increased E.U. involvement as a gamble he cannot lose.

If Chirac succeeds in convincing his European partners to seek an enhanced diplomatic role, his own position will be strengthened.

If he fails, his image in the Arab world will nonetheless improve for his having made the effort.

Chirac "has very little chance of being able to persuade his European partners, but I don't think it really bothers him," Moreau Defarges said.

"He's kind of ambivalent. He wants Europe to be involved, but above all, it's France he wants involved," he said.

E.U. foreign ministers were scheduled to meet in Luxembourg this week to discuss the appointment of a special envoy to the Middle East.

But Moreau Defarges said the envoy would have merely a symbolic role.

"He won't have much to say. He'll say what

Chirac said and no more: that the peace process must continue and everyone should make an effort," he said.

"Everyone will receive him politely, saying, 'Bonjour, monsieur. What do you have to say?' and then 'Au revoir, monsieur.'" □

#### **Hebron settlers disappointed as redeployment talks intensify**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Jewish settlers of Hebron are not getting the answers they seek.

In meetings with top-level Israeli officials this week, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, representatives from Hebron's Jewish community warned that Israel is about to make a "fatal mistake" by redeploying Israeli troops in Hebron.

The meetings came as Israeli and Palestinian negotiators intensified their discussions to reach a final agreement on the redeployment.

It also came amid reports that Jewish settlers had opened fire on Palestinian homes in Hebron.

Settler leaders, who have been warning of a bloodbath if the Palestinian Authority assumes control of Hebron, emerged dissatisfied from their meeting with Netanyahu on Sunday.

"We asked questions about security and civil matters, and didn't get any answers," Noam Arnon, the spokesman for the Hebron Jewish community, told Israel Radio. "I think the country is about to make a fatal mistake."

"These agreements can hold up as long as the situation is calm. But as soon as there are any arguments or misunderstandings with the Palestinians, they will collapse," he said.

Earlier in the day, the settlers met with the coordinator of government activities in the territories, Maj. Gen. Oren Shahor, who negotiated civilian issues in the Hebron talks.

The settlers also emerged from that meeting disappointed, saying that the Hebron agreement would ultimately "strangle" the Jewish community there by not allowing it to grow.

Meanwhile, U.S. Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross continued his mediation efforts to complete the Hebron agreement.

"It's clear that we have further narrowed the differences that exist, but we have not overcome those differences," Ross told reporters after meeting Netanyahu in Haifa. He was slated to hold talks later in the Gaza Strip with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who was scheduled to travel this week to Europe.

"Clearly the pace of negotiations is affected when the leaders are not here," Ross said, adding the clear hint that he would leave the region if Arafat left for Europe.

Israeli officials said Sunday that nearly all issues of dispute had been resolved in the negotiations.

Netanyahu told reporters that negotiations on Hebron were "at an advanced stage" and their conclusion rested solely on "Palestinian goodwill" to complete the process. But Palestinian officials said a number of key points remained unresolved, including Israeli demands for freedom of movement in Palestinian areas to safeguard Hebron settlers.

The pins-and-needles atmosphere in Hebron was underscored Sunday after a shooting incident in which Jewish settlers reportedly got out of their cars and began firing on Palestinian houses along the road.

The settlers said they fired in the air after Palestinians threw rocks and bottles at them. There were no reported injuries. □

## Tensions with Syria escalate as two Israelis die in Lebanon

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Tensions between Israel and Syria escalated this week amid reports that Israel planned to drill for oil on the Golan Heights.

At the same time, ongoing hostilities heated up in southern Lebanon, where two Israeli soldiers were killed and five others were wounded in a Hezbollah attack.

Maj. Ori Azulai, 25, of Kiryat Shmona, and Staff Sgt. Tom Karin, 20, of Kibbutz Ein Gev, were killed early last Friday morning, when their paratroop patrol detonated four roadside charges that were set by the Islamic fundamentalist group.

Azulai and Karin were buried Sunday.

The head of the Israel Defense Force northern command, Maj. Gen. Amiram Levine, said hostilities in southern Lebanon had heated up ever since Lebanon concluded its parliamentary elections in September.

"We are talking about two or three clashes a day," Levine said.

Meanwhile, the situation with Syria remained tense after reports that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had given the go-ahead for exploratory oil drills on the Golan Heights.

In Damascus, the Syrian daily Tishrin said, "The green light Netanyahu has given for an oil drill on the Golan brings with it a dangerous deterioration of the situation. This is a threat to security, peace and stability in the region."

In response to the recent reports, Israel's Infrastructure Ministry issued a statement denying plans for any drilling on the Golan.

The statement said that because of a government decision to privatize the Israel Oil Exploration company, all plans for new drilling had been frozen, including on the Golan Heights.

The situation with Syria has grown increasingly tense since Syrian troops moved into offensive positions in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley in September.

Israeli intelligence officials have said Syrian President Hafez Assad may consider military action to try to force the stalled political process forward.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who met Sunday with opposition leader Shimon Peres, said he did not believe that Syria was planning any military action against Israel.

Netanyahu said Sunday that Israel wanted to resume discussions with Damascus.

"We have offered to return to the peace negotiations and that offer stands," Netanyahu said during a tour of naval forces. "We are waiting for Syria's response."

Israeli-Syrian talks were suspended in March after Assad refused to condemn a series of Hamas suicide bombings carried out in Israel.

Chances for renewal of the talks dimmed with the election victory in May of Netanyahu, who has stated that he would not consider an Israeli pullback on the Golan, which was captured from Syria in 1967. □

## Israel lifts freeze on sale of West Bank apartments

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has lifted a freeze on the sale of some 3,000 empty apartments in West Bank settlements.

The previous Labor government had barred the sale of the apartments as part of its general policy of restricting settlement activity.

In August, the Likud-led government approved the expansion of existing settlements, but the apartment sales were held up for technical reasons, settler leaders said.

Netanyahu's decision Sunday was welcomed by settler leaders, who have been critical of the government for pursuing the peace accords with the Palestinians.

Criticism has also come from his own family.

Hagi Ben Artzi, Netanyahu's brother-in-law, announced this week that he was moving to the West Bank town of Hebron, where he would try to thwart any government plans to pull Israeli troops out of the West Bank town.

Meanwhile, thousands of Israelis took part in a Peace Now rally Saturday night in Jerusalem, calling on the government to pull the troops out of Hebron, a move that has been delayed since March.

The participants formed a human chain stretching from the center of Jerusalem to the grave of slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at Mount Herzl Cemetery.

The demonstrators then attended a rally opposite the Prime Minister's Office. □

## Israelis accused of Jericho misdeeds

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Jerusalem Magistrates Court has extended the detention of four Israelis arrested on charges of illegally entering the West Bank town of Jericho over the weekend and praying at a Palestinian restaurant.

Six other Israelis involved in the incident were released Sunday on bail of some \$300 each.

Posing as French tourists, the 10 Israelis entered the self-rule area, which has been declared off-limits to Israeli citizens since the outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence in late September.

The group of Israelis intended to worship at the ancient Jericho synagogue, reports said. But finding it locked and closed, they went to a nearby restaurant, where they began to pray.

The restaurant manager called the Palestinian police, who summoned the Israeli security forces.

The four in custody are thought to have organized the group. The judge said their actions could have sparked a disaster. □

## Israeli reservists back Netanyahu

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A group of 44 reserve officers and soldiers from Israeli combat units sent a letter last week to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in which they expressed their support for his policies and their willingness to serve in the territories.

The letter was written as a response to another letter sent to the prime minister in which 33 reserve officers and soldiers from combat units accused the government of dragging the country into an unjustified war.

"It's not that we want to serve so much in the territories," one of the signatories to last week's letter, Eitan Lassry, told Israel Radio.

It was "important to show support for the government at this time," said Lassry, who does his reserve duty in the paratroops.

He said the writers of the previous letter had used their positions in the military to express political views against the government.

While acknowledging that most of the signatories to the latest letter came from the right-wing camp, Lassry maintained that their letter was "apolitical." □

# AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

## **Spirit of shtetls endures in small Ukrainian towns**

By Lev Krichevsky

VINNITSA, Ukraine (JTA) — Fifty-five years ago, Yona Stoler, a 16-year-old Jewish boy, was shot by a German firing squad on the outskirts of a small town in central Ukraine.

On that August morning in 1941, Stoler was the only Jew out of 1,000 who survived the mass execution in Mogilyov-Podolsky, a small town in Ukraine's Vinnitsa region.

"There were rabbis among my ancestors," says Stoler, now a retired dentist. "I feel it is my obligation to keep tradition in our small community."

Today, Stoler is one of only two men in the 1,000-member Jewish community in Mogilyov-Podolsky who know how to pray in Hebrew.

Nonetheless, a small synagogue in the old town opens its doors daily for afternoon prayers.

"We have a minyan every day," Stoler says proudly, because in most of the region's Jewish communities it is difficult to get 10 Jews together even for Sabbath services.

Like elsewhere in the Vinnitsa region, many Jews in Mogilyov-Podolsky live and work on the same streets their grandparents frequented in past generations. Indeed, nearly half of Ukraine's 600,000 Jews still live in small towns where one can feel the spirit of the shtetls of old.

While there is little remaining of shtetl life elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the old, lopsided wooden houses of Jewish quarters throughout the Vinnitsa region have not changed greatly since the turn of the century.

## **Cossacks butchered thousands**

The region has a population of some 15,000 Jews, less than 1 percent of the general population.

Before the war, the region's Jews accounted for what has been estimated at between 30 percent and 60 percent of the general population, making Vinnitsa one of the most important Jewish centers in Ukraine.

The region's Jewish roots, like most of Ukraine's, run deep. A Jewish community thrived here until the mid-17th century, when Cossacks led by Bogdan Chmielnicki butchered thousands of Jews throughout Ukraine. By the end of the 19th century, the Jews had managed to strengthen their ranks. But their numbers dwindled again in the years after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, when they were once again subject to pogroms.

Most of those who did survive during the Russian civil war were later exterminated during the German occupation of Ukraine in World War II.

Now, more than a half-century later, Jews throughout the region are struggling to regain their heritage. Many Jews now living in the Vinnitsa region returned to Ukraine from Siberia or Central Asia, where they fled when German troops were approaching their homes.

Lev Gershenzon, 82, says he never went to synagogue until recently. Before World War II, Gershenzon was the principal of one of the Yiddish-language schools in Mogilyov-Podolsky.

"It might be funny, but I just recently discovered how important I am for the community. If I didn't come today, probably there would have been no service in our synagogue," he says.

The old men praying in the synagogue remember the brisk Jewish life that existed in their native town decades ago. Most of them are Holocaust survivors; they personally witnessed the destruction of their community at the hands of the Nazis.

One encounters similar experiences throughout the region, where Jews work as doctors, teachers, craftsmen, shopkeepers and unskilled laborers.

Misha Lanter is the last Jewish artisan in his native town of Gaisin. "My father was a tailor, and I've been a shoemaker all my life," the 59-year-old explains in Yiddish. His workshop is located on the same street on which dozens of Jewish craftsmen worked before the war.

Moisei Semidubersky, a construction worker in Bershad, knows well that every Jew in town calls him a "shikker," Yiddish for drunkard.

But the 59-year-old survivor of the Bershad ghetto does not seem to care much about his reputation. "At least I do not work on the Sabbath," he says.

There are no rabbis in the towns of the Vinnitsa region. Lev Klyahandler of Bershad refers to himself as one, though he never received any religious training. But every Saturday, Klyahandler walks down the street to the synagogue carrying the proof of his devotion to his adopted calling. The retired doctor never leaves the ancient Torah scroll in the synagogue — so that "it won't be stolen," he says, from the 170-year-old adobe building.

Most of the provincial communities in Vinnitsa have no functioning synagogues. "Those who can pray cannot walk, and those who can walk cannot pray," said Leonid Sklyar of Zhmerinka, where the last synagogue was closed by the Soviet authorities in the 1960s. □

## **Czech official: Swiss agreement involving Jewish assets possible**

By Randi Druzin

PRAGUE (JTA) — The foreign minister of the Czech Republic has said it is possible that the Swiss and Czechoslovakian governments signed a post-World War II agreement enabling Swiss citizens to be compensated with assets in Swiss banks that belonged to Jews killed in the Holocaust.

Josef Zieleniec said last week that such an agreement would have allowed for compensation to Swiss citizens whose property in Czechoslovakia was confiscated by the Communist regime.

The statement comes in the wake of allegations that a similar deal between Poland and Switzerland enabled the Swiss to use Polish Jewish assets deposited in Swiss banks to compensate Swiss citizens whose property in Poland was nationalized.

The foreign minister's remark also comes just days after it was suggested at a news conference in New York that the Czechoslovakian government might have made such a deal with the Swiss. The Hungarian government was also mentioned as having possibly made a similar deal.

"I cannot rule anything out," Zieleniec said, adding that such activities "were going on after the war." The Czech government said it is now looking through various archives to see whether an agreement existed.

Meanwhile, Switzerland's foreign minister, Flavio Cotti, told the Swiss newspaper SonntagsZeitung that both the Swiss and the United States were to blame for the bad blood that has put the countries at loggerheads over missing assets of Jewish victims of the Nazis.

In a related development, the Swiss minister of transport and energy, Moritz Leuenberger, told a gathering in Zurich of the European Council of Jewish Communities, "We still bear a heavy burden of shame when we think of the 'J' stamp in Jewish passports" and of the policy "which barred a great number of Jews from escaping to our country" during World War II. "The truth must be known about the role our country played, and we must support all historical investigation to get to the bottom of it," he told Jewish leaders from 30 European nations. □