



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Jordan's King Hussein and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat telephoned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to convey condolences after a Jordanian soldier opened fire on a group of Israeli schoolgirls, killing seven and wounding six. The shooting at an Israeli-Jordanian border site, which comes amid increased tensions between the Jewish state and the Hashemite kingdom, prompted King Hussein to cut short his trip to Spain and return home. [Page 1]**

■ **The United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on Israel to drop controversial plans for Jewish construction in eastern Jerusalem. The non-binding measure, passed in a 130-2 vote, comes after a U.S. veto of a similar resolution in the Security Council last week. [Page 1]**

■ **Democratic lawmakers stepped up their criticism of President Clinton's decision to send U.S. Consul General Edward Abington to Gaza this weekend for Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat's international meeting on the peace process. The Republican leadership also attacked the president's decision.**

■ **Swiss Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti told Jewish leaders in New York about his country's efforts to investigate its wartime past. World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman praised the "inspired program" that Swiss leaders have embarked upon in recent weeks to provide financial assistance to survivors of the Holocaust.**

■ **Rep. Steven Rothman (D-N.J.) and 77 colleagues sent letters to the members of the U.N. group that includes the United States and Western Europe, urging them to include Israel. Arab nations have denied Israel membership in the Middle Eastern group.**

■ **Czech President Vaclav Havel has taken "a personal interest" in the Slovak Jewish community's attempt to be compensated for gold that was taken from it during World War II, his spokesman Pavel Fischer said after a meeting between Czech and Slovak Jewish leaders. [Page 4]**

Week of escalating tension ends in terrorism for Israeli schoolgirls

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Leaders from around the world condemned this week's shooting of a group of Israeli schoolgirls by a Jordanian soldier, calling on all sides to take immediate steps to calm inflamed Middle East tensions.

The soldier killed at least seven of the schoolgirls, who were on a field trip Thursday to the Israel-Jordan border in the northern Jordan Valley. Six others, including at least one teacher, were wounded.

President Clinton condemned the what he called the "inexcusable and tragic act of violence" that took place on a hilly enclave, dubbed the "Island of Peace."

Under Jordanian control, the island in the Jordan River was leased to Israel under the two countries' 1994 peace treaty.

Clinton called Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from Air Force One to express his condolences.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright expressed her "shock and horror at the attack."

"Violence can never be an answer," Albright said in a statement. "We call upon all leaders in the region to calm the situation, to do their utmost to prevent future violence in any form and to redouble their efforts to forge a just and lasting peace."

Thursday's attack came against the backdrop of escalating tensions in the Middle East.

Arab and other world leaders had joined Palestinian officials in decrying recent Israeli decisions to build a new Jewish neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem and to withdraw from a smaller area of the West Bank than they deemed adequate.

Palestinian discontent boiled over into a decision by Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat to call an international conference this weekend in Gaza to discuss the peace process.

Arab leaders brought their discontent to the United Nations, where the General Assembly voted 130-2 on Thursday to call on Israel to suspend its plans to build at Har Homa.

At the same time, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan condemned Thursday's shooting in a statement, adding that it "highlights the need to renew confidence in the peace process."

On Capitol Hill, lawmakers also condemned the attack. But Democratic members of Congress launched an assault on Clinton's decision to send U.S. Consul General Edward Abington to Arafat's conference in Gaza.

In addition to signing an angry letter to the president, six Jewish members of Congress from the president's party lashed out at a news conference, labeling the Gaza meeting a "sham" and a "kangaroo court."

Hussein telephones Netanyahu

Relations with Jordan this week hit a strident chord that was sparked by the latest impasse on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

The Jordanian soldier opened fire one day after the publication of a pointed letter that King Hussein sent to Netanyahu, questioning his role as a partner in peace.

Hussein phoned the premier Thursday from his plane on a flight back to Jordan from Spain, where he cut short a trip because of the shooting.

In condemning the attack, Netanyahu said, "This incident emphasizes what I have been saying for some time, that the greatest threat to the peace process is the mentality of certain elements who sanctify the way of violence and who are prepared to act violently.

"There can be political differences, but there must be total, absolute and vigorous opposition to any sign of this type or any other type of violence."

American Jewish groups also were quick to condemn the attack and at least one group went as far as to link Hussein's statements with the violence that ensued. "The letter released by King Hussein and the vile action" stand "in chilling juxtaposition," Phil Baum, the executive director

of the American Jewish Congress, said in a statement. "When leaders allow themselves to characterize difficult negotiations as political acts of war, no one can claim surprise at subsequent acts of violence on the part of their followers."

Arafat, who had recently refused to take telephone calls from Netanyahu, also called the Israeli leader to express his condolences after the shooting.

Arafat said Thursday that he was willing to meet with Netanyahu — but only if the two sides held a real dialogue, referring to recent Palestinian charges that Israel was unilaterally imposing its decisions on the Palestinians.

Palestinian Education Minister Hanan Ashrawi suggested Thursday that Israel had itself to blame for creating the atmosphere in which the shooting took place.

In Washington, U.S. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns described her remark as "outrageous."

"It's that type of rhetoric that is overblown and unwarranted, and will not build the road to peace," Burns said.

Meanwhile, the victims themselves were seventh- and eighth-grade students on a field trip from the Fierst School in Beit Shemesh, outside Jerusalem. The school is one of 34 run in Israel by AMIT, a U.S.-based non-profit organization that supports Israeli schoolchildren.

Six of the victims were from Beit Shemesh: Natalie Alkalai, Keren Cohen, Nirit Cohen, Yeala Meiri, Adi Malca and Sherri Geddayev. The seventh girl was Sivan Fatihi of Moshav Tslafon.

The spot where the shooting took place is located some six miles south of the Sea of Galilee, on an area of farmland where the Jordan and Yarmuk rivers meet. Israel leased the area from Jordan under the two countries' peace treaty, and entry to the site is through a Jordanian checkpoint. It has become a popular site for tourists.

'It was a nightmare'

The students were listening to a guide when the soldier began firing at them at close range.

"As we were walking, we suddenly heard a burst of fire. We looked up and saw the soldier firing from an observation point. He then came down and began charging us," Rosa Himi, one of the teachers accompanying the students, told Israel Radio. "It was a nightmare."

Raz Hess, an Israeli who gives tours of the site, was with another group about 60 feet away from the students when the shooting began.

"They had their backs to him, and I saw him run toward them and begin shooting," he told Israel Radio. "He stood before one girl and shot her in the head."

Another teacher, Yaffa Shukrun, told Israel Radio that she told the students to lie flat on the ground. "I felt bullets spray across my back. I couldn't move, couldn't see anything, all of the most difficult thoughts running through my head," Shukrun said.

Security officials said the soldier managed to empty a magazine, some 20 bullets, before being overpowered by other Jordanian soldiers. Four of the wounded students were evacuated to a hospital in Israel. Five of the dead and two seriously wounded victims were taken to a hospital in Jordan. An Israeli helicopter and medical team were later sent to Jordan to transport the bodies and the wounded back to Israel.

Shukrun, a teacher who accompanied the wounded in Jordan, said, "When I was in Jordan, I was very tense about being there — but the medical treatment was fine. The doctors focused primarily on dealing with the situation."

Jordan's Crown Prince Hassan said the attack marked a black day in his nation's history and promised a comprehensive investigation in coordination with Israeli

police. Hassan also said he doubted that the soldier was motivated by recent regional tensions.

The gunman was identified as a driver who had been working in the area since the beginning of the year. Reports said he took another soldier's weapon to fire.

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai urged all sides to act with restraint and to continue pursuing peace.

"What is necessary from all leaders is to make every effort to prevent violence, and prevent a process in which someone or some people find themselves interpreting the matter in such a way as to take a weapon and carry out such acts of slaughter," he said.

Israel's Inner Security Cabinet convened Thursday night, but most of the discussion focused on the pending decision to build at Har Homa rather than the incident in Jordan. Despite the assessment of security officials at the meeting that construction at the site could spark violence, Netanyahu reportedly planned to seek his government's backing for the building to begin soon. □

U.S. Jews express disappointment after meeting with Hosni Mubarak

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has no plans to visit Israel anytime soon.

This was the message Mubarak left with American Jewish officials during a one-hour meeting here arranged by the American Jewish Committee. Participants almost universally expressed "disappointment" in Mubarak's handling of the recent crisis in the peace process.

In 16 years as Egypt's president, Mubarak has visited Israeli only once — for former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's funeral. The diplomatic snub has remained an underlying source of tension in the relationship between American Jews and Egypt as well as between Israel and Egypt.

"President Mubarak made it very clear that he will not change his commitment to peace," said Jason Isaacson, director of the AJCommittee's office of international and governmental affairs. "But we're disappointed in the actual steps he's prepared to publicly take."

When asked whether he would be as bold as Anwar Sadat and visit Israel, Mubarak took an apparent swipe at Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, saying that Sadat's Israeli counterpart, former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, was a man of "decision who could get his Cabinet to agree" on important issues, according to participants.

Mubarak defended Egypt's role in the peace process, but "on the other hand, he heard from the American Jewish community that Egypt could and should do more," said Jess Hordes, Washington director of the Anti-Defamation League, who participated in the meeting.

U.S. officials and American Jewish organizations had criticized Mubarak for urging Palestinians to adopt a harder negotiating line in the recent Hebron talks. Now, the Jewish groups asked Mubarak to warm up to Israel and tone down the criticism of the Jewish state.

"On balance, we were disappointed," Hordes said.

When asked about anti-Jewish and anti-Israel cartoons in the Egyptian press, Mubarak came ready to defend his country. To coincide with Mubarak's visit, the ADL had released a report on anti-Semitism in the Egyptian media and ran a full-page ad about it in The New York Times. In response, Mubarak's staff distributed a 17-page booklet of unflattering Israeli press accounts and editorial cartoons of the Egyptian premier.

"He did not address this issue in a satisfying manner," said Hordes. "There's no similarity between the two." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Palestinian security allowed to operate in eastern Jerusalem***By Gil Sedan*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As Israel grapples with whether to close Palestinian offices in eastern Jerusalem, Palestinian security officers continue to operate there.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in issuing the closure order — whose implementation remains in question — is reiterating the longheld position that the Palestinian Authority has no right to operate in Jerusalem.

Netanyahu also said Palestinian security forces should stop operating in the eastern half of the city.

Israeli officials would not admit it, but the activities of the Palestinian security officials are welcome to some extent.

Palestinian security operatives are able to achieve order among Jerusalem's Arab population with far fewer difficulties than the Israelis. As a case in point, Palestinian demonstrations were held the last two weekends at Har Homa, site of a controversial new Jewish neighborhood planned for southeastern Jerusalem. And contrary to initial Israeli concerns, the protests were not violent.

On Saturday, when the second demonstration was held, some 2,000 protesters marched from the neighboring West Bank town of Beit Sahur to Har Homa.

Several hundred Israeli police and soldiers were waiting for them at the proposed construction site.

The situation was tense — but a small force of several dozen plainclothes Palestinian security officers made sure that the demonstrators did not become violent.

Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani recently said that "he had no idea" that Palestinian security officers were operating in eastern Jerusalem.

Just the same, according to several observers, the Palestinians are operating a tourist police force in the Old City with the tacit approval of the Israeli authorities. The move came after tourists complained of pickpockets and other trouble in that part of Jerusalem.

The tourist police receive their salaries — some \$700 a month — from the local churches, allowing them to say they are not in the service of Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat. Still, they get their marching orders from Palestinian Authority officials in the Abu Dis neighborhood, just outside Jerusalem's municipal boundaries.

'Eastern city is already theirs'

Professor Yehoshua Porat of the Hebrew University, one of Israel's top experts on the Palestinians, claims that the involvement of the Palestinian Authority in eastern Jerusalem goes far beyond the tourist police. According to Porat, who is a harsh critic of the Israeli-Palestinian accords, the Palestinian Authority has introduced its own set of guidelines for daily matters in eastern Jerusalem.

These guidelines include setting rental rates, controlling educational and medical institutions, and establishing traffic "organizers" who sometimes direct the area's congested traffic — often ignoring the traffic lights and signs posted by the Israeli authorities.

This, said Porat, was the background for the Israeli determination to build at Har Homa, despite the worldwide criticism the decision engendered. "Had the government refrained from building in the eastern part of the city," he wrote in the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv*, "it would have been perceived by the Palestinians as if they have already gotten what they wanted. The eastern city is already theirs."

Aryeh Amit, Jerusalem's outgoing police commander, maintains that Israeli authorities are on the lookout to prevent growing involvement by the Palestinian Authority in the capital. In interviews he gave prior to his depar-

ture from what some say is the most difficult position held by an Israeli police officer, Amit said the Jerusalem police were holding in custody a senior Palestinian police officer who was suspected of kidnapping an Arab resident of eastern Jerusalem.

According to numerous reports, such kidnappings have become a routine part of the way in which Col. Jibril Rajoub, who is in charge of all Palestinian security forces in the West Bank, exercises control over the Arab population in Jerusalem — despite repeated Israeli protests.

Rajoub authorizes his security forces' activities in Jerusalem not only because they are part of the ongoing struggle over Jerusalem, but because the local population wants him to, said Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian, a law professor at the Hebrew University. "For better or worse," said Kevorkian, "Israel's police are perceived by the Arab population as the enemy."

Following this logic, a Palestinian whose car is stolen does not go to the "enemy" for help. Instead, Rajoub's forces — or local hooligans — are called in.

According to excerpts of a secret police report that was published recently in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, the activities of Rajoub's forces also include taking protection money from local Arabs, pursuing suspected collaborators with Israel and recruiting operatives to act against Israel if and when the need arises.

Israeli police officials believe that the Palestinian security forces should be removed from Jerusalem before they can be used against Israel in a major clash, the report said. It also noted that the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic intelligence service, disagrees with the police, seeking to maintain cooperative ties with the Palestinians.

In the meantime, the Israeli government has kept the focus on four Palestinian offices in eastern Jerusalem.

Last week, Israeli officials issued a warning that they would shut the offices in the coming days if the Palestinians did not do so themselves.

Israel has issued closure orders in the past, charging that the Palestinian Authority is specifically prevented from operating in eastern Jerusalem under the terms of the 1995 Interim Agreement.

Lawmakers critical of order

The latest closure order was issued against the Bureau of National Institutions, the Islamic National Committee for Struggle Against the Settlements, the Palestinian Institute for the Wounded and the Jerusalem Association for Welfare and Development.

Members of the Knesset Interior Committee met Monday with the top Palestinian official in Jerusalem, Faisal Hussein.

The parliamentarians emerged from the meeting with sharp criticism of the closure order.

Jawad Boulous, a lawyer representing the four Palestinian offices, met Monday with senior Israeli police officials who assured him that they would review the matter before closing the offices.

Kahalani was expected to submit his own decision later this week.

Regardless of whether the closure order is implemented, the Palestinian Authority will continue its operations in eastern Jerusalem — most notably at Orient House, the Palestinian's de facto headquarters in the city.

Neither the previous government nor the current one dared close Orient House, fearing that the move would touch off international criticism.

Beyond Orient House, numerous minor Palestinian institutions continue to operate in Jerusalem. The Geographic Bureau, for example, which was ordered closed last summer, continues to operate within the safe confines of Orient House. □

Jews and Poles initial accord on preservation of Auschwitz

By Alissa Kaplan

NEW YORK (JTA) — In the latest chapter on the fate of the site where the Third Reich murdered nearly 2 million people, Jewish and Polish officials have agreed in principle to a long-term arrangement for the preservation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death complex.

Advocates of the proposal, which was initialed March 5 in Warsaw, say they hope that it helps in resolving years of controversy involving the future of the former camps and their relationship to the nearby town of Oswiecim, where about 50,000 people now live.

Major points of the plan include physically linking Auschwitz with the Birkenau camp, which is not as well preserved and which Jewish leaders call the world's largest graveyard; ensuring the U.N. protective zone around the camp; better training for tour guides at the site.

The plan was signed in the presence of Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski.

All parties now have to approve the deal, in which case it will be brought back to Poland and officially signed, said Miles Lerman, the chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council in Washington, who headed the delegation of Jewish groups.

"The Polish government has advised me that it has looked with great favor upon my proposal," he said, adding that there was "no serious discussion" of a dollar figure for the plans. Lerman spoke in a telephone interview soon after he returned to the United States from Poland.

In addition to Lerman and Polish federal and local officials, attendees of the meetings on the future of the area included representatives of the International Council of the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the American Jewish Committee, the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and Yad Vashem.

The future of Oswiecim, the adjacent town, is also raised in the proposal, whose aims include "encouraging economic growth of the surrounding communities."

Lerman stressed that his delegation's sole concern is with the preservation of the camps and that any development of Oswiecim, a town of about 50,000 people, would be the responsibility of the Polish government.

But that aspect of the proposal has upset at least one Jewish official who has had an instrumental role in the preservation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps.

Kalman Sultanik, vice chairman of the Auschwitz Museum Council, the body charged with protecting the integrity of the Auschwitz grounds, said in an interview that he is opposed to an agreement that has to do with the neighboring town. "The Jewish point of view should be how to maintain Auschwitz," said Sultanik, also a vice president of the World Jewish Congress.

In addition, Sultanik took issue with the recent agreement's recognition that some issues, such as the controversial presence of crosses at the death camp, remain unresolved.

For his part, Lerman said the crosses had to come down. □

Three more nations join quest to discover fate of Jewish assets

By Joseph Kopel

BRUSSELS (JTA) — The ongoing investigation into the whereabouts of Jewish assets seized by the Nazis was broadened this week, with Belgian, Swedish and Czech officials announcing that they would launch probes of their own.

The Belgian government announced that a former

governor of the country's national bank, Jean Godeaux, would chair a commission that will investigate the whereabouts of assets seized during the war from the country's Jews.

Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene announced the decision to create the commission during a meeting with Belgian representatives from the World Jewish Restitution Organization.

The WJRO, which has spearheaded Jewish restitution efforts throughout Europe, was created in 1992 by the World Jewish Congress, the Jewish Agency for Israel and other leading Jewish groups.

The WJRO's Belgian representatives have been seeking to learn the fate of bank accounts and real estate that belonged to Belgian Jews who died in the Holocaust.

It has also sought to track the extent of Jewish-owned diamonds stolen by the Nazis, who used them to buy foreign currencies and thereby finance their war effort.

At the onset of World War II, the National Bank of Belgium attempted to transfer its gold reserves to Africa via France. But France's wartime Vichy regime seized the gold and gave it to the Nazis.

In 1947, the Allies returned Belgium's gold reserves, but it remains unclear whether gold belonging to Belgian Jews was part of those assets.

Elsewhere, Sweden agreed this week to cooperate with Jewish officials in a wide-ranging probe into the country's dealings with the Nazis and its handling of Jewish-owned accounts. The agreement was reached at a meeting between World Jewish Congress Secretary-General Israel Singer and Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson.

At the meeting, Swedish officials promised a comprehensive probe, which they said would be completed within a year, said Elan Steinberg, WJC executive director.

Havel has taken a 'personal interest'

In the Czech Republic, meanwhile, President Vaclav Havel has taken "a personal interest" in the Slovak Jewish community's attempt to be compensated for gold that was taken during World War II.

Presidential spokesman Pavel Fischer announced Havel's involvement after a meeting last Friday involving the head of the Presidential Office, Ivan Madek, and Czech and Slovak Jewish leaders. Fischer said Havel believes that moral rather than legal considerations should take precedence in the dispute between the Czech National Bank, which says it no longer has the gold in question, and the Association of Slovak Jewish Communities, which is seeking compensation of about \$3.6 million from the bank.

Czech Finance Minister Ivan Kocarnik has been discussing the issue with bank officials and is expected to make an announcement within a month.

In December, the bank turned down the association's initial request for compensation. The bank claimed at the time that it did not have the gold — which was transferred in 1953 to its predecessor, the State Bank of Czechoslovakia — and that compensation was a matter for the Slovak government.

According to bank officials, Slovakia obtained the gold when Czechoslovakia split into two states in 1993.

But Slovak officials have maintained that the gold in question was kept separate from other assets and was not included in the 1993 division of former federal assets.

The director of the Slovak Jewish group, Josef Weiss, said the Czech government had been more responsive than Slovak officials to the demands of his association.

Any moneys received as compensation, Weiss added, would be used to support Slovak Holocaust survivors and to refurbish Jewish cemeteries. □

(JTA correspondent Randi Druzin in Prague contributed to this report.)