

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israel's attorney general rejected police recommendations to indict Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi in connection with the Bar-On affair. The influence-peddling scandal nonetheless threatened to topple the premier's Likud-led government. [Page 1]

■ Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat agreed to resume security coordination with Israel, which he broke off in March after Israel began construction of a new Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem. The move came as a result of U.S. envoy Dennis Ross' shuttle to the region last week, which led to a meeting of Israeli and Palestinian security chiefs in the Gaza Strip. [Page 3]

■ A committee investigating the March 13 shooting deaths of seven Israeli schoolgirls by a Jordanian soldier recommended the dismissal of the head of the security division at the Education Ministry. The commission said that despite an Education Ministry ban on visiting Naharayim, the site of the shooting located in Jordanian territory, hundreds of schoolchildren have visited the site.

■ Fervently Orthodox demonstrators resumed protests on Jerusalem's Bar Ilan Street, demanding that the thoroughfare, which cuts through religious neighborhoods, be closed on the Sabbath. [Page 2]

■ The Israel Defense Force denied rumors that it had launched a commando raid in Iran to rescue missing Israeli airman Ron Arad, who was shot down over Lebanon in 1986. Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai said he had no idea of the source of the rumors, but he roundly denied that any rescue attempt had been made or that there had been any developments in the ongoing efforts to obtain information about Arad.

■ Russian President Boris Yeltsin appointed former Finance Minister Alexander Livshits to head a new economic advisory department. Livshits, who is Jewish, will take charge of supplying the president with analytical information about the country's market reforms.

NEWS ANALYSIS**Vindicated by attorney general, Netanyahu faces other challenges**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Although Israel's attorney general has announced his conclusions in the Bar-On affair, the ramifications of the investigation into influence-peddling in the senior echelons of the Netanyahu government are not yet over.

While Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu eluded indictment in the affair, he was this week continuing to defend his political stature even as he sought to ensure that none of his coalition partners jumped ship.

Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein announced Sunday night that he had not found sufficient evidence in a 995-page police report to indict Netanyahu in connection to corruption allegations surrounding the short-lived appointment of Roni Bar-On as attorney general.

Citing a similar lack of evidence, Rubinstein said the file on Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi also would be closed.

However, the attorney general did find grounds to indict Shas Knesset member Aryeh Deri for alleged breach of trust, fraud and extortion.

Speaking at a news conference where he and State Attorney Edna Arbel announced their decision, Rubinstein said that a "dismal picture" of the norms of government had emerged from the police investigation, but that insufficient evidence of criminal behavior was found.

The police had recommended bringing charges against Netanyahu, Hanegbi and Avigdor Lieberman, director-general of the premier's office, but the final decision was in the hands of Arbel and Rubinstein. They have not yet made a decision about Lieberman.

"We based our decision on purely professional elements — is there enough evidence to file criminal charges," Rubinstein said.

Netanyahu welcomed the attorney general's decision, saying he felt vindicated.

"I made a mistake, I admit that, but I did not commit a crime. There is a big difference between the two," he said in a televised statement.

The attorney general's announcement followed intensive consultations on the findings of a three-month long police probe into allegations surrounding the abortive appointment in January of Bar-On, a Jerusalem lawyer and Likud activist.

Bar-On, whose appointment was endorsed at a January 10 Cabinet meeting, stepped down two days later amid a controversy over his professional qualifications.

The allegations, first raised in an Israel Television report, suggested that Netanyahu's coalition ally Deri had pushed for Bar-On's appointment in the hope of getting a plea bargain in his own ongoing corruption trial.

Possible erosion of Cabinet support

In the aftermath of Sunday's decision by the attorney general, questions lingered about the viability of the fragile 9-month old coalition led by Netanyahu.

The immediate danger facing Netanyahu is possible erosion of support within his Cabinet over the Bar-On affair.

Netanyahu, in a CNN interview Sunday night, admitted that he "could not guarantee" that every one of his ministers would stick with him. However, he declared that the parties comprising the coalition were "solid" and the government would endure.

Two key coalition parties, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah and the Third Way, were meeting before Passover began Monday evening to decide how to respond to the attorney general's report.

Yisrael Ba'Aliyah leader Natan Sharansky was burdened by his own statement, when the allegations surrounding the appointment of Bar-On were first aired on Israel television three months ago, that "if only 10 percent of them are true — this government must go."

Yehuda Harel, leader of the Third Way, said Sunday night that the attorney general's report was "very far from an exoneration of the prime minister."

If either of these parties decides to bolt from the coalition, the prime

minister would be forced to call new elections — both for prime minister and for the Knesset.

Netanyahu could face discomfort from yet another coalition partner — the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, which holds 10 Knesset seats.

The fact that only Shas Party leader Deri is to be indicted in connection with the Bar-On affair was causing enormous resentment in Shas, and party spokesmen called Sunday night for mass demonstrations.

If, however, these three parties remain in the government, Netanyahu can be confident of weathering the possible defections of one or more of his own Likud Party colleagues.

At least two Likud Cabinet members, Finance Minister Dan Meridor and Communications Minister Limor Livnat, were assessing their own personal futures early this week. Both have expressed reservations about Netanyahu's style of governance.

In any event, Netanyahu could make a quick Cabinet reshuffle, including removing Hanegbi, who was closely associated with Bar-On, and perhaps bring in some new faces. Netanyahu promised to appoint a Cabinet committee that would carefully weigh appointments such as attorney general in the future.

An alternative scenario for the government's future envisions Yisrael Ba'Aliyah and the Third Way joining forces with the Labor Party in a special Knesset vote to remove the prime minister, which requires a majority of 80 out of the 120 parliament members.

In that event, the Knesset would not dissolve and a new election would be held only for prime minister.

What steps might be taken in the Knesset were likely to await High Court of Justice action on petitions by Labor Knesset member Yossi Beilin and Meretz leader Yossi Sarid, who were appealing to the court to overturn the attorney general's decision not to implement the police recommendation to indict the prime minister.

'It's all just politics'

However, most legal experts in Jerusalem agreed with the premier that the chances of the High Court reversing the attorney general's decision are slender at best.

As the domestic political maneuvering continues, Netanyahu can be expected to step up diplomatic moves on the stalled peace process and to seek to enhance the image of business as usual.

"We've got a lot a work ahead of us," he kept telling a CNN interviewer and his tens of millions of viewers, determined to create an image of a back-to-normal administration brushing off a passing cloud. "It's all just politics," he assured the viewers.

But the prospect of continuing domestic political instability in the weeks ahead does not augur well for efforts to get the Israeli-Palestinian peace process back on track.

With his coalition now shakier than ever, he will be more dependent on its hard-line elements, the National Religious Party and the right wing of Likud.

These elements almost rebelled over the Hebron accord in January, and over the scale of Netanyahu's proposal to transfer nine percent of rural West Bank land to the Palestinian Authority in the first of three further redeployments.

These Cabinet members had objected to the transfer of the two percent of West Bank territory that was still under sole Israeli control. The redeployment was not implemented after the Palestinian Authority objected to what it described as the redeployment's limited scope.

The hard-liners, totaling 17 Knesset members, have given notice that they will bolt if a second redeployment, slated for September, proves more generous.

To that extent, therefore, Netanyahu seems more hamstrung than ever — and the prospects of a resumption of forward movement in the peace process with the Palestinians are dim.

However, the logic of the prime minister's complicated situation could lead to a radically different outcome.

Beleaguered at home and disparaged abroad in the wake of the attorney general's report, Netanyahu might go for a dramatic move forward on the peace front as a way to recover his diminished international standing.

After all, at the end of the day the hard-liners in his coalition have nowhere else to go, while the Labor opposition can be counted on to back the premier in the Knesset if he takes a generous position vis-a-vis the Palestinians.

That may not be the most likely scenario. But then these are not ordinary times for Israel. □

Bar Ilan street protests resume after court rules against closure

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After an eight-month lull, fervently Orthodox demonstrators have resumed large-scale protests aimed at closing Jerusalem's Bar Ilan Street to Sabbath traffic.

The weekend protests came in the wake of a High Court ruling last week to keep the street open on the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays until Transportation Minister Yitzhak Levy worked out a compromise between religious and secular interests.

Bar Ilan Street, which cuts through religious neighborhoods, is also a main artery linking outlying city neighborhoods to the center of Jerusalem.

The court decision was handed down after Levy rejected earlier compromise proposals, including one that called for the street to be closed during prayer times, and another road, currently closed, to be opened to traffic.

Fervently Orthodox activists had suspended their demonstrations while they awaited the court's ruling.

Last summer, Bar Ilan Street was the site of repeated violent clashes between fervently Orthodox demonstrators and police.

At the time, secular groups held protests of their own, often calling on their followers to drive along the street on the Sabbath.

The street has become the flashpoint for an ongoing debate between secular Israelis, who want to be free of religious constraints when it comes to setting public policy, and the fervently Orthodox, who view the presence of Sabbath traffic on the street as a violation of religious law.

In Saturday's protests, which police said were less intense than expected, thousands of fervently Orthodox demonstrators clashed with large numbers of police, who pushed the protesters back to prevent them from blocking the street.

Some 20 demonstrators were detained, and about 10 police officers were injured in scuffles.

Jerusalem police chief Yair Yitzhaki said the police had achieved their goal of ensuring that the road remained open to traffic.

The police had stationed water cannons near the site of the demonstrations, but they did not use them against the protesters.

The head of the secularist Meretz faction, Arnan Yekutieli, said that in light of Saturday's demonstrations, secular activists planned to resume their protests as well.

Yekutieli charged that the fervently Orthodox protests had proved that the religious community did not intend to honor the High Court ruling. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Turkey's Islamist premier shifts attitude toward ties with Israel

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — At first, Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan had no desire at all to meet with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy.

As far as the Islamist premier was concerned, why bother with a representative of the country he has often described as “a cancer in the heart of the Arab and Muslim world?”

But Erbakan came under pressure from Turkey's secularist army generals, who seek closer ties with the Jewish state, and eventually — albeit grudgingly — he met with Levy for 50 minutes earlier this month in the Turkish capital of Ankara.

“Relations between Israel and Turkey have never been as good,” said Turkish journalist Sam Cohen in a telephone interview from his Istanbul office. “And even Erbakan cannot change that.”

The April 8 meeting marked the first time that Erbakan had a face-to-face session with an Israeli political leader.

A strong critic of Israel, Erbakan has until now refused to respond to messages sent by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In the runup to the meeting, Erbakan faced strong conflicting pressures within his country.

On the one hand, the army tells him that cooperation with Israel is a top Turkish interest. And the army has the influence to command Erbakan's attention.

At the same time, fundamentalists within his Islamic Welfare Party have been exerting pressure on him to sever relations with Israel.

Barring a drastic escalation of Israeli-Palestinian tensions, said Cohen, Erbakan will not be able to do so because Turkey's strategic interests are at stake.

At first, Erbakan was decidedly frosty during his meeting with Levy.

He led his Israeli guest to a seat to his right, stared at an imaginary point in the air and began talking about Israel's need to respect Palestinian rights and to withdraw from the territories. He also warned against Israeli plans to “demolish the Al-Aksa Mosque” in Jerusalem, as if he really believed the worst of the Islamic fundamentalists' anti-Israel propaganda.

Levy impassively responded that Israel had been careful to preserve the holy sites of all religions. He added that Jerusalem had never been the capital of any people other than the Jews.

'A common enemy: Syria'

Despite the chilly start to the session, the atmosphere slowly thawed, particularly after journalists left the room, according to participants at the meeting.

Gradually, Erbakan was smiling and talking about the countries' growing economic ties.

But he did not mention the strongest element binding the two countries — a common strategic interest.

“The two countries have a common enemy: Syria,” said Amikam Nahmani of Bar Ilan University's Begin-Sadat Institute for Strategic Studies.

Turkey regards Syria as an adversary primarily because of Damascus' support for Kurdish rebels seeking self-rule in southeastern Turkey. Water disputes also have been a source of tensions between Ankara and Damascus.

“Turkey was quite unhappy at the time when negotiations between Israel and Syria seemed to be heading toward an agreement,” Nahmani said in an interview.

“Turkey feared that if the Syrians removed their

troops from the Golan Heights, the troops might be deployed along the Turkish border.

“Turkey was equally unhappy about the possibility that as a result of an agreement with Israel, Syria would be struck off” the U.S. State Department list of countries supporting terrorism, he said.

Levy's visit last week to Turkey brought to light one of the more interesting phenomena in today's Middle East. At a time when the Arab world is united against Israel because of the crisis in the peace process with the Palestinians, the strongest Muslim power in the region is seeking enhanced military cooperation with Israel.

As a result of a defense pact signed by the two countries last year, Israeli planes have carried out exercises from Turkish military air bases, senior military officials have visited each other's countries and Israel has begun modifying Phantom jet fighters for the Turkish air force.

Bilateral economic ties have also prospered: The volume of trade between the two countries jumped from an annual \$100 million in 1991 to \$500 million last year — and it is expected to reach \$2 billion by the year 2000.

In an effort to boost trade with Israel, the Turkish Parliament ratified a free-trade agreement with the Jewish state only days before Levy met with Erbakan.

Three years ago, relations between the two countries were considered a function of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. But now, “the Turks view the relations with Israel as a totally separate sphere from the ups and downs of the peace process,” a senior Israeli official said in an interview. □

Arafat to resume cooperation with Israel on security issues

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat has agreed to resume security coordination with Israel.

Arafat broke off the coordination efforts in March after Israel began construction of Har Homa, a new Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem.

The resumption of security ties came as a result of U.S. Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross' shuttle to the region last week. That mission led to an April 17 meeting of Israeli and Palestinian security chiefs in the Gaza Strip.

Ross returned to the United States over the weekend to brief President Clinton and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, with whom Ross will confer about the next steps to advance the peace process.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said the main purpose of Ross' shuttle was to clarify ways for renewing peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. He added that large gaps between the two sides' positions still had to be bridged. □

Russian lawmaker backs Libya

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Russian ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky has voiced support for Libya in the name of the people and Parliament of Russia.

Zhirinovsky made the comment during a visit to the North African nation as part of a delegation of Russian lawmakers that included Communists and ultranationalists.

Libya has faced international sanctions since 1992, when the United Nations imposed them in an effort to force Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi to give up two men wanted in connection with the 1988 bombing of a U.S. passenger jet over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Zhirinovsky has often voiced his support for Gadhafi. □

PASSOVER FEATURE

Matzah played central role in survival of Soviet Jewry

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — When he was 11 years old, Mikhail Chlenov would go to Moscow's Choral Synagogue to buy matzah for his grandparents.

It was in the early 1950s, when the Soviet regime's anti-Jewish policy reached its most severe stage. But outside the synagogue, the Russian capital's main Jewish center at that time, the line to buy matzah was long and tolerated by the authorities.

"Matzah used to be the only visible symbol of an individual's involvement in Judaism," says Chlenov, chairman of the Va'ad, the Jewish confederation of Russia.

Chlenov is convinced that Judaism survived in the Soviet era mainly because of matzah.

"What kept Yiddishkeit alive in Russia was the food, most importantly matzah," says Rabbi Berel Lazar, chief Chabad Lubavitch emissary to the former Soviet Union. The state could forbid its Jews to perform major Jewish rites but it "could not tell them what they should eat," Lazar adds.

Yuri Kheyfetz, 74, recalls that some 60 years ago a Jew would come to his house in Moscow to bake matzah for his family and for a few other Jewish families who lived nearby.

"My parents were not observant at all," says Kheyfetz. "We never had seders at home and until very recently I didn't even know what it is. But for some reason, my parents were not giving up the tradition of baking and eating matzot once a year."

Before World War II, many Jews across the Soviet Union could have matzah for Passover only if they baked it at home. Sometimes, several families organized a temporary bakery at someone's house to provide Jews in a neighborhood with fresh matzah. This was more or less the way most Russian Jews baked matzah in Jewish shtetls before the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

Matzah considered propaganda tool

During Stalin's regime, the Soviet government occasionally allowed Jewish communities to obtain matzah from abroad. But more often, top Russian officials prevented Jews from importing matzah.

In some cases, matzah was considered by the secret police to be a powerful tool of "anti-Soviet and Jewish clerical propaganda."

In 1939, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, father of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was dismissed from his post of chief rabbi of Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, for distributing matzah to needy Jews and for receiving matzah from a foreign Jewish community. For his "anti-Soviet crimes," Schneerson was sentenced to exile in Central Asia, where he died a few years later.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the production and sale of matzah was the only source of income for the country's largest synagogue — the Choral Synagogue in Moscow.

"Private donations could hardly cover even the synagogue watchman's salary," says Russia's chief rabbi Adolph Shayevich, who also has served as the Choral Synagogue's rabbi since 1983. "We could function solely due to matzot sales. And it was quite enough."

After World War II, a matzah bakery opened in downtown Moscow. But customers had to bring their own flour. A few days later, they would come to pick up fresh-baked matzah. Meanwhile, the practice of private apartment bakeries continued.

Rabbis knew that nearly all matzah produced in the

Soviet Union was non-kosher because it was made with regular flour. But they had to approve it as kosher, because this was only matzah available to Soviet Jews, says Shayevich.

In the early 80s, the Moscow bakery was allowed to purchase about 150 tons of flour annually from the state.

Jews from across the country came to buy matzah at the Choral Synagogue. "Some were buying a kilo or two for the entire community, so that everyone could have at least a small piece," Shayevich says.

The synagogue also was mailing each year dozens of matzah packages to communities in Central Russia, Siberia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, he says.

"Most Jews would come to the synagogue only once a year for the express purpose of buying matzah," adds Shayevich. During the rest of the year, the majority of Jews would not dare to show up at the synagogue out of fear of losing their job or being expelled from school.

Because the production of matzah was officially allowed, the unleavened bread was for many Jews the only symbol of Judaism they knew.

During the Soviet era, authorities just winked at the matzah production and sales, says Shayevich. "They understood that they could not fight it, and after all this lasted only a few months a year."

Russia's 'diet bread'

In fact, sometimes matzah was sold at a general grocery store in Moscow. There it was called not matzah but "diet bread," just as Orthodox Christians' Easter cake was officially labeled "spring cake."

Many Jews jumped at the idea of the diet value of matzah. "I'm buying matzah because it's good for my diet," says one woman in her 40s at a Moscow synagogue. Years ago, she explains, her mother said the family was eating matzah a few weeks a year simply because it was healthy food.

A former KGB officer recently said in an interview that in the early 1980's, he saw some matzah confiscated from Western tourists by customs officials at the Moscow airport. Part of it was later sold through Moscow stores as the "diet bread."

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian Jews discovered the taste of Israeli and American-made matzah. This year "20 percent of Russian Jews are going to eat matzah," says Lazar.

Now, four bakeries in Israel are working overtime to make matzah for sale in the former Soviet Union.

Last year, the Lubavitch movement imported about 15 tons of matzah to Moscow alone.

This Passover, Moscow Jews will eat over 100 tons of Israeli-baked matzah. Lubavitch emissaries will distribute another 330 tons to 80 towns across Russia.

Imported matzah is favored because locally-produced matzah costs twice as much as Israeli matzah and kosher flour remains unavailable in Russia.

A new bakery that opened in Moscow last year uses kosher flour imported from the United States to make matzah. "Sadly, production here is more expensive than abroad," says Lazar.

Apart from the price, Lazar believes that Israeli-made matzah also has a symbolic meaning.

"This would show people that they are connected to Israel" when they realize that the matzah they eat tastes the same as in Israel, he says.

A Jewish woman waiting to buy matzah at a Moscow synagogue agrees. "This Pesach, me and my daughter will be eating similar matzah," says 48-year-old Bronya Lerman.

"But I will eat mine in Moscow and she in Israel, where she's been living for six years already." □