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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Demonstrations turn violent

Violence erupted during demonstrations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip marking what Palestinians term "al-nakba," Arabic for "the catastrophe" caused by the creation of the Jewish state on May 14, 1948.

Palestinian officials said eight people were killed in Gaza when a crowd confronted Israeli troops. In Jerusalem, Israeli police on horseback charged into a crowd of Palestinians protesters. [Page 1]

Premier hints at acceptance

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hinted during a morning speech in Washington that he could agree to an American demand that Israel withdraw from 13 percent of the West Bank if the Palestinians agree to concrete security requirements.

Netanyahu held a second round of talks this afternoon with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. [Page 3]

Jews asked to 'have faith'

The U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs urged the Jewish community to "have faith" in President Clinton and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright as they continue to push Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accept the American peace plan.

"The president did not get the reputation in the Jewish community as the most pro-Israel in the history of the relationship for nothing," Martin Indyk said in response to a question after a speech to the American Jewish Committee. In his speech, Indyk said charges by Israeli officials that Washington was issuing ultimatums to the Jewish state are "totally inappropriate given the way we moved forward with Israel in this process." [Page 3]

Two injured in shul bombing

Two people were injured in Wednesday's explosion at a Moscow synagogue. The explosion at the Marina Roscha shul, a Lubavitch congregation, damaged two of the building's three floors.

To demonstrate its solidarity with Russian Jews in the wake of the bombing, the World Jewish Congress announced it would hold an executive committee meeting in Moscow this fall. WJC officials say the meeting will mark the first time that international Jewish leaders convened in the Russian capital.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Palestinians mark 'catastrophe' as violence erupts in territories

By Avi Machlis

RAMALLAH, West Bank (JTA) — A huge Palestinian flag draped on the side of a six-story building in a central square testifies to the sense of pride felt in this self-rule town.

Residents are crowded on every balcony, window and rooftop as thousands of Palestinians carrying banners and waving flags march peacefully toward a gathering at Manara Square in the center of Ramallah.

They are commemorating what they call "al-nakba," Arabic for "the catastrophe" caused by the creation of the Jewish state on May 14, 1948.

The commemoration, held throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip on Thursday, was for Palestinians a difficult day of mixed emotions.

Scores of Palestinian police tried to keep the peace in Ramallah — and their efforts were more successful than elsewhere in the territories, where those emotions boiled over into the worst Israeli-Palestinian violence in more than a year.

Palestinian police said eight people were killed, including one 8-year-old boy, when Israeli troops fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse protesters in the Gaza Strip. Some 150 Palestinians were wounded.

Israeli security forces said it appeared that at least one Palestinian death was caused by Palestinian police fire. In Jerusalem, Israeli police on horseback charged into a crowd of Palestinian protesters. But in Ramallah — known as a moderate Palestinian city — there were only sporadic incidents of violence.

At midday, demonstrators carry black flags in memory of the thousands who died in the years of struggle against Israel. A noontime siren wails, and Palestinians stand in silence — much as Israelis do on their annual Remembrance Day for fallen soldiers.

"Today is the day that Israel occupied us 50 years ago, and we lost our freedom," says Tareq Muhammad, 16. "We have the right to ask for our rights back from the international community."

Although Muhammad refers to Israel's internationally recognized borders as occupied land, he and most Palestinians interviewed by a visitor to Ramallah said they accept a two-state solution to the conflict.

Just the same, for Muhammad and countless other Palestinians, the establishment of Israel remains a deeply traumatic experience. In 1948, Muhammad's family fled their home in Jerusalem. They were among an estimated 700,000 Palestinians who lost their homes during Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

To this day, Israel and the Arab world dispute the origins of the 1948 refugee crisis.

Israel has insisted that the Palestinians fled en masse on orders from invading Arab armies. Palestinians say they were forcibly driven out by Israel. The truth, say most historians, lies somewhere in between. Whatever the cause, the refugee issue is a prominent theme during the commemorations.

"We have a place under the sun," Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat says in a speech broadcast on Voice of Palestine radio after the siren sounded.

"We are asking for the return of the exiled to the homeland and to build an independent Palestinian state on our land," he says, adding the often-reiterated wish that his people may someday celebrate in their "eternal capital" — Jerusalem.

Arafat also challenges the slogan of the early Zionists who said Palestine was "a land without a people for a people without a homeland." This, Arafat charges, was a

MIDEAST FOCUS

Netanyahu, Barak met secretly

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office confirmed that the premier met secretly earlier this week with opposition leader Ehud Barak.

But Netanyahu's spokesman, Shai Bazak, denied media reports that the two had discussed the possibility of early elections.

Bazak said in a statement that Netanyahu had briefed Barak on the peace process prior to his departure for Washington and that the two leaders had met for such briefings before.

Bomb thrown at mosque gate

A Molotov cocktail was thrown at a wooden gate leading to the Al Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City, causing damage but no injuries.

Israeli police said they were investigating the attack, which occurred a day after an Arab worker was stabbed to death in a fervently Orthodox neighborhood near the Old City.

Software piracy costs millions

Some 70 percent of the computer software used in Israel is pirated and leads to millions of dollars in annual losses for manufacturers, according to lawyers who appeared before an Israeli Knesset committee.

The lawyers said the United States has threatened economic sanctions against Israel if it does not take steps to curb piracy.

Police said 36 files had been opened against computer dealers allegedly selling the pirated software.

Former finance minister dies

Former Israeli Finance Minister Yitzhak Moda'i died at the age of 72.

Moda'i, who helped craft an economic recovery plan that brought Israel out of hyperinflation in the 1980s, served for more than 20 years as a Likud Knesset member.



Daily News Bulletin

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"colonialist" slogan meant to "deny the existence of the Palestinians."

In Ramallah, banners in Arabic, English and even a few in Hebrew bear a variety of slogans, some of them strongly anti-Israel. "50 Years of Israel = 50 Years of Crimes Against Palestinian Land and Civilians," reads one banner.

Another compares Palestinian refugee camps to Nazi concentration camps.

Still other banners call for a just peace, an end to Israeli settlements and solidarity with Palestinian refugees.

Solidarity is a leading theme among Palestinians on this day.

"Sometimes strength emerges from sadness and pain," says Khalil Abu-Nahleh, who was born in September 1948. Israeli policies, he adds, were responsible for uniting his people. "The Israeli occupation stimulated our solidarity. We still hate and reject the Israeli occupation of any part of our land."

Many people gathered in Ramallah suffered personally during decades of conflict. Jewish-Arab strife hit Alexandra Odeh, 57, in an unexpected, far-off location.

In October 1985, her brother Alex was killed in a bombing of the offices of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in Santa Ana, Calif. Among the groups suspected in the still-unsolved case are the Jewish Defense League and the Jewish Defense Organization.

Odeh, a relief worker with Catholic organizations, despises Zionism for "turning Judaism from a religion into a nationalist movement." But today Palestinians are marking a "great victory," she says, because "after 50 years we are still able to stand in the face of Zionism and prove that our land was stolen."

Despite her bitterness, Odeh is willing to accept a two-state solution. But, she adds, "we want a just peace."

Mohammad Tahr, 40, lost three fingers when he was shot in the hand during the intifada, the Palestinian uprising, in 1988. He doesn't think the Palestinian struggle is over. "We can take the struggle in different directions," he says. "There will not be war, but because the Oslo door is closed now, the feeling among our people is not good."

Palestinians were divided on their analysis of where the peace process is headed. Some even expressed optimism that growing international pressure may turn the tide in their favor.

"After 50 years, the world is starting to understand our cause," says a tall, 23-year-old Palestinian policeman wearing a camouflage uniform and clutching a Kalashnikov rifle.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will "not be able to defy them. I am very optimistic that peace will come."

Frustration at the deadlock in the peace process is palpable on the streets.

"Netanyahu, listen to our shouts," chants a group of students from Bir-Zeit University in Ramallah. "This is the last warning."

Throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, that warning turned to violence as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians turned what was billed as a "Million Man March" into bloody clashes. Demonstrators charged Israeli soldiers stationed at checkpoints and near Jewish settlements. Palestinian police tried to restrain them, but could not stop them from hurling stones and bottles at the soldiers.

It was the worst Israeli-Palestinian violence since September 1996, when clashes erupted after Israel opened a new entrance to an archaeological tunnel in Jerusalem's Old City. Fifteen Israelis and 61 Palestinians were killed during three days of rioting.

Despite the latest violence, Israeli army officials said the confrontations were less serious than they could have been, due to efforts, for the most part by Palestinian police, to keep protesters from clashing directly with Israeli security forces.

The commander of Israeli forces in the West Bank, Brig. Gen. Yitzhak Eitan, said that Israeli security forces did not use any live ammunition, and the situation was far from an "uprising."

In Washington, where he was holding talks aimed at breaking the 14-month deadlock in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Netanyahu was quoted as saying that the violence was a direct result of incitement against Israel by the Palestinian Authority. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department spokesman, James Rubin, said the violence should send a strong signal of the need to rescue the peace process. □

(JTA correspondent Naomi Segal in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

JEWISH WORLD

House approves persecution bill

The U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved the Freedom From Religious Persecution Act by a vote of 375-41.

Several leading Jewish groups praised the passage of the bill, which would bar all but humanitarian aid to countries engaged in the persecution of religious minorities, prohibit exports of equipment that could be used as instruments of torture by oppressive governments and make it easier for those fleeing religious persecution to be granted asylum.

The vote came as the Senate began consideration of a similar measure.

WJC official lashes out

The secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress lashed out at Swiss Jews during a meeting with the community in Zurich.

"You don't even know what anti-Semitism is," Israel Singer said, responding to complaints that efforts by the WJC to get the Swiss to confront their wartime past had created an anti-Semitic backlash in the alpine country.

His visit came amid calls from the local community that the Swiss government not join in U.S.-brokered talks aimed at seeking a settlement of the country's financial dealings during World War II. In New York, the executive director of the WJC, Elan Steinberg, said the stance of Swiss Jews was "at odds with the sentiments expressed to us by Holocaust survivors around the world."

Argentina to investigate Croatian

Argentina said it would investigate a Croatian living in Buenos Aires for war crimes. Ivo Rojnica said in a recent newspaper interview that he was a fascist leader in the city of Dubrovnik during World War II.

Croatia is refusing to seek his extradition because of a lack of evidence, according to a news report.

Memorial may not be built

The speaker of the German Parliament was quoted as saying she doubted the country would ever build a national Holocaust monument in Berlin.

Rita Sussmuth's comments came after months of controversy and delays surrounding the monument's design and location.

Neo-Nazis may win seats

A Hungarian neo-Nazi party is poised to have representatives enter Parliament.

Based on voting trends from Sunday's first round of parliamentary elections, the Hungarian Truth and Life Party, led by Istvan Csurka, could win 10 seats in the 386-member Parliament after a May 24 runoff vote.

U.S. official fires back at Jews as Netanyahu takes case to Hill

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — America's top official for Middle East affairs has fired back at the organized Jewish community for criticizing President Clinton's peace policies.

"I would urge people who in this time of difficulty are worried about what President Clinton might or might not do to remember that this president did not get the reputation in the Jewish community of being the most pro-Israel president in the history of the relationship for nothing," said Martin Indyk, assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs.

Responding to a reporter's question at the American Jewish Committee's annual conference here Thursday, Indyk urged the Jewish community to "have faith" in Clinton and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright as they continue to push Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accept an American plan for breaking the deadlock between Israel and the Palestinians.

"I would urge you to lend your support to that effort," he added.

Indyk spoke hours before Netanyahu began a second round of talks with Albright in Washington. This week's meetings are a last-ditch effort to win support from Netanyahu for the U.S. plan, which calls on Israel to withdraw from an additional 13 percent of West Bank land and on the Palestinians to take concrete steps to ensure security. The remarks also came as the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, an umbrella body of 55 Jewish groups, sent a letter accusing the administration of creating "the perception of a shift in U.S. policy on critical issues affecting relations with Israel."

The group called on the president to "put these concerns to rest by reaffirming the United States' steadfast commitments to Israel." The umbrella group also asked to meet with the president at the "earliest possible time." The letter acknowledged a range of views in the Jewish community on the peace process, but wrote that "among the issues on which there is a clear consensus is that the government of Israel alone must make the difficult determinations affecting Israel's security."

The letter also calls on Clinton to make clear to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat that "any unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state would be a gross violation of the Oslo accords and would not be recognized by the U.S."

As Indyk urged support for the administration, Netanyahu was receiving support from lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

Netanyahu held a series of meetings with congressional leaders, including Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.)

"There was a unanimous feeling of support for the prime minister," Lott said after the meetings. Last month, more than 80 senators and 200 representatives wrote to Clinton urging him not to pressure Israel.

Meanwhile, in a series of appearances in Washington, Netanyahu hinted that he would agree to the American demand that Israel withdraw from 13 percent of the West Bank if the Palestinians agree to concrete security requirements.

Netanyahu told the Washington Institute for Near East Policy that the major sticking point in the talks is whether Albright would demand another sizable withdrawal in a couple of months. American and Israeli negotiators continued to work today to hammer out an agreement. For Israel, "the issue is not how many slices we have, but the total amount we are slicing," Netanyahu said.

"If I'm satisfied that the Palestinians have committed to a concrete program of fulfilling their obligations, and I stress the word concrete, then I would look at the question of what it is that we are redeploying," Netanyahu said.

"If I have those assurances, then I will move forward, and you will see that if those terms are satisfied, you will see it very, very soon."

Netanyahu was scheduled to meet with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan in New York on Friday. He was slated to speak at a few New York synagogues over the weekend and to lead the New York City Israel Day Parade on Sunday. □

Rabbis seek new dialogue at time of tension and divide

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — The creation of a national organization whose mission is to bring together rabbis of every denomination for dialogue is being met with a degree of skepticism — and a lot of hope.

The new group — named the North American Board of Rabbis — is the idea of modern Orthodox Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of the New York Board of Rabbis and spiritual leader of a 1,000-member synagogue in Westhampton Beach, N.Y.

Schneier raised \$50,000 from three heavyweight philanthropists to bring some 30 rabbis from across the country together this week for a daylong inaugural meeting in New York.

The gathering took place against an ongoing backdrop of severe Jewish in-fighting, spurred recently by the push for religious pluralism in Israel by the non-Orthodox movements and by an increasing insistence on religious hegemony on the part of the Orthodox. The current disagreement over the Jewish character of Israel has exacerbated long-developing tensions between Orthodox and liberal Jews in the United States.

"The American Jewish community is crying out for a voice of rabbinic cooperation, not conflict; one of devotedness, not divisiveness," Schneier said in an interview.

While Jewish unity is a mom-and-apple-pie issue for leaders of the Jewish community, the idea has proven much easier to endorse than to accomplish. The Synagogue Council of America was a venerable, 70-year-old umbrella group of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis and laity that died in 1995.

That group, with a similar mission to this new one, collapsed in part for financial reasons after some Orthodox participants decided they were no longer interested in this form of interdenominational dialogue. Is it possible that NABOR, which also hopes to be involved in national interfaith efforts, will succeed where the Synagogue Council failed? Schneier is confident that it will.

Noting that rabbis already work together on the local level, he said, "We already have the microcosms throughout the country. We're looking for a macrocosm."

Others are hopeful, too. "This stands a chance because those participating come unencumbered by institutional baggage," since they are there as individual rabbis, rather than delegates from their movements, Rabbi Henry Michaelman of New York, the longtime director of the Synagogue Council, said in an interview as the new group got under way this week.

"The Synagogue Council collapsed because it lacked a strong central office willing to engage day and night in shuttle diplomacy" between the Orthodox and liberal movements, he said. "This organization will have to do that, too, to work."

Yet others have questioned the value of adding a new organization to the alphabet soup of Jewish institutions, particularly at a time when those already in place are struggling financially.

"To go and try and organize a pan-American board of rabbis is unacceptable," said the executive of one major centrist Orthodox group who asked that his name not be used. "You're not going to paint with one brush a 'ganz' (whole) America."

"There are enough organizations already. To spend needed resources is a waste," he said.

Schneier disagrees. "We could serve as a paradigm of rabbinic

unity at a time when people are looking for this. Our very existence could rally the Jewish community," he said.

The kickoff dinner, held at the Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, included as guests Martin Kraar, executive vice president of the Council of Jewish Federations, and Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress, which were the conference's co-sponsoring organizations. The conference was funded by philanthropists Charles Bronfman, Michael Jesselson and Michael Steinhardt, who each contributed more than \$16,000 to fly in rabbis from communities large and small and from each of the major Jewish denominations.

They came from Omaha and Kansas City, Kan.; St. Louis and Portland, Maine. They came out of curiosity — and hope, said those interviewed.

"I came to compare notes as to what other boards of rabbis are doing," said Reform Rabbi Lawrence Goldmark, president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, based in Los Angeles.

The L.A. board has 250 members from all of the four denominations, "men and women, gays and straights, everybody together," Goldmark said with pride.

Orthodox Rabbi Joseph Weiss, chairman of the rabbinic council in Pittsburgh, said he came to New York "to find out just what's going on. To present a unified voice is possible, but it's not an easy course."

For Reform Rabbi Paul Cohen, head of the Maine rabbinic organization, which is based in Portland and is in its first year of operation, "What's intriguing is choosing to focus on ways that we can be together in community, rather than following the trend of looking at who's not there."

The reality in many communities is that rabbis of all denominations work closely together — most often to organize community-wide celebrations for Holocaust Memorial Day and Israeli Independence Day, but also on other matters of local interest.

And interdenominational tensions come up all the time.

In Pittsburgh, for example, where Weiss runs the 35-member rabbinic council, the clergy decided a couple of years ago to initiate a several-week community-wide, Jewish learning experience.

Classes were run by 10 rabbis from each of the denominations on a variety of topics, and were promoted to the entire community.

The catch was that each class had to be held in a venue in which any member of the community — from liberal to Orthodox — would be able to sit, and that ruled out any Reform synagogue.

Learning Torah is a religious act and in the view of many Orthodox Jews, it is forbidden to engage in religious activity in a non-Orthodox synagogue.

But one of the Reform rabbis in town insisted that his class be held in his synagogue rather than on neutral turf, Weiss said, and it turned into a major fight.

In the end, the Reform rabbi agreed to hold his class in the Jewish Education Institute, a community center devoted to learning, but the compromise was hard-won, Weiss said.

Several boards of rabbis, including Pittsburgh's, generally cope with such tensions by agreeing to put aside divisive topics. "We have a gentleman's agreement and look for common issues that we can deal with together," Weiss said.

Exactly what's next for the new NABOR is not yet clear.

Nor is it clear how this nascent group will be funded. "I have no idea" where future funding will come from, said Schneier. "I just believe there are enough people in the Jewish community who will embrace this organization and be supportive." □