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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Report: Focus placed on security

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross will reportedly focus on getting Israelis and Palestinians to agree to a memorandum on security arrangements during his current visit to the region.

Commenting as Ross began talks with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, U.S. officials said the only remaining gaps between the two sides involved security issues. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has come down with the flu and may not be able to attend a planned meeting with Ross, the premier's office said.

Israel expects U.N. challenges

Israel is expecting challenges from Arab countries and other supporters of the Palestinians during the 53rd session of the U.N. General Assembly.

During the session, which began Wednesday, questions of sovereignty over Jerusalem and Israel's possession of nuclear weapons are also expected to be raised. Israeli officials also say the Palestinians will likely use the session to strengthen their drive for statehood.

Religion measure faces setbacks

California Gov. Pete Wilson said he would veto a new state religious freedom measure because it extends protections to prisoners.

His promise to veto the bill came on the heels of a similar move in Illinois, where Gov. Jim Edgar has said he would not sign a religious freedom bill passed by the legislature unless it was amended to exclude prisoners. The veto threats constitute a major setback to efforts to put new state religious freedom statutes on the books. [Page 3]

Lileikis trial in jeopardy

A Lithuanian court is considering whether to dismiss the war crimes case against a man who headed the Lithuanian secret police during World War II. The trial of Aleksandras Lileikis, 91, has already been postponed three times this year.

In 1996, Lileikis, a former Massachusetts resident, was stripped of his U.S. citizenship for lying about his wartime activities. Lileikis denies the charges of genocide, saying the case against him was fabricated using documents forged by the Soviet KGB after World War II.

FIVE YEARS AFTER OSLO

Israeli, Palestinian hopes give way to disillusionment

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Five years after Israel and the Palestinians agreed to end their century-old conflict, many on both sides of the divide are feeling disillusionment — and anger.

Political visions such as former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres' "new Middle East" and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's "peace of the brave" appear to many as mere wishful thinking.

For them, the peace process launched in Oslo in the months before the White House signing has taken a seriously wrong turn.

The basic assumption behind Oslo was that one understanding would lead to another, mutual trust would increase and the fortress of peace would be built brick by brick.

But the Oslo architects did not anticipate the zeal of the hard-liners on both sides who would spare no effort to make the walls come tumbling down before the edifice of peace was erected.

Indeed, the months after the White House signing on Sept. 13, 1993, witnessed several stabbings and shootings of Israelis.

In one case, when two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped and killed while hitchhiking in the Gaza Strip, Hamas militants left a note with the bodies stating that the killings were a "gift to the peace process."

One Israeli who lost a friend during these months decided to wreak some retribution of his own: On Feb. 25, 1994, Dr. Baruch Goldstein opened fire in Hebron's Tomb of the Patriarchs, killing 29 Palestinian worshippers before he himself was killed by an angry mob.

The cycle of violence continued, with Hamas launching a series of suicide bombings to topple the peace process.

Starting with the first such attack in April 1994 in the northern Israeli town of Afula, Hamas and other terrorist groups have claimed responsibility for at least 15 terror bombings during the past five years.

Despite the mounting death toll, the peace process continued, with the May 1994 Cairo Agreement for launching Palestinian self-rule in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho, and more than a year later, with the September 1995 Interim Agreement for extending self-rule in the West Bank.

Weeks after that second agreement was signed, as protests from the Israeli right took on an increasingly incendiary tone, a gunshot changed the way Israel looked at itself.

The Nov. 4, 1995, assassination of Premier Yitzhak Rabin came at a Tel Aviv rally intended to give the peace process a boost.

According to some, the process begun in Oslo has never recovered from that fateful night.

Support for Rabin's successor, Peres, was shaken by yet another series of Hamas suicide bombings — in February and March 1996 — that claimed the lives of 59 innocent people and wounded some 220 others.

Israel was left reeling, and on May 29, 1996, Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of the Likud Party — and of the Oslo skeptics — was elected premier.

Although Netanyahu accepted the Oslo accords as a political given, Israeli-

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israeli official accuses Russia

Russia is still supporting Iran's missile development despite its repeated promises to cease these efforts, a senior Israeli intelligence official said.

"Even after [last week's] summit between President Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, there are no signs of change in Russian aid to Iran," the official told a Knesset committee.

Premier cancels trip

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu canceled a one-day trip to the former Soviet republic of Georgia to participate in celebrations marking 2,600 years of a Jewish presence there. The premier's office said Netanyahu had the flu, but political observers said the real reason was his failure to convince the Cabinet to support next year's budget. Thirteen of 17 ministers are opposing the budget's planned spending cuts.

More exercises planned

Israel said it is planning a joint air force exercise with Turkey. The announcement came one day after the two countries said they will hold joint naval exercises and will invite Egypt and Jordan to participate. Turkish premier Mesut Yilmaz, currently visiting Israel, lashed out at Syria, which criticized the planned exercises. Anyone complaining about Israeli-Turkish bilateral ties, he said, "should focus on the policies of the Syrian government."

Israel, Palestinians criticized

Amnesty International criticized the human rights record of Palestinians and Israelis in the five years since the Oslo accords were signed.

In a 40-page report, the human rights group said thousands of Palestinians had been arrested by both the Palestinian Authority and Israel without due process since 1993. It also said 20 Palestinians had died while in the custody of the Palestinian Authority.



Daily News Bulletin

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Palestinian relations suffered a serious setback. A period of mutual recriminations followed until what was arguably the nadir of the Oslo process: In September 1996, Palestinian rioting erupted throughout Gaza and the West Bank after Israel opened a new entrance to an archaeological tunnel alongside the Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City.

Despite Israeli assurances to the contrary, the rioters were certain that the Temple Mount was under threat.

Palestinian police and Israeli soldiers exchanged fire, with Palestinians using the very guns that were allowed them under the Oslo accords. In three days of violence, 15 Israelis and 61 Palestinians were killed.

The peace process recovered in the succeeding months, culminating in the transfer of most of Hebron to Palestinian self-rule in January 1997.

For the Netanyahu government, the transfer was a remarkable development: The Likud Party, for the first time in its history, had agreed to turn over a portion of Greater Israel to the Palestinians.

Netanyahu was trying to stave off the inevitable backlash from the Israeli right when, in March of that year, he approved the start of construction of a Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem.

Soon after, the Palestinian Authority suspended all negotiations with Israel. Despite a series of high-profile meetings arranged by the United States, there has been no meaningful progress by the two sides ever since.

Netanyahu said recently that the Oslo process has been dead for two years — but there are those who see the matter quite differently.

"Dead?" asked Ahmed Karia, the head of the Palestinian team at the negotiations in Oslo.

"Oslo is not a process of death. It is a process of life," said Karia, who was recently interviewed along with Uri Savir, his Israeli counterpart in those talks.

"There may be delays, there may be time-wasting, but I am sure that this process will not die," he said.

Savir, who was director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry when the two sides met secretly five years ago in the Norwegian capital, said that even in the best days of the Oslo process, the two populations did not sufficiently appreciate the great changes that have occurred.

"The Palestinians regarded Israelis as a people who had done them wrong. They did not see us as a people or a state," said Savir.

"We regarded the Palestinians as individuals, and not as a people or a nation with equal rights. As a result of Oslo, both parties have learned to know each other, and this can no longer be changed. This is the most significant thing that happened five years ago."

For many believers in the process, the main accomplishment of Oslo is the creation of a channel of dialogue, something unthinkable five years ago.

Meetings between top officials from the two sides no longer create banner headlines.

Some say that a major consequence of the Oslo accords will be the creation of a Palestinian state.

In fact, a portion of them believe that statehood is virtually in place.

Former Knesset member Uri Avneri, one of the first Israelis to advocate recognition of Palestinian national rights, wrote this week that "the State of Palestine is a fait accompli."

"There is not one serious officer in the IDF who seeks to reconquer Gaza, Ramallah and Nablus."

Indeed, public opinion polls have shown time and again that the majority of Israelis accept that there can be no real peace unless the Palestinians achieve statehood.

Five years after Oslo, radicals from both sides can proudly claim that they have all but stopped the Oslo wheels from turning. But according to those who, like Karia, are proponents of the accords, this is only temporary.

"The majority, with us and with you as well, know that this process has no alternative. This is what gives Oslo life and will keep it rolling." □

(JTA Foreign Editor Mitchell Danow contributed to this report.)

JEWISH WORLD

March leader called 'black Hitler'

New York City's police commissioner called the anti-Semitic organizer of last weekend's Million Youth March a "hatemonger" who behaved like a "black Hitler."

Howard Safir's criticism of Khalid Muhammad came as Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said those politicians unwilling to condemn the anti-Semitism expressed by Muhammad and other speakers at the march are forgetting the lessons of history.

Meanwhile, the Manhattan district attorney's office is planning an investigation of what caused the melee that occurred at the end of the march.

Reformer warns of 'Nazi regime'

The architect of Russia's first post-Soviet market reforms warned that the country's economic woes could spell political turmoil.

The current crisis "could have serious consequences and could end with the formation of a Nazi regime," Yegor Gaidar said.

Baltic commission questioned

A Jewish leader in Lithuania questioned the effectiveness of a newly established commission to probe war crimes committed during the Nazi and Soviet occupations of the Baltic nation.

Simonas Alperavicius, the chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish community, said he doubts that justice will be done because the commission has too many people with different views on how to confront the country's past.

Peres launches foundation

Former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres inaugurated a foundation in Spain to build cooperation among Jews, Muslims and Christians.

At the ceremony, Peres said that while he doubted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would be able to make peace, Israelis and Palestinians should still take part in joint ventures that build mutual trust.

Spielberg visits Sachsenhausen

German Jewish leaders accompanied director Steven Spielberg on a visit to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Spielberg later told reporters that his first visit to a camp on German soil had left him deeply moved.

Spielberg, who had visited numerous former concentration camps in Poland while filming "Schindler's List," is in Germany to receive a medal of honor for his efforts to generate a broader understanding of the Holocaust.

Millions of Germans, including large numbers of schoolchildren, saw the 1993 film.

Effort to pass state RFRAs hits roadblock in California

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The push to secure broad protections for religious practice around the country has hit a roadblock.

California Gov. Pete Wilson has said he will veto a new state religious freedom measure because it extends protections to prisoners. Wilson's threat comes on the heels of a similar move in Illinois, where Gov. Jim Edgar has said he will not sign a religious freedom bill passed by the legislature unless it is amended to exclude prisoners. The veto threats constitute a major setback to efforts to put new state religious freedom statutes on the books.

Since last year, state lawmakers have been working with a coalition of religious groups, including Jewish organizations, to craft legislation aimed at filling the void left when the Supreme Court invalidated the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

In striking down the 1993 law, commonly known as RFRA, the high court in essence said it was unconstitutional for Congress to dictate a standard for religious freedom to the states.

Seeking to adopt their own standards, the California and Illinois bills, as well as similar bills pending in state legislatures around the country, prohibit — as the original federal bill did — government from substantially burdening a person's free exercise of religion unless there is a "compelling interest."

While the First Amendment guarantees free religious exercise, activists say religious freedom legislation is necessary to secure religious rights when, for example, a law prohibits state employees from wearing hats or head coverings in the workplace.

"The difficulty for religious practice today is a sort of thoughtless government regulation, not intentional persecution," said Marc Stern, co-director of the American Jewish Congress' legal department.

Seeking to restore as broad protections as possible in the wake of the Supreme Court's action, religious freedom advocates have been urging Congress to adopt some new protections at the federal level. But activists have put most of their hopes into a campaign to effectively replicate the original RFRA state by state.

Florida passed a bill earlier this year, joining Connecticut and Rhode Island as the only states with religious freedom statutes on the books.

In Michigan, a bill could come up this year before the legislature adjourns, but some lawmakers there also want to exempt prisoners.

Bills have been introduced in a handful of other states, including New York and New Jersey, but so far have not moved toward passage.

In California and Illinois, both Wilson and Edgar have argued that the accommodations for prisoners under the bills could create security problems.

Edgar has already issued a conditional veto, which effectively kills the bill unless the legislature changes it to exempt prisoners.

In California the measure was amended to state that an inmate's exercise of religious rights may be subjected to reasonable restrictions. But that has not been enough to satisfy the state's Department of Corrections. Officials are arguing that the bill would lead to inmate demands for different meals, work assignments and religious paraphernalia, including some items that they claim could be converted into weapons.

Wilson has opposed the bill, but has yet to take official action.

The objections over prisoners, meanwhile, pose a dilemma for supporters of the legislation.

"The coalition's position has always been no exemptions — religious liberty for all," said Richard Foltin, legislative director and counsel for the American Jewish Committee.

But activists are now weighing whether to support a watered-down version that exempts prisoners or to hold out for a "clean bill" at the risk of getting nothing.

The position they take, and the ultimate shape of the California and Illinois bills, will likely carry implications in the coming year for other states where religious freedom bills are pending. □

Peace process chronology: Israeli-Palestinian negotiations

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — The following is a time line of key events since the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was launched five years ago on the White House lawn. The period was marked by at least 15 bombings of Israeli targets by Palestinian terrorists — as well as numerous drive-by shootings and stabbings of Israelis — several of which are included here:

- Sept. 13, 1993 — Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat exchange a historic handshake on the White House lawn as the two sides sign the Declaration of Principles, a timetable for launching Palestinian self-rule in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

- May 4, 1994 — Israel and the PLO sign the Cairo Agreement for establishing self-rule in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho. Jericho comes under self-rule on May 13. Israel completes its withdrawal from Gaza on May 18.

- Sept. 28, 1995 — Rabin and Arafat sign the Interim Agreement, which sets the stage for an Israeli withdrawal from six West Bank towns.

- Nov. 4, 1995 — Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated by Yigal Amir, a 25-year-old Orthodox Jewish law student, after a Tel Aviv peace rally. Shimon Peres steps in as prime minister.

- Jan. 20, 1996 — Palestinians in the territories vote for the first time to elect an 88-member legislative body. Arafat is elected leader of the Palestinian Council with 90 percent of the vote.

- Feb. 25-March 4, 1996 — Israel is left reeling by a series of Hamas suicide attacks in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Ashkelon that claim 59 innocent lives and wound some 220 others.

- May 29, 1996 — Israelis narrowly elect Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister.

- June 22-23, 1996 — Egypt hosts the first Arab League summit in six years to develop a united front against the new Netanyahu government's approach to the peace process.

- Sept. 4, 1996 — Netanyahu and Arafat hold their first meeting. Both sides agree to discussions on redeployment from most of Hebron, the last West Bank town to be turned over to the Palestinians.

- Sept. 25, 1996 — Palestinian rioting erupts in response to the opening of a new entrance to an ancient tunnel alongside the Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City. In three days of violence, 15 Israelis and 61 Palestinians are killed. Hundreds are wounded.

- Oct. 1-2, 1996 — Netanyahu, Arafat and Jordan's King Hussein attend an emergency summit in Washington after the previous week's violence. The summit ends with an agreement for Israel and the Palestinians to launch intensive discussions aimed at reaching an agreement on Hebron.

- Jan. 14-15, 1997 — Netanyahu and Arafat reach the Hebron Agreement during a late-night summit held at the Erez Crossing separating Israel from the Gaza Strip.

- Jan. 19, 1997 — Arafat is greeted by thousands of cheering Palestinians when he returns to Hebron for the first time in 30 years.

- Feb. 9, 1997 — Netanyahu and Arafat meet at the Erez Crossing to discuss the next stages of the peace process.

- Feb. 11, 1997 — Israel releases 31 Palestinian female prisoners — some of whom had been convicted of killing Israelis.

- March 18, 1997 — Israeli bulldozers begin construction work for the new Jewish neighborhood of Har Homa in eastern Jerusalem. The Palestinian Authority soon suspends negotiations with Israel.

- March 21, 1997 — Three days after the start of construction at Har Homa, a Hamas suicide bomber detonates an explosion at the Cafe Apropos in central Tel Aviv, killing 3 Israelis and wounding 47 others.

- July 30, 1997 — Two suicide bombers strike in the Mahane Yehuda open-air market in Jerusalem, claiming 16 victims and wounding 170 others.

- Aug. 20-21 1997 — Arafat holds a "National Unity Conference," during which he embraces political leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Israeli officials question Arafat's commitment to cracking down on terrorists.

- Sept. 4, 1997 — Three suicide bombers detonate near-simultaneous explosions at the Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall in downtown Jerusalem, killing five and wounding more than 190.

- Sept. 7, 1997 — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tells a Cabinet meeting that Israel will not "follow the normal course of the Interim Agreement" because of clear "violations on the part of the Palestinian Authority."

- Sept. 10, 1997 — U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright makes her first visit to the Middle East since becoming America's top diplomat in January. She later states that she will not return to the region just to "tread water."

- Oct. 1, 1997 — Israel frees Hamas spiritual leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin. Five days later, Yassin returns to a hero's welcome in Gaza.

- Oct. 7, 1997 — For the first time since the furor erupted over Har Homa, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators meet to discuss implementing portions of the Interim Agreement — including a safe-passage route, an airport and seaport in Gaza and the return of Palestinian prisoners. None of the issues have yet been resolved.

- Oct. 8, 1997 — Netanyahu and Arafat hold a pre-dawn meeting at the Erez Crossing. The two have not met since.

- Jan. 19, 1998 — Netanyahu begins a three-day visit to Washington. His meeting with President Clinton is overshadowed by a breaking scandal involving former White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Reports in the Arab press allege that the sex scandal was a Zionist plot aimed at deflecting Clinton's attention from the stalemated peace process.

- May 4-5, 1998 — Albright holds separate meetings in London with Netanyahu and Arafat in an effort to move the deadlocked peace process forward. The parties discuss a widely reported U.S. proposal, floated for months, under which Israel would redeploy from a further 13 percent of the West Bank in exchange for specific Palestinian steps against terror. The talks are inconclusive.

- Aug. 27, 1998 — Bomb filled with nails explodes in a trash can in Tel Aviv. Twenty-one people are injured in the attack.

- Sept. 9, 1998 — U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross arrives in the region for another round of shuttle diplomacy aimed at breaking the stalemated peace process. Political observers believe his trip signals that the talks are in the final stretch. The more optimistic among them say that Israel and the Palestinians will sign an agreement on or near the fifth anniversary of the historic Rabin-Arafat handshake. □