



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 76, No. 196

Wednesday, November 4, 1998

81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Netanyahu postpones meeting

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu postponed a Cabinet meeting in which his ministers were to discuss the Wye agreement. Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai said Israel was waiting for a Palestinian Authority commitment to arrest 30 wanted Islamic militants.

The postponement was announced one day after the Palestinian Authority gave U.S. officials a working plan to fight terrorism. White House spokesman Joe Lockhart weighed in on the side of the Palestinians, telling reporters, "We continue to believe that the Palestinians have met their obligations."

Assassination attempt cited

Palestinian security agents foiled Iranian-backed attempts by the Islamic militant group Hamas to assassinate Yasser Arafat, according to an aide to the Palestinian leader. Iran is training and funding a secret Hamas group to carry out Arafat's assassination as well as suicide bombings against Israeli targets, said Tayyeb Abdel Rahim, the secretary-general of the Palestinian Authority.

Holocaust memoir questioned

The authenticity of a highly acclaimed Holocaust memoir has been cast into doubt, The New York Times reported.

Benjamin Wilkomirski, whose "Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood" won a National Jewish Book Award after it was published in English in 1996, is not a Latvian Jew who survived two concentration camps, but the son of a Swiss Protestant mother who was later adopted by a Swiss couple, according to Swiss legal documents and news reports. Wilkomirski and his publishers are standing by his memories, which were recovered with the help of therapy.

Report: Iraq has more weapons

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is sitting on a stockpile of well-hidden chemical and biological weapons, a high-level Iraqi defector said in an interview. A private secretary to Saddam's son Uday for 15 years before defecting in February, Abbas al-Janabi told the London *Guardian* newspaper that even the Iraqi deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz, does not know where the weapons are. The interview came amid Saddam's latest standoff with U.N. arms inspectors.

NEWS ANALYSIS

U.S. Jewish, Arab groups slow to cooperate in support of Wye

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — When Israel and the Palestinian Authority signed the Wye agreement last month, many Jewish groups flooded fax machines with statements praising the breakthrough in the peace process.

One, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, jumped the gun and sent congratulations before the land-for-security deal was finalized.

Hoping to capitalize on the positive mood, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright asked many of the same Jewish groups to work with Arab American organizations to "build a constituency for peace" and set an example for the people of the Middle East by working in concert.

What better way than a joint Arab-Jewish statement, one Arab participant suggested at a meeting last week that Albright hosted for a small group representing the American Jewish and Arab American communities.

At the meeting, Albright appealed for joint Jewish-Arab action in lobbying Congress to support the hundreds of millions of dollars in additional aid to Israel and the Palestinian Authority that is part of the Wye accord. But one week after the 90-minute meeting with Albright, the fax machines remain silent.

This would not be the first indication that the two communities are failing to come together. Builders for Peace, a group of Arab and Jewish businessmen founded after the 1993 Oslo peace accord signing at the White House to help business development in the Palestinian self-rule areas, shut down operations last year.

State Department officials hoped that the Albright session would lead to regular meetings between Arab and Jewish groups. Dennis Ross, the U.S. Middle East peace envoy, tried to work some of his trademark negotiating magic as the session wound down by urging the sides not to leave the room until they set a date for another meeting.

But the gathering broke up — and, almost as quickly, prospects for a joint statement dimmed.

Most of the Jewish groups do not seem interested in the statement.

"At the present time, we're not doing anything with any other group," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

The Conference of Presidents was planning to release its own statement of support for the Wye agreement later this week.

"Arab American groups have not demonstrated any support — at the State Department or in statements — in support of the Wye agreement," said Hoenlein.

While Hoenlein stopped short of saying that it is up to the Arab American groups to make the first move, he did say, "They have not found the need to come forward and support the Wye agreement."

But that's simply not true, according to James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute.

"We are supportive of it," said Zogby, who stressed that he attended the Oct. 23 White House signing ceremony.

"It's not the end of the road by any stretch, but it's a step," said Zogby, who wrote a newspaper column praising President Clinton's role at Wye and was set to release a statement for his organization this week.

According to participants in the Albright meeting, Zogby was to work with the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Premier releases U.S. letters

Hoping to win further backing for the Wye agreement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released four U.S. letters of guarantees to Israel.

In one of the letters, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Edward Walker reiterated American opposition to a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood. Palestinian negotiator Hassan Asfour downplayed the significance of the letters, saying the Palestinian Authority is not "governed by letters of guarantee, but by the agreements signed."

Israeli Arab lawmakers make vow

Israeli Arab legislators vowed to oppose Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in all Knesset votes, except those pertaining to the peace process.

The move came after Netanyahu declared that matters of national importance could only be determined by a majority of "Zionist" parties. Netanyahu made the statement after he survived a no-confidence vote in the Knesset linked to a budget bill. A decision by Arab legislators to abstain from the vote enabled the bill to pass by a razor-thin majority of one.

Victims' families gather

Families of the victims killed in the October 1994 suicide bombing aboard a bus on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street gathered at the site to mark the attack's fourth anniversary. The families announced the creation of a scholarship in the names of the 22 victims. The attack was the first of a series of suicide bombings carried out by Islamic militants opposed to the Oslo accords.

Israel lifts restrictions

Israel lifted restrictions imposed in September on the number of Palestinian workers allowed into the Jewish state. The move raises the number of entry permits for Palestinian laborers to 60,000 from 47,000. Israel is also allowing 21,000 Palestinian merchants into the country.

Conference of Presidents on a statement — but so far the two sides have not spoken.

For its part, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an umbrella group of local and national Jewish organizations, is engaged in preliminary discussions with its members on the possibility of a joint statement. Three years ago the group teamed with the National Association of Arab Americans to condemn terrorism.

The response so far on a joint statement does not bode well for Albright's other request of the group.

"It would be quite stunning" if representatives of the Arab and Jewish communities go to Capitol Hill to ask members of Congress to support a U.S. foreign aid package linked to the Wye accord, Albright said.

It would be stunning, indeed, activists on both sides agree, if Arab Americans supported sending American taxpayers' money into the West Bank as part of the package. Israel wants money to pay for the redeployment of its troops and to build some 20 bypass roads so settlers in the West Bank can avoid Palestinian-ruled areas. U.S. aid would also pay for safe-passage routes to enable Palestinians to travel between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Congress would have never supported previous aid packages to the Palestinians without active support from pro-Israel activists. But Arab Americans lobbying for millions of dollars in aid to Israel is almost unthinkable.

For years, Arab American organizations have decried as disproportionate the \$3 billion in economic and military aid that Israel has received annually from the United States. Now, Israel is asking for hundreds of millions of dollars more.

But if the Palestinians, Israelis and Americans support it, some in the Arab American community say they will, too.

"If the parties agree to it, then of course we will support it," Zogby said.

The Clinton administration's aid proposal could also have some significant sweeteners long sought by the Arab American community and the Palestinians.

According to State Department sources, the aid package could also include changes in decades-old U.S. law, which considers the Palestine Liberation Organization a terrorist organization and requires waivers for its leaders to visit the United States and for its representatives to maintain an office.

Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon is scheduled to arrive in Washington later this month to present Albright with an Israeli request for additional aid.

As part of the Wye agreement, Clinton promised to ask Congress for additional funds for Israeli redeployment costs and for Palestinian economic development. A five-year, \$500 million U.S. aid package for the Palestinians ended this year.

If approved by Congress and signed into law by Clinton, the additional aid would mark the first time that U.S. money would go directly to fund projects in the West Bank.

But that "is disregarding the overall picture," said an Israeli official in Washington.

"The United States Constitution does not say, 'Do not put money into areas not yet determined,'" this official said.

Until the final status of the West Bank is agreed to in peace talks, "people have to live. People have to survive and people have to develop."

While bypass roads will "of course enhance the security of settlers, what is the option? Constant roadblocks of Palestinians? Constant curfews of Palestinians? This also enhances the life of Palestinians," he said.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee refused to comment until an official Israeli request is made for additional aid. Members of Congress have said they will likely support a one-time infusion of money to Israel. For the Palestinians, the issue is likely to hinge on the implementation of the Wye agreement.

"The bottom line in the minds of the vast majority of the members of the United States Congress is: Is there a firm commitment on the part of the Palestinian Authority to put down the tools of war and to provide, in a serious way, the security requirements related to Israel's legitimate needs?" Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) said after the White House signing ceremony.

"I am absolutely confident if Mr. Arafat and the Palestinian Authority keep both the spirit and the letter of the agreement they signed, that there will be no difficulty in seeing to it that economic assistance is provided to the Palestinians and to the Palestinian Authority. It all relates to security," he said. □



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.

JEWISH WORLD

High court to rule on damages

The U.S. Supreme Court said it will decide what punitive damages should be levied on employers who discriminate against workers on the basis of religion, race or national origin.

The justices will review an appeals court ruling that sharply narrowed the penalties that could be imposed on such employers. The high court said it would hear the case early next year, with a decision expected before July.

Sakic appears before judge

An alleged former concentration camp guard appeared before a judge in the Croatian capital of Zagreb in the first step to determine whether she will be tried for war crimes.

Extradited this week from Argentina, Nada Sakic denied charges that she participated in torturing civilians and other activities that led to the deaths of thousands of inmates at the Jasenovac camp. Her husband, Dinko, who ran the camp, is awaiting trial on similar charges.

Far-right leader plans run

The deputy leader of France's far-right National Front said he will run for mayor of Marseilles when municipal elections are held in 2001.

Bruno Megret recently came into conflict with the leader of the anti-immigrant party, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who blocked Megret's bid to top the Front's slate in next year's elections to the European Parliament.

Neo-Nazi asks to stay in jail

A neo-Nazi asked to remain in an American prison, saying he did not want to be released until people felt he would not do them any harm. Michael Bloom, 25, was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment in 1994 when he was found with weapons and neo-Nazi paraphernalia. Authorities said Bloom intended to bomb synagogues, churches and anti-discrimination groups. A demency board recently voted to release Bloom, the leader of the SS Action Group in Arizona, but after Gov. Jane Hull and others objected, the decision will now be reviewed later this month.

Panel probes denial site

An Australian commission heard arguments regarding an Internet site that denies the Holocaust. In the first test of that country's anti-discrimination laws involving the Internet, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry is seeking the removal of all Holocaust-denying material on the site, which is run by a group called the Adelaide Institute. Australia's umbrella organization for Jews is also trying to prevent the group from publishing similar ideas on the Internet in the future.

Hurricane Mitch levels synagogue in Honduras

NEW YORK (JTA) — Members of the tiny Jewish community of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, were proud when earlier this year they were able to make the final payments on the small house that serves as their synagogue.

The members of *Comunidar Evreya B'Tegucigalpa* also purchased prayer books and an air-conditioning unit and installed a bimah, or dais.

"We were very happy," said Rosario Losk, a member of the shul.

Now, as a result of Hurricane Mitch, the 30 or so Jewish families who belong to the synagogue have to rebuild that structure, which has been decimated. Everything was destroyed, save for one of the two Torahs that were brought to Honduras by immigrants from Germany shortly before World War II.

Mitch, which packed 180-mile-an-hour winds at its peak, ravaged much of Central America, killing as many as 7,000, according to early estimates. It did most of its damage in Nicaragua and Honduras.

No one in the synagogue's congregation, mostly members of the city's well-to-do, perished, according to Losk. But many suffered great damage to their property.

Mitch's rains and winds raised water in local rivers and forced the collapse of all of the city's bridges. The water eventually overflowed the riverbanks, causing trees to fall and buildings, including the shul, to crumble.

While details are still sketchy, early reports indicate that members of Jewish communities in the rest of Central America were not affected as severely by the storm.

On Tuesday, some members of the Jewish community were scheduled to hold a service to ask for God's help in rebuilding the synagogue.

"We need everything because we want to begin rebuilding right away. We feel very strongly that a synagogue should never remain in ruins. We want our synagogue to be alive and well," said Losk. □

Israelis honor Yitzhak Rabin amid turmoil

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel marked the third anniversary of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin with memorial ceremonies, as political leaders made renewed warnings about the dangers of political incitement.

Since the Oct. 23 signing of the Wye River Memorandum, the latest Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been the target of slurs and posters similar to those directed against Rabin during anti-government demonstrations preceding his death.

Indeed, during Sunday's official state ceremony at Jerusalem's Mount Herzl Cemetery, hecklers jeered Netanyahu when he laid a wreath at Rabin's grave, shouting that Netanyahu had incited the murder. Police dragged two protesters from the ceremony, during which Rabin's widow, Leah, did not shake hands with Netanyahu.

Leah Rabin had been among those in the immediate aftermath of the assassination who maintained that Netanyahu, then the opposition leader, had contributed to the atmosphere of incitement that made the assassination possible.

On Saturday evening, some 200,000 people took part in a memorial rally in Tel Aviv. In an address to the gathering, Labor Party leader Ehud Barak had mild words of praise for the Wye agreement, which he described as "late, hesitant and full of contradictions, but better than pointless bloodshed."

On Sunday, in addition to the Mt. Herzl ceremony, flags across the country flew at half mast and the Knesset held a special session to remember Rabin's slaying at the hands of Yigal Amir, a right-wing extremist opposed to the transfer of any West Bank lands to the Palestinians.

Former army chief of staff Amnon Shahak, speaking at the state ceremony, lashed out at those who still engage in incitement.

"Forgive us, Rabin, for not understanding what we see," he said. "And forgive us because there are those among us who do not know how to ask for forgiveness." □

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Italy struggles with memory of fascist-era anti-Semitic legislation***By Ruth E. Gruber*

ROME (JTA) — Sixty years ago, fascist Italy enacted anti-Semitic legislation that led the way to the Holocaust in this country.

Italy's public authorities and the country's Jewish community are marking the anniversary with a series of commemorations, conferences, publications and other activities.

They are aimed both at memorializing the Jews who were persecuted as well as condemning the anti-Semitic policy of the fascist state.

But they also are directed at examining the behavior of most mainstream Italians who did little to protest or combat the racist laws.

"I'll never forget the indifference," recalls Tullia Zevi, until recently the longtime president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities. "It was bitter. Nobody took a stand."

The fascist government of dictator Benito Mussolini passed the first of a series of anti-Semitic laws on Sept. 2, 1938. The laws were fully in place on Nov. 17, 1938, and affected more than 48,000 people.

They barred Jews from public life and subjected them to a wide range of humiliating restrictions and persecution.

Among other things, they barred Jewish students and teachers from public schools and universities. They barred Jews from marrying non-Jews, from working in a long list of professions, from serving in the army, from employing Christian servants, from staying in hotels, vacationing at resorts and placing classified ads in newspapers.

Thousands of Jews fled the country, including talented intellectuals and scientists, such as Rita Levi Montalcini, who won the Nobel Prize in medicine in 1986.

The racist laws were a particular shock for Italy's highly acculturated Jews. Unlike the case in Nazi Germany, the laws came with relatively little warning and more or less reversed the prior policy of the fascist regime.

Jews had been active participants in Italy's independence movement, the Risorgimento, in the 19th century, and most felt a profound sense of Italian identity.

A number of Jews were early supporters of Mussolini, and, while many Jews were anti-fascist, thousands of Jews had joined the fascist party.

"The racist laws represented a deep wound, not just for the Jews, but for the country as a whole," the Milan Jewish magazine *Il Bolletino* said in its October issue. "For the first time the united state constructed in the Risorgimento cut off a group of citizens who had participated, side by side with others, in the construction of that state."

Recalled Zevi, who was a teen-ager when the racist laws were imposed and fled Italy with her family to the United States, "From one day to the next, we became nobodies, ghosts. It teaches you about the fragility of the human condition."

Indeed, part of the problem in looking back is the fact that many older Italians must confront their own behavior in the face of the persecutions.

Italy entered World War II as a Nazi ally and ended it on the side of the Allies. The Italian fascists arrested Jews and interned them in prisons and concentration camps, but Italian Jews were only deported to death camps after the Germans occupied Italy in 1943.

About 8,000 Italian Jews were deported to their deaths.

Indeed, Italians have won praise for their role in helping Jews survive during the war.

As a result, there has been a tendency to "push the idea that attitudes of solidarity shown by many Italians during the German occupation, when Jews risked deportation, had actually begun as early as 1938," according to an article in the Milan newspaper *Corriere Della Sera*.

A survey of the grandparents of students at a Milan secondary school, the article said, showed that many thought that Italian anti-Semitic laws were only introduced after the German occupation.

A 1995 poll of young Italians aged 16 to 24 showed that only little more than 38 percent knew that Italy had ever imposed anti-Semitic laws.

The commemorations come at a time when renewed interest in the history of World War II is coupled both with a fading of memory and with debates over the true nature of Italian fascism and its legacy.

"There is a greater awareness in society, a continuous increase of information," Michele Sarfatti, a researcher on anti-Semitism at the Milan-based Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation, told JTA.

"But at the same time," he said, "the generations are changing. The people who actually remember that period are leaving the scene."

A popular book and movie this past year brought the problem before the public in different ways.

The award-winning movie "Life Is Beautiful," which recently opened in the United States, tells the story of an Italian Jew who was deported to a death camp by the Nazis after the occupation. Fascist-era Italian anti-Semitism, however, was largely glossed over.

The film makes clear the extent of Jewish assimilation in Italy — the hero is not identified as a Jew until a shocking anti-Semitic incident halfway into the film.

In the book, "The Word Jew," on the other hand, non-Jewish author Rosetta Loy focused on her own childhood memories of how the racial laws were accepted without protest by her own family and neighbors. □

Netanyahu leads in poll

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is more popular among Israelis than opposition leader Ehud Barak, according to a public opinion poll taken after the premier signed the latest land-for-peace agreement with the Palestinians.

The Gallup poll, conducted for the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*, found that 46 percent of those questioned would vote for Netanyahu if elections were held today while 35 percent would vote for Barak, who heads the Labor Party. The poll also found that 60 percent of the respondents fear that someone may try to assassinate Netanyahu in the wake of the agreement. □