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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Iraq warned not to strike Israel

U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen warned of a "very severe consequence from the United States" if Iraq targets the Jewish state. Although Israeli officials downplayed the threat of an attack, the army deployed Patriot missile batteries and opened some 90 gas mask distribution centers after the United States launched Operation Desert Fox against Iraq.

Meanwhile, the United States ordered the departure of some dependents from the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv and Consulate in Jerusalem. Children, elderly and pregnant dependents cannot be protected against the remote danger of a chemical or biological weapons attack, the U.S. State Department said in its warning. A worldwide travel advisory warned Americans of the possibility of retaliatory attacks and urged them to exercise greater caution while overseas. [Page 3]

Palestinians rally for Saddam

One teen-ager was killed as Palestinian demonstrators clashed with Israeli troops in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during angry protests against the U.S. air strike against Iraq. Shouting "Beloved Saddam, hit Tel Aviv," the protesters burned Israeli and American flags and yelled angry taunts against President Clinton, who only days before had been hailed as a hero by Palestinians for his visit to Gaza. [Page 3]

Assad gets Netanyahu letter

U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) said he gave President Hafez Assad a message from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressing his desire to resume peace talks with Syria.

Specter, on a visit to Damascus, told a news conference that he also conveyed to the Syrian leader President Clinton's readiness to become involved in helping revive the talks, which have been suspended since 1996.

Russian lawmaker not censured

A resolution censuring a Communist lawmaker for his anti-Semitic remarks failed to pass the Russian Parliament. The leftist and ultranationalist majority blocked the resolution condemning Viktor Ilyukhin, who said earlier this week that Jews in Russian President Boris Yeltsin's inner circle were responsible for "genocide" against the Russian people. Ilyukhin, meanwhile, denied that his remarks were anti-Semitic.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Prisoner issue tops list of Palestinian complaints

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When President Clinton visited the Gaza Strip this week, the issue of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails inevitably became a key item on his agenda.

Within a matter of weeks, the issue has risen quickly to the top of the list of Palestinian complaints against the Jewish state in the wake of a groundswell of popular discontent throughout the self-rule areas.

Just before Clinton was to address members of the Palestine National Council, the Palestinian Authority arranged for him to meet four children of Palestinian security prisoners.

One sobbing girl begged the president to help obtain the release of her father before the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which begins next week. Her father is serving a life sentence for killing an Israeli.

"It was a particularly moving scene for me," said Sufian Abu-Zeida, chairman of the Israeli desk in the Palestinian Authority, who had served 12 years in Israeli prisons himself.

Abu-Zeida's son was 1 year old when his father was imprisoned.

Clinton and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright were also evidently moved. Albright was described as being on the verge of tears.

The U.S. president spoke of his own emotional reaction when he addressed the gathering of Palestinian representatives.

Referring to the Palestinian children — as well as the Israeli children orphaned by terror he had met the day before — Clinton said, "These children brought tears to my eyes. We have to find a way for both sets of children to get their lives back and go forward."

The president's comment — one of many he made to urge the pursuit of peace — provoked a controversy in Israel, where Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was soon criticizing Clinton for equating the children of Palestinians jailed for murder with the children of Israeli victims of terror.

While the prisoner issue is one of several in the war of words that perpetually marks Israeli and Palestinian attempts at peacemaking, for the Palestinian side it is equivalent to Israeli sensitivity to prisoners of war or to retrieving the bodies of fallen Israeli soldiers left behind enemy lines.

While charges of continued Israeli settlement construction and land confiscations loom large in the Palestinian Authority's litany of complaints against the Jewish state, relatively few Palestinians are directly affected by these issues. But there is hardly a Palestinian who does not know someone who is being held in an Israeli jail.

In an effort to drive their plight home, thousands of Palestinian prisoners recently staged a hunger strike. The strike ended Wednesday, with its organizers declaring success in raising international awareness about the issue.

Under the terms of the Wye agreement, Israel agreed to release 750 prisoners in three stages by the end of January. When Israel recently freed the first group of 250, most were common criminals.

But the "heroes of Palestinian national struggle" were kept behind bars, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat said Monday in his address to the Palestinian representatives in Gaza. It was with that first prisoner release that the hunger strike

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak starts election campaign

Israeli opposition leader Ehud Barak launched his campaign for the premiership one day after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced he may call next week for early elections.

Barak accused Netanyahu of capitulating to his right-wing coalition when he announced a freeze on implementation of the Wye accord. Barak also said he would divert money now spent on settlements and earmark it for education, health and fighting unemployment.

Albright postpones call

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright postponed a conference call with Jewish leaders that was to take place Wednesday night. Only hours earlier, Albright had requested the opportunity to brief members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Within hours after the start of Operation Desert Fox, the conference issued a letter to President Clinton expressing "total support" for his administration's "decisive action."

Development bank closes

The Middle East Development Bank is reportedly poised to shut down operations because of the impasse in the peace process.

Created to support cooperative projects in the region, the bank was one of the main agenda items during the four annual Middle East economic conferences held from 1994 to 1997.

Housing starts up in West Bank

Some 1,420 new housing units were started by Israel in the West Bank during the first half of 1998 as compared with 600 during the similar period in 1997, Peace Now said.

The group said its figures showing the 136 percent rise in housing starts were based on data from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics.

began, spreading from prison to prison. Israel and the Palestinian Authority subsequently argued over the precise terms of the Wye accord.

Netanyahu repeatedly maintained that the Jewish state made no commitment to release prisoners with blood on their hands — a point seconded by some American officials.

Palestinian officials saw things differently, demanding the release of some 600 prisoners who had been jailed before the Oslo accords were signed in 1993.

Issa Karaka, chairman of the Palestinian Prisoners Club, insisted this week that only 250 prisoners actually had Israeli blood on their hands.

"Tell me," Arafat asked activists from his Fatah movement last week during a highly emotional gathering in Hebron, "does it make sense that I would have gone to Washington for lengthy negotiations just to release a few thieves?"

Along with the hunger strikes, the issue triggered a week of violent confrontations in the West Bank between Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli security forces. Four Palestinians died in the confrontations — including the cousin of Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat — and dozens more were wounded.

The confrontations, which lasted more than a week before the Palestinian Authority clamped down on them in anticipation of Clinton's arrival in the region Saturday, were soon dubbed the "prisoners' intifada" — a reference to the 1987-1993 Palestinian uprising in the territories.

The campaign was so well organized — with the hunger strikes in the prisons, youths taking to the streets and family members staging sit-ins — that Israel accused the Palestinian Authority of orchestrating it.

Indeed, it was on the basis of this accusation that Netanyahu recently announced he would suspend further implementation of the Wye accord until the Palestinian Authority clamped down on incitement.

At least some of the organization for the campaign came from within the prisons themselves.

Palestinian security prisoners are grouped in the prisons according to their political affiliations, with a paramilitary hierarchy.

The commanders are not only responsible for prison life, but they often extend their authority to life beyond the barbed wire.

According to a recent Israeli security report, many of the recent Hamas terrorist attacks were planned and guided by senior Hamas prisoners.

The prisoners' intifada was of major concern to the Palestinian Authority, partly because the riots were also directed against the self-rule government for having failed to reach a better agreement regarding the releases during the Wye summit in late October.

Once the Palestinian Authority realized that it, along with Israel, was a potential target of the campaign, it joined the popular movement and "channeled the violence against us," according to Maj. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, head of the Israel Defense Force's central command, which has responsibility for the West Bank.

It is true that in the past Israel has agreed to controversial prisoner releases. In 1985, thousands of prisoners "with blood on their hands" were freed in return for the release of several Israeli soldiers who were held by a terrorist group in Lebanon.

That exchange came back to haunt Israel, as many of the prisoners later engaged in new acts of terrorism.

Seen from this perspective, Netanyahu's government has been more sensitive about the issue than previous governments.

At the same time, the Palestinian Authority has a vested interest in calming the situation in the West Bank as soon as possible. It, too, is concerned that the riots will get out of control.

There was speculation this week about a possible compromise under which Israel would release a number of prisoners, perhaps on a case-by-case basis, in response to specific requests from the Palestinian Authority.

But there is at least one potential obstacle: Many of the prisoners are Hamas terrorists and activists. If the Palestinian Authority settles for the release of Fatah prisoners and neglects those belonging to Hamas, this may prove a prescription for further trouble. □



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JEWISH WORLD

ZOA: Halt aid to Palestinians

The Zionist Organization of America sent a letter to every member of Congress urging them to end all U.S. aid to the Palestinians because of anti-American statements made by Palestinian Authority leaders in response to the U.S. attack on Iraq.

Ahmed Abdel-Rahman, a senior Palestinian Authority official, reportedly condemned the attack and called for an immediate halt to the bombing. Earlier this week while in Gaza, President Clinton told the Palestinians he would ask Congress to almost double the \$100 million the United States currently spends each year on projects in the Palestinian self-rule areas.

Russian charged under hate law

A Russian man was charged with inciting ethnic and religious strife for making an anti-Semitic speech in front of a Jewish synagogue in Moscow after a bomb went off there in May.

The May 13 blast at the Marina Roscha synagogue left no injuries but caused serious damage to the building. At the time of the bombing, which remains unsolved, Russian television showed a masked man reading a speech while standing next to the burning synagogue.

Holocaust museum idea rejected

A German Jewish leader rejected a new proposal for a national Holocaust memorial in Berlin. Michael Friedman said the new plan, which envisioned a museum instead of a memorial, would be a "variety store" that "lacks content." The proposal remains mired in controversy after more than a decade of discussion.

Britain stopped Jewish brigade

British commanders repeatedly blocked the creation of a Jewish army brigade during World War II, fearing they would create a force that would fight for the establishment of a Jewish state, according to just-released files. A Jewish brigade was formed within the British army in 1944 only after Prime Minister Winston Churchill intervened.

Berlin Jews launch protest

Hundreds of people demonstrated in Berlin to protest the decision of a far-right-wing party to move its headquarters to a building once owned by a Jewish family. The Republican Party, which was founded by former Nazi SS member Franz Schoenhuber, emphasizes nationalism, xenophobia and anti-European sentiments in its platform. The Berlin Jewish community and the Social Democratic Party organized the protest against the largest of the far-right parties in Germany.

Israel prepares for Scuds, but doubts Iraq will strike

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Iraq is unlikely to target Israel as it did during the 1991 Gulf War, Israeli army intelligence officials are saying.

Just the same, some 90 gas mask distribution centers throughout Israel opened after the United States and Britain launched Operation Desert Fox against Iraq on Wednesday.

In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, meanwhile, Palestinians staged angry protests against the joint military action.

In Washington, U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen warned of a "very severe consequence from the United States" if Iraq targets the Jewish state.

"We would hope that Saddam would not act foolishly in striking Israel. But the Israelis, of course, are prepared for any potential type of attack upon their country," Cohen said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu struck this note of Israeli preparedness when he spoke about the U.S. air strikes. Declaring that Israel is not involved in the Persian Gulf conflict, he emphasized Thursday the country would nevertheless be ready should Iraq respond to the air strikes by firing missiles at the Jewish state.

"We are not part of the conflict and do not intend to become part of it. But we are ready for any possibility," he said.

Speaking on Israel Radio, the premier asked Israelis to follow the instructions of the defense establishment.

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai said Thursday that Israel was getting continuous updates from the Americans on the situation.

Despite its assessment that an attack from Baghdad is unlikely, the army instructed Israeli citizens to update their gas mask kits and obtain plastic sheeting and other materials that are used to prepare sealed rooms against possible chemical or biological weapons attack.

Brig. Gen. Amos Gilad, the head of research in the army intelligence branch, said that in a final, desperate measure, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein could fire non-conventional weapons at Israel. The Iraqi leader "is presently preoccupied with his survival," he said. "His primary objective is to preserve his strategic capabilities while bringing an end to sanctions against Iraq. Saddam Hussein is currently involved in defending himself from the United States.

"Our present assessment, as it was in the past, is that while he may consider them, he will not take steps against Israel which could open up another front against him," Gilad told Israel Radio.

Meanwhile, the army called up reservists to staff the gas mask distribution centers.

It also began deploying batteries of Patriot missiles, which were used to intercept Scuds during the 1991 Gulf War.

The Palestinians, who backed Iraq in 1991, called on the United States to cease this week's air strikes.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said the Iraqi people had suffered enough and that force is an unacceptable mode of resolving the crisis.

Palestinian demonstrators clashed with Israeli troops in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during angry protests against the U.S. air strike. Shouting, "Beloved Saddam, hit Tel Aviv," the protesters burned Israeli and American flags and yelled angry taunts against President Clinton, who only days before had been hailed as a hero by Palestinians for his visit to Gaza.

The crisis in the Gulf overshadowed the domestic political turmoil here.

Just the same, Netanyahu's dramatic announcement Wednesday that he might call next week for early elections set campaign wheels in motion.

Iraq was high on the agenda at a news conference that opposition leader Ehud Barak called Thursday. Barak, who said the government's days were numbered, warned that the risk of the collapse of the peace process with the Palestinians presently poses a more serious danger to Israel than the threat from Iraq. □

Israeli group explores diversity in the U.S. and among themselves

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — The plan: to bring a group of Israeli “influentials” in various fields and from a range of religious backgrounds to the United States to witness the diversity of the American Jewish community.

The organizer’s goal: to bridge what many describe as a growing chasm between Israeli and American Jews, as well as to foster a positive attitude toward religious pluralism.

The impact: not yet entirely clear.

The American Jewish Committee brought 10 Israeli leaders from fields as diverse as education, the military, law enforcement and journalism to see for themselves the best that the American Jewish community has to offer in Atlanta, Washington and New York.

The trip aimed to examine such questions as “What do we share as Jews? Do we have a common sense of peoplehood?” Steven Bayme, director of Jewish communal affairs for the AJCommittee, said in remarks to participants at the end of the trip.

“We want to test Rav Kook’s dictum that ‘what unites us is greater than what divides us,’ ” Bayme said, referring to Avraham Isaac Kook, Israel’s first chief rabbi.

The answer to that question was not completely clear to participants as they concluded their tour, which took place Nov. 29 to Dec. 12.

But they left the United States with some very strong impressions of the differences between American and Israeli Jewry.

In Atlanta, seminar participants visited Jewish day schools oriented toward each of the main Jewish religious movements. In Washington, they met with a Jewish senator, a State Department official and executives at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. In both cities, they spent time at Jewish community centers.

In New York, the focus was on religion: They met with rabbis from each of the main movements, visited the Orthodox and Reform rabbinical seminaries, heard from leaders of the Conservative movement and worshiped at a modern Orthodox synagogue on Manhattan’s Upper West Side.

Ellis Island and Ratners, the famous Lower East Side kosher dairy restaurant, were also on the itinerary.

Some Israelis said they were impressed by the intensity of commitment to Jewish education for both adults and children.

“I was surprised to see Jews who choose to be Jews, and invest in it” by paying \$8,000 a year in day school tuition, said Noga Rogel, who works as head of information for the education and training division of Israel’s national police force.

“Their drive to study, and their knowledge, is really impressive,” she said.

“As a secular Israeli, I find myself so ignorant that I feel ashamed.”

Others said that they were wowed by the power they saw that Jews wield in Washington.

Many said that while they were happy to see that American Jews believe that anti-Semitism is not currently a concern, they were mystified by the Americans’ confidence that it would not become one in the future.

“I don’t buy American Jewish self-assurance, their feeling of

security,” said Rabbi Eitan Chikli, who immigrated to Israel from Tunisia at the age of 19 and is now a Conservative rabbi and executive director of the Tali Education Fund.

Moshe Elazar, head of the combat system integration branch of the Israeli navy, said he was surprised by American Jews’ lack of knowledge about how things are done in Israel.

Participants complained about meeting only the elite of the American Jewish community — those most intensively engaged in Jewish study and living — and not having much chance to talk with more typical, unaffiliated Jews.

The closest they came, some said, was a chance encounter with a student at Atlanta’s Emory University, where they had gone to meet with Deborah Lipstadt, a professor of modern Jewish and Holocaust studies.

The student described herself as a Conservative Jew, said Elazar.

But when asked in what way she was a Conservative Jew, if she kept kosher or went to synagogue, she impatiently said, “Of course not,” according to Elazar.

“I got the impression that there is a thin layer of knowledgeable American Jews and a huge layer of ignorant people,” he said.

Seminar participants differed strongly about whether American involvement in promoting religious pluralism in Israel is appropriate.

“It is problematic and very dangerous to accept it,” said Aviv Lavie, a Tel Aviv-based journalist and committed secularist. “I prefer that we make our own pluralism by our own hands without Diaspora intervention.”

Others agreed, like Rabbi Yehuda Brandes, head of the study center at the Beit Morasha Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies. “We can’t be so pluralistic like it is here. The pluralistic, free solution is not our solution.”

Others, though, said that the American model made a strongly positive impression.

Vered Noam, director of the program for Israelis at Midreshet Lindenbaum, an Orthodox yeshiva for women in Jerusalem that also has many students from the United States, said she plans to speak to her students about it.

“I think I will try and promote a better understanding of Reform and Conservative in the battle for Jewish commitment,” she said.

Participants had wondered how interdenominational tensions might play out in their own group — which included Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis along with a few committed secularists.

“We expected big fights to take place within our group, because we represent very different segments in Israeli society,” said Noam. “But after two or three days, it became harmonic and lovely.”

“Many of the problems in Israel don’t get solved because the people involved are politicians and not the simple people,” she observed.

Noam concluded with a concept at the heart of what the AJCommittee tries to teach with these trips, bringing Israelis to America, which it has been doing for the past 15 years.

“If secular and religious people could sit together and discuss the issues of the State of Israel, maybe we could solve some of them,” she said.

“Once you come to know, to understand someone on the personal level, problems become much more solvable.” □