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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Palestinians wound Israeli soldier

Palestinian police wounded an Israeli soldier Wednesday near the West Bank town of Jenin. The soldier's colleagues said the shooting occurred after the car they were traveling in entered the Palestinian self-rule area accidentally.

As a result of the incident, the soldier was taken to an Israeli hospital, where he was being treated for moderate bullet wounds, and the area around Jenin was declared a closed military zone.

Israel holds Syria responsible

Israel will hold Syria responsible for the escalation in fighting in southern Lebanon, Israel's defense minister said during a two-day visit to Washington. Moshe Arens said the Syrians are "fighting a war by proxy" and if serious casualties continue "we will have to respond accordingly."

Arens' statements came as eight Israeli soldiers were lightly wounded in southern Lebanon this week in clashes with Hezbollah gunmen.

Meanwhile, the head of Israeli army intelligence, Maj.-Gen. Amos Malka, warned that Israel could attack Lebanese targets if Lebanon provides any aid to Hezbollah for anti-Israel activities.

Maine court denies voucher use

The Maine Supreme Court denied the appeal of five families who tried to use state-funded vouchers to send their children to a church-affiliated school.

The Orthodox Union, which filed a friend-of-the-court brief in support of the families, criticized Tuesday's decision, saying the ruling allows the state to "discriminate against parents who wish to send their children to religious schools."

Last year, the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld a state program that allows low-income students to use vouchers in religious schools, and the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review that decision.

Hamas to participate in elections

A spokesman for the Islamic militant group Hamas said Tuesday the group would participate in elections if a Palestinian state is established.

The comments came at a meeting of the Palestinian Central Council, where Hamas spiritual leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin said the Palestinians should walk away from the Oslo peace process.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Recent remarks revive question: Is U.S. meddling in Israeli election?

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The U.S. State Department's decision to accuse Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of breaking his word and to question his commitment to the peace process would have been remarkable at any time.

But coming just weeks before Israelis go to the polls, the accusations have renewed charges that the Clinton administration is meddling in the May 17 elections.

The dispute centers around West Bank settlements, which for decades have been a flash point of tension between Washington and Jerusalem.

What's unusual is the personal criticism that was leveled from the State Department podium, Middle East analysts say.

"Prime Minister Netanyahu has told us at all levels, on many occasions, that as a matter of policy there would be no new settlements and no expansion of settlements beyond their contiguous periphery," State Department spokesman James Rubin told reporters April 14.

"Contrary to what we were told, we see an accelerated pattern of Israeli actions that involve both construction of new settlements as well as an expansion of settlements well beyond their contiguous periphery."

Rubin went on to say: "Both sides have an obligation to do their part to create an environment for the pursuit of peace and the achievement of peace. The issue is whether the government of Israel is serious about doing its part to create the proper environment for peace."

By all accounts, the State Department spokesman's tongue was unusually — and intentionally — sharp.

American supporters of Netanyahu's settlement policy jumped to Netanyahu's defense, accusing the U.S. administration of meddling in Israel's election campaign.

"The naked bias is so transparent," said Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America.

Echoing charges made privately by Israeli officials, Klein said, "The fact that Clinton condemns Israel while ignoring the Palestinian Arabs' building at 10 times the rate of the Israelis is just another example of the disturbing and transparent objective of President Clinton to work for Netanyahu's defeat."

The administration denies that it is interfering in the Israeli elections.

"It's a fact," Dennis Ross said in an interview Monday, referring to Netanyahu's promise not to expand settlements.

"What should we do, say nothing?" he asked.

"I do not believe it is meddling," said Ross, the administration's chief Middle East negotiator.

Instead it is a desire to live up to the promise of the Wye accords, under which the United States promised to oppose any unilateral acts.

"Unilateral actions affect both sides," Ross said.

It's no secret that President Clinton, who is counting on a successful conclusion to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to shore up his legacy, would rather see Labor Party candidate Ehud Barak or Yitzhak Mordechai, the Center Party candidate, beat Netanyahu.

Despite the public line, administration officials privately say they would not be unhappy if the increased tension with the United States hurt Netanyahu with the centrist

MIDEAST FOCUS

Report: Secret talks were held

A member of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Cabinet and the Palestinian official in charge of Jerusalem held secret talks over the past year on the future of the city, an Israeli newspaper reported Wednesday.

Deputy Prime Minister Michael Eitan confirmed to the daily Ha'aretz that the meetings with Faisal Husseini took place, but declined to provide any further details.

Israel slams U.N. resolution

Israel rejected a United Nations committee resolution calling for Palestinian self-determination based on a U.N. resolution that calls for the division of Jerusalem. The United States was the only country on the human rights committee that opposed the decision referring to Resolution 181, the 1947 Partition Plan.

Russian party to tone down ads

Israeli Trade Minister Natan Sharansky reportedly instructed campaign coordinators to tone down advertisements declaring that his party, Yisrael B'Aliyah, should gain control over the Interior Ministry from the fervently Orthodox Shas Party.

The ads, which began running Sunday when political parties began airing ads for their candidates in Israel's May 17 elections.

Sharansky reportedly said that the party wanted to highlight the difficulties Russian immigrants have found in gaining their rights because of the ministry.

Conflict brews over lesbian pair

Israel's High Court of Justice recently gave the country's government three months to explain the Interior Ministry's refusal to register both partners in a lesbian couple who are raising a son together as "mothers." One of the women is the biological mother of the child, while her partner legally adopted him in the United States.

and moderate voters who hold the key to Israel's election. At the same time, the White House is trying not to alienate Netanyahu too much, knowing that there is at least a 50-50 chance that the Likud leader will be re-elected and the administration will need to continue to work with him.

For its part, the Israelis tried to downplay the recent statements on settlements, saying that "Israel and the United States have always had their differences on the matter."

The Prime Minister's Office said in a statement recently that "Israel's policy is to enable the development and expansion of existing communities in Judea and Samaria" and that the government "has no plans to build new communities" in the area.

To be sure, Clinton is not as blunt in his opposition as Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov has been in his endorsement of Netanyahu.

"I don't really want to interfere in Israeli politics," Primakov said last month at a toast for Netanyahu during the Israeli premier's visit to Russia.

"But if I were an Israeli citizen, I'd vote for Mr. Netanyahu in these coming elections."

Still, Clinton's rocky relations with Netanyahu have become part of the election subplot.

Since Netanyahu took office he has clashed repeatedly with Clinton.

The relationship began on a sour note in July 1996 when Clinton defended foreign aid to Israel at a joint news conference with Netanyahu, only to see the Israeli leader tell Congress that he would work to cut the aid.

More recently, Clinton asked those in attendance at a prayer breakfast to pray for "the peacemakers" and did not mention Netanyahu in a long list that included Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat and Leah Rabin, the wife of the slain Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin.

In fact, Clinton has engaged in what has come to be labeled "snub diplomacy" when it comes to Netanyahu.

Netanyahu has not met with the president since Clinton traveled to the Middle East in December to witness the Palestinian vote to annul the charter of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which called for the destruction of Israel.

Since then, Vice President Al Gore refused a meeting with Netanyahu in Switzerland.

And first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton skipped Israel on a recent tour of the Middle East, claiming she didn't want to interfere in the elections.

This is not the first time that President Clinton has visibly supported Netanyahu's opponent.

One month before the 1996 election, Clinton hosted Shimon Peres, the sitting prime minister, at the White House.

In a meeting noted for its warm, relaxed atmosphere, Clinton asked Peres how to spell his name in Hebrew. Clinton then copied a Hebrew spelling of "Bill" that Peres wrote on a pad.

Peres returned to Israel with a host of American goodies, including anti-terrorism aid and promises to negotiate a formal U.S.-Israel strategic agreement. But the strategy failed, as Peres narrowly lost the election to Netanyahu.

This year, while Netanyahu was trying unsuccessfully to get into the White House, Clinton found time to meet with Labor Party and Center Party leaders.

Clinton held a lengthy private meeting in February with Peres, now the No. 2 official in the Labor Party. Mordechai also had a private meeting with the president last month. Later that day, after a reception honoring Rabin, Mordechai and Daniel Abraham, a Clinton supporter and advocate for the peace process, walked up to Clinton.

Shaking their hands, Clinton told Mordechai, "Maybe he can do for you what he did for me twice," the president said, apparently referring to Abraham's financial support in helping him win two presidential elections.

Meanwhile, there seems to be a resignation that regardless of the outcome of the Israeli elections, the U.S. administration knows that nothing will happen on the Israeli-Palestinian front until after the results are in.

"There is no ability to move forward until after the Israeli elections," Ross explained. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Report: FBI spied on Chagall

The FBI suspected that the Russian Jewish painter Marc Chagall was "cozy with the Communists," according to an upcoming issue of the magazine ARTnews.

A Yale University professor who discovered that the agency, which under long-time director J. Edgar Hoover kept files on many writers, artists and political activists, compiled 300 pages on the Russian-born painter. The file concluded that Chagall was a "political crackpot" but not a spy.

Chagall lived in the United States from 1941 to 1948, but after that was denied visas to return until 1958, when he returned as a visiting professor at the University of Chicago.

U.N. parley set for Yom Kippur

The leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives International Relations Committee urged the United Nations to reschedule this year's opening of the U.N. General Assembly, currently scheduled for Yom Kippur on Sept. 20.

In a letter to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, U.S. Reps. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.) and Sam Gejdensen (D-Conn.) called the scheduling "insensitive and inappropriate."

The two representatives, who are Jewish, wrote, "We doubt that the U.N. would schedule an event of such importance on a date holy to Christians, such as Christmas, or to Muslims, such as Eid ed Adha."

Holocaust artist dies at 90

A Lithuanian-born artist known for incorporating the Holocaust into his work died in New York. Arbit Blatas, whose black-and-white drawings introduced segments of the 1978 television miniseries "The Holocaust," was 90.

Blatas fled the Nazis in 1941 and his father survived, but his mother died in a concentration camp in Poland.

A casting of the artist's series of bronze tablets commemorating the night in December 1943 when 200 Jews in Venice were rounded up and deported was later mounted facing the United Nations in New York City.

Suit filed in 'Jewpiter' incident

The father of a Philadelphia-area teen-ager suspended for writing a story about a planet named "Poland Jewpiter" filed a lawsuit claiming the school had violated his free speech rights.

In the story, Brad Herman, who is neither of Polish nor Jewish origin, described a planet in which the air smelled like sausages, people wore funny hats and danced to Bar Mitzvah music, and the food tasted good.

Court orders historian to return documents, tapes on Riga Ghetto

By Toby Axelrod

BERLIN (JTA) — A bitter legal battle waged by Holocaust survivors against a renowned German historian appears to be nearing a conclusion this week, but it may be harder to heal the emotional wounds.

A Berlin court last Tuesday ruled that Wolfgang Scheffler must return all remaining tape recordings and documents loaned to him by the Society of Survivors of the Riga Ghetto when they hired him earlier this decade to write a book about the ghetto.

Scheffler did not produce the work, and since he was hired, some 70 members of the New York-based survivors group have died.

During the four-year legal battle for return of fees and documents, Scheffler suggested he was the victim of the "machinations of a Jewish group." Herman Ziering, a member of the survivors group, compared Scheffler's behavior to that of Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels.

"A man like that should be totally wiped out" from positions of respect, Ziering, 72, said in a recent interview. Ziering was deported from Germany to Riga, Latvia, when he was 14.

More than 22,000 Jews were deported to the ghetto, and most were killed in two mass shootings on November 30, 1941, and December 8, 1941. Some 600 were selected for work, Ziering among them.

Scheffler signed a contract in 1992 to write a book about the ghetto within 28 months.

The lawsuit against him was launched in 1995, after 36 months had passed.

In 1997, Scheffler repaid the more than \$100,000 he was given, plus legal fees.

At the time, Scheffler denied that he had been given any documents or cassette tapes.

Then, last February, after another lawsuit was launched against him, the historian returned a bag of documents and 98 cassette tapes of interviews with Holocaust survivors.

"I said, 'He is lying. He always denied having anything, and now he is coming with documents we didn't even know he had,'" Karl-Georg Wellmann, a Berlin-based attorney for the survivors group, said.

At least 60 cassette tapes are still missing, as well as other documents, he said. Wellmann is now preparing for the possibility of a legal search of the historian's house.

Scheffler's lawyer, Paul Hertin, refused to comment.

Jan Philipp Reemstma, the founder of the Institute for Social Research in Hamburg, is now working on the Riga book with two assistants.

Scheffler has had an illustrious career as a historian who specializes in the Holocaust.

He was sent by the German government as an observer to the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, and in 1994 was given one of the nation's highest awards for his work toward "reconciliation with the Jewish people."

He is on the boards of the House of the Wannsee Conference, a memorial museum and archive in the building where the Holocaust was mapped out, and of the "Topography of Terror," an archive and archeological site of the former SS headquarters in Berlin.

"It makes me bitter that this man is still in such a position," Ziering says. "He wanted to rob us.

"He knows more about the Holocaust than anyone else, and he took the money and didn't do anything."

During the legal fight, Scheffler, who turns 70 this year, had responded to such reports with the comment, "As if that's my responsibility."

"So much time has been lost," said Bernhard Press, author of "The Murder of Jews in Latvia" published in 1992.

"The book would undoubtedly be very valuable." □

U.S. asks Jewish federations to help resettle Kosovar refugees

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The U.S. government, criticized for refusing to open its doors to refugees during World War II, now wants Jewish federations to help take in Kosovar Albanians who have been forced from their homes.

The Clinton administration has decided to accept 20,000 Kosovar refugees now living in Macedonian camps for resettlement in the United States. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, one of nine national agencies that resettle refugees, has agreed to help.

"The Jewish community knows only too well the importance of assisting those who were forced to flee persecution, war's devastation and displacement," said Leonard Glickman, executive vice president of HIAS, which will channel federal money to the federations that participate in the program.

The Kosovar refugees must have a relative in the United States or a serious hardship in order to be eligible. The first group is scheduled to arrive in the United States in three weeks.

Glickman said that it has not yet been determined how much the U.S. government will pay and the costs to local agencies.

It's up to individual Jewish federations, which will run the program locally, whether to participate. The State Department said there are large numbers of Albanians living in New York, Chicago, Detroit and Boston. According to HIAS, Binghamton, N.Y., also has a sizable Albanian population.

Mark Handelman, executive vice president of the New York Association for New Americans, said his agency has already received calls from Albanian Americans who want to bring their relatives to the United States under the program.

"We have a real challenge," Handelman said, referring to the recent strains placed on the refugees' physical and emotional condition. In addition, programs must be established for children who will arrive as public schools close for the summer, he said. Under the rules of the program, the refugees can remain in the United States and pursue citizenship if they choose.

While Jewish organizations in many larger cities have already resettled refugees from Bosnia and serve a large number of non-Jews, smaller federations like the one that serves Binghamton may be caught off guard.

"It would be a community decision" to resettle Kosovars, said Eileen Kriegstein, director of Jewish Family Services for the Jewish Federation of Broome County, which has resettled only one family of Jews from the former Soviet Union during the past three years. "It's a wonderful thought," Kriegstein said, "but we are very small here." □

Ariel Sharon and pope discuss millennium, conflict in Nazareth

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon has met with Pope John Paul II and other top church officials for more than two hours on what Vatican insiders termed "cordial, but difficult" talks on issues largely relating to the millennium.

However, no agreement from Monday's meeting emerged on

a papal trip to the Holy Land, a potentially explosive dispute over plans to build a mosque in Nazareth or other Middle East issues, including the status of Jerusalem.

"I want to be very clear, and I said this today" at the meeting, Sharon told a news conference Monday. "Jerusalem has been the capital of the Jewish people for 3,000 years and the capital of the state of Israel for 51. It will never be divided. It will always be the only and indivisible capital of Israel."

In the past, the Vatican has suggested that Jerusalem become either an internationally mandated holy city or the capital of both Israel and an eventual Palestinian state.

Sharon had a 30-minute private audience with the pope followed by what a more-than-90-minute meeting with Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano and other senior Vatican officials.

Sharon renewed Israel's longstanding invitation for the pope to visit the Holy Land, saying he hoped he would realize his dream of visiting sites during the millennium year.

"He wants to come and we want him to come," he said. "We hope it happens. We want him to be the first pilgrim, first in every way."

He also guaranteed safety and freedom of movement for Christian pilgrims to all Holy Land sites under Israeli jurisdiction.

The tense situation in Nazareth, he said, was high on the agenda.

Nazareth, revered by Christians as the boyhood home of Jesus, is Israel's largest Arab city. Muslims want to build a large mosque on land in Nazareth near the Church of the Annunciation, the site where Christians believe the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would give birth.

Christians oppose this plan and, with the Vatican's backing, Christian churches in the region have threatened to close their doors if Israel approves construction of the mosque. □

Campaign ads hit Israeli TV

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With slick images and catchy jingles, Israel's May 17 election campaign has shifted into high gear, as political advertisements began airing on Israeli radio and television stations.

Until May 16, the 33 parties vying for Knesset seats will run political ads during the 11.5 hours of television broadcast time allotted for the campaign.

The Likud Party is expected to portray Labor leader Ehud Barak as a front for left-wing interests who will "crumble" under pressure. The Labor Party will portray the country as having been "stuck" with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and will warn of the consequences if he is re-elected.

The Center Party, headed by Yitzhak Mordechai, prepared an ad showing two dice with the faces of Barak and Netanyahu being thrown, while an announcer asks, "What would happen if you lose this bet?"

Each party was allotted 10 minutes of broadcast time, while parties received an additional three minutes for every legislator serving in the outgoing Parliament.

As a result, the "Israel One" list — which includes the Labor and Geshet parties, as well as Meimad, the moderate Orthodox movement — was given 106 minutes for the entire period, while Likud received 67 minutes. □