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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Palestinians injured in clashes

Fifteen Palestinians demanding the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails were injured in clashes with Israeli soldiers near the West Bank town of Ramallah.

Saturday's violence occurred after Israeli troops fired rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse Palestinian demonstrators who hurled stones at soldiers and burned tires.

Palestinian currency proposed

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said the Palestinians could issue their own currency as part of a final peace settlement. Barak's comments during a speech in New York to the Israel Policy Forum reinforce recent indications that Israel wants the Palestinians to separate their economy from Israel's.

"I am proposing good fences for good neighbors and separate economies for separate neighbors," Barak said Saturday.

Jerusalem dropped from bill

Language intended to have the United States recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital was dropped from legislation included in the final budget bill approved last week.

The provision would have instructed the American Consulate in Jerusalem to report directly to the U.S. ambassador rather than the State Department and required the State Department to change its documents to refer to Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Israeli soldier slams liberal Jews

The Israeli army condemned an officer for telling an audience of soldiers that Judaism's Conservative and Reform streams have been more harmful to the Jews than the Nazis. [Page 3]

AIPAC drops to fourth

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee dropped from second to the fourth on a list of the most powerful lobbying groups in Washington, according to Fortune magazine. [Page 4]

Russian extremists hit airwaves

Campaign advertisements for an extremist bloc in Russia were scheduled to be aired despite efforts to prevent them. [Page 4]

NEWS ANALYSIS

If Syrian leader is seriously ill, talks with Israel would be tricky

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli officials, carefully monitoring reports that Syrian President Hafez Assad is ill, are worried about a power vacuum or succession battle in Damascus.

Some Israelis are worried that if the political situation in Syria is uncertain, then so is the resumption of Israeli-Syrian peace talks.

The latest word on Assad's poor health was conveyed to Israeli officials by France's foreign minister, Hubert Vedrine, who recently returned from Damascus.

According to reports, Vedrine said Assad, who is known to suffer from a heart ailment, is no longer as alert as he used to be. The man who used to drag meetings and negotiations on for hours to wear down his opponents now only works a couple of hours each day. Vedrine later denied the reports — but just the same, there have been other sources saying for months that Assad's health is deteriorating.

Some Israeli officials believe that this provides ample reason for not resuming negotiations with Syria, which were broken off in 1996.

"It is a lame-duck regime," Likud Knesset member Uzi Landau told JTA. "We do not know how long the present regime will last."

Likud leader Ariel Sharon has likewise said that Israel should freeze any further contacts with Damascus until Syria's internal situation clears up.

But this is not the position of the government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh maintained this week that the internal situation in Damascus is irrelevant.

"We operate under the assumption that Syria has a vested interest in peace with Israel, regardless of who leads it," said Sneh, who rejected Sharon's wait-and-see approach. "We cannot waste our time with speculation about the stability of regimes," Sneh said. "This will get us nowhere."

Thaer Abu Saleh, director of Al-Mustakbal College in the Golan Heights, agrees. "All the reports about Assad's health are speculation. On these sorts of things, no information leaks from the presidential palace. Nobody really knows what is going on."

Abu Saleh is well acquainted with Syrian politics. A Druse resident of the Golan, he openly defines himself as a Syrian citizen.

Although Assad has named his son, Bashar, as his successor, Abu Saleh does not discount the possibility of a power struggle after Assad's death.

"Assad intends to hand the power over to him while he is still alive, but no one knows just when that should happen," Abu Saleh said.

Bashar was not Assad's first choice. That honor originally went to the president's eldest son, Basil. But he died in a car accident in 1994.

Bashar, an ophthalmologist by training, had kept away from politics. Unlike his father and elder brother, he had no military career and had kept far from the political intrigues of Syria's ruling Ba'ath Party.

When his brother died, he was taking an advanced course in London in preparation for opening an eye clinic in Damascus.

Bashar has subsequently altered his career plans.

After taking an intensive military training course, he climbed quickly up the military ladder, getting appointed colonel last year.

While he has not received any official titles, his father entrusted him with two

MIDEAST FOCUS

Pullback still under dispute

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators are trying to resolve a dispute over the next Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. In a statement, the Palestinian Cabinet reiterated its stand that the self-rule government should have a say in determining the lands which will be transferred. Israel maintains it has the sole authority to make this decision.

Dalai Lama visits Israel

The Dalai Lama arrived in Israel for a visit that will include talks Wednesday with Knesset speaker Avraham Burg, despite Chinese pressure to cancel the meeting. Speaking at Ben-Gurion airport Saturday, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader said nations friendly with Beijing should stand firm on certain issues like human rights, freedom and the Tibetan people.

Holocaust lawsuit charges bank

A class-action lawsuit was filed against Israel's Bank Leumi regarding Holocaust-era accounts. The suit says Bank Leumi has refused to provide information to heirs of Eastern European Jews who transferred funds to banks in Palestine on the eve of World War II in an attempt to preserve their assets.

Bush calls for peace, security

"The United States should pursue peace in the Middle East based on a secure Israel," said Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush.

The governor of Texas, Bush made the remarks last Friday during his first major foreign policy speech, delivered in Simi Valley, Calif.

Sabbath business bill defeated

Israel's left-wing Meretz and fervently Orthodox Shas parties joined forces to defeat a bill that would allow businesses to open on the Sabbath. In a 55-5 vote, the Parliament last week rejected the legislation, introduced by the secular-rights Shinui Party.

highly sensitive portfolios — state security and Lebanon.

"The fact that he holds no official position is insignificant," Abu Saleh, told JTA this week. "What counts is the fact that he enjoys the trust of his father, the ruling elite and the army."

Just the same, by most accounts, Bashar does not have his father's natural authority and is having difficulty mastering the leadership skills he will need to take control of the country. According to Abu Saleh, it is entirely possible that there will be a power struggle for the succession after Assad is gone.

"Until Assad dies, we shall not know who will succeed him. There are just two many forces in the arena," he said.

Two other potential contenders in a power struggle are Assad's brother, former Syrian Vice President Rifa'at Assad, and Rifa'at's son, Sumer.

The two, currently living in exile in London, recently initiated a campaign against the Assad regime in their television and press empire.

In a further sign that trouble could be brewing, Syrian security forces several weeks ago closed down a private harbor that Rifa'at had operated in Latakia.

According to Syrian officials, two were people were killed during the forcible closure. According to Rifa'at and Sumer, hundreds were killed.

No official explanation was given when Hafez Assad dismissed Rifa'at in February 1998 as one of three Syrian vice presidents.

But there were suggestions that Assad sought to weaken his brother in the event of a struggle for succession between second-generation members of the Assad family — particularly between Bashar and Sumer.

Abu Saleh would not predict the outcome if a power struggle were to occur.

"At the end of the day," he said, "the winner will be he who will receive the support of the army — nobody else." □

Hezbollah leader warns of attacks after Israel leaves southern Lebanon

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Hezbollah may launch attacks against Israel if the Jewish state unilaterally withdraws from southern Lebanon without reaching prior agreements with Syria and Lebanon.

The warning appeared this week in the Saudi Arabian news weekly al-Majalla, which interviewed Hezbollah's deputy leader, Sheik Na'im Kassem.

Kassem did not explicitly say that Hezbollah would carry the fight into northern Israel, but he noted that a unilateral Israeli pullout would leave the "area" open to all eventualities. Citing the major factors that would determine events after an Israeli withdrawal, he referred to the future of the Golan Heights and the fate of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

Kassem's remarks followed a warning by "sources close to Hezbollah" last week that there would be no stability in the region if the problem of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon remains unresolved. While Hezbollah has yet to state outright whether it would continue its attacks after an Israeli withdrawal, Kassem's comments are thought to be the most dire to emerge on the subject from the fundamentalist group's leadership.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has repeatedly pledged to withdraw the Israeli army from southern Lebanon by the middle of next year. The pledge came in the wake of Israeli protests over the nation's growing casualties in the region.

But, according to Kassem, a withdrawal may not stem those losses.

Talk in Israel about a withdrawal is "linked to the magnitude of the losses and Israel's capacity to absorb them. Suffering losses today might be better for Israel than a withdrawal, which could lead to bigger losses if there is no agreement.

The Israelis "face a choice between bad and worse," he added.

A complete Israeli withdrawal — without an agreement over the refugees and the Golan — would leave "the picture confused and the results unknown in their details," said Kassem. "Developments could occur that would render such a withdrawal full of negative factors for Israel." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Hillary comes under new fire

Hillary Rodham Clinton came under fire after word surfaced that a Boston lawyer with ties to Swiss banks is planning a fund-raiser for the first lady's undeclared campaign for a New York seat in the U.S. Senate.

Attorney Robert Crowe, a longtime Democratic fund-raiser in Massachusetts, has represented Swiss banks accused of hiding the assets of Holocaust victims.

A spokesman for the first lady confirmed the report, but said Robert Crowe "has no official role in the campaign."

Clinton was recently criticized after she did not immediately respond when Suha Arafat, in the first lady's presence, accused Israel of using poison gas on Palestinians.

Plane mishap keeps Barak away

A plane mishap prevented Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak from appearing before the United Jewish Communities' General Assembly in Atlanta.

Stopping en route from Turkey to refuel his plane in England last Friday, Barak's plane was hit and heavily damaged by a maintenance truck. In a hastily arranged video address to the G.A., Barak said, "Today, to be pro-Israel is to be pro-peace."

Russian television attacks Jews

One of Russia's national television channels accused an umbrella Jewish organization of "helping Russia's enemies in the West."

The attacks against the Russian Jewish Congress came one month before scheduled parliamentary elections in Russia.

Poll cites German anti-Semitism

Some 43 percent of Germans believe that Jews have too much influence in the country, according to a new poll.

Analysts of the poll, which also reported that 41 percent of the respondents believe that Jews are unable to get along with Germans, say the current stalemate over a proposed national Holocaust memorial and the size of a proposed fund for Holocaust-era slave laborers explain the poll's findings.

California subpoenas insurers

The state of California served subpoenas on eight European insurance firms in a bid to extract complete lists of policyholders who perished in the Holocaust or survived concentration camps. The subpoenas come after California's newly enacted Holocaust Registry Law, which compels insurers doing business in the state to provide such lists. Companies that fail to testify are liable to fines, citations and the revocation of their licenses to do business in California.

Power of pro-Israel lobby drops, says survey in Fortune magazine

By Michael Shapiro

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The American Israel Public Affairs Committee is going to have to update its Web site, where it spotlights its Fortune magazine ranking as the second most powerful lobbying group in Washington.

In the magazine's new rankings, the pro-Israel lobby slipped to fourth, after holding the second spot for the past two years.

The American Association of Retired Persons remained No. 1. Tied for second are the National Rifle Association of America, which was fourth last year, and the National Federation of Independent Business, which was third last year.

While AIPAC has used its high placing in the survey as a sign of its power, the group's spokesman downplayed the annual list's significance.

"Let's put this into perspective," Kenneth Bricker said. "We're talking about an unscientific survey of 400 individuals. The real story here is that AIPAC, with the lowest operating budget of the so-called top 10 lobbies, continues to have a perennial place at the top of the list." Bricker said AIPAC's annual budget is \$16 million while the AARP's budget is \$540 million and the NRA's is \$137 million. Bricker also noted that AIPAC is the only foreign policy and only Jewish group on the list.

Some have suggested that the Israel Policy Forum and Americans for Peace Now could become more of a force on Capitol Hill because of the relationship they have built over the years with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and members of his Labor Party.

Officials at both organizations, however, said AIPAC is still the top pro-Israel group. Gene Burger, director of research for IPF, said that while "it's good that other voices are being heard on the peace process," AIPAC is still looked to by the Jewish community to do the "heavy lifting on bread-and-butter issues" such as foreign aid.

The survey was conducted this fall by the Mellman Group, a Democratic polling firm, and Public Opinion Strategies, a Republican firm.

Questionnaires were mailed to 2,773 people, including every member of Congress, Capitol Hill staffers, senior White House aides, professional lobbyists, and top-ranking officers of the largest lobbying groups in Washington. Fifteen percent, or 427, of the surveys were completed and returned. □

Army officer under fire for comparing Conservative, Reform streams to Nazis

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli army has condemned an officer for telling an audience of soldiers that Judaism's Conservative and Reform streams have been more harmful to the Jews than the Nazis.

"The expressions of the officer toward Reform and Conservative Jews have no place in an army address," the army said in a statement.

Lt. Gamliel Peretz, who now faces a formal army investigation, was quoted as telling a group of soldiers he did not consider people affiliated with the Reform and Conservative movements Jewish, and that the two movements "led to the assimilation of 8 million Jews, which is worse than the Holocaust."

Peretz made the remarks last week during a lecture on the status of women in the Torah and in Judaism before a group of about 60 soldiers.

When two soldiers affiliated with the Conservative movement objected to the officer's statements, Peretz reportedly said he could express his opinions, especially if they are rooted in fact. Peretz's remarks drew calls for his immediate removal from any command positions. Among those condemning the statements were Education Minister Yossi Sarid, a member of the Meretz Party.

Rabbi Ehud Bandel, the president of the Masorti movement, as the Conservative stream is known in Israel, accused Peretz of slander, adding that he had breached his authority and abused his position. □

Vatican officials in Baghdad to talk about papal trip to Iraq

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — With Pope John Paul II's long-planned visit to the Holy Land confirmed for next March, a Vatican delegation is in Baghdad to finalize details of a papal visit to Iraq.

The five-person delegation, headed by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, arrived in Baghdad on Saturday night after a 12-hour, 600-mile journey by road from Amman, Jordan.

Their arrival is the clearest sign to date that the ailing, 79-year-old pope may visit Iraq as part of a series of pilgrimages next year marking the Christian millennium.

The pope has said that he wants to visit Ur, revered as the birthplace of Abraham, as part of his pilgrimage to Old and New Testament sites. Last year a senior cardinal made a preliminary trip to the site. The Vatican never officially said that the pope would visit Iraq, but speculation has been rife for months, with unofficial sources saying it would take place in December.

Israel, the United States, Britain, Jewish groups and others are opposed to a visit, saying it could be manipulated by Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Though the pope wants his pilgrimage to be a purely religious visit, for protocol reasons it would probably include a meeting with Hussein. Unofficial sources now say the trip could take place at the end of January, although Vatican sources said last week that a final decision is still up in the air.

The Vatican announced officially Nov. 17 that the pope would travel to the Holy Land in the last 10 days of March.

No schedule details were announced immediately, but the pope will probably visit Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem, according to Archbishop Crescenzo Sepe, the secretary-general of the Vatican committee planning events for the year 2000.

The visit would be the first papal trip to the Holy Land since Pope Paul VI visited Jerusalem in 1964, and will fulfill a dream held for years by John Paul. Both Israel and Palestinian leaders had repeatedly invited the pope to visit, and both welcomed the news that the trip was official.

"The pope's visit is a milestone in the relationship between the Jewish people and Christianity," Israeli Public Security Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami said in a statement.

But this trip, too, could be controversial due to volatile relations among Jews, Christians and Muslims, and continuing tensions between Israel and the Palestinians over the status of Jerusalem. □

Extremist group in Russia to air campaign ads — at least for now

By Lev Gorodetsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Campaign advertisements for an extremist bloc in Russia may hit the airwaves despite efforts to prevent them.

Last week, Russian Chief Rabbi Adolph Shayeveich said the Spas bloc's participation in the election would be "absolutely unacceptable."

The ads were slated to be aired after the Central Election Commission refused to disqualify Spas, Russian for "Savior," from

taking part in the Dec. 19 elections for the State Duma, Russia's lower house, even though a court ruled earlier this month that the group's registration should be canceled.

The court ruled that the bloc did not have approval to run in at least 50 percent of Russia's 89 regions.

Commission officials say they can rule on the party's right to run only after a judgment by Moscow's City Court on the group's legality.

As a result of the commission's delay, the party may also be able to take part in televised debates.

Spas was set up by one of the country's leading extreme-right politicians, Vladimir Davidenko, with the aim of providing an electoral base for Alexander Barkashov, whose Russian National Unity group, the most widely known neo-Nazi organization in Russia, was not allowed to run.

Members of the RNU openly employ anti-Semitic rhetoric, wear swastika-like symbols and give stiff-armed Nazi-style salutes.

Russian authorities appear to be firm in their determination to prevent Spas candidates from taking part in the State Duma elections.

The Ministry of Interior announced last week that it is opening a file against Spas for allegedly forging registration documents.

Earlier this month Russian Justice Minister Yuri Chaika was quoted as saying: "People who propagate fascist ideology can't run for Russia's elected offices."

Some politicians are calling on the government to improve the present election law to exclude a similar situation from occurring in the future.

If the Central Election Commission disqualifies Spas, it will leave 27 parties running in the legislative elections.

Since the election ballots have already been printed, Spas will still likely appear in the No. 4 slot on the ballot. □

Israel may end state of emergency that has been in effect for 51 years

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel may soon cancel the state of emergency that has been in effect since the state's founding.

"Today the government approved the request to extend" the order "by only six months, a move it has never asked the Knesset to do. It generally asks that the order be extended by a year," Justice Minister Yossi Beilin told Israel Radio on Sunday.

"The significance is that in another half year, we will inform the Knesset we do not intend to extend the order — and there will be no more state of emergency in Israel," he added after the Cabinet discussed the order during its weekly meeting.

Beilin has previously described the nation's legal state of emergency as a "preposterous" situation.

Other critics have said the emergency order gives the government far-reaching powers and enables the passage of legislation that violates civil rights.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the order is that it allows for administrative detentions, under which individuals suspected of terrorism or subversion can be jailed without formal charges being brought against them.

Under the order, the government can also prevent essential public sector workers from striking. □