



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 78, No. 192

Thursday, October 12, 2000

83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Annan meetings spark optimism

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan held surprise meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

The meetings raised hopes for a diplomatic breakthrough to end the violence that began late last month. Along with Annan, several other high-profile mediators are in the region, including Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and the European Union's Middle East peace envoy, Miguel Angel Moratinos.

Holy site work provokes warning

The Israeli army warned that the Palestinians are laying the groundwork for turning "a Jewish holy place into a Muslim mosque."

The warning came after Palestinian workers repairing Joseph's Tomb in the West Bank town of Nablus painted the site's dome green, the color of Islam. Nablus Mayor Ghassan Shakaa claimed that city officials simply wanted to return the building to the way it looked before it came into Israeli hands during the 1967 Six-Day War.

Murdered rabbi buried

Hundreds of mourners in the West Bank settlement of Elon Moreh took part in a funeral procession for an American-born settler who was slain by Palestinian militants over the weekend.

Rabbi Hillel Lieberman had tried to reach Joseph's Tomb in Nablus after he heard that Palestinians were destroying the Jewish site, which housed a yeshiva where he taught.

Italy offers to host summit

Italy offered to host a Middle East peace summit in Rome.

"We are awaiting a response" from regional leaders on whether such a meeting "would be conducive" to the peace process, Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato said when he made the announcement Wednesday before a Parliament session.

French synagogues targeted

French President Jacques Chirac condemned a series of arson attacks on synagogues in France.

Five synagogues were targeted this week, apparently in reaction to the ongoing violence in the Middle East.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

U.N. vote raises questions about future role as broker

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — A U.N. Security Council resolution passed over the weekend that blames Israel for the Middle East crisis reveals that the world body is still biased against the Jewish state, say Israeli diplomats and American Jewish observers.

Moreover, they say, it reinforces why the United Nations cannot be a trusted third party in the peace process and underscores why it should not be granted guardianship of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Before the recent escalation of violence, when the two sides were still talking peace, the Israeli side had floated such a suggestion for the site holy to both Jews and Muslims.

The U.N. resolution passed Saturday by a vote of 14-0.

The United States abstained.

The resolution noted the disproportionate number of Palestinian victims without mentioning Jewish casualties; condemned the excessive use of force against civilians, without mentioning Israel by name; omitted the apparent unwillingness of Palestinian leaders to rein in the rioters; and mentioned the Temple Mount only by its Arabic name, Haram As-Sharif.

"The resolution is one-sided, unfair and doesn't portray the entire reality," said one Israeli diplomat.

"Unfortunately, the Security Council proved that it probably will not be able to play the role of an unbiased, honest broker in any future negotiations."

Israel's long-troubled relations with the United Nations had clearly improved of late, mostly because of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's efforts to achieve peace.

After years of lobbying, the country had attained official — albeit partial and temporary — entry in May into the Western European and Others Group, one of five regional U.N. groupings.

Prior to its admission into WEOG, Israel was the only one of 189 U.N. member states shut out of the regional grouping system — and therefore ineligible to serve on the Security Council and prominent U.N. agencies.

But Saturday's resolution indicated that little has changed, say some.

"The Security Council has reverted to being an arena of political warfare being used by Arabs against Israel," said Harris Schoenberg, chairman of the U.N. caucus of Jewish non-governmental organizations, an umbrella for about 25 Jewish groups.

More condemnation seems to be in store for Israel.

The Geneva-based, 53-member Commission on Human Rights is scheduled to hold a special session next week to discuss the Middle East crisis.

Special sessions are rare; the last one the commission held was to discuss the crisis in East Timor.

"Considering the commission's track record, it's fair to assume that things will not go well for Israel," Michael Colson, executive director of the Geneva-based U.N. Watch, said, noting that each year, the commission ritualistically passes five anti-Israel resolutions.

Schoenberg and other critics, though, singled out for praise U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who is currently trying to mediate the release of three Israeli soldiers kidnapped on the Israeli-Lebanese border over the weekend by the Islamic militant group Hezbollah.

Jewish U.N.-watchers have often lamented the way in which Arab and Muslim

MIDEAST FOCUS

Death toll in crisis rises

A Jewish settler was killed near the West Bank settlement of Eli when a car driven by a Palestinian overturned and hit a group of Israelis. Police said they believed Wednesday's incident was an accident, but settler leaders described it as a terror attack.

Israeli soldiers shot dead a 17-year-old Palestinian during clashes in the West Bank and an 18-year-old in the Gaza Strip.

Before their deaths on Wednesday, the U.N. Children's Fund said 22 Palestinian children under the age of 18 had been killed and more than 1,000 wounded during the violence in the region.

Pope calls for end to violence

Pope John Paul II appealed for an end to violence and a return to dialogue in the Middle East. "Faced with such a dramatic situation, I can only beg everyone to put an end to this spiral of violence without delay," he said Wednesday.

Warning issued to Israeli tourists

Israel warned its citizens against traveling to Muslim states. The Department for Fighting Terrorism told travelers who do go to Islamic countries that they should refrain "from emphasizing that they are Israeli, particularly in public places."

Kuwaitis seize Israeli mangoes

Kuwaiti authorities seized boxes of Israeli mangoes that had been shipped into the Gulf State from Jordan, according to a Kuwaiti newspaper.

Legal action is expected to be taken against an importer who reportedly crossed off a label reading "Israeli products" on the side of the boxes.

The mangoes appeared "at a time of rising tension between Israel and Arab states and reported calls to boycott any dealings with Israel," said the newspaper. Kuwait has no direct trade with the Jewish state.



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.

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member states use their control over large blocs of votes to batter Israel.

To assure a large majority on votes or resolutions, they allegedly bully their allies, including the Europeans, with threats to cut off oil supplies or foreign trade and investment.

That's why, if anything, the resolution reaffirms the primacy of the United States as a true "honest broker" in the peace talks, say Jewish observers.

This desire likely weighed heavily in America's decision to abstain, as U.S. officials appeared intent not to antagonize their other allies in the Middle East.

The U.S. national security adviser, Sandy Berger, said the American abstention was "motivated by a very deep concern" for Israel, but was informed by security and intelligence sources who had advised that the Palestinians would greet a veto with a potentially explosive reaction, and "diminish if not end our ability to end the violence."

Nevertheless, a number of Jewish activists expressed "disappointment" and "dismay" that United States didn't veto the resolution.

For the most part, though, they were careful not to criticize President Clinton too loudly.

One exception was the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

"We are shocked and profoundly disappointed in the administration's failure to veto this one-sided resolution," said Howard Kohr, AIPAC's executive director.

"By not vetoing this one-sided attack, the U.S. has lent support to those nations seeking to isolate Israel.

"At this critical time, it is imperative for the U.S. to stand by Israel as efforts continue to put an end to Palestinian violence."

The U.N. resolution reportedly would have been much worse, if not for the intervention of the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke, and others.

Israel itself went along with the final wording, said a diplomatic source, because it sensed that a resolution was inevitable. At least the Jewish state was not threatened with any form of sanctions, said the source.

Some Arab countries came before the 15-member Security Council and portrayed the violence in the Middle East as a "holocaust" and "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing," said Jozef Scheffers, the Netherlands' deputy representative to the council.

"Countries like Bahrain, Syria and Libya said, 'How can the survivors of the Holocaust do this to the Palestinian people?'" said Scheffers, whose country voted for the resolution.

In light of such a charged atmosphere, the ultimate resolution was "pragmatic and moderate," Scheffers said.

"If we talk about victims, the statistics speak for themselves: All but a few of them are Palestinians," he added.

As for any added damage the resolution might do to Israel on the international stage, Scheffers tried to reassure: "I would say everything is relative. Things can move quickly and change quickly. If we sign a Middle East peace deal, everything will be seen differently."

Meanwhile, Canada's vote for the resolution stirred controversy at home.

"The resolution is clearly slanted with an anti-Israel bias," said Stockwell Day, leader of the opposition party Canadian Alliance.

"I am not sure we will further the cause of peace if we as a nation join in the finger-pointing, rather than working with both sides cooperatively."

In defense of the vote, a spokesman for Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs said the resolution "reflects the desire of the council and the international community to see the violence end immediately."

For all the hullabaloo about warmer relations, one Jewish activist said, "Israel doesn't expect that much out of the U.N."

With that, and in light of the failure of Palestinian police to prevent the destruction of Joseph's Tomb in the West Bank, some Jewish activists are convinced that holy sites within Israel should remain under the control of the Israeli authorities.

"Israel should continue with its proven record of protecting and making all holy sites accessible to people of all faiths," said Bonnie Lipton, national president of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. □

(JTA correspondent Bill Gladstone in Toronto contributed to this report.)

JEWISH WORLD

Austria to pay POWs

Austria's chancellor said his government will make monthly compensation payments to thousands of its soldiers who were in Allied prisoner-of-war camps during World War II.

Wednesday's announcement by Wolfgang Schuessel came days after Austria agreed to pay \$7,500 apiece to Holocaust survivors for property restitution. Under the latest plan, the former Austrian POWs would receive about \$19 each month.

JCC to stay closed on Shabbat

After opening a new building, Ottawa's Jewish community center voted to continue its policy of remaining closed on Shabbat, according to the Canadian Jewish News.

Approximately two-thirds of North American JCCs are open part of the day on Shabbat, although most close their business offices and refrain from running organized activities "that wouldn't be in the spirit of Shabbat," said Mitchell Jaffe, director of community services for the Jewish Community Centers Association of North America.

Dr. Laura atones

A Jewish radio talk show host said Yom Kippur prompted her to apologize to gays and lesbians for her "poorly chosen" comments attacking them.

"On the Day of Atonement, Jews are commanded to seek forgiveness from people we have hurt," Laura Schlessinger said in an ad that appeared in an edition of the Daily Variety trade newspaper. But one gay activist indicated that he would not accept the apology.

Australia cracks down on site

Australia ordered a Holocaust denial group to remove anti-Semitic material from its Web site and publicly apologize to the Jewish community for breaching the country's laws against racial hatred.

The move by the country's human rights commission against the Adelaide Institute came after a complaint from Australian Jewish officials, who view the ruling as a step forward in combating hate speech on the Internet.

'Jewish Peace Corps' to get focus

A coalition of American Jewish organizations plans to meet later this month to discuss an international Jewish service program modeled loosely on the Peace Corps, according to officials from the Trust for Jewish Philanthropy.

The effort will likely recruit college graduates for assignments that combine Jewish learning with projects such as teaching at Jewish day schools or doing community development work in developing countries.

U.S. ambassador reinstated to help with Middle East crisis

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As the United States continues to push diplomacy to stop the Middle East violence, one man who was thought to have been sidelined is actually right in the middle of the game.

Martin Indyk, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, has had his security clearance reinstated "for the duration of the current crisis," according to the State Department. Indyk will be able to perform his full duties and will have access to classified information.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made the decision to reinstate the ambassador's clearance "in light of the continuing turmoil in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip and for compelling national security interests," the department said.

The clashes between Israelis and Palestinians have killed at least 88 people in the past two weeks.

The reinstatement of Indyk's security clearance indicates the United States is going all-out to get both sides talking. President Clinton spoke to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat on Tuesday to "discuss steps that they could take in the region to end the cycle of violence," said White House spokesman Jake Siewert.

The United States urged both sides to "defuse the tension to lower the level of violence and ultimately to find a way that we can begin to get back to the table and resolve differences at the negotiating table and not in the streets," Siewert added.

Siewert said no decision had yet been made on whether there would be an emergency summit in the region with Barak and Arafat.

Egypt coolly received the idea of holding a summit in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheik.

Barak told Israel Army Radio he is willing to attend a U.S.-sponsored peace summit.

Siewert said there were still a number of options on the table, including a possible trip by Clinton or Albright to meet with Barak and Arafat.

The spokesman also said Indyk "remains part of the team."

When his security clearance was suspended, Indyk was supposedly stuck in Washington until his investigation by the State Department is cleared up.

But Indyk was allowed to return to Israel for the Jewish holidays and later the decision was made to have him remain in the area and meet with diplomats and officials but without access to classified information.

Because of the escalating violence, however, the State Department then chose to reinstate Indyk's security clearance.

Indyk is being investigated on grounds of "suspected violations" of American security standards, including his use of unclassified, government-owned laptop computers.

State Department officials have emphasized that there is "no indication of espionage in this matter" and that no "intelligence information" had "been compromised."

The investigation into his activities is ongoing.

After the situation in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip stabilizes, his clearance will be re-evaluated. □

Cairo embassy evacuates staff

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's embassy in Egypt evacuated its staff's families on the eve of Yom Kippur due to security concerns amid the ongoing violence in the Middle East.

Several anti-Israel protests have been held in Cairo, and in other major capitals around the world, since clashes that have killed at least 88 people broke out two weeks ago. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Barak faces challenges to get tougher with Arabs*By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As leaders of the world community try to bring the Middle East back from the brink of war, Prime Minister Ehud Barak is facing a mounting political challenge to get tougher with the Arabs both inside and outside Israel.

Despite the intermittent violence that continued in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, it was the deadly Arab-on-Jew and Jew-on-Arab violence within the country that sent shock waves through Israelis as they tuned in to the news after Yom Kippur ended Monday night.

The Cabinet, in emergency session through much of Monday night, issued a somber statement deploring the violence involving the state's majority Jewish and minority Arab populations.

Barak told the nation at dawn Tuesday that each citizen, Jew and Arab alike, shared responsibility for preserving the delicate Jewish-Arab relationship built up painstakingly over the five decades of the state's existence.

One of the dangers posed by the street battles is that they may quickly become part of the political contest between Israel's political right and left. This despite the ongoing rhetoric from both sides calling for unity at this time of national emergency.

The death toll among Israeli Arabs since the unrest began in late September rose to at least 13 over Yom Kippur with the shooting in Nazareth of two Arab men on the eve of the solemn holiday. Three others were seriously wounded by gunshots fired in the city that has Israel's largest Arab population.

Israeli Arab leaders blamed police for the shootings, but police said the fatal shots were most likely fired by civilians.

It soon became clear, however, that the violence in Nazareth was not an isolated incident. Instead, it was the worst of a series of events that had Arabs attacking Jewish cars and property, and Jews attacking Arabs and Arab property around the country. One day after Palestinian mobs destroyed the Jewish holy site of Joseph's Tomb in the West Bank city of Nablus, Jewish mobs attacked an old mosque in downtown Tiberias.

The violence continued with arson attacks on synagogues in Jaffa and Ramla, and Jewish looting of Arab shops in Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Haifa, Acre and other towns. Israel's Army Radio said the scenes of violence Monday night looked like "civil war."

Sunday night's rioting in Nazareth was apparently begun by Jewish youths marching toward an Arab residential area, but this is still being disputed.

Given the lack of media coverage, apparently due to Yom Kippur, the exact order of events remains unclear. The lack of clarity has reinforced the Israeli Arab leadership's demands for a state inquiry into what happened.

While these leaders have stopped short of calling for a general strike, they want to know who is responsible for the mounting number of deaths among Israeli Arabs since turmoil engulfed the region late last month. Even within Barak's own coalition, there has been increasingly strident criticism against the police for acting too forcefully against Israeli Arab rioters.

And the violence within Israel's borders has become the subject of debate among the nation's politicians.

Salient among the voices calling for unity was that of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Silent through the previous week of crisis, he went on the air Monday night to "offer my support to the prime minister."

Netanyahu pointedly refused to be drawn into any criticism of Barak's performance, either on the home front or when dealing with the Palestinians. Netanyahu's measured tone contrasted with the sharp criticism of the prime minister expressed the next day by the leader of the Likud opposition, Ariel Sharon.

On Tuesday, Sharon accused Barak of vacillating when it came to diplomatic efforts and displaying a lack of resolve in military matters. Some observers put these differences between Netanyahu and Sharon down to a rivalry within the Likud Party.

They note that, despite all the talk of unity and a unity government, Barak is plainly hesitant to take Sharon into his government. He is, no doubt, at least partly concerned about the effect such a move would have within the Arab world and the wider international community.

In addition, Justice Minister Yossi Beilin is leading a group within Barak's Labor Party that publicly opposes the idea of Sharon serving as a senior minister in a unity government. At least to some extent, this group shares the broad international judgment that Sharon's high-profile visit to the Temple Mount on Sept. 28 was a reckless act that triggered the subsequent crisis.

For his part, Sharon, who has repeatedly denied that his visit there was intended as a provocation, has been stridently defending Alec Ron, the commander of the northern district of Israel's police force. Ron has been criticized by the Israeli Arab community, and by the left of the political spectrum, for his handling of the confrontations involving that community.

Barak, however, said that Ron was acting under orders and the entire police force deserved the nation's support at this difficult time. But the sense of unease over police performance has been spreading in coalition circles.

Barak is, meanwhile, being attacked for several other decisions he has made during the ongoing crisis. The premier on Tuesday rejected criticism of his decision to extend the 48-hour period he gave the Palestinians to end the rioting.

The premier said his initial ultimatum to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to end the rioting by Monday night had prompted a wave of intervention by world leaders, and that these efforts must now be given time to bear fruit.

Barak's standing has also suffered in the wake of the Israeli army's sudden withdrawal from Joseph's Tomb in Nablus on Saturday — and the Palestinian mob's subsequent destruction of the Jewish holy site. The Israel Defense Force's withdrawal came just one day after Barak said that to leave under pressure of violent action would be "to create a precedent" and therefore the army would not abandon the site.

The premier has also been weakened by Saturday's kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah gunmen. The IDF failed to stop the kidnapers from advancing north, and efforts to rescue the soldiers from Lebanon have since shifted to the diplomatic front.

The kidnapping affects Barak's because as minister of defense, he carries ultimate responsibility for what was apparently a serious lapse of judgment on the part of local IDF commanders.

The incident also cast a pall over what Barak has projected as his most notable success since he assumed office: the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon last May. □