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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Battle erupts in West Bank hills

A Jewish settler bled to death while waiting for an Israeli rescue helicopter during a gunfight between settlers and armed Palestinians that lasted more than five hours.

One Palestinian died earlier Thursday during the battle outside a refugee camp near the West Bank town of Nablus.

At least 10 others were wounded, five settlers and five Palestinians.

Each side has vastly different accounts of how the fighting began.

Geneva panel condemns Israel

The U.N. Commission on Human Rights approved an Arab-sponsored resolution condemning Israel for "war crimes" and "crimes against humanity" during the violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Thursday's vote, which came at the end of a three-day session in Geneva, was 19 states in favor, 16 against, 17 abstentions and one delegation absent.

Jerusalem under fire again

Two Israeli tanks stationed in the Jewish neighborhood of Gilo on the outskirts of Jerusalem came under fire Thursday from a nearby Arab neighborhood.

Israeli officials have threatened harsh retaliation if the sniper shooting, which began earlier this week, continues.

Israel lifts internal closure

Israel lifted the internal closure on Palestinian areas, allowing Palestinians to resume travel between towns within the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Israel also opened the Karni border crossing with the Gaza Strip to commercial traffic on Thursday as part of the cease-fire reached this week in Sharm el-Sheik.

But Israeli officials have yet to lift a closure between Israel and the Palestinian areas, which prevents thousands of Palestinians from working inside the Jewish state.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, Oct. 23.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Middle East crisis could affect voters' choice for U.S. president

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — With Election Day approaching, the presidential race has taken a back seat to the current crisis in the Middle East, and the shifting focus could help decide a winner in this tight election.

Although the candidates' messages are being relegated to the back pages of newspapers and the second story on TV, their viewpoints on foreign policy issues are now in the forefront.

Supporters of both Vice President Al Gore and Texas Gov. George W. Bush say the conflict — and, more importantly, the United States' role in handling it — will help their candidate.

Both say that in times of crisis, the country looks for leadership and they will find it in their nominee.

Foreign policy was expected to be a clear winner for Gore.

But Bush got a boost during last week's second presidential debate.

His grasp for names, places and events helped alleviate fears among some that he was a foreign policy lightweight.

With the Middle East crisis, the killing of 17 American soldiers in an attack on a U.S. naval ship in Yemen and the fall of Yugoslav dictator Slobodan Milosevic all on the domestic radar screen, the Texas governor gets a near-daily chance to try to show he knows his stuff.

Bush has been treading lightly.

He's come out in support of President Clinton's policies in the Middle East in the second and third presidential debates.

But in campaign appearances, he has also attempted to separate himself from the current administration, criticizing the United States' actions in the peace process and its energy policies.

Foreign policy is "the one area that people haven't had exposure to him and are trying to gauge where he stands," said Matthew Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition. "It's demonstrating he's got a grasp on foreign policy issues."

Not everyone agrees.

Democratic pollster Mark Mellman called Bush's foreign policy answers at the second debate "pathetic," because he basically just agreed with the Clinton administration's policies.

He also said the debates' impact might not matter.

"People trust Republicans more than Democrats to deal with foreign affairs and defense," Mellman said.

"But people prefer Al Gore to George W. Bush to deal with international crises. So the net effect is pretty small."

The polls seem to reflect that dichotomy.

When likely voters were asked last week which candidate would do a better job on foreign policy issues, Gore and Bush each received 45 percent, according to a Time/CNN poll.

When asked who would do a better job on the situation in the Middle East, Bush fared slightly better, 45 percent to 42 percent for Gore.

But those numbers are still within the poll's margin of error. For their part,

MIDEAST FOCUS

Bill would cut aid to Palestinians

Several U.S. lawmakers introduced a bill to cut off all non-humanitarian aid to the Palestinian Authority until Yasser Arafat renounces the ongoing violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee and other Jewish groups support the legislation, which was introduced in the House of Representatives on Thursday.

Israel: Militias a violation

Israel's acting foreign minister accused the Palestinian Authority of failing to abide by the cease-fire reached earlier this week in Egypt.

Shlomo Ben-Ami said Thursday the Palestinian militias should be disarmed, calling them a violation not only of the cease-fire "but also of the agreements signed between us and the Palestinian Authority since 1993."

Graffiti sparks Hebron clash

Clashes erupted in Hebron after Palestinians found graffiti insulting the Muslim prophet Mohammed on walls near a Jewish enclave.

No injuries were reported.

Also on Thursday, two Palestinian policemen died in an apparent gas explosion at the Bethlehem headquarters of an elite Palestinian unit.

A spokesman for the police said the explosion had "nothing to do with the clashes" with the Jewish state.

Think tank expert predicts terror

There is a good chance that new terror attacks will soon take place within Israel, according to a Middle East expert with a London-based think tank.

Such an attack would "certainly set back whatever efforts are being contemplated to renew peace negotiations," said Steven Simon of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.



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Shoshana S. Cardin, *President*

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Lisa Hostein, *Editor*

Howard Levy, *Managing Editor*

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Democrats see the current crisis in the Middle East as a way to highlight the vice president's experience, emphasizing his role as a member of Clinton's national security team.

During the third presidential debate Tuesday in St. Louis, Gore made a point of noting that he broke from campaigning last week to be involved in the administration's strategy for the Middle East.

Both candidates, however, pointedly refrained from specifics in answering a question about how they would handle the current Middle East crisis.

The vice president's supporters think his experience will benefit their cause in this tight race.

"The biggest factor people will look for in a time of crisis is experience," said David Harris, the deputy executive director for the National Jewish Democratic Council.

"George W. Bush has not yet dealt with foreign policy; Al Gore has for 24 years," he said.

But Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, a think tank based in Philadelphia, said this one bad month could not come at a worse time for the Democratic Party, which has touted eight years of foreign policy achievements and domestic prosperity.

Pipes said the current conflict has left some people feeling that the entire Oslo peace process, which has been a major focus of the Clinton administration, was based on false premises.

He compared it to the 1980 presidential election and the Iran hostage situation, where the country's mood on Election Day was tainted by a temporary international conflict.

"You can claim that drastic situations are on their way, but so far things have been pretty good," he said. "Gore will want to look at eight years; Bush will want to look at eight days."

Republican pollster Frank Luntz said that despite Clinton's seeming success at reaching a cease-fire agreement this week at Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, voters have seen other agreements crumble — and they may be cynical of the benefits of just another signed piece of paper.

And if the cease-fire fails and the fighting continues, a lot of the blame may rest with Clinton, which could hurt Gore as well.

The conflict in the Middle East has the chance to be a negative for Bush if it raises the need in voters' minds for someone with crisis-management experience, said Steven Livingston, associate professor of political communication at George Washington University.

"This isn't like being the manager of the Texas Rangers," said Livingston, referring to Bush's former ownership of a major league baseball team. "We need someone up to par with foreign affairs."

Another wild card is the vice presidential candidates.

Both are strong on Middle East issues, and are seen as potentially even stronger than the top of their tickets.

Republican candidate Dick Cheney was secretary of defense during the Persian Gulf War and is well-versed in that region.

His Democratic counterpart, Joseph Lieberman, is a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

But while foreign policy could have an impact in this close a race, many analysts think it might not matter all that much, even if events do stay in the spotlight during the final weeks of the campaign.

Even during the height of the conflict in Kosovo, the issue rarely broke 1 percent in polls on pressing issues for America, Livingston said.

And a look at the questions at the town hall debate in St. Louis showed that most undecided voters are more concerned with domestic issues such as health care, Social Security and education.

"The reality is," Mellman said, that foreign policy "is not likely to be the decisive factor."

"Americans are mostly focused inward right now." □

JEWISH WORLD

Delegation to visit Ethiopia

A Jewish delegation is slated to travel to Ethiopia next week to observe the processing of Ethiopians who want to immigrate to the Jewish state.

The visit by the group from the United Jewish Communities comes as estimates of the number of Ethiopians scheduled to arrive in the Jewish state this year has risen to 3,000 from an earlier estimate of 1,300.

Camp portrait nets \$1.68 million

A planned New York art gallery paid \$1.68 million for a painting by Felix Nussbaum, who died in the Auschwitz death camp.

The Neue Galerie, which is slated to open in the fall of 2001, bought "Self-Portrait in the Camp" at a Sotheby's auction in London on Wednesday. The previous record price for a work by Nussbaum was \$260,000.

Russian neo-Nazis rise in East

Neo-Nazi activity is increasing in the Russian city of Blagoveshchensk, according to the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews.

For two months, walls of some apartment buildings in the eastern city along the Russian-Chinese border have been defaced with swastikas and with such graffiti as, "This Is a Russian City!" and "Russia for Russians!"

Local neo-Nazis recently held a torchlight procession, when their leader announced that his organization is going to run in municipal elections.

Blast may be linked to Mideast

A bomb that exploded outside the offices of a South African opposition party may be related to the crisis in the Middle East, according to a spokesman for the Democratic Alliance/Democratic Party.

The party's Jewish leader, Tony Leon, criticized the governing African National Congress for siding with the Palestinian Authority.

But Leon refused to speculate whether Wednesday's incident in a Cape Town suburb was related to the ongoing violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Holocaust historian dead at 59

Sybil Milton, an American historian of the Holocaust, died Monday at 59.

The cause of death was not immediately known. Milton was vice chair of an international commission of historians that issued a report last December criticizing Switzerland's policy toward Jewish refugees during the Holocaust.

She was senior historian at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington until 1997.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jews and Arabs in U.S. cities try to talk rather than confront

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Jewish and Arab leaders in major American cities are working quietly to forestall confrontations during the current tension in the Middle East.

The efforts are most fully developed in Detroit, Los Angeles and New York, cities with the largest Arab and Muslim populations.

"We started establishing contacts with the Arab community after the signing of the Oslo accords seven years ago," said Allan Gale, assistant director of the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit.

The area holds some 200,000 Arab Americans, twice the number of Jewish residents.

"We've had some incidents and some vociferous Arab spokesmen, but on the whole relations are good," Gale said.

In Los Angeles, some 10 Jews and five Arabs met Tuesday in the sukkah of one participant. Although all were aware of the Mideast tensions, the meeting had been scheduled some time ago as one in a series of monthly dialogue group meetings.

The group was established more than a year ago, when representatives of the two communities signed a code of ethics in a public ceremony.

"We try to keep our lines of communications open and learn about each other's culture and faith," said Elaine Albert, the urban affairs director for the city's Jewish Community Relations Committee.

One member of the dialogue group is attorney Gideon Kracov of the Progressive Jewish Alliance.

"We have a joint interest in dealing with hate crimes and maintaining an attitude of mutual respect," he said.

Douglas Mirell, the alliance's president, said, "We're in a period when it's easy to be carried away by emotions and to say things that we may come to regret later. We need to curtail the level of rhetoric here and the level of violence in the Mideast."

One leading Arab voice within the dialogue group — Salam Al-Marayati, executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Committee — tends to attract controversy.

A year ago, his appointment to the U.S. National Commission on Terrorism was rescinded under pressure from national Jewish organizations, which described him as an apologist for terrorists.

Many Los Angeles Jews who have worked with Al-Marayati took issue with this description.

Al-Marayati's organization strongly condemned the recent destruction of Joseph's Tomb in Nablus by rampaging Palestinians.

"Our dialogue with the Jewish community is working," said Al-Marayati. "We are both free communities, and if we can't talk to each other, how can you expect Palestinians and Israelis to talk to each other? At all times, we must show zero tolerance for violence and hate crimes."

In New York, Michael Miller, executive vice president of the city's Jewish Community Relations Council, is one of the key figures in the Coalition of Concerned Arab-Christians, Jews and Muslim New Yorkers.

The coalition is scheduled to meet next Monday and recently released a statement noting that "although the tensions that currently exist in the Middle East can intensify emotions here in New York, we can not allow these events to divide our city."

In addition, "isolated incidents must not be used as an excuse for scapegoating or reason to condemn entire communities," the statement said.

Efforts at Jewish-Arab dialogue are marked by some common guidelines:

- Don't try to solve — or even discuss — the basic issues roiling the Middle East. Acknowledge deeply felt differences and go on from there;
- Condemn any act of violence by their co-religionists in the United States;
- Build on the trust established in previous years in joint battles against discrimination.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Violence has French Jews tense, but they won't change their routine***By Joshua Schuster*

PARIS (JTA) — The presence of French riot police has dampened spirits somewhat in the Marais, the usually lively Jewish neighborhood here in the French capital.

On a recent day, local Jews could be seen going about their business in the cluttered district of felafel stands, butchers, bakers and bookstores.

The smells of humus and freshly made challah hung in the air, as they do six days a week, but customers were few and their pace seemed a bit more brisk than usual.

Just the same, in a sign that routines were continuing, a Chasidic man bearing a lulav and etrog warmly beckoned any passers-by, particularly tourists, to join in some of the rituals associated with the holiday of Sukkot.

The well-known old Jewish quarter is just one of dozens of Jewish religious and communal sites across the nation where police have set up stakeouts in hopes of ending a series of incidents that targeted Jews and Jewish sites across France.

French Jews have reacted with mixed feelings to the slew of anti-Semitic incidents, which began after fighting broke out between Israel and the Palestinians late last month.

While Jewish leaders issue calls for communal steadfastness in the face of the incidents, some members of the community dread walking the streets alone. They say that the wave of anti-Semitism has heightened tensions and confusion within the Jewish community to levels not seen since World War II. Others, however, note that a police presence at Jewish sites is quite common in France — and, they add, they are not about to change their routines.

“There is some fear, but it is not at all like it was between 1939 and 1945,” said Alain Derey of Paris. “There is some tension, especially when you see a group of young Arab kids walking around in groups. But really, we are ready to defend ourselves.”

Sophie Ruben, a lawyer living in a suburb north of Paris, called the incidents “very serious,” but said they only served to reinforce her Jewish identity.

“I’ll continue to go to the synagogue and observe the holidays, because you can’t let such threats stop your beliefs.”

However, others have remarked that they have seen a decline in the number of Jews wearing yarmulkas in the streets.

On one recent evening, an observer noticed a small group of children walking in the streets who donned their skullcaps only after meeting up with a much larger group of Jews.

Theo Klein, honorary president of CRIF, the umbrella group of secular French Jewish organizations, said he “was not persuaded” that the recent acts of violence “are even anti-Semitic. These are spontaneous acts by people who like violence.”

Klein called “absurd” the “overly emotional” reaction of some of his fellow Jewish community members, who have likened the incidents to Holocaust-era violence.

Noted intellectual and community activist Alain Finkielkraut, however, said that “it is normal that Jews have fear. A certain anti-Semitism has become now common in the streets.”

He added that “people should be able to criticize Israel without having to revert to anti-Semitism.”

Joseph Sitruk, France’s chief rabbi, pleaded for composure among the Jewish community, but acknowledged that he was “divided between revulsion and worry.”

In an incident reflecting the nervousness pervading some in the community, Sitruk announced in a radio broadcast last Friday that six young Jews had been stabbed and one had died.

But a few hours later, he returned to the airwaves to say that the attack was a false rumor and asked that everyone stop spreading gossip that “only adds to the current anguish.”

Since the outbreak of violence in the Middle East, French Jewish officials have recorded more than 80 acts against Jews in their own country.

These are some of the incidents:

- Firebombs were thrown at synagogues in Creil and at the Jewish community center in Colombes, both in the Paris region;
- A door of a synagogue in southern France was doused with gasoline and set on fire;
- The doors of two Jewish homes in Orly, south of Paris, were set on fire;
- Students at a day school in Paris were pelted with objects and subjected to insults as they left school last week;
- In Strasbourg, located near the border with Germany, a Jewish-owned bakery was left to burn Saturday when a blazing car was pushed through the shop window. Among the store’s melted glass and scorched walls, the perpetrators had scrawled “Jews, assassins” and “Hezbollah” — remarks similar to other graffiti spray-painted on synagogues, Jewish schools and homes across the nation during the past two weeks.

Police believe the majority of such acts are committed by a small group of disgruntled teen-agers.

Although by the riots in the Palestinian territories clearly provoked the acts, Jewish community members suspect members of the extreme right, as well as hoodlums from the Arab community, have been involved. But Jewish leaders insist the violence is coming from a few unorganized troublemakers.

Leading Islamic religious figures have been quick to join rabbis in denouncing the violence. For example, the head of the Paris mosque joined an interfaith group led by Sitruk that demanded an end to the anti-Jewish incidents.

“We call on all our fellow citizens to maintain a climate of serenity and peace. We should listen to the voice of reason and act in a manner of dignity and respect of other people,” the group, which also includes the president of the French Protestant community and a leading Catholic bishop, said in a statement.

The Jewish community is asking the government to dramatically increase the police presence at Jewish sites and to set harsh penalties for those caught engaging in violence or making threats.

Moreover, during a meeting with French officials on Monday, Jewish leaders asked the government to consider using army forces if the anti-Semitic violence persists.

French President Jacques Chirac, who was recently criticized for his apparent bias toward the Palestinians when a summit was held in the French capital earlier this month, has denounced the violence as “unacceptable.”

Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said the government would react with the “utmost severity” against “all those responsible for acts of violence or racist and anti-Semitic slogans.”

However, only three teen-age suspects have been arrested so far. □