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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak: No new U.S. peace plan

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said there is no U.S. plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian violence and revive peace talks with the Palestinians.

Dismissing reports that he had rejected a U.S. offer to mediate the crisis, Barak also lashed out at Labor Party members, whom he accused of pressuring him to try to reach an agreement with the Palestinians before the end of President Clinton's term.

Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat denied reports that Israel and the Palestinians have been holding secret peace talks.

Arafat's denial Sunday came after the Palestinian leadership issued a declaration two days earlier that it will continue the struggle against Israel despite the Palestinians' "human, material and economic" losses.

In another development, the leader of Palestinian militias in the West Bank said the Palestinians will not stop fighting Israel even if peace talks resume. Pressure from Palestinian fighters will help the Palestinians in the negotiations, Marwan Barghouti said.

Protests held at Lieberman home

Hundreds of people protesting the contested U.S. presidential race demonstrated Saturday outside the Connecticut home of Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman.

Democrats charged Lieberman's critics with anti-Semitism for holding the rally on the Jewish Sabbath.

Republican sympathizers accused the Democrats of trying to steal the election through repeated vote recounts in Florida. Lieberman, who is an Orthodox Jew, was in Washington at the time.

U.S. skinheads sentenced

Five skinheads who attempted to firebomb a synagogue in Reno, Nev., one year ago were sentenced to up to 15 years in prison. [Page 4]

Israel to cooperate with panel

Israel said it will cooperate with a U.S.-led fact-finding panel probing the causes of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian violence.

During a telephone call last Friday, Prime Minister Ehud Barak and President Clinton discussed the panel, which is due in the Middle East later this month.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Front-line Israeli commander describes a 'complicated' war

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — During these past two months of Israeli-Palestinian violence, Col. Gal Hirsch has lived his life from shooting to shooting, riot to riot, day into night into day again, without more than two hours of sleep in any given day.

As commander of the Binyamin Brigade, Hirsch has controlled Israeli military activity at some of the worst flashpoints of violence in the West Bank, including the outskirts of Nablus and Ramallah, as well as at some of the nearby Jewish settlements that have been fired upon repeatedly.

With an endless cycle of violence to contend with, Hirsch has not spent much time with his family.

Since the crisis began in late September, he has forgone weekly leaves. Twice, he returned home to see his wife and two children. Both times, he was quickly called back to his unit.

Yet with the army keenly aware that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is taking place in the media as well, the 37-year-old Hirsch was given an hour off from his hectic duties to tell JTA about how the crisis looks from the perspective of a senior Israeli military commander on the ground.

During an interview at the Israel Defense Force's Central Command headquarters in eastern Jerusalem, Hirsch fielded several calls and beeper messages reporting fresh incidents in the field, then quickly bounced back to the subject at hand.

His dissection of Israel's military predicament appeared uninfluenced by the enormous burden of his sleepless daily routine or the complexity of the larger challenge facing his units and the entire IDF.

"We are in a complicated situation. It isn't correct to say it is complex," he says with analytical precision. "A complex situation can be taken apart, but a complicated situation cannot be taken apart. In a complicated situation, we must behave with extreme caution. We cannot just walk into that china shop and behave like an elephant."

The complicatedness of the situation can be seen in Hirsch's multifaceted role in the field. On a typical day, he is involved in everything from ordering Israeli responses to riots or shootings, dealing with the daily needs of Israeli settlers, planning special operations, appearing before the media and maintaining a surreal dialogue with Palestinian commanders through remaining communications channels.

But whether Israel has been behaving like the elephant Hirsch describes — the Hebrew equivalent of the proverbial bull in a china shop — this is perhaps at the core of the international controversy Israel is mired in today.

During the first weeks of the conflict, scores of Palestinian civilian deaths sparked accusations by international human rights groups that Israel used excessive force when dealing with Palestinian rioters. The accusations severely harmed Israel's image.

Even as the conflict has shifted toward a guerrilla-like war spotted with terror attacks, the excessive-force question is still on the agenda — particularly when Israel retaliates with helicopter raids on the hearts of Palestinian cities.

For Hirsch, who himself was seriously injured three years ago when Palestinians hurled a cement block through his windshield, the answers are clear.

"Israel is behaving in a very, very restrained fashion," he says. "Our restraint is unprecedented in any campaign against terror or guerrilla activity."

Despite Palestinian evidence of scores of deaths and thousands of injuries inflicted

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israeli wounded near Ramallah

An Israeli was stabbed and critically wounded at a junction near the West Bank town of Ramallah, Israel Radio reported Sunday. The attacker escaped after coming under a hail of Israeli gunfire.

Mosque prayers go peacefully

Thousands of Palestinians marched last Friday in the plaza in front of the Al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem, but there were no reports of violence.

Israel eased some restrictions on young Palestinian worshippers and allowed Muslims with Israeli identity cards to take part in what were the first Friday prayers during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Labor backs Barak candidacy

Israel's Labor Party voted to support Ehud Barak for prime minister but said other candidates could put their names in the running.

The party's Central Committee backed the leader, though they are expected to clash with Barak over a proposal to abolish the system to directly elect a prime minister.

Rabin aide faces two years in jail

A Tel Aviv court sentenced a senior aide to the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to two years in prison on charges of attempted bribe-taking, fraud and breach of public trust. The court, which last Friday also gave Shimon Sheves a one-year suspended sentence and levied a fine of more than \$12,000, agreed to postpone the start of his sentence until he appeals to the Supreme Court.

Study: More women depressed

Almost twice as many Israeli women as men suffer from depression, according to a new study.

Thirty-nine percent of Israeli women suffer from depression and depression-related effects, compared with 21 percent of men, the study said.



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by the Israeli army on the upper bodies of stone-throwers, Hirsch says his units have followed orders that compel soldiers to shoot only at lower body parts and to use live fire only when fired upon.

Mass riots backed by what Hirsch describes as heavy gunfire have created a very difficult situation for troops on the ground. Yet Hirsch insists his men have been careful to use only rubber-coated steel bullets against rioters, while using live fire without hesitation to shoot at any Palestinian firing a gun.

He also denies that soldiers have taken the law into their own hands by shooting indiscriminately. "Our activity in the field is under complete control," he says. "I know about every bullet that leaves a gun barrel."

Having appeared on local and international television, Hirsch knows the current conflict is twofold, playing out not only in the field but also on the airwaves.

He knows the world sympathizes more with the Palestinians because they are seen as underdogs. And he knows that in a globally wired world, images of what his units do are flashed around the world instantly. "An Israeli soldier in a full-metal jacket and M-16 facing a child with a grenade never makes a good picture," he says.

"But I believe that even in the media arena the world is starting to get tired of the Palestinian point of view, and they are starting to understand that this is initiated violence and not spontaneous."

According to Hirsch, the army was well-prepared for the explosion of violence in September and has watched carefully as the conflict evolved from its early days of mass popular uprisings backed by gunfire into the current situation.

After those initial weeks, the Palestinians shifted gears and tried to challenge the Israeli army at night.

Then they shifted to more use of gunfire during the daytime, including some snipers. In recent weeks, they have made yet another shift — shooting attacks on main West Bank arteries at Israeli soldiers and civilians. There are still riots, but far fewer than at the beginning of the conflict.

The multiple tactics employed by the Palestinians explain why the situation is so complicated. The status quo is not a state of classic war between two sovereign states, nor is it a clear-cut guerrilla war or a popular uprising.

Hirsch describes it vaguely as a "fighting situation," including multiple components such as guerrilla warfare, terror, counterterror, riots and demonstrations.

Israel has also started to change its strategy as well. Initially, the strategy was simply to contain the violence. "Now we are shifting into a 'shaping' attitude, taking more action with offensive implications," he says.

Yet the jury is still out on whether such a strategy can help Israel extricate itself from the crisis. Even though Hirsch believes the Palestinians have made no military gains to date, and have realized they will pay an increasingly heavy price for confronting the powerful IDF, the question of whether Israel can defeat the Palestinians militarily and forge a political solution to the conflict remains open.

"That depends on whether Israel wants to win by points or by knockout," he says, using a boxing analogy. A knockout would only be possible if Israel decides it wants to unleash all of its military force to completely destroy the Palestinian Authority. Military protocol forbids Hirsch from making political comments, but it is clear that the diplomatic backlash against Israel in such a case would be devastating — and it could also spark an all-out regional war.

Assuming Israel does not choose a knockout punch, the other option — a long, drawn-out conflict that Hirsch calls victory "by points" — poses big questions not only to the military but also to Israeli society. So far, Hirsch believes Israelis have demonstrated that they have the staying power to stick the conflict out for the long haul.

For example, he says, reserve soldiers have been reporting for duty with high morale. Furthermore, despite raw emotions driving the Palestinians to fight for their independence and their assumed ability to sustain much heavier losses than Israel, Hirsch believes they are reeling under the force of the army.

"Whether or not Israel can 'win by points' is an internal question we must ask ourselves. It will depend on what victory means for Israel, and what do we want as a country," says Hirsch. "Winning by points will be complicated — just as complicated as this entire war." □

JEWISH WORLD

\$1.2 million paid for Talmud

Ten volumes from the 1520 Bomberg edition of the Talmud sold for \$1.2 million at the New York-based auction house of Kestenbaum & Company.

Purchased Nov. 28 by an anonymous Jewish buyer, the tractates were part of the London Beit Din Library's book collection, established in the late 18th century by Britain's first chief rabbi, Solomon Hirschell.

Panel: Swiss wronged Gypsies

Switzerland unjustly prevented thousands of Gypsies fleeing Nazi persecution from entering the country during World War II, an international panel of historians said last Friday.

A year ago, the panel lashed out at Switzerland's wartime policy toward Jewish refugees. The panel, headed by historian Jean-Francois Bergier, was created by Switzerland in December 1996 to study the nation's wartime past.

Austria to pay Shoah reparations

Austria will offer to pay Jews and other groups whose property was seized by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

U.S. Deputy Treasury Secretary Stuart Eizenstat said last Friday that victims' representatives have asked for less than \$1 billion from the Austrian government and companies.

Temple services make waves

A Reform temple in Baltimore is broadcasting hour-long Shabbat services on the radio each Saturday morning, according to the Baltimore Jewish Times.

Temple Oheb Shalom officials said the broadcast — on an AM station that carries sports talk shows during the week — is designed to help those who are unable to make it to shul.

Bible scholar wins prize

A Jewish scholar's view of the Bible won a \$200,000 religion award from a Christian seminary in Kentucky.

"The Bible As It Was," by James Kugel, which deals with early interpretations of the Bible, won the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary's 2001 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion.

Groups take part in AIDS day

A coalition of Jewish groups participated in a World AIDS Day commemoration in Washington.

The American Jewish World Service released an informational brochure, "AIDS in Africa: A Jewish Response," which provides information on the dimensions of the crisis and suggests ways that synagogues and Jewish organizations can get involved.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Students make Europe smaller with a new home on the Internet

By Joshua Schuster

PARIS (JTA) — Inviting students from 32 European countries to take a "daily online kosher coffee break" for Jewish identity and unity, a sleek new Web site hopes the continent's Jewish youth movements will come out of their shells.

The site, the brainchild of the European Union of Jewish Students, has all the latest technology, with chat rooms, videos, classified ads. It even offers all those who register free e-mail. The site was launched a few months ago at www.eujs.org.

Now it just needs students.

"We wanted to find a way to get as many people involved as we could across Europe, so we came up with the Web site as a way to reach everyone," said Joelle Fiss, 24, the full-time chair of the group who is based in Brussels.

"We think it is a way for people to integrate Judaism in their daily lives. They can post their opinions, have their own e-mail for their Jewish contacts and keep in touch with the people they meet across Europe."

There are approximately 170,000 European Jewish students, and each nation has its own student group. Students gather once per year at a conference to jam all the learning, organizing and friendship building they can into a few days.

Yet after such gatherings, students go their separate ways and tend to lose the contacts they made, Fiss said. Moreover, many complained that their local Jewish student groups have become a bit stale, mostly offering the same old pizza parties and karaoke each month.

EUJS, founded in 1978, sponsors conferences across Europe and also successfully passed a resolution at the European Youth Forum condemning the recent wave of anti-Semitic violence that spread in Europe since battles erupted in Israel and the Palestinian territories in late September.

EUJS is hoping students will use the site to continue the conversations they begin at meetings and fetes that go on across Europe.

That was the way the site got started. According to the Web site, "after having experienced a week of stormy debates and outrageous cocktails," Jewish students in Amsterdam dreamed up the site so they could continue to build on the excitement of their meeting.

The site definitely has a hip touch to it, with a glowing yellow background and a polished but welcoming feel. "Whether you prefer chatting in Danish to a Polish vodka-sipper in Geneva, or joking in German over a British tea in Rome, you have reached the place where minds are connecting by the second," it reads.

Fiss, herself half-British and half-Swiss, remarked that the vibrancy of the site is certainly intentional. "I think that Jewish life can be sexy," she said. "We want it to be a lot of fun. We think you can have fun and learn at the same time."

While the site is entirely in English, webmaster Benjamin Van Gelder, a 22-year-old Amsterdam resident, says he hopes there will be some Russian-language content and that conversations or messages are welcome in any language.

Van Gelder hopes particularly that the site will catch on with students in smaller and more isolated countries like Bulgaria and Croatia that rarely have the chance to meet other Jewish students.

"When I was in Hungary last year for the annual student conference, I was amazed to meet so many people from countries with small Jewish populations. I think we often underestimate them. A lot of them have e-mail and use it regularly, so this is perfect for them."

So far, the site seems to be doing the right things to pique interest, students say. Marina Haddad, 21, a student from Versailles, France, said that since "young people use more and more the Internet, it is a great way to get their attention.

"I went to England a year ago and tried to look up information on the Internet about the Jewish community. I think the site will encourage students to travel more and meet Jewish people in different countries," she added. □

In Canadian election, Jewish vote was wooed as never before

By Bill Gladstone

TORONTO (JTA) — As Prime Minister Jean Chretien prepares for his return to Ottawa for a third consecutive majority government, he leaves behind a campaign that courted Canada's Jewish vote as never before.

At the height of the campaign, in which an unusual amount of mud was slung, Jewish Parliament member Elinor Caplan, who represents a sizeable Jewish electorate in a district north of Toronto, declared supporters of the Canadian Alliance to be "Holocaust deniers, prominent bigots and racists."

Jack Silverstone, the national executive director for the Canadian Jewish Congress, said that while he's convinced the accusation is not true, it shows how the Canadian Alliance engaged in a fierce tug of war with the Liberals for Jewish support during the heated 37-day campaign leading up to the Nov. 27 election.

Although Canada's Jewish community numbers only 350,000 out of a population of 30 million, Jewish votes are seen as key in a handful of urban districts, mostly in Montreal and Toronto, which are regarded as traditional Liberal strongholds.

The Liberals won 170 seats in the 301-seat Parliament. The Quebec-based separatist party, the Bloc Quebecois, dropped to 38 seats, six less than in the last Parliament.

As before, the official opposition is the right-wing Canadian Alliance Party, which held steady at 68 seats, mostly in western Canada.

Five Jewish members of Parliament, all Liberal, retained their seats. They included Herb Gray, who currently serves as deputy prime minister, and Irwin Cotler, a law professor who gained international renown for his activism on behalf of former political prisoners such as Andrei Sakharov, Natan Sharansky and Nelson Mandela.

According to Silverstone, the government's support of a recent Security Council resolution that seemed "unfair and unbalanced" in its condemnation of Israel probably cost the Liberals some Jewish votes.

"But we're also aware that the Canadian representatives have taken important positive initiatives in support of Israel at the United Nations that have been welcomed by the Israeli government," Silverstone said.

Cotler's criticism of the Security Council resolution — he called it "one-sided, misinformed and prejudicial to the cause of peace in the Middle East" — earned him the respect of the Jewish community but the rancor of Canadian Arab groups and even of five of his fellow Liberal legislators, who publicly criticized him for breaking party ranks.

Last week, however, Cotler emerged triumphant and quite unscathed by the criticism.

In fact, his 83 percent margin of victory in a Montreal district was the largest majority of any candidate in the country.

He acquired that margin even though seven opponents ran against him, including those from all the major parties.

Cotler said he was "delighted" by his support in what he called Canada's "rainbow" district, despite leaflets circulated the day before the election accusing him of "supporting the murderers of innocent Palestinian children."

"I ran on a human rights platform, which included an emphasis on women's rights, rights of minorities, rights of children, a human rights foreign policy and my human rights record," Cotler told JTA. "My position on the U.N. Security Council resolution was based on a human rights perspective — namely that Israel, like any other member state in the U.N., is entitled to international due process. I am pleased that the strong majority has vindicated that human rights platform."

For other Liberal politicians, however, fallout from the U.N. vote may have been behind the party's heated campaign rhetoric in pursuit of Jewish votes, Silverstone said.

"A great deal of effort was made to draw our community in partisan ways to a degree unprecedented in our experience," he said. "We repeatedly had to remind the players" from the Liberal and Canadian Alliance parties "that we are a nonpartisan organization and that we do not endorse candidates for political office," Silverstone said.

"We resisted their aggressive attempts to make a political football out of our community. We have good relations with all the parties and we were not going to be dragged into a partisan debate, despite their most intense efforts." □

(JTA correspondent Bram Eisenthal in Montreal contributed to this story.)

Skinheads in U.S. shul attack receive up to 15 years in jail time

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Five skinheads who attempted to firebomb a synagogue in Reno, Nev., one year ago have been sentenced to up to 15 years in prison.

On Nov. 30, 1999, the five, aged 19 to 26, accompanied by two teen-age girls, tried unsuccessfully to burn down Temple Emanu-El, home to an 80-year old Conservative congregation.

The sentence "sends a very strong message that this kind of hatred is not going to be tolerated, at least not in this community," Assistant U.S. Attorney Daniel Bogden said following last week's sentencing by Judge David Hagen.

According to the defendants' testimony and plea bargain, which avoided possible 40-year sentences, one of the skinheads threw a liter bottle filled with concrete and then threw a Molotov cocktail at the temple's 8-foot window.

The concrete bottle shattered — but did not break — the window, and the gas-filled bottle only scorched the sidewalk, according to reports in the Reno Gazette-Journal newspaper and wire services.

Joshua Kudlacek, at 19 the youngest of the defendants, received a five-year sentence.

Terms of between 14 and 15 years were imposed on Scott Hudson, Daniel McIntosh, Carl DeAmicis and Christopher Hampton. They were also ordered to pay the temple \$3,743.50 for damage to the window.

Prosecutor Bogden gave a slide presentation of the defendants' "clubhouse," which showed Nazi and Confederate flags, a "Whites Only" sign and a photo of Ku Klux Klan members in full regalia.

Three of the defendants sported Nazi tattoos in the video. The most prominent was a 4-inch-high swastika, outlined in red and black, just above the right ear of DeAmicis' shaved head. □