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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak announces resignation

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak formally resigned on Sunday, following his surprise announcement the previous night that he would seek a new mandate to pursue his peace policies with the Palestinians. Barak presented his letter of resignation to President Moshe Katsav, setting in motion a countdown to special elections for prime minister within 60 days.

Hours later, Benjamin Netanyahu announced his intention to run for prime minister.

He urged the Knesset to take steps that would enable him to do so.

The former premier said Sunday he felt he had to respond to what he called a mounting public demand for him to challenge Barak. **[Page 1]**

Israel tries to block shootings

Israel's army chief of staff said Israel has forbidden private cars carrying groups of Palestinian men from traveling between towns in the West Bank.

Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz announced the move Sunday as part of an effort to prevent Palestinian drive-by shootings on Israeli vehicles, following two such attacks last Friday in which three Israelis were killed. They were among 10 people killed last Friday and Saturday, when Palestinians called two "Days of Rage" to mark the anniversary of the start of their 1987-1993 uprising.

Chief rabbi's bus under fire

Israel's Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, came under fire Sunday afternoon when Palestinians shot at a bus carrying him and another passenger from the settlement of Ateret, near Ramallah in the West Bank. He was not hurt by the broken glass. Lau said he had switched from his car to the bus because his personal vehicle is not bullet-proof.

Israeli soldiers shoot bomber

Israeli soldiers shot and killed a Palestinian man who was trying to plant a roadside bomb Saturday night near the settlement of Har Gilo in the Bethlehem area. A second man fled into the Palestinian self-rule areas. In another incident, the army located and defused a bomb near the Jewish settlement of Elon Moreh near the West Bank city of Nablus, according to Israel's Army Radio.

With elections on the horizon, Barak strikes pre-emptive blow

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With elections inevitable, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's surprise resignation has been widely interpreted here as a pre-emptive strike designed to keep former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu out of the race.

Under Israeli law, if the prime minister resigns, special elections for prime minister must be held within 60 days. However, only standing Knesset members can seek the post — and Netanyahu gave up his Knesset seat after losing to Barak in May 1999.

Netanyahu on Sunday denounced Barak's "cynical trick" and said he indeed will run, placing his faith in the Knesset's willingness to take the necessary legislative steps to open the election to all candidates.

Saying he was putting his name forward to restore security for "every home, mother and child in Israel," Netanyahu said he felt obligated to respond to what he called a mounting public demand for him to challenge Barak.

"An hour doesn't pass when a citizen doesn't come up to me and say, 'Come back and make the country what it used to be — a place where we could live,' " said Netanyahu, who had just returned from a U.S. lecture tour.

Netanyahu's challenge came hours after Barak submitted his resignation letter to President Moshe Katsav on Sunday afternoon and was affirmed by the Labor Party Central Committee as Labor's candidate in the elections.

Unless Barak has a last-minute change of heart, his resignation will take effect Tuesday afternoon. However, he will continue to head the government until elections are held.

Katsav said he understood Barak's desire to reaffirm the public's confidence as Israel faces an "emergency" situation in its conflict with the Palestinians.

A former army chief and Israel's most decorated soldier, Barak trounced Netanyahu in the 1999 election by focusing on the stalled peace process and the recession-bound economy.

Since the outbreak of the current Israeli-Palestinian violence, however, Netanyahu has developed an enormous lead over Barak in public opinion polls.

On Saturday night, looking pale and exhausted, Barak called a news conference and launched into a 20-minute, campaign-style speech, at the end of which he stunned the nation by announcing his resignation.

Under political fire fueled by more than 10 weeks of Israeli-Palestinian violence, Barak said he sought a new mandate from the public to carry out his policies. He added that the Israeli opposition offers no security or political alternative.

"There are those who doubt the mandate I received from you, the citizens of Israel," Barak said. "I have decided to seek a new mandate from the Israeli public and to receive a new mandate to lead the state of Israel on the way to peace, security, a proper civil and social agenda."

Barak's decision forces elections for prime minister within 60 days, but not for the Knesset.

However, there are several scenarios under which Netanyahu could yet run for prime minister:

- Passage of early election legislation. The Knesset has given preliminary approval to opposition bills to dissolve the house. Following Barak's announcement, right- and left-wing legislators said they would still press for early elections. If the bills are approved in two more votes, elections for both prime minister and Knesset would be

MIDEAST FOCUS

U.N. to vote on peacekeepers

The U.N. Security Council plans to vote Monday on a Palestinian request that U.N. peacekeepers be dispatched to monitor the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian violence.

The request was initially to be put to a vote last Friday, but voting was postponed after some council members requested a delay.

Report: Labor may alter platform

Israel's Labor Party is considering a proposal to revise the portion of its platform dealing with Jerusalem, according to Israel Radio.

The revision would allow for Arab neighborhoods within Jerusalem to become part of a Palestinian state, the report said.

Germany said to be mediating

A Hezbollah leader confirmed Germany is involved in mediation efforts between Israel and the Shi'ite group regarding the fate of three Israeli soldiers that Hezbollah abducted across the Israeli-Lebanese border in October.

Meanwhile, Israeli President Moshe Katsav told a German publication that Germany had passed on a message to Hezbollah expressing Israel's willingness to reach an agreement regarding the soldiers.

In addition to the three soldiers, Hezbollah is holding an Israeli businessman.

AP photographer gets apology

The Israeli army formally apologized to an Associated Press photographer shot by a soldier in Bethlehem last month.

The army said last Friday that the soldier, who thought the photographer was a Palestinian rioter, went against army rules of engagement, which require that a soldier be in immediate mortal danger before shooting live ammunition. The army also said it would punish the soldier.

held within 90 days. In such a case, Netanyahu could run in a Likud Party primary preceding the election.

- Passage of a law to allow any citizen to run for prime minister. The fervently Orthodox Shas Party said it would initiate such legislation enabling Netanyahu to run. Commentators noted it is not clear whether there would be sufficient backing for such a bill, which would open a legal Pandora's box by fundamentally changing the foundations of Israel's system of government.

- A Knesset vote of no-confidence in the prime minister. Passage of such a motion by an absolute majority of 61 in the 120-member house would dissolve the Knesset and force general elections.

Barak said Saturday he would support any initiative to hold early elections or open the prime ministerial race to any citizen. But media reports said Barak and close advisers had already phoned members of the left-wing Meretz Party on Sunday, urging them not to back early election initiatives.

Likud Knesset member Danny Naveh said this only cemented the belief that Barak's resignation was intended to prevent Netanyahu from running.

If Netanyahu is not able to run, the Likud candidate likely will be current party chairman Ariel Sharon, who also leads Barak slightly in public opinion polls.

However, Sharon has several significant strikes against him. At 72, he is considered by many to be too old for the post. Controversial in the West and the Arab world, he is reviled by many Israelis for launching the 1982 Lebanon War, which sparked the 18-year occupation of south Lebanon.

A few other Likud politicians, such as Limor Livnat, Meir Sheerit and Silvan Shalom, also are considering challenging Sharon to be the Likud candidate.

Barak's resignation and the electoral parameters it set also prompted speculation that he had cut a secret deal with Sharon, agreeing that if they ran against each other, the winner would invite the loser to form a national unity government.

Sharon denied any kind of deal and said he was surprised by Barak's decision.

"I want to state clearly: there was no coordination with Mr. Barak, no deal," Sharon told a meeting of the Likud Knesset caucus. Reacting to Barak's decision, he said earlier, "Barak apparently reached the conclusion that his government cannot continue to function in the grave security situation and political mess it created."

Sharon said he would support allowing any citizen, including someone who is not a Knesset member, to run for prime minister.

Israeli commentators were split over whether Barak's move was suicide or a stroke of political genius. Analysts alternately called it a necessary step in the current political reality, a pre-emptive move to set the best possible terms for re-election, or a Kamikaze act.

The move appeared to quash any remaining speculation that Barak would try to forge a deal with the Palestinians that he could then present as a referendum in elections.

Barak told the Cabinet on Sunday that Israel is focusing on ways to reduce the violence, which claimed the lives of three more Israelis and at least seven Palestinians over the weekend.

Palestinians called Barak's resignation an internal Israeli matter, but they said it further dampened any chances of reaching a political deal in the near future.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, on a visit to Saudi Arabia, said Barak's resignation no doubt was precipitated by pressure on the Israeli leadership by the current Palestinian unrest. He also said that such precipitous elections meant an end to the peace process.

Ahmed Karia, the speaker of the Palestinian legislature, said it was hard to believe that Israel and the Palestinians could possibly reach an agreement within 60 days.

If special elections are held for prime minister only, whoever wins is likely to encounter the same political deadlock that has characterized the Knesset for the past 18 months.

Barak's hope is that a renewed mandate will make it possible for him to form a stable government on a strong parliamentary base. However, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz wrote in an editorial that whoever is elected prime minister could suffer again from a divided and conflicted Knesset.

Barak, in fact, won a huge majority in 1999, yet his government proved one of the most unstable in Israel's history. □



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JEWISH WORLD

O.U. gets panel's report

A commission investigating the Orthodox Union's handling of complaints that a high-ranking youth group employee sexually harassed and molested teens delivered its 332-page report to the organization's president.

A summary of the report's findings, conclusions and recommendations is expected to be made public by the end of the month.

Volcker to oversee payments

A U.S. judge appointed former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker to oversee the payment of compensation to Holocaust victims who deposited money in Swiss banks during World War II and never got it back.

Under a distribution plan that the judge approved last month, \$800 million has been set aside to cover dormant account holders from a \$1.3 billion settlement that Swiss banks agreed to pay Holocaust families.

The rest of the settlement will go to wartime Jewish refugees, former slave laborers and needy Holocaust survivors.

Romanians vote in run-off

Romanians voted Sunday in a run-off presidential election that pitted former communist Ion Iliescu against right-wing extremist Corneliu Vadim Tudor.

Prior to the vote, the Romanian Jewish Federation issued a statement saying Tudor had been "a staunch enemy of the Jews" in Romania for many years and had repeatedly displayed anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

Museum gets new director

A former U.S. Nazi investigator was named the director of the New York-based Museum of Jewish Heritage — a Living Memorial to the Holocaust.

David Marwell, who said he hopes to boost the museum's Web site, previously worked for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and also served as a Nazi-hunter at the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations.

Marwell, 48, holds a doctorate in modern European history.

Russian Jews' exit visas blocked

The Union of Councils for Soviet Jews sent letters to the Russian government on behalf of two Jews denied permission to go to Israel.

Raisa Isakova, a Jewish activist in the city of Omsk, and Dmitri Murashovsky, who wanted to join his family in Israel, were refused permission for foreign travel because of their alleged knowledge of secret information.

Commission due in Mideast this week, but its mandate is still cause for debate

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A U.S.-led international commission that plans to investigate the causes of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian violence is expected to reach the region this week.

With three Israelis and seven Palestinians killed in fresh violence over the weekend, the commission will get to work just as tensions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are heating up once more.

Israel and the Palestinian Authority agreed to the fact-finding commission at a mid-October summit in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, but the commission's goals continue to be debated.

Israel wants the commission to look into the actions of the Palestinian Authority, the question of Palestinian leaders' incitement and the role the Palestinian media have played in the violence, an Israeli official said.

The Palestinians see the fact-finding commission as a propaganda vehicle, the official said.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported that Israeli officials are preparing evidence to persuade the panel that the Palestinian Authority is responsible for encouraging the violence.

Palestinian officials want the commission to have a broader scope.

The officials say that Israel's refusal to abide by U.N. resolutions and its occupation of land that the Palestinians claim ought to be subject to the commission's scrutiny.

Israel indicated only last Sunday that it would cooperate with the commission, which is led by former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, who mediated peace efforts in Northern Ireland.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak may meet with the commission members, and Israeli lawyers and Cabinet ministers plan to work with the group.

The other members of the committee include European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana, a former NATO secretary general; former U.S. Sen. Warren Rudman, the Jewish leader best known for co-authoring deficit reduction law and cross-examining Oliver North during the Iran-Contra hearings; former Turkish President Suleyman Demirel; and Norwegian Foreign Minister Thorbjørn Jagland.

Jagland met with Barak and Arafat in August and said then that there was a real possibility to advance the peace negotiations if both sides showed "a creative approach."

President Clinton made the appointments in consultation with Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Mitchell has described the commission's goal as helping to break the cycle of violence so that the two sides can resume their efforts toward peace.

He said a few weeks ago that he expects the commission to issue a report on its findings by March.

Israel had sought to delay the investigation, saying Palestinian violence must first stop.

The Palestinians had wanted a U.N.-led inquiry, and they still are pressing for a U.N. force of unarmed military observers to protect civilians.

Last week, Gilead Sher, an aide to Barak, told Israel Radio that Israel would cooperate with the commission fully and transparently.

Palestinian Minister for Planning and International Cooperation Nabil Sha'ath said the Palestinian Authority would give it total freedom to investigate.

Israeli foreign ministry sources said Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami had told U.S. National Security Adviser Sandy Berger that Israel understood the commission would not have the authority of an official inquiry and would not interview witnesses without letting the parties know.

The commission's findings and recommendations will go to the next U.S. president and to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

In Palestinian gunshots, settlers find support ebbing among Israelis

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Since the outbreak of Palestinian violence in late September, Israeli commentators have adopted a new tactic: publishing open letters to Jewish settlers in Israeli newspapers.

Perhaps the most controversial such letter was written by A.B. Yehoshua, one of Israel's leading authors.

Addressing his "brethren" in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Yehoshua urged them to pack their belongings and return to Israel, concede that the settlement movement was a mistake and acknowledge that the settlements are among the chief obstacles to peace.

Not surprisingly, his letter triggered angry reactions from settlers, who say that, more than ever in the past, they are convinced they are right.

Citing frequent shooting attacks against Jerusalem's Gilo neighborhood from a nearby Arab town and the recent terror bombings in Jerusalem and Hadera, the settlers say Palestinians make no distinction between the settlements and locations inside Israel proper.

They also contend that if Israel agrees to dismantle the settlements, it would next face Palestinian demands on Tel Aviv, Haifa or Hadera.

More open letters followed Yehoshua's.

Earlier this month, Ma'ariv columnist Ya'ir Lapid wrote a letter asking "my brother, the settler" to stop preaching to other Israelis about love of country.

"I love this country no less than you do, and I am tied to it and to its landscapes and its historic memories, which grow here like ancient olive trees. We should not compete with each other in love for country, because we shall both lose," Lapid wrote.

While settlers may have the right to put themselves in the front lines in the fight for portions of the West Bank and Gaza, some Israelis are questioning whether the settlers have the right to raise their children in a war zone.

The question became more urgent after a terror bombing last month on a school bus traveling from the Gaza settlement of Kfar Darom left three young siblings severely crippled.

"We are constantly on the alert," said Yaron Alima, a father of four who lives in the West Bank settlement of Barkan. "The stories of what happened in Kfar Darom are frightening. Every passing car is frightening."

Alima's son, Dan, goes to school in the West Bank town of Ariel, a 15-minute ride from Barkan. Although an army guard escorts the school bus, every ride is 15 minutes of fear.

The children are instructed not to stand during the ride, "but if there is a bomb, it's not too safe on the floor either," Dan said.

Not all of the estimated 200,000 settlers living in the territories are motivated by ideology.

Increasing numbers of "mortgage settlers" — who moved to the territories because of the quality of life and cheaper housing — have recently returned to Israel, at least until the current fighting ends.

But settler ideologues insist that those returning to Israel represent only a small minority of the settler population, and that

they have been replaced by other families buying homes in the territories.

The Palestinians have made it clear that the settlements are their prime target. With the exception of the attacks in Jerusalem and Hadera, Palestinian violence has been directed at military and civilian targets in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Palestinians likewise describe their shooting attacks on Gilo as an attack against settlements, since they consider Gilo — a Jerusalem neighborhood built on land conquered in the 1967 Six-Day War — as a settlement.

The Israeli left has long demanded that Israel dismantle certain controversial settlements like Pesagot in the West Bank and Netzarim in Gaza.

But most Israelis, even the most enthusiastic supporters of a Palestinian state, will not endorse concessions while the current fighting rages. A poll issued by the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University showed that only 18 percent of Israelis support giving up settlements unilaterally.

As Hirsch Goodman, a leading Israeli journalist, put it, "You do not give in under fire."

But that sentiment could change if the violence subsides.

Recent polls indicate that most Israelis know that dismantling settlements will be part of the price for peace — and they are willing to pay that price. □

Use of Palestinian children in war is form of child abuse, doctors say

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — A group of U.S. pediatricians has condemned the use of children in battles in the Middle East, Asia and Africa as a particularly virulent form of child abuse.

The impetus for their protest came from the use of Palestinian children in the front lines against Israeli troops in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

More than 200 pediatricians formed DOCS — Doctors Opposed to Child Sacrifice — to combat the abuse of children at the hands of parents, clergy and governments.

"Day in and day out, Palestinian families feed their children healthy breakfasts and see them off into battles on the streets of the Palestinian-controlled areas to clash with Israeli soldiers at the edges of their communities," said Dr. Pejman Salimpour, clinical chief of pediatrics at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. "These children are being used as forced foot soldiers in a war directed by their elders," he added.

DOCS is focusing on the proliferation of child "martyrs" among Palestinians, but Salimpour said countries such as Sierra Leone, Angola, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia and Afghanistan are guilty of similar practices.

At the same time, DOCS' founding statement urges all governments "to exercise maximum restraint when confronting non-peaceful demonstrations that include children."

The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a "child" as anyone under 15 years of age. Amnesty International estimates that more than 300,000 soldiers younger than 16 are currently fighting in conflicts in more than 30 countries.

Pediatricians interested in DOCS' goals are asked to contact the organization by e-mail at docs@dr.com. □