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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Negotiators due in Washington

Israeli and Palestinian officials are expected to travel to Washington this week for separate talks with U.S. officials on the peace process.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami met Saturday night with senior Palestinian officials to see if a basis can be found for renewing peace negotiations.

Last Friday, just hours after high-level meetings began between Israel and the Palestinians, clashes broke out between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Six Palestinians were killed.

Powell vows to push peace talks

President-elect George Bush's nominee for secretary of state said he would be "fully engaged" in seeking Middle East peace.

Vowing to be an honest broker, Gen. Colin Powell also said Saturday he would be sensitive to the "aspirations of the Palestinians" and "of the other Arab nations in the region."

Despite his promise of U.S. involvement in Israeli-Palestinian talks, Powell added that it would be up to the two principals to take the necessary steps for peace.

Barak: I won't give Temple Mount

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak vowed that sovereignty over Jerusalem's Temple Mount would never be transferred to the Palestinians.

Barak's remarks followed reports that Israeli and Palestinian officials have discussed an American proposal to give the Palestinians rule over the Temple Mount in exchange for deferring the issue of Palestinian refugees.

Barak also reportedly is prepared to offer the Palestinians more West Bank land than he proposed at the Camp David summit in July.

Haider visit prompts clashes

Violent clashes erupted Saturday in Rome as Austrian far-right politician Jorg Haider took part in a ceremony to light the Vatican Christmas tree.

Earlier, during a Vatican ceremony in which Haider presented the tree to Pope John Paul II, Haider and his delegation received copies of a papal speech condemning racism and xenophobia. [Page 3]

FOCUS ON ISSUES

As Israeli tourism industry reels, Jewish groups blast travel warning

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish leaders and their allies are stepping up pressure on the U.S. State Department to lift a sweeping warning against travel to Israel that has damaged the Jewish state's economy.

According to some estimates, the nosedive in tourism since the current round of violence began in late September will have cost Israel \$300 million to \$500 million by year's end, and forced the layoff of as many as 20,000 Jewish and Arab workers.

Another casualty surfaced this week, when the Jewish Community Centers Association, citing the travel warning, announced that it was canceling plans to include 37 Jewish soldiers and other personnel in the U.S. military on a January trip with Birthright Israel.

Closer to home, the State Department warning has had a ripple effect on airlines and New York-area businesses related to the tourism industry, such as travel agencies, New York City Councilman Noach Dear said.

The State Department, however, apparently will leave the warning in place until the situation on the ground is "safer and more secure" for American visitors, a spokesman said.

"When the situation changes, we'll change the warning," he said.

Both Jewish and Palestinian Americans are complaining about the warning's economic impact, the spokesman said, "but that cannot, however, be a factor in our decision-making process.

"Right now, we continue to believe the travel warning accurately reflects the situation on the ground."

The U.S. advisory, posted Oct. 24, begins: "The Department of State warns U.S. citizens to defer all travel to Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. The U.S. government has indications that there is a heightened threat of terrorist incidents in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.

"American citizens should exercise caution and avoid shopping areas, malls, public buses and bus stops as well as crowded areas and demonstrations. American citizens should maintain a low profile and take appropriate steps to reduce their vulnerability," it continues.

Such warnings are based on analyses from the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv and the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem. The warnings generally are issued for an entire country, not for particular regions that are most dangerous, the State Department spokesman said.

Included in the Oct. 24 warning was a line that might have affected the Jewish military personnel set to join the Birthright group: "U.S. Government employees have been prohibited from traveling to the West Bank and Gaza and urged to avoid East Jerusalem, including the Old City."

As a result, the Jewish Welfare Board's Jewish Chaplains Council recommended that the community centers association exclude the military personnel, council director Rabbi David Lapp said.

"I'm terribly upset about this; we had a great plan for these 37 members," said Lapp.

The trip may be rescheduled for May, he said.

"But what if, God forbid, something happens? Who's responsible for this group?"

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel, Fatah dispute bomb death

An explosion killed a senior activist in Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement in the West Bank.

The Israeli army said the man apparently blew himself up while preparing a bomb. A Fatah official called Sunday's blast an Israeli assassination.

Shas to decide voting stance

Rabbinic leaders of Israel's fervently Orthodox Shas Party plan to decide Monday whether to support calls to dissolve the Parliament and hold general elections.

Shas officials are believed to oppose general elections for fear that they would lose some of their 17 seats to the Likud.

Last week, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would not run for prime minister unless elections were also held for a new Knesset.

More SLA members convicted

A Lebanese military court convicted 78 people, most of them former members of the South Lebanon Army, of collaborating with Israel during its occupation of southern Lebanon.

Prison terms ranged from three weeks to three years.

Since the trials of alleged collaborators began in June, the court has sentenced more than 1,600 people to jail terms of up to 20 years.

Iraq: No changes under Bush

An official Iraqi newspaper said U.S. President-elect George W. Bush would disappoint the Arab world in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and deny Palestinians their "legitimate" rights.

A front-page editorial in al-Thawra, the mouthpiece of Iraq's ruling Ba'ath Party, said things would continue the way they have "as long as Zionism dominates completely American decision-making."



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he asked. "We're sponsoring these military personnel, so we're responsible."

Asked about the statements from many Jewish leaders that Israel is safe, Lapp said, "I probably agree with that. It is safe, but you never know when one meshugah can do something like" a terrorist act.

Some Jewish leaders say the State Department warning, together with heavy media coverage, fuels the misperception that all of Israel is wracked by violence. To combat that, they have gone on the offensive.

On Dec. 4, Dear, the New York City councilman, sponsored a resolution calling on the State Department to lift the warning. It passed the council by a vote of 51-0, but has had no practical effect.

On Dec. 11, a delegation of six American mayors who traveled to Israel last month on a trip sponsored by the American Jewish Congress also urged the government to lift the warning.

"Our safety and security were never in doubt and we saw no signs of strife," the mayor of Boise, Idaho, H. Brent Coles, said in a statement.

"While we understand that isolated incidents of violence do occur, what we saw was a peaceful nation."

On Dec. 12, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations issued a rare "Kol Koreh" — a clarion call — urging American Jews to reaffirm their solidarity with Israel, ignore the travel warning, and visit the country.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Presidents Conference, said he would continue to lobby State Department officials to "see our point of view, and define" the warning "rather than leaving it so general."

Hoenlein concedes, however, that the Nov. 22 bombing of a bus in the northern Israeli town of Hadera hurt the claim that the violence is generally confined to the territories.

Three weeks earlier, a terrorist bomb exploded in the heart of Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo has been fired upon almost nightly.

Dear said the warning is excessively harsh, and alleged it is motivated by political, not security, considerations.

"It's a way to put pressure on Israel, to punish it for not making peace with the Arabs," he said. "This president wants to walk out with the Nobel Peace Prize, and it's not going to happen."

The State Department spokesman responded that he had heard that complaint "a thousand times."

"It is completely unfounded, baseless, untrue and has no relation to fact," he said.

"The one and only consideration is the safety and security of American citizens. We present what we believe is an accurate description of the situation on the ground."

Meanwhile, the warning — not to mention the bloodshed itself — has derailed what was expected to be a record-breaking year for Israeli tourism, said Arie Sommer, Israeli Commissioner for Tourism for North America.

The Jewish state was expecting more than 3 million tourists this year, but 70 percent of all trips planned for October through December have been canceled, Sommer said.

American travelers themselves generally make up about 20 percent of tourists to Israel.

"So much was invested in promotion and marketing," said Sommer, "then one morning, everything went down the drain."

That desperation was reflected by the Israeli manager of Kfar Kedem, a recreated mishnaic-era village in the Galilee, who recently wrote an open letter to American Jewish communities.

"I look around me today and the beauty of the Galilee is at its peak following the first rains," Menachem Goldberg wrote. "Our sheep are grazing on the fresh grass while our herd of donkeys idle in their sheds. The olive press remains still and the threshing floor is vacant.

"And where are the tourists?" Goldberg asked the American Jews. "Where is the real 'Partnership 2000' now that we need you? And where is the dignity and courage of the American Jewish community that is not frightened away by the propaganda broadcast daily on CNN?"

"We don't need solidarity missions to Gilo or angry letters to the New York Times. We need you!"

□

JEWISH WORLD

KKK marches in Skokie

Police in Illinois arrested 10 counterdemonstrators who attempted to break up a Ku Klux Klan rally in the Chicago suburb of Skokie.

Saturday's rally in Skokie, home to many Holocaust survivors, took place 22 years after a neo-Nazi rally was held there.

U.S. releases Palestinian

The U.S. government released a Palestinian who had been held for three years in jail without being charged with a crime.

But U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno said last Friday that Mazen Al-Najjar, who the government believes is linked to Middle East terrorist groups, may be deported soon. Al-Najjar had been living illegally in the United States for several years before he was arrested.

Poland pressed on restitution

New York's top financial officers are calling on Poland to make restitution for property looted by the Nazis from Polish Jews. State Comptroller H. Carl McCall and New York City Comptroller Alan Hevesi urged Poland to stop trying to block a lawsuit brought by Holocaust survivors who want Warsaw to return billions of dollars in stolen property.

On Dec. 14, more than 100 Holocaust survivors demonstrated in Brooklyn to protest Poland's attempts to have their legal claims thrown out of U.S. courts.

The survivors have joined in a class-action lawsuit seeking to recover thousands of properties seized by the Nazis and subsequently confiscated by the Polish government after World War II.

Ex-KKK leader accuses Jews

Former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke accused Jews of trying to put Russia into an "electronic concentration camp," according to the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews.

Duke, who spoke Dec. 13 in Moscow at the invitation of the Union of Writers of Russia, is on an extended book tour to promote the sale of a Russian translation of his new book, "The Jewish Question Through the Eyes of an American."

Mandela opens Jewish museum

Former South African President Nelson Mandela attended the inauguration of a new South African Jewish museum in Cape Town.

Speaking at the Dec. 13 dedication ceremony, Mandela said the museum would play a vital role in ensuring that the Jewish contribution to South Africa's liberation struggle would not be forgotten.

The museum traces the history and contributions of the nation's Jews.

Jews, militants protest Vatican audience with Austria's Haider

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — The Vatican downplayed Pope John Paul II's audience with a far-right Austrian politician this week, but the hundreds of rioters who fought with police and the Jewish merchants who shuttered their shops obviously took it more seriously.

The clashes erupted Saturday near St. Peter's Square when Jorg Haider took part in a ceremony to light the Vatican Christmas tree. The tree comes from Austria's Carinthia region, where Haider is governor.

Earlier in the day, Haider and a 250-member delegation formally presented the tree to Pope John Paul II in a controversial but low-key ceremony inside the Vatican.

Riot police used tear gas against hundreds of protesters who tried to march on the square during the tree-lighting ceremony. The marchers, many of them militant left-wing students, carried a huge picture of Auschwitz and banners reading "Haider, No Thanks" and "Read Haider, Think Hitler."

About 200 helmeted riot police blocked the avenue leading to the square with a phalanx of shields and police vans. The protesters hurled cobblestones and smoke bombs. Police retaliated by firing tear gas canisters and wading into the crowd with their truncheons.

The clashes were described as the most violent protests in memory associated with a Vatican event. About 30 people were reported injured, including two dozen policemen and a reporter for a local newspaper.

Numerous peaceful protests took place as well. Among them, Jewish shopkeepers in some of Rome's most crowded shopping streets turned off the lights of their stores for half an hour. Told of the Jewish gesture, Haider made a sarcastic comment to Italian television that outraged public opinion.

"If they want to save money on electricity," he said, "let them go ahead."

The Italian government, Israel, leftist groups and local and international Jewish organizations repeatedly had called on the pope not to meet with a man they consider the symbol of resurgent European racism and xenophobia.

Under intense international pressure, Haider stepped down earlier this year as leader of Austria's Freedom Party, which is known for its anti-immigrant stands. Years ago, he praised Hitler's employment policies and members of the Nazi SS, though he has repeatedly apologized for the remarks.

When the Freedom Party entered Austria's coalition government earlier this year, the European Union imposed unprecedented diplomatic sanctions, and Israel withdrew its ambassador from Vienna. The E.U. sanctions have since been lifted.

Anti-Haider demonstrators had staged peaceful street protests for days, and more than 1,000 police were ready Saturday in case of violence. The Christmas tree itself, towering above a traditional manger scene, was under 24-hour guard.

During the formal Vatican ceremony Saturday morning, some observers thought the pope gave Haider a frosty welcome. The Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* reported that the pope had tried unsuccessfully to convince Haider not to come to Rome.

The pope spoke only for a few minutes with Haider and a local bishop.

He did not mention Haider by name when he addressed the group, but noted that he had agreed to accept the Christmas tree from Carinthia three years ago — that is, before Haider became governor.

At the close of the audience, a Vatican official gave Haider and his group copies of a papal message released last week that strongly condemns racism and xenophobia.

Jewish leaders in Rome sharply criticized Haider's visit. Amos Luzzatto, president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, said he felt bitter and disappointed over a string of Vatican actions that has thrown Catholic-Jewish dialogue into crisis.

"Over the past six months, we Jews have been bombarded by a series of actions and positions on the part of Vatican authorities that seem to have been planned out," he said. "We wonder where it will end."

Earlier Vatican moves included its beatification of the anti-Semitic Pope Pius IX and a Vatican document implying that other religions are not equal to Catholicism. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Advocates for Iranian Jews
fear policy shift under Republicans***By Michael J. Jordan*

NEW YORK (JTA) — Iranian and U.S. oil officials seem to be rubbing their hands with glee now that two oil men, George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, are preparing to occupy the White House and end America's long-standing oil sanctions against Iran.

But among American activists lobbying to free 10 Iranian Jews imprisoned for alleged espionage, opinion is divided as to whether a Republican administration would forsake their cause for oil interests.

At the same time, some activists lament that as the "Iran 10" judicial process drags on and hopes for their release grow dimmer, American Jewish leaders are preoccupied by the violence engulfing Israel and the Palestinians. The 10 were convicted in July on various charges connected with spying for Israel.

Amid international pressure, an Iranian court reduced their sentences to terms ranging from two to nine years. They could have faced the death penalty; 17 other Jews have reportedly been executed in Iran for alleged spying since 1979.

Now undergoing a second appeal, the case is being reviewed by the Iranian prosecutor general. It is unclear when he will render a decision. He may let the ruling stand, order a retrial, or send it up to Iran's Supreme Court.

One remaining option would be to appeal to Iran's chief spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to pardon the prisoners.

With American Jewish leaders furiously defending Israel on several fronts — in Washington, at the United Nations, in the media — the Iranian case has clearly slipped down on the priority list.

"We're stuck," said Pooya Dayanim, spokesman for the Los Angeles-based Council of Iranian American Jewish Organizations.

While he said he understands the attention among mainstream Jewish leaders on the situation in Israel, he feels that the lobbying effort on behalf of the Iranian Jews has lost tremendous steam as a result. But Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the influential Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, who has been a major advocate on the issue, said that despite the crisis roiling Israel, he continues to monitor events in Iran daily.

Communication with the 27,000 or so Jews in Iran and other Iranian sources has worsened during the Mideast violence, Hoenlein said, as Tehran has ratcheted up its pro-Palestinian, anti-"Zionist enemy" vitriol.

The Jewish community of Shiraz, from which most of the 10 prisoners were arrested, is now "leaderless" and fearful of what may come next.

"Yeah, we know what kind of government we're dealing with in Iran, but we and the families are not giving up hope," Hoenlein said.

Likewise, oil folks are hopeful their lot will improve.

In a news report Dec. 5 from Tehran, Iranian Deputy Oil Minister Hossein Kazempour-Ardebili said removal of U.S. oil sanctions is "inevitable."

Iran is reported to be OPEC's second largest producer of oil after Saudi Arabia, generating some 3.7 million barrels per day.

"Representatives from U.S. oil firms had informed Iran five months ahead of the U.S. presidential elections that in case of a Republican victory, the sanctions would be lifted swiftly," Kazempour-Ardebili was quoted as saying.

The same day, in Houston, a top official at the Conoco oil firm also expressed optimism that America's oil policy vis-a-vis Iran and fellow rogue state Libya "will change in the next 12 months."

Conoco, the fourth-largest U.S. oil company, heads a coalition of oil concerns that has reportedly lobbied Washington intensively to lift the sanctions.

American companies are banned from doing business in Iran because of its place on the State Department's annual list of sponsors of terrorism.

In addition, a 1996 law, known as the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act, calls for punitive trade measures against foreign companies and countries that invest in Iran's energy sector.

"We're going to be there the day after sanctions are lifted in Iran and Libya," Archie Dunham, Conoco's chief executive, was quoted as saying by Reuters.

The coalition includes Halliburton, the company led by Dick Cheney until he was tapped as Bush's vice presidential running mate.

Cheney has, in the past, lobbied against sanctions, but said early during the campaign that he would accede to Bush on the issue.

The Clinton Administration has balanced criticism of Iran's handling of the "Iran 10" with its stated goal of rapprochement with Iran, apparently to reward its relatively moderate president, Mohammad Khatami.

This spring the administration lifted the ban on several Iranian luxury exports, like caviar, carpets and pistachios, angering advocates of the "Iran 10."

President Clinton once reportedly described the "Iran 10" case as "an irritant" that hamstrung his efforts at reconciliation with Iran.

Nevertheless, some observers predict a Bush administration would be less responsive to human rights concerns, and more eager to promote trade.

During the presidential campaign, both Bush, a former oil executive in Texas, and Al Gore proclaimed the fate of the 10 Jews a "test" that would shape future U.S.-Iran relations. Cheney also announced he would cease his oil-related lobbying.

The Republican Party platform adopted in August does not specifically mention sanctions, but says that Iran's record on terrorism and human rights, specifically the case of the Iranian Jews, "demonstrates that Tehran remains a dangerous threat to the United States and our interests in the region."

Bush and his advisers were "clear and unambiguous during the campaign that they would maintain the sanctions against Iran, and they are suspicious of the Clinton administration's statements about the 'moderation' of the Iranian government," said Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition.

Indeed, Iran's reported actions over the past two months could temper any notion that moderation is sweeping the country.

For example, the Iranian foreign minister was in Damascus, Syria, in October, reportedly exhorting leaders of Hamas and other terrorist groups to launch attacks within Israel. Hoenlein said Iran has also increased financial support to Hezbollah, the Shi'ite gunmen in southern Lebanon. □