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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak: Ties may be in trouble

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak warned his Cabinet that Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan could be in jeopardy if Israel fails to reach a peace deal soon with the Palestinians.

Barak made his comments Sunday, a day after President Clinton asked Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to respond by Wednesday to his latest proposal for a peace deal. Israeli officials said progress was made at last week's negotiations in Washington, but Palestinians said wide gaps remain.

Report: Israel may give up Mount

Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami reportedly told U.S. Jewish leaders in a conference call Friday that Israel is willing to recognize the Palestinians' de facto control over the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Ben-Ami said an accord also would have to recognize the Jewish people's special link to the site.

Meanwhile, the Israeli opposition demanded that Prime Minister Ehud Barak immediately break off negotiations with the Palestinians, accusing him of conducting a "clearance sale" on Israeli interests before the upcoming elections. The opposition says that if it wins the Feb. 6 prime ministerial election, it will not consider itself bound by any agreement Barak reaches in the pre-election period.

Jewish leader gets out of jail

A Spanish judge freed Russian Jewish leader Vladimir Goussinsky last Friday on \$5.5 million bail.

Goussinsky, a media tycoon who has been the target of a Kremlin legal campaign since earlier this year, will remain under strict house arrest pending a High Court decision on his extradition to Russia, where he is wanted on charges of fraud.

Leaflets threaten Israeli Arabs

Leaflets threatening Israeli Arabs with hanging if they vote in Israel's upcoming election were distributed in Arab communities over the weekend and published in an advertisement in a leading Israeli Arab newspaper.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Tuesday, Dec. 26.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Ever controversial, Sharon hopes violence will swing Israelis to right

By Avi Machlis

HERZLIYA, Israel (JTA) — Ariel Sharon was in his element.

Surrounded by generals, senior members of Israel's intelligence community, strategic analysts and supporters of his Likud Party, Sharon arrived here last week to address a conference on Israel's security agenda.

Just a few days before, Sharon had benefited from a stroke of fate. After a series of political twists and turns, Benjamin Netanyahu had dropped his drive to take over the Likud Party. That left Sharon, the 72-year-old former general, as default party leader and Likud candidate for the premiership against Prime Minister Ehud Barak in the Feb. 6 election.

Now, in Herzliya, the man known as "The Bulldozer" strolled calmly to the podium, an 18-point lead in opinion polls almost palpable in his confidence, to lay out his strategic vision for Israel and the region. After so many years as one of the most controversial figures in Israeli politics, he knew that the violent Palestinian uprising had created a golden opportunity to swing Israelis over to his side.

"It is impossible to reach a permanent peace, because Jerusalem cannot be divided," Sharon told the conference as Israeli and Palestinian negotiators struggled to reach the basis for such an agreement in Washington.

The basis for any agreement, Sharon added, must be "a long-term interim accord without a timetable, because we have now seen what happens with a timetable."

Step by step, over many years, Israel should continually monitor its relationship with the Palestinians before concessions are made, Sharon said. But he offered no populist, militant calls to hit the Palestinians harder, as many right-wing Israelis demand.

Sharon suggested that the Palestinians be given connected territory, while Israel maintains its grip on sizable strategic zones. He did not explain how this strategy, which falls well short of Palestinian demands, would quell the violence that has traumatized Israel since late September.

However, he did outline a broader — and questionable — strategic prognosis for the region as the basis for his Palestinian plan.

"In contrast to conventional wisdom, in my opinion time is not working against us," Sharon said. "It may very well be that the windows of opportunity in the future will be greater and more convenient."

This, explained Sharon, was based on research indicating that Arab oil producing countries may face a severe economic crisis in 10 to 15 years as Western countries introduce electric cars and global demand for fuel declines. When Arab states are weakened economically, Sharon argued, the dangers to Israel will decline.

Strategists from Israel's peace camp have argued that peace must be made as soon as possible because a window of opportunity that opened after the Gulf War and the fall of the Soviet Union could close when Iran achieves nuclear capability. But even analysts who do not subscribe to that vision questioned Sharon's thinking.

"Oil pricing and production are notoriously variable, and you cannot pin a strategic position on such a thing," said Professor Barry Rubin, a Middle East expert at Bar-Ilan University. "And the weakening of Arab states is by no means to Israel's advantage, because that can lead to internal instability and radicalism."

"I've never been a believer in the 'window of opportunity,' and I do not think that

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel arrests 14 Palestinians

Israel arrested 14 suspected members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in a raid in the Nablus area of the West Bank.

Those arrested are suspected of involvement in terrorist activity.

Report: Prisoner mediation over

A German mediator trying to arrange a prisoner swap between Israel and Hezbollah left Beirut, a Lebanese newspaper reported over the weekend.

The paper, Al-Mustaqbal, said it was unclear whether the mediator's efforts succeeded or failed.

Hezbollah kidnapped three Israeli soldiers and an Israeli businessman in October.

Israel allows more Palestinians in

Israel allowed 6,000 more Palestinians to return to jobs in Israel in a further easing of sanctions. Last week, the state gave permission to 10,000 Palestinians to return to their jobs, but only 1,000 did so.

Work permits have been granted to married Palestinians aged 35 and over who have at least one child, previously worked in Israel and have undergone a security check.

Iranians march against Israel

Tens of thousands of Iranian marchers chanted "Death to Israel, Death to the U.S.A.," during an annual Jerusalem Day protest in Tehran.

Iranian officials charged that Israel does not intend to compromise with the Palestinians and accused the world's Islamic community of not doing enough for Palestinians.

Adoption ring investigated

Israeli police are investigating an illegal adoption ring involving women from Russia and Ukraine allegedly brought to Israel to give birth and then sell their babies to barren Israeli couples.

if you do not get a deal in the next three weeks there will never be peace," Rubin added. "The issue is the kind of deal you get and whether it will be a lasting arrangement."

That is precisely the issue for many Israelis these days, and Sharon's spin doctors will try to portray him as the only leader capable of delivering a lasting peace. Given his controversial background, it will require a tricky balancing act.

In the 1950s, Sharon founded an elite army unit that launched bloody reprisal raids against Palestinian terrorists in Jordan, which then controlled the West Bank. In the early 1970s, Sharon crushed Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

He also distinguished himself as a brilliant strategist in the Sinai campaigns of the 1967 and 1973 wars, but his impetuosity and his unwillingness to follow orders is believed to have cost him a chance to be army chief of staff.

Overshadowing all else in Sharon's resume is his role as the architect of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon as defense minister under Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Many Likud supporters still defend Sharon's decisions in Israel's most unpopular war, but the peace camp will likely use the war against him in the election campaign.

Sharon was forced to resign as defense minister after a commission found him indirectly responsible for the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps because he failed to anticipate the carnage Israel's Lebanese Christian allies would wreak there.

"Ariel Sharon is a symbol of Israel's rejectionist, warmongering minority," said Didi Remez, spokesman for Peace Now. "He is personally responsible for the Lebanon war, which led to the deaths of over 1,000 Israelis and countless Lebanese and Palestinians.

"He is known as a sponsor of Israeli settlement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which are one of the main obstacles to achieving peace," Remez added.

Sharon's decision in late September to visit the Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City will probably prove less controversial in the campaign. Though the Arab world — and much of the West — sees Sharon's visit as the spark for the current unrest, most Israelis believe the Palestinians used it as a pretext for violence.

Still, it will not be easy to balance Sharon's warrior image with the pragmatism and commitment to peace most Israelis demand.

"He has to keep the support of the right and make them happy, while making the center happier than it is," explained Zalman Shoval, a senior Likud member and Israel's former ambassador to the United States.

Many Likudniks scoff at the notion that Arab countries, which despise Sharon, will see his ascent to power as a sign of Israeli intransigence.

"I am not concerned at all about the Arab world," Shoval said. "Experience has shown that the best progress toward real peace was made when there was a strong and hawkish leadership for Israel."

Ironically, some Likud ideologues worry that Sharon is too pragmatic; after all, as Begin's defense minister, he sanctioned the evacuation of Israeli settlements in Sinai for peace with Egypt.

And though Sharon stands by his promise never to shake the hand of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, he negotiated the Wye accords as Netanyahu's foreign minister in 1998.

Members of the Likud overwhelmingly preferred to make Netanyahu their candidate, but now the party is expected to rally behind Sharon.

"It has no choice right now," said Meir Sheerit, a senior Likud Knesset member. "Everybody wants victory over the left."

In any case, his chances now seem better than ever. A Gallup poll published in the Israeli daily Ma'ariv indicated that Sharon would trounce Barak if elections were held today, and not even a lightning peace deal would dramatically improve the incumbent's chances.

According to the poll, voters would reject the peace deal if it were tied to a vote for Barak. If a separate referendum on a peace agreement took place alongside the vote for prime minister, Israelis likely would approve the deal — but choose Sharon to implement it.

Sharon has said he will not honor an agreement that Barak signs in the pre-election period. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Sister: Wallenberg info lacking

The sister of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews during World War II, is not satisfied by the results of a Russian inquiry into his death.

Nina Lagergren said last Friday's statement, that Wallenberg died in a Soviet prison camp, is incomplete because it did not state the cause of his death.

The statement did say that Wallenberg was "arrested without grounds" and "repressed by Soviet authorities for political reasons."

Bombing suspect extradited

A man wanted in connection with the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires arrived in Argentina after being extradited from Switzerland.

Wilson Dos Santos is wanted for giving allegedly false testimony regarding the bombing of the AMIA center, which killed 86 and wounded 300.

Putin lights the Chanukah lights

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited a Jewish center late last week to light Chanukah candles as he tried to boost relations with the Jewish community and allay growing fears of renewed Russian anti-Semitism.

Jewish groups earlier this month accused the Kremlin of doing nothing to end attacks on Jewish targets.

Meanwhile, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on a two-day visit to Russia, met with Putin at a reception in the Jewish community center run by Chabad-Lubavitch.

Russian Jewish leader attacked

The executive director of a leading Jewish group in the former Soviet Union was attacked Saturday at Moscow's Choral Synagogue.

Avrohom Berkowitz, of the Lubavitch-dominated Federation of Jewish Communities, said three men tried to drown him in the synagogue's mikvah, or ritual bath.

Clinton sings the dreidel song

The fact that Jewish, Christian and Muslim holidays overlap this year serves as a reminder of shared values and the ability to build a peace, President Clinton said in his Chanukah message.

Clinton lit a menorah in the Oval Office and listened to third-graders from a Washington-area congregation sing "I Have a Little Dreidel."

Yahoo! appeals ruling

In a U.S. court, Yahoo! appealed a French court ruling that it must limit French residents' access to auction sites where Nazi memorabilia is sold.

Quebec premier breaks ranks, rallies to Jewish community's defense

By Bram Eisenthal

MONTREAL (JTA) — Anti-Semitic comments by a hardline Quebec nationalist are roiling the provincial Parliament, with the local premier abandoning partisan loyalty to come strongly to the Jewish community's defense.

The uproar began several weeks ago with a radio interview given by Yves Michaud, a Quebec nationalist who hopes to stand as the Parti Quebecois' candidate in a Montreal-area district in upcoming elections.

Speaking on a local French-language station, Michaud said Jews focus on their own suffering while ignoring the plight of others, called B'nai Brith Canada the enemy of Quebec nationalists and a phalanx of the Israeli government.

He also condemned the heavily Jewish suburb of Cote Saint-Luc for voting against separation in the 1995 referendum.

The separatists lost the 1995 referendum by a slim margin, prompting then-Premier Jacques Parizeau of the Parti Quebecois, the ruling party in Quebec, to blame the loss on "money and the ethnic vote" just before resigning. Parizeau, no longer in government, has emerged as one of Michaud's staunchest defenders in the current scandal.

Last week, the Parti Quebecois joined with the Liberals to pass a motion censuring Michaud in the province's National Assembly.

Premier Lucien Bouchard strongly condemned Michaud's comments, calling them "an attack on a people who don't deserve to be treated like that."

"Quebecers are all equal. They have the right to vote for whom they want," he said, adding that the Jews undoubtedly have suffered greatly during their history.

On Dec. 20, he broadened his criticism.

"We are not in a political party to just buy membership cards or have national councils," he said. "We are there to defend values, to propose things to society."

Michaud, who once likened the English language to a "cancer" in Quebec society, has refused to apologize. In fact, he has demanded that Bouchard apologize for humiliating him.

"I was stupefied when I heard you accuse me last night, in a harsh, angry and vindictive tone, of being impervious to the greatest crime in the history of humanity," the Holocaust, Michaud wrote in a letter published in Quebec's major newspapers.

The result has been turmoil in the governing Parti Quebecois, with Bouchard insisting that Michaud not be allowed to represent the party in this spring's election unless he recants.

Divisions in the party deepen daily. Some analysts believe Bouchard ultimately will be forced out of office over the issue, or will resign, if he fails to swing a majority in the party to his view. Others believe that Bouchard indeed wants out, and sees the Michaud Affair as the perfect cover.

Meanwhile, members of the Jewish community are pleased with Bouchard's supportive stance. Robert Libman, Quebec regional director of B'nai Brith Canada and mayor of the municipality of Cote Saint-Luc, applauded the premier's comments.

"Yes, I am surprised by events," Libman told JTA. "I never expected either the National Assembly motion" censuring Michaud, "or Mr. Bouchard standing tall like this. But it isn't a surprise, actually, as he has always shown a strong commitment to the Jewish community and he has been unbelievably strong now as well."

Libman pointed to Bouchard's commitment to Israel during the 1991 Gulf War.

"He was then the leader of a federal party, the Bloc Quebecois" — which he founded to further the goal of Quebec's separation — "and he stood in the House of Commons and made the most passionate speech in support of Israel, likely the most moving of any speaker," Libman said. "He was very powerful that night."

Libman admitted that his B'nai Brith office has received an unusual amount of anti-Semitic phone calls and e-mails since the Michaud Affair broke.

"We are getting about 50-60 e-mails per day that are anti-Semitic in nature, but we suspect they are from the same dozen people," he said. "They are quite sophisticated in nature." □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Pressure grows to approve International Criminal Court

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — With a Dec. 31 deadline bearing down, lobbying efforts are underway to persuade President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to support a permanent International Criminal Court that would prosecute genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In the words of one Jewish advocate, the creation of the international court is the “unfinished business” of the Nuremberg Trials where Nazi leaders were prosecuted after World War II.

In the works almost since the end of the Holocaust, the ICC would be charged with prosecuting the most egregious instances of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. The tribunals that now exist — for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia — are temporary.

Supporters of an ICC hope the court would hold perpetrators — political leaders, military commanders and civilians alike — accountable for their actions, and would deter similar acts.

The United States and Israel support these aims, but neither has signed on in support of the court.

Both worry that the proposed 18-judge panel would be vulnerable to politicization, becoming a kangaroo court where Americans or Israelis are dragged before it and tried on trumped-up charges.

Momentum for the court would be boosted, at least symbolically, if the globe’s lone superpower and the victims of history’s greatest genocide were to lend their support, advocates say.

The U.S. Congress and Israeli Knesset would still need to ratify any moves by Clinton or Barak, but if the deadline passes without a signature from the top, the court will likely be established without input from Washington or Jerusalem.

To date, some two dozen countries have ratified the document. Sixty are needed for the court to be formed.

U.S. resistance, emanating from the Pentagon, is predicated on the notion that many countries resent America’s military might and would seek ways to upbraid it. Critics say such resistance is unfounded, as numerous safeguards would protect Washington from frivolous charges.

For example, court prosecutors would choose which cases to pursue, and countries would reserve the right to prosecute alleged criminals in their own courts.

Yugoslavia, for example, accused Clinton, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and other U.S. leaders of war crimes during NATO’s 1999 air strikes to curb the persecution of Kosovo’s Albanians. More than 500 civilians were reportedly killed during the 77-day campaign.

However, the prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Carla Del Ponte, declined to bring charges against the American leadership.

The real reason for America’s resistance, some say, is an unwillingness to have its actions held up to international scrutiny.

“There really is a double standard here: we want the court to work for everyone else, but not for us,” said Felice Gaer, director of the American Jewish Committee’s Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights.

The U.S. military establishment “wants absolute authority, that

no American will be tried without American consent,” she said.

Imagine, Gaer and others say, if Iraq’s Saddam Hussein or Yugoslavia’s Slobodan Milosevic were afforded the same veto.

Israel’s concerns stem from the international community’s penchant to gang up on the Jewish state, especially in forums such as the United Nations.

On Oct. 19, for example, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights condemned Israel for supposedly causing the recent violence in the Middle East, going so far as to accuse it of “war crimes” and “crimes against humanity.”

If an International Criminal Court existed today, would Barak and his generals be hauled in for judgment?

Moreover, it remains unclear how judges would be selected. Presumably there would be a demand for geographic proportionality, and judges might be proffered by countries that fall well short of Western democratic standards.

It’s quite possible that the court, like the U.N. organs, would be full of anti-Israel members, supporters of Israel say.

“The selection process of judges poses some difficulties for the state of Israel,” said Aaron Jacob, Israel’s deputy representative to the United Nations.

More specifically, Israel worries that the settlements it has constructed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip may be interpreted as “war crimes.”

At the 1998 Rome conference where delegates from some 150 countries voted overwhelmingly to create an ICC, Egypt and Syria successfully pushed to have those involved with “civilian population transfers” into “occupied territory” — both settlers and government officials — labeled “war criminals.”

That prompted Israel — which earlier had lobbied for the ICC — to join the United States, China, Libya, Algeria, Qatar and Yemen as the only U.N. member-states to vote against its formation.

At a pro-ICC event this month at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in New York, one congregant voiced his concern: “Some of us may not support the actions of the settlers, but that doesn’t mean we see them as war criminals.”

But the AJC’s Gaer and others assure that the language instituted by Egypt and Syria has been greatly watered down.

Besides, ICC backers say, prosecutors and judges will want to be viewed as legitimate and serious, and will tackle only the most heinous transgressions. Crimes would not be prosecuted retroactively.

In part because of these reassurances, and because of the moral obligation Jews feel to throw their weight behind an international court, Israeli ambassador Jacob told the B’nai Jeshurun audience that “serious discussions” are under way in Jerusalem about signing the ICC document. □

Palestinian bombers strike

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A bomb exploded near the Netzarim settlement in the Gaza Strip on Sunday, but no one was hurt.

Last Friday, a Palestinian suicide bomber walked into a roadside restaurant near a Jewish settlement in the Jordan Valley and blew himself up, seriously wounding several Israelis.

Meanwhile, Palestinians erupted in a stone-throwing riot when they were turned away from prayers at the Al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem last Friday, the most important prayer day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. □