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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Terrorists target Tel Aviv bus

At least 13 people were injured after two explosions rocked a bus in Tel Aviv.

Hours later, two Israelis were killed and two injured in an explosion along Israel's border with the Gaza Strip. [Page 1]

Rumsfeld nomination welcomed

In 1998, Donald Rumsfeld urged President Clinton not to grant a pardon to Jonathan Pollard.

Nonetheless, Jewish analysts are welcoming President-elect George W. Bush's choice for defense secretary as someone with "serious" experience, particularly his involvement in studying the ballistic missile threat to the United States. [Page 3]

Tourist defaces Western Wall

An American tourist from Los Angeles was arrested after he splattered red paint on the Western Wall.

Police spokesman Shmuel Ben-Ruby said the unidentified man "came to Israel two weeks ago and then decided that he didn't like Israeli policies."

In the hours after the attack, workers tried to clean off the paint while Jewish worshippers continued to pray nearby.

Ashcroft confirmation targeted

The National Council of Jewish Women plans to work to prevent Sen. John Ashcroft's confirmation as U.S. Attorney General.

The group, which claims Ashcroft is a "champion for right-wing causes," disagrees with him over abortion rights, affirmative action, gun control and church-state separation issues.

Disease fears hurt Jewish group

The body that oversees the religious needs of France's Jewish community has seen its revenues dwindle as a result of fears of mad cow disease.

The Consistoire, which collects a levy on meat sold by kosher butchers, stands to lose about \$2.8 million next year if observant Jews continue to shun meat, as many French consumers now do.

"We think revenues have dropped about 30 to 40 percent over the past two months," Moise Cohen, the president of the Consistoire, said Wednesday. "Some of our personnel are now out of work because of this."

Peace deal uncertain as bombs explode in Gaza, Tel Aviv

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A fresh wave of attacks against Israelis has compounded the uncertainty that President Clinton can forge a last-minute Israeli-Palestinian peace deal in the weeks before he leaves office.

In the Gaza Strip on Thursday, two Israelis were killed and two injured in an explosion near the border with Israel.

The explosion near the Sufa Crossing in southern Gaza occurred when Israeli soldiers were attempting to dismantle a roadside bomb.

Hours earlier, at least 13 people were injured, two of them seriously, when two pipe bombs exploded on a commuter bus in Tel Aviv during lunch-time traffic on a busy thoroughfare.

Police said more serious casualties were averted due to a malfunction in one of the devices, which they said were set off by remote control.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak described the attack as "deplorable" and vowed to "reach the perpetrators and those who dispatched them."

Hours later, Barak renewed a closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Thursday's attack came just days after Israel relaxed a previous closure and began letting Palestinian workers return to jobs in Israel.

In another incident Thursday, an Israeli was moderately wounded when shots were fired at his car near the West Bank settlement of Alon Moreh.

In Washington, Clinton condemned the violence, saying it "reminds people of what the alternative to peace is."

Clinton, who earlier this week presented Israeli and Palestinian negotiators with the broad outlines of a peace accord, said Thursday's terror attack in Tel Aviv was "the best argument for going ahead and finishing" the peace process.

Clinton said his proposals were based on what he had heard from the two sides during his term in office.

"If there is a peace agreement here, I'm convinced it's within the four corners I've laid out," he said.

Islamic fundamentalist groups had threatened earlier this week to step up terrorist attacks amid intensified efforts by Israel and the Palestinian Authority to reach a peace agreement.

Arafat released scores of terrorists from jail shortly after the Palestinians began their violent uprising against Israel three months ago.

Thursday's attacks came amid diplomatic uncertainty over the future of Clinton's proposals.

Israel on Thursday approved the ideas, on condition that the Palestinians also accept them as the basis for an agreement.

While refraining from formally rejecting the ideas, the Palestinians raised a series of reservations that they said must be clarified before they make a final decision.

As a result of their reservations, Barak canceled a planned summit on Thursday with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in Egypt.

Regardless, Arafat traveled to Egypt to confer with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Arafat later said an Arab summit would convene next week to review the U.S. proposals.

Clinton's proposals call for far-reaching concessions by both Israel and the Palestinians. Most controversial for Israelis is a proposal to cede control of Jerusalem's

MIDEAST FOCUS

Olmert moves office to Wall

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert relocated his office from downtown Jerusalem to a building next to the Western Wall in the Old City, despite Palestinian warnings it could trigger a wave of violence.

Olmert said Thursday he is protesting concessions Israel is reportedly prepared to make regarding Jerusalem as part of a U.S.-sponsored peace agreement with the Palestinians.

Israeli Arab families reject funds

The families of 13 Israeli Arabs killed by Israeli police during riots in October refused to accept financial help from the Palestinian Authority, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Each family was offered \$10,000, the amount bereaved families in the West Bank and Gaza Strip receive.

Arafat got Christmas Eve help

Israel permitted Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to drive through Jerusalem on Christmas Eve after difficult weather conditions prevented his helicopter from taking off from Bethlehem, where he had attended holiday services.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert described Israel's move as a "humanitarian gesture."

Court convicts computer hacker

A computer hacker known as the Analyzer was convicted in an Israeli court Thursday of breaking into the computers of the Pentagon, the U.S. Navy and other sensitive sites three years ago. Ehud Tannenbaum previously pleaded guilty to the charges.

Chief rabbi meets Muslim clerics

Israel's chief Sephardi rabbi met with a group of Muslim clerics. Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron said later Thursday that religious leaders must be a force for regional peace.



Daily News Bulletin

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Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, to the Palestinians. The plateau today houses an important mosque.

Israel also would divide Jerusalem into a patchwork of neighborhoods, with Arab neighborhoods coming under Palestinian rule.

In exchange, the Palestinians would scale back their demand that descendants of the Arab refugees who fled or were expelled in Israel's 1948 War of Independence — some 4 million people in all — be allowed to return to their former homes inside Israel. Even the most dovish Israelis consider this a veiled call to eliminate the Jewish state.

Barak has been harshly criticized for conducting negotiations under the deadline of Israel's Feb. 6 elections.

His re-election chances are believed to hinge on reaching a deal with the Palestinians before the balloting.

The opposition Likud Party has likened Barak's efforts to a "clearance sale" of vital Israeli assets, and said it will not be bound by any agreement if it wins the election.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert on Thursday relocated his office from downtown Jerusalem to a building next to the Western Wall in the Old City, despite Palestinian threats to react with violence.

Olmert said the move, to last a week, was meant to underscore the possibility that Jews could again lose the Western Wall. Between 1948 and 1967, when the Old City was under Arab control, Jews were denied access to the Western Wall, despite agreements on free passage to holy sites.

The Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for Thursday's double-bombing on the Gaza Strip border fence, Israel Radio reported.

Israeli explosives experts had spotted one of the bombs on the border fence and had called in reinforcements when it went off, followed by the second blast.

Initial reports said Hamas had claimed responsibility for the bus bombing in Tel Aviv, but a group calling itself the Saladin Brigades later took responsibility.

In the attack, two pipe bombs exploded on the back of a Dan bus No. 51, traveling from downtown Tel Aviv to the suburb of Petach Tikva.

"When I reached the bus stop near the Recital reception hall, I heard an explosion coming from the back seat. I opened the doors to let the passengers off when we heard the second explosion, from which passengers were wounded," driver Yigal Reichman was quoted as saying.

Four of the 13 wounded were Israeli soldiers, including one woman who was put on life support and described as being in serious to moderate condition.

Israeli police cordoned off the area and sappers defused explosives that had not gone off. Police are still investigating how bombs were planted aboard the bus.

One person detained for questioning was released after police found he had no link to the incident. □

Hungarian Jews get official recognition

By Agnes Bohm

BUDAPEST (JTA) — Hungary has signed an accord with local Jewish leaders "to promote the political, social and economic stability of Hungarian Jewry."

The signing ceremony took place last Friday, the first day of Chanukah, in the nation's Parliament.

The government has already signed similar agreements with the Catholic, Lutheran, Evangelical, Baptist and Serbian Orthodox churches.

In each case, the accords grant official recognition to the religious denomination.

Among its measures, the accord with the Jewish community states that the Hungarian government will back efforts to have Holocaust studies taught in the schools and to have victims of the Holocaust "regularly and in due manner remembered."

Peter Tordai, the president of the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities, told JTA that the government also agreed to erect a memorial honoring Jewish Holocaust victims.

Existing Holocaust memorials were erected by the Jewish community.

Tordai praised the accord as the first undertaken by the government with Hungarian Jewry since 1849. □

JEWISH WORLD

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Bush's choice for defense welcomed despite opposition to a Pollard pardon

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — In 1998, Donald Rumsfeld was one of seven former secretaries of defense to urge President Clinton not to release Jonathan Pollard, a convicted spy for Israel.

Thus he reappears on the national stage as President-elect George W. Bush's choice for defense secretary in direct opposition to the organized Jewish community on a key issue. Across the political and religious spectrum, Jewish officials have reiterated their pleas in recent days for Clinton to pardon Pollard, who is serving a life sentence, before the president leaves office.

But despite the gap with Rumsfeld on Pollard, several Jewish analysts welcomed the appointment. "You have to see the whole picture," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "We view it as a positive appointment."

Rumsfeld served as secretary of defense for less than two years under President Ford, from 1975 to 1977, and served as a special presidential ambassador to the Middle East for seven months under President Reagan.

He also served as White House chief of staff and U.S. ambassador to NATO during the Nixon administration.

Despite his role as special ambassador to the Middle East, longtime activists and observers have little recollection of his involvement in the region.

"He was not particularly involved in Middle East issues," said Morris Amitay, an Israeli activist and former executive director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby. "He's hard to characterize as one way or another."

Most Jewish observers are focusing, instead, on Rumsfeld's role in studying the threat of ballistic missiles to the United States. Rumsfeld chaired the 1998 Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threats to the United States, which found that such threats to the United States were greater than previously believed.

It found that rogue nations, including Iran and Iraq, could be developing weapons of mass destruction and that the United States would have little warning of those threats. The findings were heralded by Jewish officials who have been pushing U.S. policies that keep these nations in check.

"He comes with a background of serious experience," said Marvin Feuer, director of defense and strategic issues at AIPAC. "He has a direct understanding of the threats the United States will face in the next century."

Tom Neumann, executive director of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, said, "When it comes to important national security issues, he's a top notch choice."

Rumsfeld, 68, has stayed in the spotlight over the last 20 years, and he has been applauded for his work both in the public and private sector. Rumsfeld is characterized in his Defense Department Web site biography as a "roving ambassador for the Defense Department" during his Pentagon tenure. The youngest man to lead the department, he apparently focused on mostly managerial tasks.

Feuer said Rumsfeld was a young, able executive brought in during a critical period following the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. He credits Rumsfeld with working behind the scenes to organize a strategic dialogue with Israel. And a generation later, Feuer said, Rumsfeld carries the prestige of an elder statesman back to the Pentagon.

Bush was said to have been considering former Sen. Daniel Coats (R-Ind.) and the former undersecretary of defense in the elder Bush administration, Paul Wolfowitz.

Wolfowitz, who is Jewish and current dean of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, was a foreign policy adviser to the president-elect during the campaign.

So far, Bush has named no Jews to his Cabinet. □

(JTA Washington correspondent Sharon Samber contributed to this report.)

Hackers target ADL Web site

Hackers attacked the Anti-Defamation League's Web site, posting anti-Israel threats and propaganda that were subsequently removed.

"The Internet has clearly become a new weapon in the arsenal of cyber-terrorists who wish to derail the peace process and prolong Palestinian violence," ADL National Director Abraham Foxman said. ADL officials notified the police after the Dec. 26 attack, and an investigation is under way.

Museum in Romania attacked

Two men smashed windows and beat a guard at a Jewish museum in Romania.

Before going on their rampage Thursday, the two asked a guide in the Bucharest museum, "Where is the soap made of human fat? Is there any Auschwitz soap?" Many Holocaust scholars say the claim that the Nazis made soap from human fat is a myth. Before the Holocaust, the museum functioned as a synagogue.

Town vows to fight Jews' lawsuit

Municipal leaders of a New Jersey town said they would fight a discrimination suit filed by local Orthodox Jews all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, according to the Bergen Record.

Orthodox Jews filed a federal suit on Nov. 24 to defend the right to retain their newly-constructed eruv, a wire that permits observant Jews to carry on Shabbat. Officials in the town of Tenafly complained that proper permission had not been sought for the eruv, but others suggest they really fear an influx of Orthodox Jews.

Art collection given to Germany

A Jewish art dealer handed over his collection of Picassos and other artworks to Germany for a fraction of their worth.

Heinz Berggruen, 86, escaped Hitler's death camps by fleeing his native Berlin in 1936, later becoming a successful art dealer in Paris after the war. Last week, in an act of reconciliation with the country he once fled, he turned over the works for \$115 million. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who attended the ceremony, called Berggruen's act "an extraordinarily noble, humane gesture."

Youth group marks 50th year

The Conservative movement's youth group is celebrating its 50th anniversary at a convention this week in Boston attended by approximately 1,200 teens.

United Synagogue Youth recently announced it will invest \$250,000 to double its membership. The group currently has 25,000 members throughout North America.

Israelis debate morality, efficacy of new policy of targeting militants

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Launched recently with little fanfare, a new Israeli policy of assassinating Palestinian militants held responsible for violence against Jews is beginning to arouse debate.

The first, and very public, demonstration of the new policy was the Nov. 9 missile attack on the car carrying a leader of the Palestinian Tanzim militias, Hussein Abiyat, in Beit Sahur in the West Bank.

Several other high-profile deaths have followed: Hamas bomb-maker Ibrahim Bani Odeh was killed by a remote-controlled bomb in his car in Nablus on Nov. 23. Militant Mahmoud Mughrabi was shot to death Dec. 10 near Beit Jallah in the West Bank. On Dec. 11, in Nablus, Israeli soldiers shot and killed Islamic Jihad militant Anwar Mahmoud Hamran, implicated in 1997 terror attacks in Jerusalem and freed from Palestinian prison when the recent violence began.

Though Israel has never confirmed its suspected role in several of the attacks, at least 10 alleged Palestinian terrorists are believed to have been killed by Israeli "hit squads" since the Palestinian violence began in late September.

Until now, only Israeli Arab legislators voiced many complaints about the new liquidation policy. Among the Jewish public, the deaths of Palestinian terrorists and militia leaders have been overshadowed by the daily Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians and soldiers — and more recently by the election campaign — and are only now beginning to attract the attention of Israeli leftists and human rights activists.

"I fail to see the difference between state-sponsored terror and terror" carried out by individuals, Zahava Gal-On, a Knesset member from the left-wing Meretz Party, told JTA. "If the army possesses incriminating evidence against someone, then efforts should be made to bring him to trial."

The wave of attacks is reminiscent of the mysterious deaths of Palestinian leaders in Europe throughout the 1970s, following a wave of Palestinian terror that culminated in the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games.

The Israel Defense Force had been threatening for some time to begin initiating activities against Palestinian militants — rather than merely reacting to specific attacks.

Barak said in mid-December that the slight drop in violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was due in part to IDF activities "that don't always meet the eye."

Backers of the new system say the Palestinian Authority has made such a policy necessary.

By encouraging military action against Israeli targets, ceasing to arrest terrorist leaders and even releasing terrorists from its jails, the P.A. forced Israel to find ways to fill the security vacuum, backers of the policy say.

The decision to go to a liquidation policy would have to have been approved by the heads of the various security branches as well as by Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

Prior to the granting of such approval, there was no thorough and open discussion of the issue in the Cabinet.

Anti-terror experts argue that such operations are a legitimate

tactic in what has become a mini-war with the Palestinians. Those killed "are those who planned terrorist attacks, and by killing them we prevent them from doing so," said Maj. Gen. Meir Dagan, former head of the anti-terror headquarters at the Prime Minister's Office.

"There is no specific interest in killing them. If possible, they are being arrested. But if it is a territory which is not under our control, and where detention is impossible without risking soldiers, we prefer killing."

The growing controversy revolves around two main issues: Is it moral for a sovereign state to engage in terrorist-style activities in the struggle against terrorism? And, if so, are such actions effective?

The operations themselves are not always clean, typifying the dilemma that Israeli policy-makers face.

On Nov. 22, for example, Jamal Abdul Razek, 28, a veteran of Israeli jails, drove from Rafah to Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip. According to Israeli sources, Razek had been involved in a number of attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians in the past three months, including an attack on an Israeli school bus near the Gaza settlement of Kfar Darom on Nov. 20 in which two adults were killed and nine children wounded.

Israeli intelligence learned that Razek would soon be passing the settlement of Morag, and a commando unit set up an ambush nearby. As Razek's car approached, the soldiers placed an army truck on the road to block his way. Unfortunately, another Palestinian car passed Razek's and headed toward the Israeli ambush. Neither car appeared willing or able to stop at the Israeli roadblock.

Soldiers fired at both cars, killing Razek and three other Palestinians. Regional commander Brig. Gen. Yair Naveh later said that Razek was "a filthy terrorist, and it was right to try and stop him."

Critics, however, suggested that Razek was more valuable alive than dead, as he might have provided valuable intelligence information.

Moreover, the lives of the passengers in the second car — who were later identified as activists in the Tanzim militias, but were not on Israel's wanted list — could have been spared.

"Sometimes an incident may end up killing the target," Maj. Gen. Dagan said.

"After all, we are dealing with armed men whose arrest is a matter of life and death. However, in most cases we have detained more than we have killed. It seems to me that even these recent cases were killed because the situation developed into a head-on confrontation."

Critics argue that neither the moral nor the operational aspects of the "executions" system were discussed thoroughly in the Cabinet.

Even more significant, perhaps, is the fact that the public somehow remained apathetic to the new policy. Until now, that is.

"It is our policy that everyone is entitled to a trial, even a war criminal like Slobodan Milosevic," the former president of Yugoslavia, said Najib Abu Rakia, an activist in the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem.

Abu Rakia argued that the authorities deliberately demonized some of the Palestinian targets after they had already been killed, exaggerating their importance.

B'Tselem is expected to release a report on the issue next week. It will likely stir a public debate on the policy. □