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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Clinton, Arafat talk amid doubts

Hours before Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat arrived at the White House for talks Tuesday with President Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak expressed skepticism that Arafat would accept Clinton's proposals for a final Israeli-Palestinian peace accord.

Barak has been speaking increasingly about "separation" from the Palestinians should Clinton's 11th-hour attempt fail to achieve a final peace deal. [Page 4]

At least 30 injured in bombing

An Israeli Cabinet minister called for breaking off negotiations with the Palestinians.

Speaking after a terror bombing Monday in the coastal city of Netanya injured at least 30 people, Communications Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said, "We should stop everything and figure out where we go from here."

In the wake of the attack, Israel stepped up sanctions against the Palestinians, barring the passage of all goods except for humanitarian supplies into the West Bank and Gaza Strip. [Page 4]

Violence persists in territories

Two Israeli soldiers were injured by roadside bomb blasts in the Gaza Strip. In other violence Tuesday, an Israeli soldier was moderately wounded during an exchange of fire in Hebron, and a Palestinian man was killed during clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen in Gaza.

Later Tuesday, two Israelis were wounded, one of them seriously, when Palestinian gunmen opened fire on their car near the Israeli town of Maccabim.

In a shooting attack on the same road last month, another Israeli, Eli Cohen, was killed in an ambush.

Nevada shul attacked again

Thirteen months after five skinheads firebombed Temple Emanu-El in Reno, the same synagogue was attacked in the first hour of the New Year.

Police said an arsonist apparently used a flammable liquid to ignite the fire, which engulfed the temple's front entrance and charred the entryway.

The flames were discovered Monday at 12:45 a.m. and were quickly extinguished. [Page 3]

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

O.U. debates sex abuse report, but fails to convince some skeptics

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — With a new president and plans to overhaul the organization, the Orthodox Union is trying to restore its credibility after a report found "profound errors of judgment" in the way O.U. leaders dealt with a top professional who sexually abused scores of teens.

However, judging from the responses at the organization's biennial convention last weekend in New York state, it appears that the new plans will not be enough to satisfy all constituents.

Allotted 90 minutes, a heated session on the issue ran a full hour longer than scheduled. Harvey Blitz, the O.U.'s new president, called the behavior of longtime youth leader Rabbi Baruch Lanner a "stain and blemish" on the group — one "we're going to work hard to remedy." Lanner is accused of sexually assaulting at least 26 teenage girls and physically assaulting many boys. A summary of an O.U. report on the charges was released Dec. 26.

Blitz, who has been an officer with the O.U. for more than 20 years, replaces Dr. Mandell Ganchrow as president. Blitz, who had been scheduled to replace Ganchrow even before news of the scandal broke, said a 13-member commission of board members appointed by Ganchrow would recommend ways to implement the report's recommendations.

The report also noted a larger problem of "poor management practices" in the Orthodox Union. Blitz said the O.U. would appoint review committees in the areas of structure and governance; the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, the O.U.'s youth group; personnel; and finance. Blitz said the Lanner report would be his first priority as president and promised that the committees would work quickly, though he did not offer specific completion dates for their work.

In questions at the session and in comments afterward, critics raised the following concerns:

- The O.U. will not disclose the full 332-page report, which names members of the O.U.'s professional and lay leadership who were aware of Lanner's behavior. The summary released Dec. 26 does not contain names.

- The organization has not stated how it will discipline top professionals, particularly executive vice president Rabbi Raphael Butler, who allowed Lanner to continue at his post despite "red flags" about his behavior. Blitz said he does not think it necessary to place Butler on administrative leave while the organization decides whether and how to discipline him and other people.

- Decisions about implementing the report are being left to an all-male committee of 13 people, four of whom Blitz said are cited in the report as having some knowledge of Lanner's behavior. Final decisions will be made by the organization's executive committee. Fewer than 10 percent of the committee are women.

- There is a lack of consensus as to whether the O.U. engaged in a "cover-up" to protect Lanner or whether key professionals simply made errors of judgment.

The bulk of the criticism at the convention came from synagogue members in New Jersey, many of whom were victimized by Lanner or knew his victims. Outside this core, the O.U.'s constituency — members in almost 1,000 Orthodox synagogues throughout the United States — appears divided as to whether the organization's current plans are sufficient. One issue that arose repeatedly at the session, and remained

MIDEAST FOCUS

Attorney general: Talks unethical

Israel's attorney general sent Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak a letter expressing reservations about continuing peace negotiations with the Palestinians in the runup to Israel's February election for prime minister.

Elyakim Rubinstein did not say such negotiations are illegal, but implied they are unethical.

Top Israelis may be targeted

Palestinian militia leaders have created special units to track down and eliminate prominent Israeli figures, the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot reported.

The paper said the initiative was launched after Israel Defense Force sources confirmed that they are targeting Palestinian militants suspected of carrying out attacks against Israelis.

Orthodox draft exemptions OK'd

Israel's Knesset approved an order extending by another four months the draft exemptions granted to fervently Orthodox yeshiva students.

The measure was approved Monday with backing from Likud leader Ariel Sharon, who seeks Orthodox backing in his race for the premiership. Prime Minister Ehud Barak opposed the measure.

Netanyahu backs Sharon

Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would help opposition leader Ariel Sharon become Israel's next prime minister. Netanyahu, who recently dropped out of the running for the premiership, avoided stating Monday whether he believed Sharon would make a good prime minister.

Militants mark Fatah anniversary

Firing their weapons in the air, hundreds of masked Palestinians marched through the streets of Ramallah to mark the 36th anniversary of the founding of Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction.

unresolved, was the extent to which O.U. officials were aware of Lanner's behavior but failed to discipline him.

The report summary says only that "certain members of the O.U. and NCSY leadership share responsibility for Lanner's misconduct," without specifics.

Ganchrow announced that the commission report concluded there was no cover-up, but simply "errors of judgment and failure to see red flags." Blitz, too, said "complicity was not something that came flying off the pages of the report."

He added, "Some will reach the conclusion that they couldn't have known, others that they must have known. It's not 100 percent clear."

The assembly reached its tensest moment when Elie Hiller, one of Lanner's victims, stepped up to ask questions. Hiller criticized Ganchrow for describing the charges against Lanner as a case of "he said, she said."

Hiller also insisted there had been a cover-up, and urged the O.U. to make the full report public. When Hiller stayed on for three questions, Ganchrow tried to dismiss him, saying, "We've given you more time than anyone else."

"You deserve more time than anyone else." Blitz quickly reassured him.

Later, when the session moderator again asked Hiller to sit down, audience members called out, "Let him talk!"

Vivian Luchins of Bronx, N.Y., asked why there are no women on the 13-member committee. Blitz said he regretted the scarcity of women in the O.U. leadership, and promised to make an effort to recruit women for the committees reviewing the organization's practices. In an interview afterward, he acknowledged that "it's a mistake" not to have women on the 13-member committee, but did not announce plans to change its composition.

Not everyone in the audience was angry at the O.U. Using the Yiddish term for observant, David Mandell of Long Island, N.Y., said Lanner's victims should "take some comfort from knowing you've changed the way the frum community will look at the problem of sex abuse."

After the session, many participants were hesitant to be interviewed and insisted that their names not be used. One woman, who identified herself only as a student at Yeshiva University's Stern College, said she is "confident about the new president," but "I definitely think there should be more women" on the committees implementing the commission's recommendations.

Rabbi Isaiah Koenigsberg of Queens, N.Y., said "errors of judgment were made," but did not believe the leaders were "willfully negligent. They knew this person for so many years and they couldn't believe it could happen," he said.

However, critics of the way the O.U. has handled the affair left the session unwilling to give the leadership the benefit of the doubt.

Hiller said he is pessimistic that the matter will be resolved to his satisfaction, and fears that top leadership may go unpunished. Allowing this, he said, "is sending the message to people that what happened was okay."

Murray Sragow, a leader with the New Jersey region of NCSY and administrator of an e-mail list focusing on the Lanner issue, shared Hiller's concerns.

While he approves of Blitz's plans to have committees review the O.U.'s governance, Sragow said, "I'm very concerned that at the end of the day it's all going to be like moving deck chairs on the Titanic."

"It seems to me that the reason all this with Lanner happened was there was a conscious decision of O.U. administrators to make a deal with the devil," he said.

O.U. leaders may have known of Lanner's questionable behavior, he suggested, but "were willing to turn a blind eye to his negative aspects" because of Lanner's ability to inspire teens.

"I don't think that that philosophy is going to change as long as Rabbi Butler continues to be around," Sragow said.

Sragow said he and many of the 150 members of his e-mail group, most of whom live in New Jersey, hope to persuade O.U. officials to release the report and discipline people. They also are considering pulling their synagogues out of the O.U. and creating an independent youth group.

"If the O.U. continues to fail us, then it would be irresponsible to let our kids continue in NCSY," Sragow said. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Queen honors Lubavitch rabbi

A Lubavitch rabbi was honored by Queen Elizabeth in her New Year's Honors List. Rabbi Nachman Sudak, the principal of the Merkas Menachem School in London, was granted an Order of the British Empire because of his services to young people.

German leader decries racism

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder spoke out against far-right extremists in his end-of-year message. "Europe has no room for racism or anti-foreigner sentiment, and certainly no room for anti-Semitism," he said Saturday.

King Hussein sought Israel aid

Jordan's King Hussein asked Israel for help in 1970 against Palestinian forces threatening to take over parts of his kingdom, according to British government files just made public. The appeal, made to Israel via British and American intermediaries, was the only time an Arab leader ever asked for military help from the Jewish state.

Israeli intervention proved unnecessary, because Hussein's troops inflicted heavy damage on the Palestinians soon after he sent the request for help.

Dutch Shoah forms on Internet

Dutch Jews whose property was looted during the Nazi occupation now can get claim forms on the Internet, the Dutch government announced. The forms are available in Dutch at www.joodsetgoeden.nl.

Dutch officials said they expect to pay claimants a first installment of \$5,600. A second round of payments may be made in two years.

College hosts anti-denial site

A Web site to combat Holocaust denial is housed at Emory University, home to a professor who won a trial against a Holocaust denier earlier this year.

The Web site, www.HolocaustDenialOnTrial.org, established with the help of the American Jewish Committee, is based on research conducted for Professor Deborah Lipstadt's defense against charges made by David Irving that she slandered him in print.

Miniseries focuses on Shoah hero

Italian Television began filming a miniseries based on the story of an Italian police commissioner who helped save Jews during the Holocaust.

The two-part series, called "Without Borders," is slated to be broadcast in the spring. It tells the story of Giovanni Palatucci, a police commissioner in Fiume who is believed to have helped some 5,000 Jewish refugees leave the port city by ship. Palatucci was arrested by the Nazis and died in Dachau in 1945.

Jews doubt poll showing growing American support for Palestinians

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish leaders are questioning the validity of a new poll that shows American public opinion swinging toward the Palestinians in the current Middle East conflict.

The Zogby International poll, taken of 1,012 likely American voters, found that 63.5 percent support a Palestinian state and 57 percent do not support moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. It also found that voters want President-elect George W. Bush to steer a middle road in the peace process, with 71.5 percent saying they want Bush to pursue a policy that does not favor either side.

While the poll showed that Americans continue to favor Israel in the conflict — with 30 percent supporting the Israelis and 11 percent supporting the Palestinians — the Arab American Institute, which commissioned the poll, said it represents a leveling of American attitude toward the Middle East combatants.

"There is a growing sense that people want a balanced approach," said James Zogby, the institute's president. "The trend is striking. It's a significant change from the 70s and 80s."

The results differ drastically from a Gallup poll taken two months earlier, which showed 41 percent of Americans supporting Israel in the Middle East situation, and 11 percent siding with the Palestinians.

Kenneth Bricker, director of communications for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, said the Gallup poll was more reliable.

"Any poll can be made to say anything the sponsor would like it to," Bricker said. "In this case, Mr. Zogby has a vested interest in the outcome."

Zogby's brother, John, conducted the poll.

But James Zogby said the difference may be that the Gallup survey used the word "Arabs" in differentiating between the sides in the Middle East conflict, while the Zogby poll referred simply to "Palestinians."

American Jewish Committee spokesman Kenneth Bandler said he thought the 30 percent figure in Zogby's poll was low, but he still found the numbers encouraging.

"The American public is sympathizing with Israel, and this is after three months of violence in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank," Bandler said. "You have a majority of Americans supporting the Clinton administration approach to the peace process and wanting to continue that in the next administration."

About half of the respondents said they believed Clinton was "steering a middle course," while 29.5 percent said Clinton leaned towards Israel and 5 percent said he leaned toward the Palestinians.

Bandler also said he was encouraged that only 32 percent of respondents said they felt Israel had used excessive force in the recent conflict. □

Nevada shul attacked again

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Thirteen months after five skinheads firebombed Temple Emanu-El in Reno, the same synagogue was attacked in the first hour of the New Year.

Police said an arsonist apparently used a flammable liquid to ignite the fire, which engulfed the temple's front entrance and charred the entryway.

The flames, discovered Monday at 12:45 a.m., were quickly extinguished.

Police officials, who classified the attack as a hate crime, had few clues other than a poor-quality surveillance photo of the arsonist.

One month ago, a federal judge sentenced five self-avowed skinheads for hurling a concrete-filled soda bottle and a Molotov cocktail at a temple window in December 1999.

"We had hoped that the harsh sentences would send a strong message to people, but I guess some people didn't get the message." Rabbi Daniel Mehlman of Temple Emanu-El, an 80-year-old congregation, told the Reno Gazette-Journal. □

Netanya bombing overshadows Clinton-Arafat talk on peace deal

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — President Clinton's 11th-hour efforts to salvage the peace process may be too little, too late for many Israelis.

Faced with heavy American and European pressure to reach a peace agreement before Clinton leaves office later this month, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat flew to Washington on Tuesday for a meeting with the U.S. president.

However, their talks were overshadowed by the latest terrorist bombing in Israel, and charges that the Palestinian Authority is encouraging the attacks.

At least 30 people were wounded when a car bomb exploded Monday night in the coastal city of Netanya.

A day before, Binyamin Ze'ev Kahane — the son of Rabbi Meir Kahane, the slain founder of the outlawed far-right Kach movement — was killed along with his wife, Talia, when Palestinian gunmen opened fire on their car on a West Bank road.

Five of the couple's six children were wounded in the attack. The couple's only son had been dropped off at school minutes before the attack and was not with the family.

The Netanya bombing came four days after two pipe bombs exploded on a commuter bus in Tel Aviv, wounding 13 people, one of them seriously.

A week before that, Hamas claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing near a roadside restaurant in the Jordan Valley in which three Israeli soldiers were wounded, two of them seriously.

Reacting to the ongoing violence and terror attacks, Prime Minister Ehud Barak expressed pessimism Tuesday that an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal could be reached before Clinton leaves office — or before Israel's Feb. 6 election, for that matter.

Barak has been speaking increasingly about "separation" from the Palestinians should Clinton fail to achieve a peace deal.

During a phone conversation Monday, Barak told Clinton that Israel is now focusing on fighting terror, and that it is unlikely a peace agreement can be signed in the coming weeks, Israel Radio reported.

The report quoted Barak as telling Clinton that Israel would still consider invitations to send representatives for talks in Washington.

Speaking on Israel Army Radio, Barak accused the Palestinian leadership of supporting the terror attacks.

"The recent terrorist attacks show that the Palestinians are backing actions against us," he said Tuesday.

Senior Israeli security officials made a similar assessment, telling a Knesset committee that the Palestinian Authority has released all jailed terrorists and is encouraging attacks against Israel.

Israeli media provided an even darker picture, reporting that Barak has instructed the Israel Defense Force to prepare for a possible regional war. In a meeting with senior IDF officers, Barak said peace talks with the Palestinians could reach an impasse that causes the region to "deteriorate to a comprehensive war."

Barak also accused Arafat of wasting time by demanding clarifications to Clinton's proposals before formally responding to them.

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 Temple Mount to the Palestinians. Israel also would divide Jerusalem, 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 during Israel's 1948 War of Independence be allowed to return to their former homes inside Israel.

In Monday night's attack in Netanya, the explosives had been planted in a car parked next to a bus station.

Witnesses said three blasts rocked the downtown area, scattering nails that were packed in the bombs.

"There was a big explosion. The plate glass window shattered onto customers," said Yuval Tuchshneider, who works at an optician's shop opposite the bombing site. "We stood there frozen, and there was horrible shrieking outside."

Yehuda Ben-Hemo, another witness, said, "I saw a man fly from the car burning. I ran in his direction and he was burnt."

Following the bombing, an Israeli Cabinet minister called for breaking off negotiations with the Palestinians.

"We should stop everything and figure out where we go from here," Communications Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said.

In the wake of the attack, Israel stepped up sanctions against the Palestinians, barring the passage of all goods except for humanitarian supplies into the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Israel also banned Palestinian VIPs from traveling through Israel to get between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and closed the Rafah and Allenby border crossings.

The one person seriously wounded in the attack was believed to be the terrorist who detonated the explosives.

Israeli security officials were investigating whether Arafat's Fatah movement was behind the attack, which coincided with Fatah Day commemorations in the territories.

If so, this would mark an intensification of Fatah's struggle against Israel, which until now has not included terrorist attacks inside Israel proper. Those attacks generally have been executed by Islamic fundamentalist groups, who ostensibly are Arafat's opposition.

Settlers warned of retaliatory attacks after Binyamin Kahane was killed Sunday. Hours later, in an unrelated attack, a senior member of Arafat's Fatah faction was gunned down, and Palestinian militia leaders promised to avenge his death.

Doctors at Hadassah Ein Kerem Hospital, where the family was taken, said Binyamin and Talia Kahane were hit by bullets, and their children were wounded when the car flipped over into a ditch.

Like his father, Kahane was militantly anti-Arab.

Binyamin Kahane, who ran religious seminaries, founded Kahane Chai — Hebrew for "Kahane Lives" — which espoused his father's beliefs. That movement was outlawed, in 1992.

An estimated 20,000 people took part in his funeral procession through western Jerusalem, where some mourners rampaged through stores trying to attack Arab workers.

Sunday's slaying of the Fatah leader also drew vows of revenge. Palestinian officials claimed that Thabet Thabet, Fatah's secretary-general in the Tulkarm area, was the victim of an Israeli assassination squad. □