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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Sharon, Barak agree on gov't

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon and outgoing Premier Ehud Barak agreed on creating a national unity government. Israeli media said Barak agreed to serve as defense minister after meeting with Sharon on Thursday.

Barak's office said the Labor Party would receive the Defense and Foreign ministries in the new government, but the two sides still had to finish ironing out policy guidelines. Barak hopes to bring a final agreement for Labor Party endorsement early next week, Reuters reported.

Sharon, Arafat trade blame

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon said Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat bears personal responsibility for Wednesday's hit-and-run attack south of Tel Aviv, in which eight Israelis were killed and 20 injured. Sharon said Arafat is failing to combat the terrorist infrastructure, while members of his own security forces take part in anti-Israel activities. Arafat said Thursday that Israel is responsible for the escalating violence.

Driver: Hit-and-run no accident

Khalil Abu Elba, the 35-year-old Palestinian who rammed an Egged bus into a crowded bus stop Wednesday, admitted that he intentionally carried out the attack. Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat dismissed the incident as a "road accident."

Abu Elba was questioned by investigators at an Israeli hospital, where he was treated for wounds sustained during a police chase.

U.S. Jews meet German leaders

Germany's top government officials assured visiting American Jewish leaders of their commitment to a special relationship with Israel and to the fight against racism at home.

"There was a real dialogue with everyone we saw," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "We were reassured by everything we heard that our decision to visit Berlin was right."

A delegation from the Conference of Presidents met Thursday with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Mideast regional war unlikely, despite alarming new tensions

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It did not take long after Ariel Sharon was elected Israel's prime minister for alarms to sound from the Arab world.

On the day after the Feb. 6 elections, the Syrian government newspaper Al-Thawra branded Sharon's victory a declaration of war.

The Arab League later warned that Sharon could lead the entire Middle East toward disaster.

Ehud Barak, the incumbent prime minister trounced by Sharon, had tried to frighten Israelis during the campaign by warning that Sharon would drag the region into chaos. Post-election U.S. appeals for regional calm also reflected the fear that a storm was brewing.

Even as violence intensifies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, however, several experts told JTA that the chances of an all-out Mideast war are slim.

By and large, the experts said, Arab leaders — at least among Israel's immediate neighbors — are keen to maintain stability and avoid conflict.

"The situation is unstable, but it is not nearly as unstable as it seems," said Gerald Steinberg, a professor of political science and a strategic expert at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan.

"The self-interest of the regimes and the Arab countries to avoid war is very high," he said.

Many Arabs consider Sharon a war criminal, but the contrast between popular Arab disgust and the response of key Arab leaders has been stark.

While fiery editorials in the Arab press denounce Israelis' decision to elect Sharon, many key Arab leaders have issued measured responses — even as they warn of dire consequences if Sharon backtracks on the peace process.

Amid the upsurge in violence, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat congratulated Sharon and said he would wait to see the direction and shape of the new Israeli government.

A meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Amman, Jordan, took a similar position. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has said explicitly that his country wants to avoid war.

"Even in Syria, where the rhetoric is in the opposite direction, the behavior has been cautious," Steinberg said, referring to Syria's perceived restraint of Hezbollah gunmen on the Israel-Lebanon border.

"The Syrians and Egyptians clearly know that their militaries are not up to fighting Israel. Syria has not acquired a single weapon — nothing that moves — since the collapse of the Soviet Union."

But that does not mean there are no lurking threats.

"In the 'inner circle,' we still have peace agreements that have to be maintained and can survive the shock," said Martin Kramer, director of the Dayan Center for Middle East Studies at Tel Aviv University. "The overall perspective of Israel is that the major threats come from outside the 'inner circle,' and potentially from Iran and Iraq down the road."

Even so, Kramer does not expect to soon see nonconventional weapons raining down on Tel Aviv, or the Iraqi army rumbling across Jordan toward Jerusalem.

Still, the incoming Israeli government is taking nothing for granted. Dore Gold, a former ambassador to the United Nations and one of Sharon's key foreign policy

MIDEAST FOCUS

Palestinian infiltrator killed

A Palestinian security official reportedly trying to infiltrate a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip was killed in a firefight with Israeli troops Thursday. The man was not in uniform when he tried to enter Kfar Darom, but carried documents identifying him as a member of the Palestinian Preventive Security Service.

Bibi attacks Barak concessions

Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu blamed the escalating Mideast violence on peace concessions that outgoing Premier Ehud Barak offered the Palestinians.

"What we got, as a result of these far-ranging concessions in the face of violence, was the collapse of peace. They perceived, on our part, weakness," Netanyahu said Wednesday night at a Philadelphia synagogue.

He also accused Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat of using the peace process as cover while plotting to destroy Israel. "What Arafat was asking for was not a West Bank state next to Israel, but a West Bank state instead of Israel."

Egypt denies natural gas deal

Egypt is denying that it signed a natural gas agreement with Israel last month. The Jerusalem Post reported that Egypt published a notice in the official Al-Ahram daily newspaper announcing that reports of a signed deal, said to be valued at some \$3 billion over 10 years, are unfounded. The deal was announced last month after years of negotiations.

IDF counters nerve gas claim

The Israel Defense Force's former chief medical officer denied Palestinian claims that the IDF has used nerve gas in the ongoing violence, according to the Jerusalem Post. Dr. Eran Dolev said Thursday that pictures on Palestinian television purporting to show victims of Israeli nerve gas attacks were fabricated.



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advisers during the transition period, gave a more pessimistic view of the regional situation. Today's threats are far more worrisome than those after the Gulf War a decade ago, Gold said.

Then, he explained, a defeated Iraq had been placed under strict U.N. sanctions. Iran was still reeling from its eight-year war with Iraq. The Soviet Union, which had provided strategic backing to many Arab regimes since 1955, was crumbling.

Now, the consensus on sanctions against Iraq is crumbling, international weapons monitoring is dead and the Russians, according to Gold, are freely transferring missile and nuclear technology to the Iranians.

"We are in a completely new strategic reality in the Middle East, and what it means is that Israel's approach to peace and security has to be extremely cautious, taking into account that" Iran and Iraq "seek to be players in the Arab-Israeli conflict," he said. "This elevates the importance of defensible borders like the Jordan Valley."

One concern is Iraq's Saddam Hussein, who increasingly is trying to position himself as the champion of the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Iraq recently flexed its muscles by moving five army divisions to the country's Western panhandle bordering Jordan — from where, theoretically, they could roll across Jordan and reach Israel in 36 hours.

Nobody denies that King Abdullah of Jordan is loathe to allow Iraqi forces onto his territory, and that he maintains the best relations with the Jewish state of any Arab leader.

Nevertheless, under extreme circumstances — such as raging violence between Israel and the Palestinians — Abdullah could be pressured by Jordan's large Palestinian population to take a more hostile approach.

"Jordan is a weak link," an Israeli Foreign Ministry official said.

"Like many other Arab rulers, Abdullah cannot rule without the consent of his subjects, and he cannot afford to continue peaceful relations with Israel if there is real tension."

According to the official, if the United States does not re-emerge as a deterrent to Iraqi power, Saddam might tempt Abdullah, who constantly must strike a balance between Israel to the west and Iraq to the east.

However, the official also pointed out, any worst-case scenario also depends on Israeli actions.

"In 1990, the reason King Hussein fell into Saddam's arms — and we did see Iraqi reconnaissance flights over the Jordanian border — was a result of Israel's policy that 'Jordan is Palestine,'" said the official, referring to the position of Yitzhak Shamir, Israel's prime minister at the time.

Sharon, who originated that policy, no longer uses such terms and now is open to a Palestinian state in part of the West Bank.

To prevent a regional flare-up, Sharon's first priority will be to keep the violence with the Palestinians under control.

Yet this will be difficult, as Palestinian officials dismiss Sharon's proposals for long-term nonbelligerency pacts, a far stingier offer than Barak's. In addition, Palestinian militia leaders are calling for heightened attacks against Israel as a show of defiance against Sharon.

Sharon could find himself caught between the need to maintain regional stability and the need to show Israelis he will take tough action against Palestinian violence.

Hezbollah, too, could test Sharon's resolve if the group's backers — Iran and Syria — decide to step up their indirect role in pressuring Israel.

Analysts say that Israel's deterrent power, long a stabilizing force in the region, has eroded since the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon last May.

In such a delicate situation, Sharon's desire to re-establish this deterrence will be tricky.

"I hope" Sharon "will not be tempted to do reckless things, and maybe if we enter the government we can have an influence," said Ephraim Sneh, a Barak confidant and Israel's deputy defense minister. "If there is no solution in sight to the Palestinian conflict, we may face an accelerated guerrilla war in the territories that could deteriorate into a broader conflict.

"All measures must be taken to squelch it," Sneh said.

"But a responsible government of Israel has to do everything politically possible to prevent it." □

JEWISH WORLD

Protests at Palestinian mission

Nearly 200 protesters gathered Thursday at the Palestinian Mission to the United Nations in New York to condemn the killing a day earlier of eight Israelis by a Palestinian bus driver.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat "ignores the climate of hate that he has fostered among the perpetrators of terror," said Ezra Levin, president-elect of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, which co-sponsored the event with UJA-Federation of Greater New York.

Wednesday night, AMCHA — Coalition for Jewish Concerns demonstrated at the same location.

O.U. applauds school tax credit

The Orthodox Union applauded an Illinois appeals court decision upholding a tax credit for families that send their children to private schools.

The court rejected the argument that the credit should be declared unconstitutional because the majority of such credits would be claimed for expenses related to religious schools.

Sharon envoy briefs Britain

An envoy of Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon arrived in London on Thursday to brief Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and other British officials.

After visiting Moscow earlier this week, Eitan Ben-Tsur told the officials that Sharon wants to ease the Palestinians' economic hardship.

But, he said, this will only be possible "under conditions where the Palestinian areas cease to serve as the staging ground for violence and terrorism against Israelis."

Arms sales to Israel questioned

The Washington-based Arab American Institute called on the United States to suspend certain weapons sales to Israel, saying the sales violate a U.S. law forbidding arms exports detrimental to the peace process. The group said Israel uses the weapons to target Palestinian officials and escalate violence.

Evolution back in Kansas schools

The Kansas State Board of Education voted Wednesday to reinstate the mandatory teaching of evolution in public schools.

In 1999, the board removed evolution from the state's science curriculum, prompting a national debate over how to teach human origins.

The new standards recommend that teachers tell students that alternative views exist, but they are not scientific. They also recommend that students not be forced to accept scientific concepts such as the theory of evolution as fact, but simply understand them.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Reform Jews look for renewal at Synagogue 2000 conference

By Julie Wiener

PHILADELPHIA (JTA) — At the last Reform movement biennial conference in 1999, its president, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, called for a "revolution" in the way Reform Jews worship.

If so, a 400-person conference this week in Philadelphia might be considered the revolution's boot camp. But these are amiable revolutionaries, whose rallying cries are words like "spirituality" and "meaning," whose anthems are sung to folk guitar and whose uniforms — if there can be any in a movement that prides itself on individualism and free choice — are multicolored prayer shawls and large crocheted yarmulkes.

Clergy and congregants from 18 Reform temples throughout the United States gathered in Philadelphia to launch their two-year-long participation in Synagogue 2000, a trans-denominational program that helps synagogues rethink their approach to concepts such as worship and Jewish study.

It was the largest such conference to date for Synagogue 2000, which was founded by two Jewish educators five years ago, and the first in which all participants were part of one movement.

The conference comes as the Reform movement is moving away from its "classical" past in which leaders valued social action over traditional Jewish ritual and observance. Many criticize the old-style synagogues — with their cathedral-like buildings, organ music and operatic cantors — saying they do little to encourage lay participation and spiritual intimacy.

One conference participant, Elizabeth Klein Shapiro of Champaign, Ill., recalled how her wedding 39 years ago at a Reform temple in Manhattan had no chupah, or wedding canopy, and no glass-breaking.

"Reform threw out the baby with the bath water, and now it's saying, 'Hey, we need the baby back,'" Klein Shapiro said.

The movement now has 906 congregations in North America — more than the Conservative and Reconstructionist movements combined — and is investing heavily in synagogue "transformation."

This year it is spending \$150,000 on the Synagogue 2000 effort, plus an estimated \$250,000 in professional and support services.

Individual synagogues sent "teams" of 15 to 25 people, many of whom paid their own way. Most participants, buoyed by the feeling that they were making Jewish history, said they were excited to be there and looked forward to improving their synagogues.

Participants ranged in age from age 16 to 70-something, but the majority appeared to be middle-aged. There were approximately twice as many women as men.

Longtime synagogue members said they hoped to make the synagogue experience more rewarding for newcomers, while many new members said they looked at the Synagogue 2000 teams as a way of getting more involved in their communities.

"I go to services regularly and love it," said Sandy Glass, a longtime member of Philadelphia's Rodeph Shalom. "I want everyone to enjoy it as much as I do."

Those who worried that the gathering might be too touchy-feely were pleasantly surprised. At a meeting for Temple Israel of Hollywood, Calif., one woman said her fear of the "Kumbaya factor" had dissipated after the opening plenary.

Marc Gilman, 41, of Temple Adath Yeshurun in Manchester, N.H., happily remarked that the gathering "isn't hokey or corny."

Still, there were some critics, including one woman at a "debriefing" session who complained that a Shabbat evening service with folk music and dancing was more like "a rock concert than a spiritual event."

At a similar "debriefing" after a Shabbat morning service, one man complained that the Hebrew-language prayers and songs were like "gibberish," since most participants didn't understand them.

The conference did not fall on Shabbat, but Shabbat services were included so participants could see different options for worship. □

Jewish community combats gathering of 'messianic Jews'

By Tom Brodigan and Joyce Moed Charman
Palm Beach Jewish News

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (JTA) — The steeple at West Palm Beach's First Baptist Church lit up like a beacon in the newly darkened sky, the doors kept invitingly open.

But for the 60 Jews gathered outside, the sight of such a disarmingly friendly setting only brought home the dire warnings about "messianic Jews" they'd been bombarded with in recent weeks.

"Now we understand why we have to do something," said Mike Salomon, 17.

"We can't just sit back and just let this go on."

Salomon was objecting to last weekend's conference that drew hundreds of "messianic Jews" and Southern Baptists to Palm Beach County.

Hosted by the Chosen People Ministries, the Feb. 8-Feb. 10 event, "To the Jew First in the New Millennium: A Three-Day Conference on Jewish Evangelism," was designed to make Jewish evangelism a priority of the millennium, according to a flier. It featured testimonies from "messianics" about why they accepted Jesus.

Some "messianic Jews" follow many of the basic tenets of Judaism, but all accept Jesus as the messiah.

"The conference was designed to encourage and exhort the church to become a more active participant in the mandate of Romans 1:16, which states that the gospel message is 'to the Jew first, and also to the gentile,'" said Chosen People Ministries President Mitch Glaser.

Glaser spoke from the group's New York offices.

But it was a message that troubled local Jewish leaders, who worried that conference organizers were targeting them for conversion to Christianity.

In recent weeks, Jewish organizations have blitzed local high schools and community groups with presentations that take issue with the belief that people can be Jewish and accept Jesus as their messiah.

"It's a spiritual Holocaust," said Robin Isaacson, co-director of the Palm Beach branch of Torah Life & Living. "It is so wrong to believe that the New Testament is the logical continuation of the Old Testament."

The Boca Raton-based Torah Life & Living works to educate people about "messianic Jews," cults and missionaries.

Jewish community leaders had agreed not to call more attention to the conference with massive protests and newspaper tirades.

Instead, they staged the small demonstration Saturday outside the conference's closing event, a concert and candlelight vigil for peace in the Middle East.

"We decided to leave the face-to-face encounter for the people who were trained, such as Torah Life & Living," said William Rothschild, director of the Palm Beach office of the Anti-Defamation League.

Outside the conference, Jewish protesters sang Jewish songs and passed out fliers that emphasized the differences between "messianic Jews" and Judaism.

Scattered throughout the group were more than 40 teen-agers who had spent the night at a Shabbat-long workshop at Temple

Emanu-El in Palm Beach designed to combat the effects of the weekend-long conference.

Isaacson said groups like Chosen People Ministries often prey upon teens for conversion, targeting an age group that can be fraught with confusion and pressure.

"It's the pressure to succeed, plus a need for acceptance, that makes teens a key target for 'messianic' groups," said Alexis Konigsberg, 16, a student at the Dreyfoos School of the Arts in West Palm Beach.

Konigsberg added that she knows of teen-agers "who have been to one of these services and they've gotten letters asking them back.

"They're kids who I went to Jewish day school with and you'd never expect to be in this position, but they're teen-agers and they're vulnerable."

At the shabbaton, members of Torah Life & Living held services, educational workshops and social gatherings.

Newly armed with information on "messianic" tactics, the teens then marched to a Havdalah service outside the conference site.

"We drew such a crowd that people came outside," Isaacson said. "I think it made a difference."

"We spoke to them and asked them to read our brochure, to call us and to make an educated decision," she said.

Isaacson said it is not the message of Jesus but the way of wrapping him in a Jewish cloak that concerns her and other Jewish leaders.

To her, the most disturbing part of the conference was its Jewish ambience.

Inside the church, speakers donned kipot, showed videos of Israel and referred to Jesus as "Yeshua," the Hebrew word for salvation.

The crowd danced and sang Hebrew songs, including Israel's national anthem, Hatikvah.

"They basically talked as if they were proud Jews," said Luis Fleischman, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County. "They were offended that we called them non-Jews. They run their lives as regular Jews, participating in the JCC and feeling connected to Israel."

Fleischman characterized the conference attendants as "naive" and the speakers as "shrewd and misleading."

He said only Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., clearly explained that he was delivering a Christian message.

"Mohler's discourse was Christian; he was clearly embracing gospel," Fleischman said. "He was the only one with no ambiguity."

But Chosen People's Glaser insists that the conference was not designed to blur the line between Judaism and Christianity. He said participants simply wanted to share their belief that Jesus is the Jewish messiah.

"When I look at the news and see an Israeli motorist ambushed and two Palestinians killed in the West Bank, I am even more convinced that the world must know that true and lasting peace can only come when the world knows that Jesus is the messiah for all people — Jews, Arabs and gentiles," he said.

Konigsberg says she wasn't fooled by the handshakes and warm words offered by the Chosen People Ministries staff.

"They're not torturing people," she said. "They're going straight for their souls." □