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84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Foxman regrets Rich support

The national director of the Anti-Defamation League said he "probably" should not have joined the effort to pressure President Clinton to pardon fugitive financier Marc Rich.

Abraham Foxman's statement on Monday came as a U.S. congressional committee is reportedly preparing to issue subpoenas in the investigation into the Rich pardon.

Israeli slain near Bethlehem

Israel reimposed a blockade around the West Bank town of Bethlehem after an Israeli driver was shot and killed in the area. After being shot Monday, 58-year-old Baruch Cohen, a resident of the West Bank settlement of Efrat, lost control of his car and hit an oncoming truck. Brig. Gen. Benny Gantz, the Israeli commander in the West Bank, said the Palestinian gunmen later fled into Bethlehem.

In another incident, Palestinian militants fired three mortar bombs from the Gaza Strip into Israel in what Israeli security forces described as a grave escalation of the conflict. Sunday night's attack marked the first time Palestinians in the area of the Gaza Strip had fired into Israel proper since the violence began nearly six months ago.

Powell, Ross address AIPAC

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said the United States is "ready to assist, not insist" on the path toward peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Powell, who received several standing ovations while speaking Monday at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual policy conference, also told the audience that the U.S. partnership with Israel would "remain rock solid."

In an apparent message to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, Powell said "leaders have the responsibility to denounce violence, strip it of its legitimacy, stop it. Violence is a dead end."

On Sunday, Dennis Ross, who served as President Clinton's Middle East envoy, was met with applause and boos when he spoke at the AIPAC conference.

Reflecting on his role as the leading U.S. facilitator of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Ross said Sunday his biggest regret was that "we allowed one environment to exist at the negotiating table and another environment to exist on the street."

NEWS ANALYSIS

Is Arafat in control of the uprising? Sharon, most Israeli experts say yes

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Yasser Arafat was caught by surprise when the first Palestinian intifada, or uprising, erupted in 1987.

At the time, PLO leader Arafat and his top commanders were headquartered in Tunisia. The intifada was the work of a younger generation of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip who dictated the Middle East agenda for years to come.

The Palestinians' second uprising, the "Al-Aksa Intifada" that erupted six months ago, is a different story.

Several Palestinian officials, including Communications Minister Imad Falouji, admitted recently that the present wave of violence was planned well in advance, and that Arafat ordered it up after the failure of last July's Camp David summit.

According to the Palestinian officials' statements, the visit that then-opposition leader and now Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made to Jerusalem's Temple Mount on Sept. 28 — far from being the intolerable provocation that caused the violence, as Palestinians claimed at the time — was only a pretext to begin the violence that had been awaiting Arafat's cue.

Some analysts believe Sharon's visit was a godsend for Arafat, who was threatened by popular anger at the corruption and ineptitude of the Palestinian Authority.

"I have it from reliable Palestinian sources" that the Palestinian public was readying itself to fight "not against Israel, but against the corrupt regime of Arafat," Professor Yosef Ginat, a senior lecturer at the Israel Studies Department of Haifa University and a veteran observer of the Palestinian scene, told JTA this week.

"Prior to September 28, Palestinian friends told me that you, Israelis, should help us act against our corrupt leaders."

But as things turned out, Sharon's visit enabled Arafat to divert public rage from himself to Israel — and gain international sympathy and a crucial sheen of legitimacy for the uprising.

Baffled by the violent response to an unprecedentedly conciliatory peace proposal from Israel's dovish government, Israeli experts pondered Arafat's motives.

One theory was that the uprising allowed Arafat — who glories in his image as a revolutionary leader and continues to appear exclusively in military uniform eight years into the Oslo process — to pave the path to an independent Palestinian state with blood, sweat and tears, to win a state by force and sacrifice rather than Israeli benevolence.

Even if Arafat did give the initial order, however, the question remains whether he is still in control of the violence half a year later.

Has the intifada slipped from Arafat's grasp? Is a younger generation of Palestinians again taking control of the uprising?

Israeli policy-makers are not quite sure. Marwan Barghouti provides the most conspicuous example of what would appear to be Arafat's diminishing authority.

Until the outbreak of violence last September, Barghouti was the obscure leader of the equally obscure Tanzim organization, the West Bank militia of Arafat's Fatah Party.

Since the start of the violence, however, Barghouti has soared to prominence, orchestrating the bulk of military operations against Israelis and Israeli targets around Jerusalem, issuing belligerent threats and exhorting Palestinians to militancy.

Although he frequently pledges loyalty to Arafat, Barghouti nonetheless has said that he would disobey an order from Arafat to hold fire.

No such order has been forthcoming, but the fact is that comments like Barghouti's

MIDEAST FOCUS

Sharon meets U.S. officials

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that Israel is willing to conduct negotiations with the Palestinians, but "one thing has to be clear: There won't be negotiations under the threat of terror and violence," Israeli sources said.

Making his first trip to Washington since being elected last month, Sharon also met with Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and CIA Director George Tenet.

Israeli found near northern border

The body of an Israeli man was found Monday near Israel's border with Lebanon.

Missing since March 15, Yitzhak Kabartov, the 54-year-old head of security at Kibbutz Manara, was found in a river bed near the kibbutz.

Israeli officials suspect that Palestinians seized Kabartov and forced him to open a warehouse from which they stole 60 automatic rifles before killing him.

Sharon may cede settlements

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon may consider evacuating some Gaza Strip settlements if Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat considers Sharon's proposal for a long-term interim agreement, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

Sharon is not contemplating similar evacuations in the West Bank, according to Ha'aretz. The paper said the idea will be presented as part of Sharon's talks with Bush administration officials this week.

More Har Homa homes OK'd

Jerusalem city officials approved the building of an additional 2,800 apartments in Har Homa, a controversial neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem, according to the Jerusalem Post. The first stage of the Har Homa project, with some 2,400 apartments, is expected to be finished by the summer.



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were unheard of in the past. A recent public opinion poll, conducted by a Palestinian research institute, showed that backing for Arafat has shrunk to as low as 35 percent of the Palestinian public.

Most Palestinians still respect Arafat, who is a symbol of the nation to an extent that leaders in democratic societies cannot be. But various groups are girding themselves for the power struggle that will take place after Arafat, now 72 and in uncertain health, is gone.

In addition to the Tanzim, these armed groups include:

- Force 17, which is responsible for the personal protection of Arafat and Palestinian ministers;
- the Preventive Security Service, or Palestinian secret service, headed by Mohammad Dahlan in the Gaza Strip and Jibril Rajoub in the West Bank;
- the intelligence service, headed by Amin al-Hindi;
- Arafat's mainstream Fatah Party;
- the Shabiba, the Fatah youth organization; and
- the Palestinian police force, which includes tens of thousands of armed men.

On paper, each of these groups has its own area of responsibility and is subordinate to Arafat and the Palestinian Authority Cabinet.

In reality, however, each is in competition with the others, and the intifada has provided each one with an excellent opportunity to prove its worth to the Palestinian public. In addition to these competing groups, there also are Islamic militant groups — Hamas and Islamic Jihad — eager to take a leading role in the violent confrontation with Israel.

The complexity of the situation has made it difficult for Israel to deal with the Palestinian population.

"If Arafat is not in control," Zvi Bar'el wrote in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, "there is no point in pressuring the civilian population, because it has no accountable authority."

However, if Arafat is in control, then Israel likewise cannot pressure the local population because "one can hardly expect the civilian population to come out against its leadership."

Even Israel's top military experts disagree whether Arafat is in control of the uprising. Two weeks ago, Lt. Gen. Ya'acov Orr, the government coordinator of affairs in the territories, told the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that the Palestinian Authority is collapsing.

He said that Palestinian institutions responsible for public order — such as the police, courts, education and health services, as well most government ministries — are no longer functioning.

A week later, however, Lt. Gen. Amos Malka, the head of army intelligence, told the same committee that for the time being there was no sign of "an imminent collapse of the P.A."

Malka said Arafat is still in charge, even if he does not go into the details of each and every operation directed against Israel.

Yet Arafat has built a career out of bluffs and feigned weakness, and his historic foes — such as Sharon — believe the apparent chaos in Palestinian areas is part of the pattern.

Encouraging the "Lebanonization" of the Palestinian territories — creating competing but limited power bases that confuse observers as to the real source of power — allows Arafat both to dodge blame for the violence and plead impotence when asking for international aid and forbearance.

Sharon insists that Arafat continues to exercise overall strategic control of the Palestinian uprising, and thus must be held accountable for the violence.

Some top Israeli analysts, like Ehud Ya'ari, the Arab affairs correspondent of Channel One TV, also believe Arafat is strong enough to order a cease-fire "within a matter of hours."

Those who believe that Arafat is still firmly in command note that he strengthened his position when he ordered the mass release of Hamas terrorists from Palestinian jails last fall, a move that enabled him to achieve a high degree of coordination with Hamas, his main opposition.

Even if Arafat retains a firm grip on power, he does not look likely to rein in the uprising any time soon. □

JEWISH WORLD

U.N. rights official steps down

The U.N. commissioner for human rights announced that she will not seek re-election when her term ends in September. Mary Robinson is viewed by Israel and its advocates as one-sided in her criticism of the Jewish state.

A former president of Ireland, she made the announcement Monday at the U.N. Human Rights Commission's opening session in Geneva, where Israel expects to be the target of another round of condemnation for the ongoing Middle East violence.

AJCongress presses Spanish firm

The American Jewish Congress called on the president of the Spanish telecommunications firm Telefonica to investigate anti-Semitic comments attributed to an executive with the firm.

The request came after Epoca, one of Spain's leading magazines, reported that Joaquim Agut had issued a directive to his top management team prohibiting them from conducting any business with Jews.

Agut denied the report.

Venezuela asked for Nazi-era info

The Simon Wiesenthal Center is asking Venezuela to help it learn the fate of 18 Nazi collaborators from the Baltic nations who immigrated to the South American country after World War II.

The 14 Lithuanians, three Latvians and one Estonian mainly served in local police squads that helped the Nazis persecute Jews.

Group helps quake victims

The American Jewish Committee donated \$50,000 for projects that include rebuilding two schools damaged in India's late January earthquake.

The schools in Ahmedabad, which serve more than 3,000 Muslim, Hindu and Christian students, hope to open in June.

Shtetl film gets good notices

Early reviews are praising "Simon Magus," a British film set in a 19th-century Polish shtetl.

Billed as "a tale from a vanished world," the film, according to the Associated Press, "captures the spirit of ancient Judaic mysticism, a world of visions, apparitions, omens and maledictions."

Egyptian Jewish Communist dies

Chehata Haroun, a leading Egyptian Jewish politician, died March 14 at age 82.

Haroun was an anti-Zionist who stayed in Egypt when most Egyptian Jews fled because of persecution after the founding of Israel in 1948. He was a founding member of Egypt's Communist Party in the 1940s.

For British Jews, new report raises question of ties to Muslims

By Richard Allen Greene

LONDON (JTA) — The publication of a major study on religious discrimination in Britain has put the country's Jews between a rock and a hard place.

The community faces the critical question of whether to support calls for a new law banning religious discrimination, or even a permanent commission to fight it, like Britain's Commission for Racial Equality.

The community's natural tendency is to take a stance against religious discrimination wherever it occurs, said a leading community member who asked not to be identified.

But most Jews believe the latest study is the result of pressure from the British Muslim community, and some Jews are asking hard questions about how strongly they want to come out in favor of Muslim interests, the communal leader said.

The report did not make policy recommendations on the issue, disappointing some Muslim leaders.

"Although international instruments guarantee the right to practice one's religious faith freely and without discrimination, the domestic law of the United Kingdom does not protect religious communities in this respect," said Massoud Shadjareh, chairman of the Islamic Human Rights Commission.

Shadjareh said it was time to "start addressing the inadequacies of the British legal system."

Paul Weller, the lead author of the report, said the "very strong expectation, particularly among Muslims," was that the report had the responsibility "to make recommendations."

In fact, it was designed only to track experiences of religious discrimination, not to make policy recommendations, he said.

One thing is clear from the study, carried out by the University of Derby and commissioned by the government: British Jews are comparatively unconcerned about religious discrimination.

Jews identified ignorance, verbal abuse and damage to property as the top three problems facing the community.

Some 66 percent of Jews thought ignorance — their No. 1 concern — was "very serious" or "quite serious."

By contrast, 86 percent of Muslims and 73 percent of Christians were very worried about the same problem.

Only 59 percent of Jews complained about verbal abuse, compared to 82 percent of Sikhs and 75 percent of Muslims.

And just over 50 percent of Jews were worried about vandalism of community property, while 81 percent of Sikhs and 72 percent of Hindus were concerned about it.

The more fervently Orthodox segments of the Jewish population tend to support legislation to counter religious discrimination.

But the mainstream is not convinced.

"We are a content group. We are not an aggrieved party," the community leader said.

As a result, Jews are reluctant to push for laws banning religious discrimination, the community figure added.

Jews have been allowed to live in Britain for more than 300 years, and most British Jews have assimilated and tend not to be the subject of overt discrimination, said Neville Nagler, executive director of the Board of Deputies, the umbrella organization that represents most British Jews.

The Board of Deputies' official response to the publication of the report was lukewarm.

Jews need to think about whether to associate themselves with the minority of "non-Christians," or subtly align themselves with the majority by being "Judeo-Christians," the community leader said.

"Annoying the population and making them more aware of religious issues may not be in our interest," the leader explained. "Society can handle our minor cultural differences." □

Blast at Israeli Embassy recalled amid anger that case still unsolved

By Nicolas Penchaszadeh

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — As Argentina's Jews mark the ninth anniversary of a deadly car bombing of the Israeli Embassy here, the community still lives with the frustration that those responsible for the attack have gone unpunished.

The March 17, 1992, bombing killed 29 and wounded more than 200, but Argentina's inquiry into the attack still has failed to produce suspects.

Many of the community's fears and wounds remain the same as at last year's anniversary, but this year's somber commemoration was different in at least one respect: The honeymoon between the Jewish community and the government of President Fernando de la Rúa is over.

"We don't want to beg for justice, we demand it," said Carlos Susevich, whose daughter died in the bombing. "We want the same fervor used in political speeches and campaign promises to be used to get results in the investigation."

A year ago, the newly elected de la Rúa and his entire Cabinet attended a public ceremony inaugurating a public square where the embassy once stood.

The Jewish community cheered him as a welcome change from the previous government.

This year, however, the only government official to attend the commemoration was the deputy justice minister.

De la Rúa was busy announcing austerity measures to deal with the nation's severe financial crisis.

Also attending Saturday's commemoration was Israel's ambassador to Argentina, Benjamin Oron, who took up the post last September.

His predecessor, Ambassador Itzhak Aviran, was among the harshest critics of Argentina's failure to find those responsible for either the 1992 embassy bombing or the 1994 bombing of Buenos Aires' AMIA Jewish center — an attack that killed 86 people and wounded about 300.

Jewish leaders here and abroad have blamed Argentina's inability to find the culprits on incompetence, corruption or anti-Semitism among security and government officials.

At Saturday's ceremony, Oron read a message from Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres urging the government to "redouble efforts to find those responsible for the attack and bring them to justice."

In an interview with JTA, Oron said he still has hope in Argentina's judicial system.

"We cannot give up. We must continue with the investigation and exhaust all channels," he said. "After nine years, there are some preliminary conclusions, but no complete results," Oron said. "Nobody is under arrest, nobody is being tried. We are very frustrated."

But he praised the government's political will to continue with the investigation.

"This was the biggest attack against Israel abroad, and our expectation is to bring the people responsible to justice," he said.

In 1998, Argentina's Supreme Court, which is overseeing the investigation of the embassy bombing, said the attack may have been the work of Islamic Jihad terrorists headquartered in the Middle East.

But the court was never able to identify local contacts who

helped the terrorists plant the bomb.

The bombing of the AMIA center two years later underscored Argentine Jewish institutions' vulnerability to attack.

Fear of another terrorist attack, especially as Israeli-Palestinian violence continues, haunts the community.

As Oron said at Saturday's commemoration, "Fear is the biggest success for terrorists." □

L.A. Jewish institutions up security as trial begins of Islamic extremist

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Los Angeles police officers are visiting Jewish institutions, schools and synagogues, urging them to take extreme precautions while an Islamic extremist is on trial in a federal courthouse here.

The defendant in the high-profile case is Ahmed Ressam, a 33-year-old Algerian accused of conspiring with other Islamic militants to bomb Seattle and other U.S. cities during millennium celebrations.

"I want to stress that we know of no plans or threats targeting specific institutions," Deputy Chief of Police David Kalish said.

Each of the city's 18 area police control centers has developed an operational plan to contact institutions in its jurisdiction to review security measures, he said.

"Our contacts include airports and transportation hubs, but in this case Jewish institutions are at the top of our list," Kalish said.

Kalish emphasized that there is no cause for panic, but that the police would be remiss if it did not plan for all contingencies.

At the least, the police visits allow Jewish institutions to renew their relationships with local officers and review security plans, he said.

An officer who visited the offices of the Los Angeles Jewish Journal asked if any threats had been received, checked on emergency phone contacts, asked how many people were working in the office and urged that any suspicious individuals and packages be reported to police.

Major Jewish organizations were highly reluctant, perhaps understandably, to have their names linked to security concerns.

The Los Angeles Jewish federation acknowledged only that a police visit had taken place, as did the Freda Mohr Center of the Jewish Family Service.

Organizations that normally maintain a high level of security, such as the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Anti-Defamation League, said they had not received police visits.

But the regional director of the ADL, David Lehrer, said, "The nature of such a trial in Los Angeles should heighten all our sensitivities."

Ressam was arrested Dec. 14, 1999, as he allegedly drove a car loaded with high explosives and other bomb material off the ferry from Canada into Washington state.

He is alleged to have trained in camps run by terrorist leader Osama bin Laden and to have conspired to bomb the Space Needle in Seattle, and possibly airports in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Seattle officials took the threats seriously enough to cancel plans for the city's New Year's Eve 2000 festivities.

The trial was transferred from Seattle to Los Angeles due to concern about security in Seattle's aging courthouse and the likelihood that Ressam might not be able to receive a fair trial because of massive publicity about the case. □