



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 79, No. 65

Wednesday, April 4, 2001

84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli rockets pound Gaza

Israeli helicopters fired rockets at Palestinian Authority targets in the Gaza Strip. Tuesday's 30-minute assault, which an Israeli official said was directed against targets "involved in terrorism," came after a 10-month-old Israeli infant was critically injured in a Palestinian mortar attack earlier in the day on a Jewish settlement in Gaza.

Palestinians rewrite baby's death

Voice of Palestine Radio is promoting an alternative version of the killing of the 10-month-old Israeli baby last week in Hebron. According to Palestinian radio, Shalhevet Pass was killed not by a Palestinian sniper but by her own mother, who wanted to be rid of the child because Shalhevet was retarded.

An official at Israel's Foreign Ministry said the report proves "just how low the Palestinians are willing to go in order to win world public opinion."

Germany convicts ex-SS officer

A German court sentenced a former Nazi SS officer to 12 years in jail for killing seven Jewish prisoners in 1945 as they dug trenches in what is now the Czech Republic.

Czech Jewish leaders welcomed Tuesday's conviction of 83-year-old Julius Viel. "It sends an important message that such people, even after 60 years, cannot and should not escape justice," said Tomas Kraus, executive director of the Czech Federation of Jewish Communities. German media dubbed the case the nation's "last Nazi war crimes trial."

Sharon rejects Arab initiative

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon rejected an Egyptian-Jordanian proposal for resuming Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Israel Radio reported.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak presented the proposal during a meeting Monday with President Bush at the White House, but Sharon, who received it through unofficial channels, sees it as an attempt to renew talks while Palestinian violence continues.

Because of the Passover holiday, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, April 9 or Tuesday, April 10.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israelis find rare common ground standing firm against Arab violence

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Six months into the Palestinian uprising, Israeli doves and hawks are no longer arguing about the nation's settlement policy.

In fact, they are displaying a rare unity in the face of Palestinian attacks and terrorism.

Palestinian attacks in recent days on two settlement enclaves left two 10-month-old Israeli babies among the victims — one dead, the other gravely wounded — but the attacks did not produce the once-familiar calls from the Israeli left to dismantle the settlements.

The first attack took place March 26, when a Palestinian sniper killed Shalhevet Pass, picking her off as her father wheeled her in a stroller by a Jewish playground in the West Bank city of Hebron.

On Tuesday, in the Atzmona community in the Gaza Strip, a 10-month-old infant was seriously injured after being hit by shrapnel in a Palestinian mortar attack on the settlement.

The mother also was hurt, though less seriously than her child.

The Pass family at first refused to bury Shalhevet until the Israel Defense Force seized the Palestinian neighborhood of Abu Sneineh from which the sniper fired. On Sunday, following appeals from public figures including Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the family laid Shalhevet to rest.

The initial refusal to bury Shalhevet triggered some controversy in Israel, but it was overshadowed by a deafening silence — the marked absence of debate that such attacks on the settlements once would have generated.

In times gone by, the attacks would have left Israeli doves demanding the dismantlement of isolated settlements — to avoid "provoking" Palestinian anger — and hawks urging that they be strengthened to show Palestinians that violence is futile.

Such debate now seems anachronistic.

Only a few doves still argue for withdrawing from any settlements, even the most isolated ones.

They understand that appearing weak under fire would send the wrong message to the Palestinians and to the wider Arab world — that violence pays.

The hawks, barring the most extreme among them, no longer deny that outlying settlements, such as those in Gaza, would have to be removed if a peace agreement is reached.

But that presupposes a peace process.

In its absence, there is little for the doves to get enthusiastic about or the hawks to argue over.

Both groups now roundly blame Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian leadership for the lack of a peaceful solution or of progress toward one, and for the spiraling violence that has claimed 72 Jewish lives since late September.

This "domestic peace" among the usually raucous Israeli parties has made Sharon's unity government much more than a marriage of political convenience.

For all the lingering unease on the left about Sharon's hardline past, there is a spirit of unity on the fear-swept streets of Israel's cities.

And this unity appears to be stiffening the public's resolve in the face of daily Palestinian suicide bombings, ambushes, stonings and firefights.

Israelis are determined to go about their business despite their apprehensions, not

MIDEAST FOCUS

Soldier killed at Rachel's Tomb

A 19-year-old Israeli soldier was killed by Palestinian sniper fire at Rachel's Tomb on the outskirts of Bethlehem on Monday. Danny Darai's death came a day after an Israeli reserve soldier was killed by Palestinian gunfire on an Israel Defense Force base near the West Bank city of Nablus.

Barak: Arafat 'deceived' Israel

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak told members of a U.S.-led committee investigating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the Palestinians "deceived" Israel during last year's peace talks.

In a meeting with members of the Mitchell Committee, Barak was quoted as saying that Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat decided to adopt a path of violence to achieve his goals as early as last July's Camp David summit, when he rejected peace proposals raised there.

Powell, Sharon discuss conflict

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon conferred by phone Monday night to discuss the escalation of violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Sharon was quoted as saying the Palestinian Authority's failure to take any steps to foil terrorist attacks leaves Israel no choice but to act, including striking at those involved in terrorism.

Report: Arab admits to bomb

A member of the Palestinian security services confessed to planting a bomb in Netanya that was later defused by Israeli officials, according to Israel Radio.

Rahman Fudah reportedly admitted that other members of Palestinian security forces were also involved.

According to Israeli officials, the confession proves that the Palestinian Authority is behind the recent wave of terrorist attacks against Israelis.



Daily News Bulletin

Shoshana S. Cardin, *President*

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Lisa Hosten, *Editor*

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.

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to give the terrorists a victory by disrupting normal life in the Jewish state.

When bombs do strike and blood is spilled, there seems to be a tougher and more stoic response than in years gone by, when Israeli society was divided between "the peace camp" and "the national camp" and every Palestinian terror attack widened the gulf between the two.

By the same token, Sharon's decisions on how to strike back at Palestinian violence — which in recent days have involved a marked military escalation on Israel's part — have encountered little resistance in the political center, though the right is clamoring for a sterner response.

Last Friday, Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer announced that Israel is ready to take off the gloves in the conflict with the Palestinians.

He also said he would consider sending Israeli troops into areas under Palestinian control "if they try to misuse territory which we agreed in advance was theirs."

On Sunday, the IDF crossed into an area under Palestinian Authority control and abducted six members of Arafat's Force 17 presidential guard, charging them with cooperating with Palestinian militants in planning terror attacks against Israelis.

On Tuesday, Israel released three of the men, but the point had been made. As the IDF chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, said, Israel would no longer take lines on the map into account "in our strikes against the terrorists."

Sharon and Ben-Eliezer also have ordered the use of helicopter gunships, despite an earlier pledge from Ben-Eliezer not to deploy them.

Following a wave of bombings in Israeli cities, helicopters were used March 28 to rocket Force 17 targets in Gaza and the West Bank city Ramallah.

On Monday, rockets were used again to kill a leading Islamic Jihad militant in southern Gaza.

On Tuesday, helicopters rocketed a Palestinian naval police base, a Force 17 facility and a compound shared by several Palestinian security services, all in Gaza.

The same day, Sharon rejected an Egyptian-Jordanian proposal for resuming Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak presented the proposal Monday during a meeting with President Bush at the White House.

But Sharon, who received it through unofficial channels, sees it as an attempt to renew negotiations while Palestinian violence continues — something he has repeatedly vowed not to do.

As with his other recent actions, the Israeli prime minister's rejection met with broad public support.

His basic position — that shooting must stop before talks can resume — appears to jibe with the public mood, which is determined not to reward Palestinian violence.

Palestinian strategists have focused on Israel's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon last May after years of low-level war with Hezbollah gunmen.

This has led them to predict that similar Palestinian pressure — a euphemism for acts of terror — will eventually force Israel to give up all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Israel's staying power in recent years has been sorely lacking — but so far, at least, Israelis are showing more steadfastness than the Palestinian strategists bargained for.

Even those Israelis who wholeheartedly supported former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's willingness to give up land for peace are just as wholeheartedly rejecting such concessions under military pressure.

Arafat's rejection of the Barak-Clinton peace proposals has engendered a genuine sense of national unity among Israelis.

It might dissipate if and when the diplomatic conditions change.

But for now, at least, it is palpable and real. □

Israel to monitor settlers

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has instructed the Shin Bet domestic security service to increase its monitoring of Jewish extremists in Hebron.

The Israeli daily Ma'ariv reported that the directive came after a propane gas tank exploded in an Arab store in Hebron, an attack attributed to extremist elements. Hebron settlers said the extremists came from outside the community. □

JEWISH WORLD

New group eyes social justice

A new Jewish group plans to mobilize Jewish organizations and individuals to be more active on social justice issues. At Tuesday's kickoff for Amos — named for the biblical prophet — the group released a poll showing that a majority of U.S. Jews see "making the world a better place" as the most meaningful aspect of their Jewish identity.

The poll also found that more than 90 percent of American Jews are familiar with the Anti-Defamation League and Hadassah, while only 20 percent know of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Doorman killed at Rio shul

The doorman at a Sephardi synagogue in Rio de Janeiro was killed when robbers stole \$300 from the shul. The incident prompted calls for greater security at the Bnei Sidon synagogue, which has been robbed before.

In another development, neo-Nazi groups plan to meet later this month in northern Brazil to celebrate Hitler's birthday. Such groups have become increasingly active in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, according to a local newspaper. The groups have been creating neo-Nazi Internet sites, and may be responsible for the recent theft of mezuzahs from local synagogues.

Austrian fund starts payments

An Austrian fund made its first payments to Holocaust survivors for assets stolen between 1938 and 1945. The Claims Conference said some 60 people received about \$7,000 apiece Tuesday.

U.N. commissioner to keep post

U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson has decided to remain in her post for another year, reportedly after a number of world leaders urged her not to leave.

Presumably, Israeli officials were not among them. Jewish observers have long accused Robinson, the former president of Ireland, of being one-sided against Israel in her assessment of the Middle East conflict. Robinson will now stay on until at least September 2002.

E.U. blasts Austrian rightists

An E.U. panel issued a report condemning Austria's far-right Freedom Party for using racist and xenophobic messages in a recent election campaign.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance also reported Tuesday that current Austrian legislation was insufficient to combat racism and discrimination. The report also said racism in Britain against asylum seekers and refugees was "particularly acute."

British Jews divided as rabbis take part in Arab memorial event

By Richard Allen Greene

LONDON (JTA) — A decision by leading rabbis to join Palestinian representatives in commemorating Palestinian suffering during the creation of the State of Israel has split British Jewry down the middle.

Rabbi John Rayner, life president of the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, described his participation in the Deir Yassin Remembered memorial as "a religious, a Jewish, and — in the best sense — a Zionist thing to do."

But Rabbi Sidney Brichto, a vice president of the union, said that the event would "give a propaganda coup to the Palestinian authorities by diverting attention from the fact that they began an unprovoked intifada" — or violent uprising — "after rejecting peace proposals."

The union did not take an official position on the event. Neither did the Board of Deputies, the umbrella organization that represents most British Jews.

Board Executive Director Neville Nagler said board officers received invitations to the ceremony, but "agreed it was not a desirable event to get involved with."

The April 1 commemoration consisted of an evening of music, readings, short plays and prayers at the 1,000-seat Peacock Theater in central London.

Organizer Paul Eisen, who is Jewish, said the event was sold out nearly a week in advance. Despite that, it received virtually no attention in the British press.

The event commemorated a 1948 attack by the Irgun and Stern Gang, underground Jewish militias that sometimes cooperated with but often opposed the central Zionist authority, on the Arab village of Deir Yassin on the western edge of Jerusalem.

A report in The New York Times on April 13, 1948, said that 254 Arabs, including women and children, were killed in the attack. More recent research, including an exhaustive study by Palestinian academics, puts the figure closer to 100.

Official Zionist leaders condemned the incident, and David Ben-Gurion — leader of the pre-state Jewish community — apologized to Jordan's King Abdullah. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber also spoke out against the killings.

All parties to the conflict had their reasons for exaggerating the casualty figure. The underground Jewish militias believed a higher number would prove their fighting mettle. For the Zionist mainstream, it confirmed the alleged recklessness of the militias.

The Arab leadership trumpeted the event widely, believing it would rouse the Arabs to a belligerent frenzy. Instead, it appeared to have the opposite effect, causing many Arabs to flee their homes in fear of the Jews — as Irgun leader Menachem Begin reportedly acknowledged.

Regardless of the facts, the event has taken on legendary stature in Palestinian circles as a symbol of their alleged persecution at the hands of the Jews.

Eisen described the commemoration as "a creative event, not a religious one." It took place a week before the April 9 anniversary of the incident, so as not to conflict with Passover. Eisen said he helped organize the event because Deir Yassin "has come to symbolize Palestinian oppression."

"It's not commemorated just because it's an atrocity — if that were the case, we would be commemorating every day of the year on both sides," he said. "It is as important an event in Jewish history as in Palestinian history. We require, quite rightly, that our suffering is commemorated. Theirs should be too."

Israeli Embassy spokesman D.J. Schneeweis would not comment on the event, saying only: "We look forward to the day when representatives of the Palestinians are able to show the same kind of sympathy for Jewish suffering at the hands of the Palestinians as Jewish representatives are showing for them."

Rayner said he thought the event had "achieved something significant. It was a mixture specifically of Palestinians and Jews in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect."

Eisen said he guessed the audience was about 60 percent Palestinian, with "significant" Jewish representation, including a number of rabbis.

The announcement that Rayner and Rabbi Jeffrey Newman, another senior Liberal figure, would attend prompted furious debate on the letters page of the Jewish Chronicle, the country's leading Jewish weekly. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

JDC jumps into Polish scrap, hopes to ease restitution process

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — A leading American Jewish organization is trying to resolve Jewish infighting that is jeopardizing the reclamation of thousands of Holocaust-era properties in Poland.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee invited Polish Jewish leaders to New York this week, hoping to reconcile the tiny Polish Jewish community with the World Jewish Restitution Organization.

At stake are up to 4,000 Jewish communal properties — synagogues, schools, hospitals and administrative buildings — worth perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars.

The properties were first confiscated by the Nazis, then by Poland's Communist regime.

Polish Jews and the WJRO reached an agreement in 1997 to cooperate on reclaiming the properties, but their collaboration has unraveled in recent months.

The conflict appears to have dissolved into a very public grab for money and power, marked by personal animosities.

The involvement of the JDC — a founding member of the WJRO and an active participant in Polish Jewish affairs — follows an appeal from several American Jewish leaders.

According to one source close to the issue, "It's going to be tough to resolve this because there's been a hardening of feelings on both sides."

The five-year deadline for filing claims expires in May 2002, but only 600 claims have been filed so far.

Reclaiming every property would require filing 10 claims a day for the next year — a tedious, if not impossible, process of research and documentation.

At least one participant in this week's negotiations, World Jewish Congress Vice President Kalman Sultanik, sounded optimistic.

"I don't think there is any other option" to working together, "because time is working against us," Sultanik said.

"The Jewish community is like us, with only one interest in mind: not wasting time, and trying to reclaim as many Jewish properties as possible, as soon as possible," he said.

Jerzy Kichler, president of the Union of Jewish Religious Congregations in Poland, took part in the New York negotiations this week but could not be reached for comment.

But another Jewish leader, who remained in Poland this week, told JTA that reconciliation "seems impossible to us. The WJRO has lost credibility, and we must devote all energy to restitution of Jewish communal property rather than to another round of negotiations."

If they miss the deadline, it's unclear whether Polish Jews would forfeit their right to further claims, or if the government would give them more time.

Some observers suggest the Polish government would not want to appear hard-nosed for fear of provoking Jewish outrage and, possibly, accusations of anti-Semitism.

In any case, frustrated Jewish observers lay the blame for the current crisis entirely at the feet of the Jews themselves.

They wonder why the two sides can't work together through the claims process, secure the properties or compensation — and

then haggle afterward over how to divide it.

In 1997, Poland passed a property restitution law that deemed the tiny Union of Jewish Religious Congregations — which represents 5,000 registered Jews — heir to vast communal property holdings scattered across Poland's 49 counties.

The WJRO — a coalition that includes the JDC, American and Israeli Holocaust survivor groups, the Jewish Agency for Israel, the Claims Conference and B'nai B'rith — reacted angrily.

The WJRO noted that far more Holocaust survivors from Poland's Jewish community — which once numbered over 3 million — today live outside Poland than within it.

Therefore, the WJRO contended, it better represents the interests of survivors than do the few Jews remaining in Poland.

However, some WJRO members went further, accusing the remaining Polish Jews of not being "real Jews" and of having "sold out" to Polish authorities.

In turn, Polish Jewish leaders accused the WJRO of trying to run roughshod over the local community.

Nevertheless, in recent years the two sides appeared to be implementing a 1997 agreement to create a foundation to research and submit claims, defend claims before state and local officials, own and manage reclaimed property or compensation, and allocate proceeds for the needs of Polish Jews in Poland and abroad.

Reclaimed property in 19 of 49 counties would have been retained and used by the local Jewish community, while properties or compensation in the other 30 counties would have been transferred to the new foundation for broader use.

The foundation board was to be composed of five representatives of the WJRO and five members of the local Jewish community, and chaired by American Jewish leader and cosmetics magnate Ronald Lauder.

The WJRO had pledged \$800,000 to the foundation to pay for researchers, lawyers and filing fees.

But the agreement collapsed last June, apparently when the WJRO announced it would withhold its funding unless the Union gave the WJRO complete oversight of every financial transaction.

Nearly 10 months later, the foundation exists only on paper, and has not even been registered by the Polish government.

With the WJRO and the Union in a standoff, Lauder stepped into the breach in March. He was quoted as criticizing the "internal bickering" of the WJRO, and reportedly established a body called the Polish Restitution Foundation, Inc. to fill the void.

However, Lauder did an abrupt about-face last week, ending his direct involvement without explanation. He could not be reached for comment.

The local Jewish leadership has pledged to go it alone if need be, even taking loans from Polish banks to cover research and administrative costs.

Still, the JDC hopes to mend fences.

While the Polish government may ultimately extend the deadline for filing claims, observers suggest the government may face domestic pressure from Polish groups who feel the Jews squandered a generous opportunity, and do not deserve another.

But an extension might not make much of a difference if the JDC fails to resolve the dispute.

"I don't think anyone wants to bank on what the Polish government may do," said one source close to the situation. "But that's not a solution anyway. So what if they extend it one more year? Would that only give the WJRO and the Union another year to argue?" □