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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Senior militant escapes attack

Israeli helicopters fired missiles Wednesday at two cars traveling in the Gaza Strip, killing a Hamas militant and wounding four other Palestinians.

Palestinians said the attack was aimed at senior Hamas militant Mohammed Deif, who was traveling in one of the cars.

Atop Israel's most wanted list for years, Deif is accused of masterminding several 1996 suicide bombings that killed dozens of Israelis.

Commandos kill 5 Palestinians

Israeli commandos killed two Palestinians who allegedly were planting a bomb, as well as three other Palestinians who later approached the bodies.

The incident occurred early Wednesday morning, when the commandos spotted three Palestinians who they said were trying to plant a bomb in the area of Shavei Shomron, an Israeli settlement near the West Bank city of Nablus. The commandos said the third man escaped after being wounded.

German preps for Mideast talks

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said he has been in touch with officials from the United States, Russia and the European Union as part of preparations for a meeting between Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat that is expected to take place in Berlin.

Peres confirmed Wednesday that he plans to meet with Arafat to discuss a cease-fire, but would not say when or where.

Slovakia to consider restitution

The Slovak government agreed to set up a joint commission with local Jewish leaders to consider compensation for property the Nazis confiscated from Slovak Jews.

Jewish leaders welcomed the move, saying they had been fighting for the creation of such a commission for more than two years.

Israel fires at Gaza police station

Israeli troops fired two missiles Wednesday at a Palestinian police station in a village in the Gaza Strip, wounding seven Palestinian policemen.

Israel said it fired the missiles after a Palestinian mortar attack on a nearby Israeli settlement.

With solidarity rally a month away, activists mobilizing Jewish masses

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Via planes, trains and automobiles, tens of thousands of Jews from across North America are expected to descend upon New York on Sept. 23 for the long-anticipated continental rally in support of Israel, organizers say.

Preparations for the rally have begun to gel, with speakers and sponsors spanning the religious and political spectrum, including Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The message will be one of solidarity with Israel, and a reminder to Washington, the United Nations and the rest of the world that Israel and Jews in the Diaspora are united.

Perhaps even more important, said the rally's honorary chairman, Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, is for Jews to stand together.

"Many of us have the feeling that we don't know where to go," Wiesel said Tuesday in a conference call with American Jewish media.

"We need to feel that we are not alone, that we are with other Jews, that we are with friends, that we are with Israel."

The federation world, led by the umbrella United Jewish Communities, first discussed the possibility of a large-scale rally back in March amid debate about the most effective way to use communal funds in showing solidarity with Israel.

The UJC tentatively planned a demonstration for June 4 at Madison Square Garden in New York, but canceled for what officials said was an inability to guarantee Sharon's presence — or his security.

"The situation has changed so dramatically since then, with a series of wake-up calls, that people need an avenue of expression," said Arthur Naporstek, vice president of the UJC's Israel and Overseas Pillar and national director of the Israel Now Solidarity Rally.

"Transcending our individual interests and differences is the centrality of Israel in people's lives, that Israel is being challenged, and the message that Jews are in Israel to stay," Naporstek said.

The UJC settled on Sept. 23 — in the middle of the High Holidays and one day before the U.N. General Assembly opens — as one element of its multi-pronged "Israel Now and Forever" campaign.

The rally is being described as the most significant for American Jewry since Dec. 6, 1987, when more than 200,000 American Jews marched on Washington to demand that Soviet Jews be allowed to emigrate.

In addition to Sharon, speakers from Israel will include Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg and perhaps Housing Minister Natan Sharansky; from New York, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Gov. George Pataki and U.S. Sens. Charles Schumer and Hillary Clinton; and from Washington, former vice presidential candidate Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), among many others.

Rally organizers say they chose New York over Washington because it is home to the largest Diaspora Jewish community and because the rally is not a protest against the Bush administration.

Besides, they said, they'd rather protest against the perceived anti-Israel bias at the United Nations, headquartered in New York.

Rally organizers brush off grumbling from those who suggest the event would make a stronger statement in Washington, and wonder whether the cost — an estimated \$900,000 to \$1.2 million — would be better spent on solidarity trips to Israel.

In addition, some Israelis, at least in e-mails making the rounds, have complained

MIDEAST FOCUS

Jerusalem pizzeria to rebuild

The management of a Jerusalem pizzeria gutted by a Palestinian suicide bomber earlier this month said they plan to renovate and reopen the restaurant.

"The Jerusalem Sbarro branch has a symbolic significance that goes beyond the commercial aspect, and we will do everything to rebuild the branch," a company spokesman said.

Fifteen people were killed and more than 130 wounded in the Aug. 9 suicide bombing.

Two police stations destroyed

An Israeli tank destroyed a police station in the West Bank town of Ramallah following a firefight between the army and Palestinian gunmen at the entrance to the nearby settlement of Pesagot.

In another incident Wednesday, Israeli forces destroyed a Palestinian police station near the West Bank town of Jenin after an exchange of fire.

Murdered infant's father arrested

The father of an infant killed earlier this year by Palestinian gunmen in Hebron was arrested Wednesday on suspicion of hitting an Israeli policeman, but was released after two hours, according to the Jerusalem Post.

Hebron's Jewish community issued a statement calling the arrest of Yitzhak Pass, father of Shalhevet Pass, "hard-hearted."

Arafat appeals to Arab ministers

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat told a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo that "it's high time to take a firmer Arab stand" against the Jewish state.

The daylong meeting, which Arafat requested last week, is the fifth such gathering of Arab foreign ministers since Palestinian violence erupted last September.



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of the perceived inaction of American Jewry. "If we got preoccupied with the cynics and the naysayers, we'd never get anything done," Naparstek said.

Once word went out that the rally's date was in stone, the community swung into action.

Through mail and fliers, e-mails and Web sites, newspaper and radio ads, Hillel is organizing its students, yeshivas are sending their young scholars, and synagogues of the four major streams — Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist — are mobilizing their congregants.

Organizers predict that up to 130 of the 189 federations and 100 of the 123 community relations councils nationwide will be represented at the rally.

"We're trying to tap the energy we know is out there, to make it a creative force in one place at one time," said Benita Gayle-Almeleh, the Jewish Council of Public Affairs' director of community relations and special projects.

Larger communities like Cleveland, Chicago, Atlanta and South Palm Beach County are chartering airplanes.

Federations have arranged a deal with Amtrak to shuttle in Jews from Washington and scoop up Jewish passengers from throughout the Northeast corridor — from Boston, down through Connecticut, into New York City.

A number of communities are offering partially subsidized trips, for up to \$100 off the normal fare.

Others are trying more creative approaches.

The Los Angeles community is luring larger donors with a "Jewish roots" trip to New York, to be coupled with the rally.

The Jews of Harrisburg, Pa., are arranging for "family, adult and youth buses" that will include food, videos and discussion about Israel, all for as low as \$10 a person.

If that's not reason enough to attend, participants will also receive a commemorative hat.

"They're really looking to make it a pleasurable trip," Gayle-Almeleh said.

For some, the trip will be grueling — but worth it, activists say.

The Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland hopes to send 500 to 1,000 members, marketing director Michael Bennett said.

One hundred seats have been reserved for a flight and 18 buses have been chartered for the eight-hour drive.

The group will leave late Saturday night, stop for breakfast outside New York City, attend the rally, and return to Cleveland Sunday night.

"We'll have to call our Jewish chiropractors and assign them to buses," Bennett joked.

Community delegations are being encouraged to arrive with a large banner indicating their hometown, as is done at Democratic and Republican political conventions.

The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago has chartered two 177-seat planes and hopes to send a contingent of 500 that will stick together at the rally, Executive Vice President Michael Kotzin said.

The federation is also trying to round up Chicagoans living in New York, such as university students, Kotzin said.

"We're doing this as a community, not simply as individuals, to show that we're a community that's part of a broader national community," he said.

Overall, Gayle-Almeleh predicted that some 65,000 people may turn out, though circumstances may draw even larger numbers.

"The likelihood of there being a precipitating event, of something happening that would attract others who ordinarily may have made other plans, is strong, given the climate in the Middle East," Gayle-Almeleh said. "Quiet, it's not."

Exactly how many Jews turn out Sept. 23 ultimately may determine whether the rally is deemed a success.

As Wiesel acknowledged, with 3 million Jews in New York and 6 million nationwide, a poor turnout would be "a mark of shame" for the community.

Moreover, he said, a poor turnout could be used as propaganda against Israel, intended to show that American Jews don't care about the fate of the Jewish state.

"I will not be satisfied with 50,000 or even 100,000," Wiesel said. "We must concentrate our efforts to give Israel strength, because Israel gives us hope." □

JEWISH WORLD

Slovak Jews' appeal to be heard

A German court plans to hear an appeal next February filed by Slovakia's Jewish leaders.

The move comes after Slovak Jews lost a multi-million-dollar lawsuit last March in which they claimed compensation for Slovak victims of the Holocaust. Slovakia's Jewish community is seeking up to \$63 million for payments the wartime pro-Nazi Slovak state made to the Third Reich to transport more than 57,000 Slovak Jews to death camps.

Wash. Post called too pro-Israel

A handful of people protested Tuesday outside the editorial offices of The Washington Post. The protesters accused the paper of having a pro-Israel bias and of running more Op-Ed pieces that were pro-Israel than pro-Palestinian.

During the last week, three prominent columnists appearing in the paper suggested that Israel use more military force against the Palestinians.

German leader visits Czech shul

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder visited a new synagogue in the Czech town of Liberec that was built on the site of one burnt down by the Nazis.

Schroeder said the synagogue is a symbol of hope for a life of peace without ethnic or religious hatred.

Yeshiva students get free ride

Subway officials in New York extended free student-pass hours until 10:30 p.m. for yeshiva students who attend classes late in the evening.

Most student passes are only good through 8:30 p.m., and some yeshiva students had been arrested for jumping subway turnstiles when their passes didn't work after late classes, according to a spokeswoman for New York Assemblyman Dov Hikind.

Free Braille prayer books offered

The Jewish Heritage for the Blind is offering large-print and Braille editions of its High Holiday prayer book. Those interested in obtaining a prayer book should send a doctor's note to: The Jewish Heritage for the Blind, 1655 E. 24th St., Brooklyn, NY 11229; send a fax to either 718-338-0653 or 877-230-2205 (a toll-free number); or send an e-mail to jhb.ny@operamail.com.

Estonia offered Nazi-hunting help

An official with the Simon Wiesenthal Center presented Estonia's prime minister with evidence against Harry Mannil, a suspected Nazi war criminal living in Venezuela. During his meeting Wednesday in Estonia with Prime Minister Mart Laar, Efraim Zuroff also offered to help Estonia's new investigations unit deal with suspected Nazi collaborators.

OBITUARY

Peter Bergson, who worked for European Jews, dies in Israel at 86

By Daniel Fleishman

NEW YORK (JTA) — Peter Bergson, who raised awareness in the United States of the Holocaust in the 1940s, has died at the age of 86.

Bergson died Saturday at his home in a Tel Aviv suburb.

Known in Israel as Hillel Kook, his birth and Hebrew name, Bergson was born in Lithuania in 1915.

At the age of 10, he immigrated to Palestine with his family.

A lifetime of activism began a few years later when he joined the Irgun, the armed Jewish underground movement.

In 1937, he went to Poland to help smuggle Jews into Palestine.

Bergson came to the United States in 1940. Two years later, his efforts were almost entirely focused on increasing awareness of the genocide — which to that point had received little if no attention in the U.S. media — through advertisements, rallies and plays.

Bergson co-founded the Emergency Committee to Save the Jews in Europe in 1943. His causes piqued the interest of eminent actors such as Edward G. Robinson, Marlon Brando and Stella Adler, who toured the United States performing in the plays and appearing at the rallies.

"If you want to call him a hero of the Holocaust, he certainly deserves it," said Henry Feingold, a professor of American Jewish history at the City University of New York. "He was the first to make that story known. He broke through the curtain of silence."

Some credit Bergson's work for impelling the U.S. government's decision to create the War Refugee Board in 1944, the first federal organization to deal with the perilous position of European Jews.

"He was a master of public relations at a very young age," his daughter, Rebecca Kook, a political science professor at Ben-Gurion University in Israel, told The New York Times.

"In many ways, he established what many consider to be the first example of a real political lobby in Washington."

After considerable success in the United States, Bergson returned to Palestine in 1948 and reverted to his birth name, which he had changed in order to shield his family from his political activism.

He was elected to the nascent state's assembly as a member of Menachem Begin's Herut Party when Israel declared independence, but later resigned and left the country in protest when Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's promise of a constitution within one year was not delivered.

Bergson returned to the United States in 1951 with his wife, Betty, and worked for nearly 20 years as a Wall Street stockbroker.

His wife died in 1964, and Bergson became involved in politics once again in Israel in 1970, when he fought for a constitution that would draw a clear line between religion and government.

Israel still has no constitution.

Bergson is survived by Nili Haskell, whom he married in 1975, two daughters and three grandchildren. □

Alleged war criminal to get second opinion

LONDON (JTA) — Scotland said it would seek a second opinion on whether a suspected Nazi war criminal can stand trial.

A first report on Anton Gecas, accused of participating in the killing of Jews and other civilians in what is now Belarus, found that he is too ill to stand trial, London's Jewish Chronicle recently reported.

Gecas, 85, suffered two strokes earlier this year and has been hospitalized since May. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**With racism forum set to begin,
Jewish leaders brace for the worst***By Michael J. Jordan*

NEW YORK (JTA) — To go, or not to go?

That remains the question for the Bush administration less than two weeks before the U.N. World Conference Against Racism begins in Durban, South Africa.

Within the Jewish community, too, the question is stirring debate.

Jewish activists assume that Israel will be singled out for harsh criticism at the conference, and are divided as to whether U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell should attend, boycott and send a lower-level delegation, or withhold all U.S. representation.

The State Department is expected to announce a decision within days. Its verdict may determine if the conference — to run from Aug. 31 to Sept. 7 — ultimately succeeds or fails.

Powell indeed is the linchpin, analysts say: His appearance would give the proceedings a stamp of credibility, while his absence would indicate that the world's lone superpower believes Arab and Muslim efforts to turn the meeting into an anti-Israel vehicle have robbed the conference of its seriousness.

To enable Powell to attend, U.S. officials continue to work behind the scenes to remove from the conference agenda the anti-Israel vitriol and a proposed discussion of slavery reparations, according to a State Department official.

"We're talking to every country we think could be helpful," the source told JTA.

Early this week, the odds seemed to indicate that Powell would not go to Durban but would send a lower-level delegation.

Regardless, Jewish activists on their way to Durban to monitor the proceedings are resigned to the likelihood that Israel will take a rhetorical beating.

In the U.N. system of democracy, which bestows one vote per country, the huge Arab-Muslim bloc easily can dictate meeting agendas and wording of resolutions, analysts say.

Among the broadsides expected in Durban, conference participants may: denigrate Zionism as racism; accuse Israel of being an apartheid state; exclude anti-Semitism from the various forms of racism; minimize the Holocaust as merely one of many instances of genocide rather than a unique event; and equate the suffering of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with that of Jews under the Nazis.

Activists also are bracing for anti-Israel demonstrations. For example, some 10,000 Muslim South Africans reportedly protested against Israel in Cape Town on Tuesday, some holding signs comparing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to Hitler.

"We're going there with our eyes wide open, knowing that the next two weeks won't be a picnic," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, an observer of numerous U.N. preparatory meetings.

While most Jewish activists are pessimistic about the conference, the Reform movement's Religious Action Center wants Powell to attend — "as long as the possibility exists that the noxious language might be removed, or modified in a way which would make it acceptable," RAC Director Rabbi David Saperstein wrote in an Aug. 16 letter to Powell.

At a news conference Tuesday, Richard Heideman, president of B'nai B'rith International, and Amy Goldstein, director of Israel,

Zionist and International affairs for Hadassah: The Women's Zionist Organization of America, said they hope the United States will send a senior delegation to Durban, but the decision is up to the Bush administration.

If Bush decides that it's appropriate to send Powell, that would be "terrific," Heideman said. But the two said the delegation should walk out of the conference, if necessary, over anti-Israel language.

But activists like Cooper who are familiar with the workings of international conferences say that the proposed declarations are "95 percent" set in stone before the dignitaries touch down on the tarmac.

There was a flicker of hope last week that, from Israel's perspective, the conference could be salvaged. A South African official — whose country, as host, has a vested interest in the conference's success — proclaimed that a compromise had been reached and "Zionism equals racism" was off the agenda.

But American Jewish activists rejected the notion.

What anti-Israel states actually had done at the final preparatory meeting in Geneva earlier this month, the Jewish activists asserted, was to present cosmetic alterations that merely substituted the term "occupying power" for "Zionism."

The intent remained the same, however — to single out Israel as the most egregious practitioner of racism in the world.

"'Occupying power' is written in a way that it is a direct and exclusive reference to Israel; it can be interpreted in no other way, and was written for no other purpose," said Jason Isaacson, director of government and international relations for the American Jewish Committee. "It is not a compromise at all; it is subterfuge."

In fact, Jewish activists say, they left the Geneva meetings with a sense that Israel's fate at the Durban conference was sealed.

In a private meeting with Jewish groups in Geneva, U.N. Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, under whose purview the conference falls, is said to have implied that she supports efforts to remove the harshest anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic language.

At the same time, Robinson — whom pro-Israel advocates long have accused of hostility toward the Jewish state — also indicated her belief that the conference must address Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

"We tried to explain that in a conference about racism, to mention only one country implies that country is the worst offender in the world," said Stacy Burdett, the Anti-Defamation League's associate director of government affairs.

On the other hand, Jewish leaders across the board have praised the Bush administration for its "principled" stance.

The Anti-Defamation League has called on Washington to boycott the conference outright. If Powell does not attend, other Jewish groups, including the Religious Action Center, hope that Washington will send at least a lower-level delegation.

"You don't want to legitimate what's going on, but you also don't want to leave the battlefield defenseless," said Dina Siegal Vann, director for Latin American and U.N. affairs for B'nai B'rith International.

B'nai B'rith and others would want the American delegation to try to tone down the language. If that fails, they hope, the American delegation will either denounce the declaration, walk out in protest or both.

If Washington takes such a stand, the activists say, they hope other allies will follow suit. □

(JTA correspondent Matthew E. Berger in Washington contributed to this report.)