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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Cease-fire parley might be on

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat both said a proposed cease-fire meeting could take place soon.

Peres told diplomats that "preparations are on" for a meeting, but that he prefers to have it in an isolated setting, not on the sidelines of an economics conference in Italy.

An adviser to Arafat was quoted as saying the meeting could be held as early as next week.

Meanwhile, Russia is sending an envoy to the Middle East as it intensifies its efforts to broker a cease-fire aimed at ending nearly a year of Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement Wednesday came as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon continued his three-day trip to Moscow.

'Iran 9' want out for Yom Kippur

Nine Iranian Jews convicted of spying for Israel want to be temporarily freed from prison to commemorate Yom Kippur.

The nine, who are serving sentences ranging from two to nine years, have been seeking a pardon from Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader.

Labor Party vote halted

Vote counting in elections for chairman of Israel's Labor Party was halted after one of the candidates claimed fraud.

Current Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, who was unofficially trailing Knesset speaker Avraham Burg by 50.1 percent to 48.6 percent with 95 percent of the vote counted, said he would appeal to legal channels to determine the outcome of the vote. [Page 3]

Vatican archives battle rages

The Jewish members of a Jewish-Catholic team formed to study the Vatican's behavior during World War II criticized a leading cardinal's attacks on them as "inflammatory" and "totally unjustified" and renewed calls to open Vatican archives on the period.

The scholars responded Tuesday to a document issued Aug. 24 by Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. Kasper accused them of "indiscretion and polemical remarks in the press" that fomented "distrust" and made research "impossible to continue."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

As racism forum enters last days, anti-Israel sentiment appears to wane

By Michael J. Jordan

DURBAN, South Africa (JTA) — Some of the non-Jewish groups at the U.N. World Conference Against Racism that looked on as Israel was labeled a "racist, apartheid" state now are lining up to denounce the declaration as deeply flawed and anti-Semitic.

And perhaps in response to mounting criticism that they went too far, the Palestinian and other Arab caucuses released a statement Wednesday in which they seemed to backtrack from the harshest language in the declaration.

The conference ends Friday, and its success is very much in doubt following the walkout earlier this week by the American and Israeli delegations and the Jewish caucus.

Because of that, it appeared Wednesday that the anti-Israel tide was turning somewhat. But it still was considered likely that a final declaration would cite deep concerns about Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

Sources speculated that the apparent Arab retreat was an effort to seek compromise language for a final declaration of the governmental portion of the U.N. conference.

The harshest condemnations of Israel appeared in a document approved over the weekend by nongovernmental organizations that met before the governmental conference began.

France appeared to be pressing for such a compromise Wednesday, when a French Cabinet member quoted Prime Minister Lionel Jospin as saying that France and its European partners might withdraw from the conference if a declaration labeling Israel as racist were not dropped.

Canadian Foreign Minister John Manley also left the conference in protest. Lower-level Canadian delegates are remaining in Durban to try to ameliorate draft language that is "absolutely unacceptable to us," Multiculturalism Minister Hedy Fry said.

On Tuesday, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, whom Jewish leaders and activists say has done little to silence the anti-Israel and anti-Jewish vitriol here, said she was so "distressed and disturbed" by the NGO document that she could not recommend it to the governmental delegates hammering out their own declaration.

In particular, Robinson said it was unacceptable to accuse Israel of genocide.

Toward the end of the day Wednesday, the Palestinian and Arab caucuses released a statement saying they were "shocked and dismayed" by Robinson's refusal to recommend the NGO declaration.

"Mrs. Robinson has rejected the voices of all the victims of racism and the thousands of delegates who were present at the NGO Forum," the press release read.

The caucuses also sought to clarify — and seemingly tone down — the NGOs' charges that Israel is guilty, for example, of "genocide."

Instead, the Arab groups said, Israel should be accused of "acts of genocide" related to the 1982 massacre of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps during the Lebanon War. The massacres were carried out by Lebanese Christian militias allied to Israel.

The press release also condemned "in the strongest terms any and all anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish materials, including any that may have been circulated at the conference. Those materials that condemn the State of Israel for its systematic violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, or condemn those racist practices

MIDEAST FOCUS

Suspected terrorists arrested

Israel arrested four Israeli Arabs suspected of planting a bomb at a soldiers' hitchhiking post in the Galilee, the Jerusalem Post reported. An alert soldier raised the alarm after spotting a suspicious bag near the post last Friday.

The four suspects, who reportedly were recruited by a Palestinian militia from the West Bank city of Jenin, admitted that they also planned to kidnap and murder soldiers, according to Israel's Army Radio.

And Israel arrested six Palestinians from Jerusalem who allegedly belong to a terrorist cell believed to be responsible for a number of bombings in the Israeli capital.

Israel fires at Palestinian HQ

Israel fired missiles at Palestinian security headquarters in the Gaza Strip. Wednesday's attack came in response to Palestinian mortar attacks in Gaza that landed near Israeli settlements, the Israeli military said.

Mubarak wants new spy trial

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak overturned the acquittal of a man accused of spying for Israel and ordered a retrial. A trial date of Sept. 19 was set for Sherif Filali, an Egyptian engineer accused of trying to gather military information for the Jewish state. Israel has denied any involvement in the case.

Envoy: Israel should lower taxes

The U.S. ambassador to Israel said high taxes could harm overseas venture capital investment in the Jewish state.

Daniel Kurtzer, who came to Israel this year after several other Middle East postings, told the Israel-America Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday that the ongoing violence also makes Israel less desirable for investment.



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conducted in the name of Zionism, are not anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish."

According to one Arab activist here, Jamil Dakwar, an Israeli Arab lawyer with Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, "The statement is to make it clear that the Palestinian NGOs' position is well-based on international law and norms, and that the victims of racism should not be blamed for any failure of this conference.

"According to international law, it's not accurate to use the term genocide with regard to the reality of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the suffering of the Palestinian people," Dakwar told JTA. "Accuracy is important so as to not undermine other genocides, such as the Armenians, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and the horrors of the Holocaust."

It's not clear why so many non-Jewish groups waited nearly four full days to dissociate themselves from the NGO declaration indicting Israel for "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing."

They blame the confusion prevalent during the conference, and say they worried that publicly disavowing the declaration might undermine a resolution whose other portions were well-intentioned.

In the end, though, a growing number of NGO representatives now say they are obliged to distance themselves from the declaration because the anti-Jewish section flew in the face of the conference's declared aim — to extinguish racism.

While expressing concern for "abuses" Israel allegedly has committed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, they say the language used was inaccurate and inflammatory.

On Wednesday, the head of one caucus, the Asian and Asian Descendants Caucus, took the extraordinary step of confessing that amid the chaos of the late-night approval session — during which the Jewish caucus walked out in protest — she inadvertently voted to strike the passage Jewish activists had inserted that identified anti-Zionism as a virulent new form of anti-Semitism.

"I found to my embarrassment and dismay that I had mistakenly voted" for the motion, said Karen Narasaki of the United States, president and executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium.

At the same news conference Wednesday, several groups, led by a key Washington-based coalition of multicultural groups, also spoke out against the "fervent rhetorical attacks" on Israel.

Without mentioning the groups responsible, they rued the fact that media coverage of the Palestinian question had drowned out virtually all other issues at the conference.

While much of the NGO declaration's language is valid and crucial for fighting racism, some of it "clearly crosses the line into elements of anti-Semitism, which we believe is totally unacceptable," said Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. "We think it's extremely important for the NGO community to stand up and make clear where it stands on these issues."

Jewish activists were encouraged by the statements.

"We're very pleased to hear them speak out and are very proud that they are our coalition partners," said Reva Price, Washington representative of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. "The heartfelt emotion and understanding of our issues is very gratifying. It's tragic that the issues that they've come to talk about in Durban have not gotten the same attention as the Middle East and Israel."

The Eastern and Central Europe Caucus weighed in later Wednesday afternoon, saying it could not endorse the NGO declaration, which was generated by a process that had been "hijacked" and was "neither democratic or transparent."

Indeed, final approval of Saturday's NGO declaration came nearly six hours into the meeting, at 1:30 a.m., with only 100 delegates from the 8,000 who attended the conference reportedly ratifying it with applause. Representatives of the Eastern and Central Europe Caucus said Wednesday that a petition they are circulating opposing the NGO declaration has attracted signatures from 77 groups so far.

"We must emphasize that the language of the chapter 'Palestinians and Palestine,' as well as the deliberate distortions made to the chapter 'Anti-Semitism,' is extremely intolerant, disrespectful and contrary to the very spirit" of the conference, said caucus head Yuri Dzhibladze, president of the Center for Development of Democracy and Human Rights in Russia. □

(JTA correspondent Bill Gladstone in Toronto contributed to this report.)

JEWISH WORLD

S. African doctor beaten

A Jewish doctor in South Africa was beaten by a group of men wearing kaffiyehs and chanting anti-Jewish slogans, but will not press charges, according to Israeli news reports.

Police said it was the third time the doctor, who was reported to be in satisfactory condition, had been attacked.

The attack comes amid anti-Israel and anti-Semitic demonstrations at the U.N. World Conference Against Racism taking place in Durban, South Africa.

Vichy official loses ruling

The property of a former Vichy France official jailed for war crimes must be sold off to pay the legal fees of Jewish victims seeking damages from him.

A judge ruled Tuesday that Maurice Papon fraudulently claimed bankruptcy in order to stop the lawsuits against him. Papon, 91, was found guilty of helping deport some 1,500 Jews to Nazi death camps during World War II, when he was the second-ranking official in the area for the pro-Nazi Vichy regime.

Huge card unveiled at Israel rally

A teen-age survivor of the June 1 disco bombing in Israel spoke at a pro-Israel event in New York.

At Wednesday's demonstration, the world's largest Rosh Hashanah greeting card also was unveiled.

The 6,400-square foot, 1,000-pound card is the largest greeting card ever assembled, but the Guinness Book of World Records is not recognizing the card because of the way it was assembled.

Jews help rebuild Kosovo mosque

A war-damaged mosque repaired and rebuilt with funds from Jewish, Catholic and Muslim sources will be dedicated Friday in the village of Shqiponje, Kosovo.

"The rededication marks an important milestone in Kosovo's inter-religious affairs," said Eli Eliezri, the representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Kosovo.

Spielberg opts for shul over fest

Filmmaker Steven Spielberg will skip the upcoming Venice Film Festival to attend his son's Bar Mitzvah.

Spielberg sent a video to be shown at the festival, where his most recent film, "A.I.," is slated to be screened.

Meanwhile, a film about two American Zionists who emigrate to Palestine in the 1940s is also being shown at the festival.

"Eden," directed by Israeli Amos Gitai, is based on a novel by Arthur Miller.

Burg has lead in Labor primaries, but Ben-Eliezer demands recount

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In a scene evoking the turmoil of last year's U.S. presidential vote in Florida, Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer is pledging to go to the courts to contest the outcome of this week's Labor Party primary.

Ben-Eliezer made the remarks following a tight race Tuesday against Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg. Final unofficial results showed Burg ahead by 1,088 votes of the 60,000 cast, giving him 50.1 percent of the vote to Ben-Eliezer's 48.6 percent.

At a news conference Wednesday, Ben-Eliezer claimed there was widespread fraud in voting in the Druse sector. He called on Burg to agree to the appointment of a committee headed by a retired judge to determine the outcome of the vote.

The vote is "one of the gravest political scandals in our political history," Ben-Eliezer told a news conference.

"This is a theft. This is a theft," he continued. "This is not South America; this is Israel."

The Burg campaign opposed Ben-Eliezer's demand for an inquiry, and called for Burg to be recognized as the winner.

"It is too bad the defense minister is prepared to do anything within his power to alter the decision of the voters, even at the price of the Labor Party," Burg's camp said.

Labor's election committee was meeting Wednesday to discuss Ben-Eliezer's petition for a recount. Attorney Ram Caspi, who represents Ben-Eliezer, said that according to party rules a declaration of the winner should be delayed by 48 hours until a hearing on the appeal has taken place, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

Ben-Eliezer's main complaint concerns eight ballot boxes in Druse communities. On Wednesday afternoon, the head of Labor's election committee, Effi Shtensler, announced that results from one polling station had been disqualified, the Jerusalem Post reported, but it was not clear how this would affect the results.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported that votes in 14 disputed ballot boxes had been recounted, and their results certified.

The winner of the primary is expected to set the tone for Labor's efforts to rehabilitate itself before the next election, scheduled for November 2003.

The Iraqi-born Ben-Eliezer, 65, is a long-time party member and relative hawk, who is considered close to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Barak endorsed Ben-Eliezer in the party primary.

The Jerusalem-born Burg, 46, is a former chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, a modern Orthodox Jew and a relative dove. □

Italian soccer team sets goal of tolerance

ROME (JTA) — An Italian soccer team with a history of racist and anti-Semitic fans is working to replace that image with one of unity.

The Lazio team of Rome joined Israel's Maccabi Haifa and Asec Mimosas of the Ivory Coast Monday in the Shalom Cup, a tournament aimed at combating racism.

Lazio's participation in the high-profile match demonstrates "a commitment that we want to carry forward on a long-term basis," said Sergio Cragnotti, the club's president. "Fighting against racism and violence must be a lesson for everyone, beginning with young people."

In recent years, Lazio fans have come under fire for using racist and anti-Semitic slogans against opposing teams. Three groups of Lazio fans boycotted the Shalom Cup, calling it "improbable" and "anachronistic."

Only some 8,000 people attended the Shalom Cup, but a large banner reading "Racism Is Disgusting" dominated the stands.

"Even if it is acting late after years of guilty tolerance of its militant fans, Lazio has recently been doing everything to make up for lost time," wrote Stefano Boldrini in the La Gazzetta dello Sport newspaper.

Lazio members have also made visits to Jewish schools, donned T-shirts with anti-racism slogans and spoken out against militant fans. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Stem cell decision could mean funding for Technion scientists

By Jessica Steinberg

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As Congress debates the ethics of federal funding for stem cell research, scientists at the Technion — Israel Institute of Technology hope some of the money will be headed their way.

Federal funding would be a potential boon for Technion researchers, who have spent three years studying the beneficial stem cells, the building blocks for all human tissue.

“Our biggest problem in Israel is funding for the basic research,” said Dr. Lior Gepstein, a cardiologist on the Technion research team. “If NIH will help and if there’s more work done worldwide, we have a bigger chance for discovering something than if it’s just Lior in the Technion.”

NIH, the National Institutes of Health, identified 64 stem cell lines in Israel, the United States, Australia, India and Sweden that met President Bush’s criteria of developing colonies of existing human embryonic stem cells.

Israel is at the back of the pack, with four identified stem cell lines.

Embryonic stem cells have a unique ability to renew themselves and develop into specialized cell types in the body. Scientists hope to use them to produce healthy tissue for people with debilitating diseases such as Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and diabetes.

At the Technion in Haifa, Israeli scientists have been researching stem cell applications for curing diabetes and heart disease.

Dr. Karl Skorecki, a nephrologist who directs the Rappaport Family Institute for Medical Research at Technion, has been working on developing stem cells to replace pancreatic cells that produce insulin, which diabetics lack.

In July, Skorecki’s team announced that the stem cells they had been growing in a petri dish displayed characteristics of the beta cells of the pancreas.

Now his research team needs to develop the requisite number of beta cells and ensure they don’t “poop out” while growing, he said.

He credits Dr. Joseph Itskovits, a Technion faculty member who launched Israel’s stem-cell research program, for first generating the embryonic stem cells as the “raw material” necessary to the research.

Itskovits and his team of researchers began studying stem cells in 1998, in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin.

The scientists developed embryonic stem cells in mice and began looking into possible applications, Itskovits told JTA. They first used the stem cells on rats with spinal injuries, helping them partially recover from paralysis.

They then created beta stem cells that produce insulin and injected them into diabetic lab rats to help reduce their hypoglycemia.

Another team of Technion scientists at the Cardiovascular Research Laboratory succeeded in growing heart cells from stem cells that have electric and mechanical characteristics of young heart tissue.

The heart cells could help cure patients who suffer from clogged arteries that lead to heart attacks by reducing the blood supply.

“The most interesting area to us is being able to regenerate

heart cells in adults,” said Gepstein, who participated in the research.

“When the stem cells adjust into the heart, we hope it will integrate with the host tissue and survive and improve cardiac function,” Gepstein said. “There’s a lot of ifs, so research is the first step.”

With 5 million people in the United States suffering from heart failure — and half a million new cases each year — there is a significant market for treating heart disease.

Heart transplants are one possibility, but most patients aren’t candidates, given the limited number of donors and matching genetic characteristics.

In both efforts, several more years of research are needed to determine whether the new cells would survive long enough to work effectively, and how to prevent the body from rejecting them.

At present, the Technion heart research team uses embryonic stem cells that have a self-renewing capacity — that is, they can theoretically generate an indefinite number of new stem cells.

In order to move the research forward, the scientists have to find ways to create more heart tissue and select only heart cells. Once that’s done, they will transplant the heart cells in animals and see if the new tissue replaces the nonfunctioning tissue.

The last hurdle would be testing the immune system’s reaction and possible rejection of the tissue. The key is to generate a number of stem cell lines with genetic variability.

It’s a similar process with Skorecki’s diabetes research. While the stem cells growing in petri dishes display genes characteristic of the beta cells of the pancreas, they now need to be “purified” to be useful.

There also must be enough of them — roughly 100 million — to replace a diabetic’s missing cells.

Both Technion teams face long research processes that may never succeed, the scientists cautioned. But federal funding from the United States would allow other research groups to compete, fueling intense global activity and progress, Skorecki said.

“The more labs, the better,” he said. “We’re going to make every effort possible to maintain a lead role in this research by attracting funding from all sources: Israel, the U.S., private industry. Wherever we can get resources, we’ll take them.”

U.S. funding would also make their lives “more comfortable regarding ethical issues,” Itskovits added.

Stem cells come from discarded human embryos, a sticking point for right-to-lifers. From Israel’s standpoint, Jewish law allows embryos to be destroyed if the research has the potential to save lives. Moreover, the embryos used are surplus eggs from in-vitro fertilization for infertile couples — in other words, frozen embryos that have never been in a uterus, said Skorecki, who is an observant Jew.

“People don’t remember that distinction,” he said.

At the Technion, the issue of embryo origins has never been problematic.

“Obviously it’s always been a sensitive issue and we’ve taken that into account,” Itskovits said. “We don’t act in a vacuum — we always needed proper consent forms, showing that we were using proper embryos.”

Nevertheless, while the Bush decision has dampened the ethical issues for now, the possibility of Technion being included in the NIH research is still “very preliminary,” Itskovits noted.

“We’re really happy to have the chance of doing our work in Israel with approval from the U.S.,” he said. “And it will certainly help research to have federal, local or business funding.” □