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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S., Israel spar over killings

The United States criticized Israel's renewed policy of killing the alleged leaders of Palestinian terror groups before they can carry out attacks on the Jewish state.

But Israel brushed off the criticism, equating its policy of killing Palestinian terrorists to Washington's goal of seizing suspected terrorist leader Osama bin Laden dead or alive.

U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher rejected the equation, saying Monday that while Israel's policy and the U.S. hunt for bin Laden might be similar, "that doesn't mean the two situations are comparable or require the same response."

Lawmaker backs Saudi prince

A letter from Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.) to Saudi Arabia's Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, in which the lawmaker said New York City should have accepted \$10 million from him despite his comments blaming the U.S.-Israeli relationship for the Sept. 11 attacks, has sparked outrage from the Jewish community in Atlanta.

McKinney said U.S. priorities in the Middle East should be re-examined, and that the donation could be sent to aid blacks in America.

Israeli's remains found at WTC

A body extracted from the rubble of the World Trade Center has been identified as an Israeli. Shai Levinhar, 29, worked for the bond trading firm Cantor Fitzgerald on the 103rd floor of one of the Twin Towers.

Levinhar's widow, Liat, who worked for the Israel Economic Mission in New York, recently returned to Israel with her 10-week-old daughter, Sapir.

Militant killed in Gaza blast

Israel said it knew nothing about an explosion in the Gaza Strip that killed a Palestinian militant. Iyad Ahras, 28, was reputedly a member of the Popular Resistance Committee, a group of gunmen from various Palestinian factions who frequently battled with Israeli soldiers stationed in southern Gaza.

Palestinian security officials said they were investigating the explosion, which could have been a "work accident" that took place while Ahras was preparing a bomb for an Israeli target.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sharon coalition threatened after party bolts government

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — His voice thick with sarcasm, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon accused the seven members of the hawkish National Unity bloc of "making Arafat's day" with their decision to quit Sharon's national unity government.

Addressing the opening session of the Knesset's winter term Monday, the prime minister faced rumblings from his supporters and among pundits that the first defection from his coalition could spell the beginning of the end for his eight-month-old administration.

Veteran politicians already are predicting elections next April instead of in November 2003, when they are currently scheduled.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat was having a good day Monday even before the seven members of the far-right bloc — which includes two parties, National Unity and Israel Our Home — walked out on Sharon.

Arafat was being hosted in London by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who voiced his support for the creation of a "viable Palestinian state."

With Blair applauding Arafat's "effort to control violent rejectionist groups within the ranks of the Palestinian people," the Palestinian leader basked in the West's appreciation for his decision to back the American-led anti-terror coalition.

Given the overwhelming sentiment on the Palestinian street against the American and British campaign in Afghanistan — a Bir Zeit University poll last week found some 90 percent opposed — Arafat's decision is bold, but clear-headed.

Arafat knows that if he makes the same mistake as in 1991, when he threw his support behind Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf War, he might not survive America's wrath this time.

As it is, Arafat is hoping for a quick return on his investment: He told Blair that he needs to show his people good practical reasons for backing the U.S.-led coalition.

So far, Arafat can point to a series of public assurances from President Bush, Blair and, on Tuesday, Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok, all supporting the creation of a Palestinian state.

Arafat also has assurances that the United States is determined to weigh in with a new peace plan and get the Palestinians and Israelis to sit down and negotiate again.

For his part, Arafat has begun making a limited number of arrests of Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants — though far fewer than the 108 Israel wants him to nab. Israel claims the six or eight operatives arrested are being held in comfortable conditions that essentially shield them from Israeli reprisals.

Just the same, the level of violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has dropped markedly in the past week, which Arafat attributes to his new measures.

Sharon's sarcastic reference to Arafat in his bitter attack on the National Unity bloc was very much related to Arafat's newfound popularity in the West.

The bloc quit the national unity government Monday, complaining that Sharon was succumbing to U.S. efforts to prod him toward a peace deal with the Palestinians.

The immediate catalyst was Monday's withdrawal of Israel Defense Force troops from Palestinian-controlled areas in the West Bank city of Hebron. Ten days earlier, Israel seized two hilltops in Hebron after Palestinian gunmen repeatedly fired from them at Jewish neighborhoods in the center of town.

Over the weekend, Israel's Inner Security Cabinet decided to accept Palestinian assurances that the shooting would cease. The decision came despite vehement protests

MIDEAST FOCUS

Rice speaks to Al Jazeera

The United States will not back away from its Mideast policies while trying to build Arab support for an international anti-terror coalition, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said in an interview Monday with Qatar-based Al Jazeera TV.

"We believe that the policies that the United States is pursuing are ones that are good for the Middle East as a whole — populations that are Arab populations, as well as the population of Israel," she said.

The interview was part of an administration effort to cast America in a better light abroad, particularly among Muslims outraged at the week-old air war against Osama bin Laden and his Taliban protectors.

Israel may sue over air crash

Israel's attorney general convened a committee Monday to consider whether Israel can sue Ukraine for compensation for the victims of the Sibir Airlines flight that went down in the Black Sea on Oct. 4.

Elyakim Rubinstein convened the panel one day after Ukraine's president another that a missile fired during Ukrainian military exercises most likely caused the explosion that brought down the flight, killing 78 people, including 66 Israelis.

On Saturday, Ukraine's defense minister, Olexander Kuzmuk, issued an apology for the incident. The committee is studying international legal precedents as it prepares the case, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

IDF, U.S. officials meet in D.C.

Israeli Defense Force officials are holding security meetings with U.S. officials in Washington as part of longstanding cooperation between the two countries, an Israeli spokesman said.

Counterterrorism issues are expected to be highlighted at the sessions.



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from the city's 450 or so Jewish residents, who fear for their safety after the Israeli withdrawal. The National Unity bloc move followed an unprecedented act of public protest by the IDF chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, who published an official statement opposing the Hebron withdrawal.

Sharon and Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer considered firing Mofaz, but instead Ben-Eliezer reprimanded Mofaz and ordered him not to grant interviews until further notice. Mofaz also issued a public apology for his criticism.

Some here tried to link the incidents involving Mofaz and the National Unity bloc to Benjamin Netanyahu, the former prime minister who is campaigning against Sharon for the leadership of the right. Mofaz is scheduled to retire in April and many see his recent behavior as evidence of his desire to enter politics, perhaps as Netanyahu's candidate for defense minister. Sharon himself, at a Cabinet meeting, implied that Mofaz's move could be seen in that light.

Netanyahu vehemently denies any involvement in either the Mofaz debacle or the National Unity defection.

The pundits note, though, that the leader of the Israel Our Home Party — Avigdor Lieberman — is a former senior aide to Netanyahu who has remained close to the former premier.

When he resigned as infrastructure minister — along with Rehavam Ze'evi, who gave up the tourism portfolio — Lieberman said he was concerned about the anticipated U.S. peace initiative and Bush's expression of support for a Palestinian state.

"The great challenge before the State of Israel is how can we stymie this American initiative," Lieberman said Monday.

National Unity's resignation left Sharon in control of 76 of the Knesset's 120 seats. It would take 61 votes to force new elections.

But the balance of power now rests with the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, which has 17 seats and has proven a notoriously fickle ally in previous governments.

Shas legislators this week said they intend to make vigorous use of their new leverage.

With economists predicting a negative growth rate for the Israeli economy this year, Shas, which represents a working-class constituency, can be expected to press for social welfare legislation that runs counter to the government's tight fiscal policies.

It's unclear whether Shas also will try to press other aspects of its agenda — such as legislation curtailing religious pluralism — that in the past have proven highly divisive. But Sharon's primary worry is the knowledge that Shas will be vying for voters' sympathies against parties in the opposition — including National Unity and the National Religious Party — and therefore will be prone to pressures from the right.

The same logic applies to another, smaller, coalition partner, Natan Sharansky's Yisrael Ba'Aliyah Party.

This party competes for Russian immigrant votes with Lieberman's Israel Our Home, and likely will find itself attacked from the right for supporting policies perceived as too conciliatory toward the Palestinians.

Yet if in responding to these pressures, Sharon moves too far to the right, he could trigger a crisis in his uneasy partnership with Labor. Labor too is subject to incessant sniping from the dovish opposition party, Meretz, and is divided over its role as Sharon's partner.

Last week, in a bid to reassure his hard-line partners, the prime minister pledged to forbid future meetings between Peres and Arafat. But now Peres is asking to be sent to Washington to prepare the ground for the anticipated American diplomatic initiative.

And the pressure on Sharon keeps building. □

Anthrax scare at Ma'ariv

JERUSALEM (JTA) — There was an anthrax scare Tuesday at the Israeli daily Ma'ariv when the newspaper received a suspicious letter containing white powder, but police said it turned out to be a prank.

Police evacuated the newspaper's offices in Jerusalem and called in hazardous materials experts after they received an envelope with the suspicious powder and a note saying "regards from Afghanistan."

A police spokesman later declared the incident a "practical joke." □

JEWISH WORLD

Court to hear solicitations case

The U.S. Supreme Court agreed Monday to determine whether groups may be required to register for permits before performing door-to-door solicitations.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, which brought an initial lawsuit against the town of Stratton, Ohio, say the policy infringes on its religious freedom, but the town claims people have a right to security and privacy. The case could be an important test of free speech rights.

Anti-Semitism hits Berkeley

In response to a number of anti-Semitic incidents on campus, Jewish students at the University of California at Berkeley are planning a sit-in and flyer campaign Thursday in order to speak out against anti-Semitism and other forms of hate.

The moves come in the wake of an assault against a male student celebrating Simchat Torah.

The student was attacked by two men after he had just finished dancing outdoors with a Torah as part of the Simchat Torah celebrations.

Holland backs Palestinian state

The prime minister of Holland joined international calls for the creation of a Palestinian state that respects Israel's security needs, issuing a statement one day after British Prime Minister Tony Blair backed the idea.

During a joint news conference Tuesday with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in The Hague, Wim Kok said, "There should be no doubt about the absolute necessity to have lasting peace, and this can only be the case if there is a viable Palestinian state offering and guaranteeing complete security with no danger for the Israeli people."

Religion-science programs funded

Israel's Bar-Ilan University and California-based Stanford University were selected by the John Templeton Foundation to develop three-year interdisciplinary programs that explore the relationship between science and religion.

Each university will be awarded \$100,000 over three years to institute their programs.

Survivor leader dies at 81

Kurt Hacker, the president of the International Auschwitz Committee, died Saturday of heart failure in Vienna at 81.

Hacker, who was not Jewish, reportedly died as he was about to board a train to attend a meeting of the Auschwitz Committee, which brings together former Auschwitz prisoners.

Hacker was a political prisoner in Auschwitz for two-and-a-half years.

Anthrax threat scares Jewish leaders and temporarily shuts down Brandeis

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Threats to prominent Jewish organizations may be par for the course, but the current anthrax scare has Jewish activists as jumpy as other Americans.

Israeli authorities on Monday conducted anthrax tests on a suspicious powder found on an El Al airplane, and Brandeis University evacuated a building after a white powdery substance was received in an envelope.

Both incidents turned out to be false alarms.

Jewish organizations have experienced a general increase in threatening calls and letters since the Palestinian intifada began a year ago, but Jewish leaders say there has been no additional rise in threats to institutions since the events of Sept. 11.

Nevertheless, they're not taking chances.

The leading pro-Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, stopped opening mail Monday that lacked a return address after it got word that U.S. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle's office had received a letter containing anthrax.

AIPAC is now re-assessing its mail policy, spokeswoman Rebecca Needler said.

"We're going to do everything in our power to secure AIPAC offices all around the country," she said.

In interviews, most Jewish leaders said they are scrutinizing their mail much more closely, especially letters from suspicious locales — such as Florida, where the anthrax scare began.

Meanwhile, the Israeli Embassy in Washington was temporarily closed Tuesday in response to an anthrax scare.

A letter containing a suspect substance arrived at the building next door, occupied by the United Arab Emirates Embassy.

U.S. authorities are examining the envelope. The embassy later reopened.

At another prominent organization, a letter postmarked from Florida with no return address was quickly hustled into an isolated room, where it was opened with latex gloves and a letter opener. It turned out to be just another letter from the Messiah — or someone claiming to be.

But that's typical run-of-the-mill, off-the-wall correspondence, say activists.

"We, like all Jewish institutions, have always received crank communications, threatening communications, some more credible than others," said Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress. "I don't see an increase in the quality or quantity of such communications. However, because of the changed circumstances and the sober reality we're facing, I think we address it in a much more serious manner."

Jewish communities abroad already had been on high alert since the intifada began a year ago, but have been placed on even higher alert since the Sept. 11 attacks, Steinberg said. To buttress these efforts, he said, the WJC has established a new "security fund" for these communities to upgrade their building security with, say, reinforced locks or doors or additional television monitors.

Another U.S. Jewish leader who is outspoken in his hard-line views said he began to receive threats after the intifada began. Law enforcement officials advised him to purchase a bulletproof vest.

The activist, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said he has worn it more often in the past month when he travels to speaking engagements, "because I'm more concerned now."

At Brandeis, two buildings were evacuated Monday after an administrative assistant to President Jehuda Reinharz opened an envelope and found white powder on her hand. The buildings were cleared for three hours.

Jewish organizations and institutions should be vigilant — but careful not to go overboard, activists say. "There's no indication Jews are special targets, but that doesn't mean we're not vulnerable," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "We should take every necessary precaution, but not allow ourselves to be diverted from our work or paralyzed by fear." □

(JTA intern Amy Sara Clark contributed to this report.)

Rabbi could face death penalty if convicted of his wife's murder

By Suzanne Pollak

CAMDEN, N.J. (JTA) — It's been almost seven years since the former rabbi of one of the largest Reform congregations in southern New Jersey walked into his living room and saw his wife of 29 years lying face down in a pool of blood, the victim of a brutal beating with a lead pipe.

Since that time, Rabbi Fred Neulander quickly sunk from a revered member of the Jewish community into an inmate confined to a small jail cell, awaiting the verdict of a jury that could sentence him to death.

Although the long-awaited murder trial only began Monday, much of the events leading up to the Nov. 1, 1994 murder of Carol Neulander are already known. Testimony is expected to focus on Fred Neulander's alleged infidelity and disreputable characters allegedly hired to be hit men.

The rabbi, now 60, resigned his pulpit at M'Kor Shalom in Cherry Hill, N.J., in 1995 after the world learned of his two-year affair with a famous radio personality who had come to him for counseling.

Elaine Soncini, whom Neulander helped convert to Judaism, has told police that the two met often and wrote love poems to each other.

She is not the only woman Neulander is said to have had affairs with after counseling.

In 1996, Neulander was suspended from the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform movement's rabbinic association.

The investigation continued and two years later, he was arrested on charges of being an accomplice to murder and conspiring to commit murder.

He was freed on bail.

Then in May 2000, two men came forward and confessed to the murder, alleging that Neulander hired them to kill his wife.

In light of the confessions, a Camden County grand jury indicted Neulander again — on charges of capital murder, felony murder and conspiracy, and the judge revoked his bail.

Besides lies and love, the trial also is expected to feature testimony from at least two of the rabbi's adult children — Matthew, an emergency medical technician, and Rebecca, who was on the phone to her mother shortly before her death — and employees of the Classic Cake Company, which Carol Neulander had formerly owned and still worked for at the time of her murder.

The trial has enough intrigue to bring in Court TV cameras, which are expected to roll through much of the trial and is carried across the United States.

Local Jewish reaction has ranged from initial shock to sadness and anger.

Stuart Alperin, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Southern New Jersey, says he is not particularly concerned about the attention now that the trial has started.

"I don't think it has any effect on how it affects the Jewish community," Alperin said. "It's a controversial case, because he is a clergyman. But it would be no different if he was a prominent priest."

Through it all, Neulander has maintained his innocence. No murder weapon has been found. No fingerprints were obtained. And almost all the witnesses against the rabbi come with enough

baggage to undermine their credibility. The two confessed hit men, Leonard Jenoff and Paul Michael Daniels, have pleaded guilty to aggravated murder and await sentencing following this trial.

Jenoff, a former congregant of Neulander who says the rabbi offered him \$30,000 for the killing, once told people he worked for the CIA and now admits that he lied to offset his failures and low self-esteem.

He had a "severe, severe alcohol problem," according to James Lynch, the attorney prosecuting the case for the state.

Daniels leads "a difficult life," including drug abuse, Lynch said Monday during his opening statements in the trial.

Myron "Pep" Levin, Neulander's racquetball partner who claims the rabbi told him he wished his wife was gone, has served prison time for fraud. And Soncini is now married to the Cherry Hill police officer assigned to her immediately following the murder.

The trial, expected to last four weeks, will feature testimony from these people as well as the rabbi himself.

On the trial's first day, Neulander showed little if any emotion.

Family members were obviously pained by some of the first day's proceedings, especially the airing of the 911 tape of Neulander's gasping voice as he made the original call to police.

But Neulander's gaze was fixed.

His only movements came as his fingers brushed his lips and cheeks from time to time.

Shortly before the murder, Neulander and Jenoff spoke about "how to do it neat, how to do it clean and how to keep suspicion off Mr. Neulander," Lynch said in his opening statement.

"This was no burglary ladies and gentlemen. They came into this house to kill. She opened the door to her killers. A series of blows rained down upon her head. They came to kill and they carried out their purpose," Lynch told the jury.

Lynch also worked to discredit Neulander, noting that for a time, he lied to the police about his affair with Soncini. He said Neulander is guilty, adding, "He planned it. He plotted it. He paid money to have it carried out."

But defense attorney Jeffrey Zucker said there were too many gaps in the case for any juror to find Neulander guilty.

He said Neulander may be "a person who betrayed, a person who disappointed.

But that is not what he's on trial for."

Zucker spoke harshly of the people who will testify, saying Soncini's comments "get more and more detailed against Neulander the further she went along."

He accused Jenoff and Daniels of trying to lessen their jail sentences by testifying.

Of Jenoff, he said, "This is a man who by his own admission could not sift out truth and fantasy. His whole life was a fantasy."

Jenoff's testimony will paint him as "a sick, demented person who was desperate for money," Zucker said.

Zucker also questioned the police investigation against Neulander, noting that a sharp knife was found beneath a cushion about three days after the murder.

It was also discovered that Carol Neulander's purse with a large amount of money was missing; yet Cherry Hill police didn't learn of this until later.

Testimony is expected to continue for weeks as many people, Jews and non-Jews alike, continually monitor the TV news and check their local newspapers to see if the prime witnesses are disreputable people out to get Neulander — or if the former rabbi really hired someone to kill his wife to avoid a messy divorce. □