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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

NEWS ANALYSIS

International attack on Israel could further harm peace efforts

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — With an international forum set to condemn Israel once again, Israeli and Jewish activists fear the meeting will further harm peacemaking efforts between Arabs and Jews.

Most important, the Dec. 5 reconvening of the Fourth Geneva Convention could escalate the bad blood between Israelis and Palestinians just as Washington is prodding them toward a cease-fire. But the bottom line, say Jewish observers, is that next week's gathering in Geneva — just like the U.N. anti-racism conference in Durban, South Africa, three months ago — will lay bare a stark fact: The Jewish state is held to a different standard than the rest of the world.

The Fourth Geneva Convention, centered on the "protection of civilian persons in time of war," was established in response to Nazi atrocities committed against civilians, primarily Jews, in occupied territories.

The convention, to which every country is a signatory, has been convened only once in its long existence — on July 15, 1999, at the behest of the Arab world, to scrutinize Israeli treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and eastern Jerusalem.

That meeting, boycotted by Israel and the United States, was adjourned indefinitely after only 17 minutes.

Now it is set to reconvene Wednesday, again without Israeli or U.S. representation. Again, the focus will be Israeli behavior in the territories.

"Reconvening it is so outrageous, you want to scream," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

"It's a hypocrisy; it's a charade. It's like Durban II, and that we haven't learned anything. It's a slap in the face of Israel and of the Jewish people."

At the Durban conference, a fortnight-long global gathering in September, was ostensibly aimed at galvanizing the world against all forms of hatred and prejudice.

But it was commandeered by Arab and Muslim activists and diplomats bent on isolating Israel as the worst offender of these universal ideals.

In Geneva, the meeting will likely last less than a day, and the draft declaration now being circulated has apparently been toned down from its original form.

But the fact remains: Israel, alone, will be under the microscope.

"It's scandalous," said Harris Schoenberg, chairman of the U.N. caucus of Jewish nongovernmental organizations. "Here I thought it was crazy that you have all these prisoners being killed in Afghanistan" — summary execution of prisoners violates international law governing conduct in a military conflict — "and they're reconvening the Fourth Geneva Convention to demonize Israel for protecting its citizens from Arabs going around blowing them up."

Switzerland, as "gatekeeper" of the Fourth Geneva Convention, is responsible for organizing such a meeting — when requested to do so.

In October 2000, soon after the Palestinian intifada broke out, both the U.N. General Assembly — a world body dominated by Arab and Muslim member-states — and the 22-member Arab League submitted a request to organize the meeting.

"It's to urge all parties to the Fourth Convention to adhere to their legal obligations," Valentin Zellweger, legal adviser to the Swiss Observer Mission to the United Nations, told JTA.

"The aim is to protect victims and support humanitarian actors."

The draft declaration, Zellweger said, reiterates that the convention's legal

Bus bomb kills 3 Israelis

At least three Israelis were killed when a bomb exploded in a bus in northern Israel.

At least six others were wounded, two critically, in the apparent terror attack on the bus, which was traveling from Hadera to Afula. [Page 4]

Legislative staffer resigns

An aide to Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.) resigned after writing that pro-Israel members of the U.S. Congress have a "conflict of interest."

Raeed Tayeh, a legislative assistant in McKinney's office, said in Wednesday's edition of *The Hill*, a newspaper published on Capitol Hill, that he was disturbed that lawmakers "care more about Israel than human rights and American values."

He also said that President Bush took a "courageous step" in recognizing Arab rights to "stolen Palestinian land."

McKinney said the letter was "not an official statement from my congressional office or me" and that some comments "do not reflect my thoughts and positions."

Sharon backs Palestinian state

Ariel Sharon said Israel could accept a future Palestinian state. Israel and the Palestinians "will reach a solution in which there will be a Palestinian state, but it has to be a Palestinian state by agreement and it has to be a demilitarized Palestinian state," the Israeli prime minister said Thursday.

Speaking to reporters hours before his departure for the United States, Sharon also said the United States would give Israel advance warning if it decides to strike against Iraq.

Claims against France increase

Claims filed by Jews who suffered financial losses during the Nazi occupation of France have increased sharply, according to a French commission.

The Drai Commission, which was appointed by the French government in 1999 to administer reparations to Jews who incurred "material or professional losses" during the occupation, cited a recent media campaign in France and the United States for the increase in petitions during the past two months.

So far the commission has decided on 1,276 files, approving payments totaling some \$23.5 million.

MIDEAST FOCUS

Powell promises peace timetable

Secretary of State Colin Powell said a timetable for peace in the Middle East will "come in due course."

After meeting Thursday with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher in Washington, Powell said he expected the U.S. envoys in the Middle East to construct a timetable for a cease-fire as part of their discussions with Israeli and Palestinian officials.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat asked for a timetable when he met with U.S. envoy Anthony Zinni in Ramallah on Wednesday. Powell also said the United States is looking at ways to accelerate economic aid to Egypt, given the drop in tourism there since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Sharon, Peres clash over team

A rift has developed between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his foreign minister. Shimon Peres is angry over his exclusion from the team meeting with U.S. envoy Anthony Zinni.

A senior government official acknowledged the two had clashed at a meeting Wednesday, when Peres accused Sharon of bypassing him and creating a "second Foreign Ministry."

Peres has argued on several occasions with Sharon since their coalition government was created earlier this year.

Annan calls for cease-fire

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said the Sept. 11 terror attacks have lent new urgency to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "A cease-fire is now desperately needed," Annan said Thursday at an annual U.N. gathering marking the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

He added that "the expansion of settlements, assassinations, all acts of terrorism, economic blockades and incursions into (Palestinian) autonomous areas should cease immediately."



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obligations apply to the West Bank, Gaza and eastern Jerusalem, and contains a specific reference to Israel as the "occupying force."

Washington remains opposed to the meeting.

"We believe such a meeting would be counterproductive and has no legal basis under the convention, which we strongly support," a State Department official said.

To prevent some European states from boycotting, the language in the draft declaration is still being negotiated and has reportedly been toned down.

Italy is one country said to be on the fence.

Nevertheless, the 15-member European Union will be represented by Antonio Vittorino, the body's commissioner for justice and home affairs, an E.U. official confirmed. Vittorino's spokesman could not be reached for comment.

That the Europeans are lending credibility to the meeting disturbs Jewish observers. The convention, they note, was created because of what was done to the Jewish people; now it's being used against the Jewish people.

"I can understand their feelings, the bitter irony," a European diplomat, who did not want to be identified, said about Jewish sentiments.

"But Arabs would raise the concern, 'Why is the situation in Middle East not of concern to the U.N. Security Council?' It's always a question of your perspective."

Pro-Israel advocates think they have some of the answers.

In world bodies like the United Nations, where each country has an equal vote, the "numbers game" of the large Arab and Muslim bloc prevails.

Then there's economic pressure the Arab world presumably exerts, because of their oil, bank assets, investments, and competition for business contracts across the region.

But meetings and declarations like those planned for Geneva have consequences, say Jewish observers, both short term and long term. In the short term, it's another blow to Israel's image on the international stage, and another attempt to internationalize the peacemaking efforts between Israelis and Palestinians.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat has long been suspected of trying to marginalize the U.S. role as facilitator, banking on a more sympathetic ear for Palestinians with a U.N. or E.U. "honest broker."

Some say such meetings could also produce more bloodshed.

"The crowds will feed off this, definitely," said an Israeli diplomat.

"When all of Israel's dearest friends convene and speak passionately against Israel, often with clear anti-Semitic tones, once their populations hear these speeches of incitement, it will feed the violence and hatred of Israel."

It may also backfire, by generating greater Israeli intransigence.

"The more Israel feels it is being ganged up on, it undermines Israel's confidence in terms of making those compromises and taking risks for peace," Foxman said.

Then there's the potential long-term ramifications of having such declarations and resolutions — passed with the Western world's complicity — on the books.

"Textbooks will say that Israel was guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity, which legitimized the isolation of Israel and the questioning of its legitimacy," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

"Then the Arab world will justify this by pointing to documents such as the one they'll be signing at Geneva and say, 'It wasn't us who did it; it was the entire international community.'" □

Nazareth mosque plan draws fire

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Representatives of Christian churches in Jerusalem are urging Israel to permanently halt construction of a mosque in Nazareth.

The representatives said in a statement Thursday that construction of the mosque near the Catholic Basilica of the Annunciation is ill-advised and incomprehensible.

They also said the affair shows the Jewish state can not be trusted to guard other religion's holy sites, and that international guarantees are needed. Christians believe the basilica is built on the spot where the angel Gabriel told Mary she would give birth to Jesus.

Israel initially approved the building of the mosque, but said recently it had ordered construction halted because the builders had not received a building permit. □

JEWISH WORLD

Swiss protected Nazi assets

Switzerland protected vast assets belonging to Nazi Germany after World War II, according to a report.

The report, issued Thursday by an international panel of historians studying Switzerland's wartime past, said Swiss authorities evaded a postwar agreement to liquidate German assets and give the proceeds to the Allies so they could be used to compensate war victims.

The panel, also known as the Bergier Commission, also confirmed earlier accusations that the Red Cross issued travel documents to prominent Nazis after the war's end.

Team may study Vatican archives

The Vatican is trying to put together a new interfaith team to study the Vatican's World War II archives. According to the New York Jewish Week, the new team will exclude the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, which has been the Vatican's traditional partner for such projects.

The last group of Jewish and Catholic scholars studying these archives disbanded over the summer after some members said they needed greater access to the archives to answer questions about Vatican behavior during the Holocaust.

Solidarity rally planned

Some 70 rabbis from across the religious spectrum will lead a rally expressing support for the U.S. and Israeli campaigns against terrorism.

The event is planned for noon Sunday in Manhattan. Busloads are expected from New York, Connecticut and New Jersey.

Rebuilt Russian shul defaced

A renovated synagogue in Russia repeatedly has been defaced with swastikas.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia jointly funded the project, which involved adding the new building to the synagogue in Kostroma, northeast of Moscow. There was a still-unsolved arson at the synagogue last summer.

Jewish power behind new paper

Jewish philanthropist Michael Steinhardt is among the backers of a new New York newspaper.

Two former leaders of the English-language Forward will edit the new daily, to be called The New York Sun. Seth Lipsky, the Forward's former editor, and former managing editor Ira Stoll will head the new paper, which plans to debut next year. Another major investor is Hollinger International, the newspaper chain that owns the Jerusalem Post.

NEWS ANALYSIS

On first visit in nearly six months, Sharon may find changed tone in U.S.

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The world has changed since Ariel Sharon last visited the White House.

When the Israeli prime minister meets President Bush and other administration officials Monday, his first visit since the Sept. 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington, he will be seeking a better understanding of the changing U.S.-Israeli relationship.

In addition, the visit may test the limits of Sharon's restraint, coming as it does just after two major Palestinian terror attacks in Israel this week — a bus bombing on Thursday and the machine-gunning of civilians on Tuesday. Sharon learned of Thursday's attack as he arrived at Ben-Gurion Airport for his flight to the United States, and delayed his departure.

Sharon last visited the United States in June, and his visit comes amid two major international efforts that affect Israel — the U.S.-led war on terror and an enhanced U.S. push for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Analysts say the visit will be a chance for the Bush administration to reinforce the U.S.-Israel bond — and pressure Israel to do its part.

Sharon will need to reinforce the Israeli commitment to a cease-fire, and he is expected to pledge his commitment to the Mitchell plan, a timeline for resuming peace talks outlined by a commission led by former Sen. George Mitchell last spring.

Israeli officials said Sharon will insist that he will make no concessions on political issues until after Palestinian violence stops and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat follows through on his commitments to halt attacks against Israel.

"I expect a good deal of discussion between the president and the prime minister on the fulfillment of that position, and the steps that can be taken by Israel once the Palestinians fulfill those commitments," said Jason Isaacson, director of government and international affairs for the American Jewish Committee. "My guess is that there is, at both the private level and public level, a considerable reservoir of understanding for Israel's situation."

Sharon is expected to stick to his call for seven days of quiet before the steps outlined in the Mitchell plan begin.

The Bush administration originally expressed its understanding for Sharon's condition, but both the United States and Israel's own Labor Party, part of Sharon's governing coalition, now are pressuring Sharon to be more flexible.

Sharon supporters insist that if Arafat can't ensure even a week without attacks, he can't be trusted to deliver a lasting peace that entails heavy Israeli concessions.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, several incidents have suggested a weakening of the U.S.-Israel link.

Sharon publicly warned the United States against selling out Israel as the West sold out Czechoslovakia to the Nazis in 1938, concerned that the United States would sacrifice Israeli interests in courting the Arab world for its anti-terror coalition. Bush was outraged by the analogy.

In addition, despite its own strong statements about the need to fight terrorism, the Bush administration has not given Israel the green light it expected against Palestinian terrorism, continuing to criticize Israeli incursions into the West Bank and Israel's policy of killing leading Palestinian militants.

But Sharon's meetings with Bush and other senior administration officials might be the antidote to weakening relations.

"It will send a reassuring signal," Isaacson said. "It will be read by Israel's enemies as a sign that Israel's alliance with the U.S. is unshaken."

Sharon will be seeking an understanding of Israel's role in the U.S.-led campaign against terrorism, and whether the coalition eventually will target Iraq and Iran, both of which Israel regards as serious strategic threats.

Israel has been pleased with recent moves to lump Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad together with Al Qaida and other organizations that the United States classifies as terrorists. □

Non-stop violence greets envoys seeking another Mideast cease-fire

By JTA Staff

JERUSALEM (JTA) — U.S. envoys attempting to broker an Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire instead got a glimpse of just how difficult their job will be.

Since their arrival in Israel on Monday, the envoys — former Marine Corps Gen. Anthony Zinni and the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, William Burns — have been confronted by Palestinian terror attacks.

The latest occurred Thursday, when at least three Israelis were killed after a bomb exploded on a bus traveling from Hadera to Afula in northern Israel.

At least six others were wounded, two critically, in what police said was a Palestinian suicide bombing.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was informed of the attack as he arrived at Ben-Gurion Airport for a flight to the United States.

When they heard of the bombing, Palestinians in a refugee camp near Jenin in the West Bank celebrated by firing shots into the air, according to Israel Radio.

Earlier Thursday, Israel had declared a state of alert along its border with the West Bank after receiving intelligence reports that terrorists were planning to carry out a bombing attack in the country's center. A paramedic at the scene of the attack was quoted as saying that the bus was completely blown apart, apparently from a bomb on the inside.

The attack came as Zinni was holding talks with Palestinian officials in an effort to cement a truce. Palestinian officials have been concerned about the diplomatic repercussions of the series of terror attacks that have occurred during Zinni's visit.

Zinni offered his condolences to the victims' families.

"These vicious terror attacks must stop now if we are to create the environment that leads to peace," he said.

The Palestinian Authority said in a statement after Thursday's bombing that it "condemns the attack on Israeli civilians."

The statement also pledged that the would "exert every possible effort to cease fire" and "follow and arrest all those who violate the leadership decision."

Despite that, Israeli government spokesman Avi Pazner blamed P.A. President Yasser Arafat for the bus bombing.

"These terrorist attacks are the means by which the Palestinian Authority undermines the peace mission of Gen. Zinni," Pazner said. "This is a very serious escalation, the responsibility for which is entirely on the Palestinian Authority."

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said he had confidence that Zinni would make headway, despite the continued violence.

"Zinni will be dogged. He will be patient. We are going to try to take real, small, reciprocal steps and move forward toward this cease-fire," Powell said Thursday.

The bus attack is the second Palestinian suicide bombing this week. On Monday, a Palestinian suicide bomber lightly wounded two Israeli soldiers at the Erez Crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

A day later, two Palestinian gunmen from the West Bank city of Jenin opened fire on civilians in the northern Israeli city of Afula, killing two Israelis and wounding dozens more.

Also on Tuesday, an Israeli woman was killed in a Palestinian grenade and shooting attack on a Gaza road.

"Unfortunately, there is no letup in the wave of terror against

the State of Israel," Dore Gold, an adviser to Sharon, said Thursday.

Not far from the site of Thursday's bus bombing, an Israeli soldier was killed and another seriously wounded in a Palestinian drive-by shooting along the border with the West Bank.

In other violence Thursday, Israeli troops killed one Palestinian man and wounded another at a West Bank checkpoint. The troops opened fire on their car when the men tried to break through the checkpoint.

Palestinian witnesses said the two men had been angry about the long wait at the checkpoint. □

Stripped-down version of faith bill likely to become law by end of year

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Bush's faith-based initiative may be alive and well, but direct government funding for religious groups seems to be dying a slow death.

The latest incarnation of the faith-based bill appears largely to skirt that most contentious issue — known as charitable choice — and focus on tax incentives for charitable giving. The legislation likely will be folded into a larger spending bill at the end of the year.

Jewish groups consider the latest version of the bill to be a good compromise.

They are pleased with anticipated changes that include an IRA charitable rollover and a nonitemizer tax deduction — which could boost the amount of money Americans will give to charity — as well as an additional \$250 million in federal funding for social services. But there still are some concerns.

The language is not yet final in the Senate version of the legislation, which is expected to be released next week. But some groups argue that sections of the draft version leave the door open for religious groups that receive public funds — albeit not directly — to proselytize and discriminate.

Most Jewish groups have been wary of the increased role of faith-based organizations in social service programming, fearing the Bush administration's effort to increase partnerships between the federal government and religious institutions could erode the separation of church and state.

Other Jewish groups — primarily Orthodox ones — want faith-based institutions to play a greater role in providing social services and want to lower the wall that separates church and state, as long as minority religions are protected.

Groups such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee have been meeting with staffers of Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), who is working on the legislation with Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.). They hope to shape the final bill to include language countering discrimination in hiring and protecting civil rights and religious freedom.

In the bill that passed the U.S. House of Representatives in August, religious groups would be permitted to receive direct federal funds for a range of social service programs. Most Jewish groups objected to the House bill, and would not support a compromise effort with the Lieberman-Santorum bill.

Since the Lieberman-Santorum bill would include most of the consensus issues, it will be harder for charitable choice provisions to pass on their own next year. □