



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 79, No. 227

Wednesday, December 12, 2001

84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

2 Palestinians killed at roadblock

Israeli soldiers shot and killed two Palestinians at a West Bank roadblock.

The soldiers opened fire Tuesday morning when the two tried to drive through the roadblock, located near Tulkarm. In another incident, Israeli army forces arrested five Palestinians near Bethlehem on Monday night.

The five were suspected of participating in terrorist activities.

Rabbi arrested on sex charges

An L.A. rabbi pleaded not guilty Dec. 5 to charges he molested three of his male students. Mordechai YomTov was arrested on 10 felony counts for the alleged acts against the boys, aged 8 to 10.

Police appealed to the public to come forward with information about any other related incidents that may have occurred during the past seven years. During that time, YomTov taught at the Cheder Menachem School, which serves 185 male students.

Over 1 million Israelis in poverty

There were 1.16 million Israelis living below the poverty line last year. This represented a small increase over the previous year, when the total stood at 1.13 million, according to statistics issued Monday by Israel's National Insurance Institute.

Though small, the increase in 2000 came during a year in which the economy expanded at a rate of 6 percent and salary levels climbed. Among those living below the poverty line in 2000 were about 510,000 children.

Editorial pages tough on Arafat

A majority of American newspaper editorial pages say Yasser Arafat should end terrorism, a new survey finds.

After a deadly series of Palestinian suicide bombings last week in Jerusalem and Haifa, 21 of 50 large circulation newspapers focused on how the Palestinian Authority president was responsible for terrorism in the region and needed to crack down on it, the Anti-Defamation League survey found.

The survey also found that another 13 papers said Arafat should be given a chance to renounce terrorism and bring the parties back to the negotiating table.

U.S. Jewish leaders pleased as Bush backs Israel strongly

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Heartened by a week of staunchly pro-Israel comments from the White House, U.S. Jewish leaders had little to quibble about after a Chanukah meeting with President Bush.

Jewish leaders from a wide spectrum of organizations who spent about an hour with Bush on Monday said they walked away impressed with the depth of his knowledge and his resolve to combat terrorism and support Israel.

"I think he was as good as any president can be with regard to support of Israel and the Jewish community," said Jack Rosen, the president of the American Jewish Congress. "It doesn't get better than that."

Others among the 29 Jewish leaders, who represented 19 different organizations, described the meeting as "spectacular" and an "impressive performance" by Bush.

"I have never heard any American president, from Reagan to Clinton, ally himself so closely with the Israeli position," said Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles.

Bush made clear that organizations that target Israel will be dealt with in later phases of the U.S.-led war on terrorism, specifically naming Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad. Bush also spoke of his early December meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and said he thinks Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat needs to do more to curb violence.

He added that America should press Europe to support Israel so the Palestinians can not appeal for European support as a means of avoiding U.S. pressure.

The meeting, which focused exclusively on international affairs, came as the White House and the American Jewish community seem to be coming closer on the issues of the day.

Last week's suicide bombings in Jerusalem and Haifa sparked a major shift in U.S. policy toward the Palestinians, as the White House increased pressure on Arafat to curb violence and openly questioned his ability as a leader.

At the same time, the administration did not call on Israel to respond with restraint, as it often does after an attack.

Shortly afterward, Bush started to crack down on the financial supporters of Palestinian terrorists, freezing assets of the Holy Land Foundation and two other groups that allegedly funnel money to Hamas.

Anthony Zinni, the U.S. envoy in the region, has shifted his role in keeping with the new U.S. viewpoint. No longer actively seeking a cease-fire between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, he has been pressuring Arafat to do more to combat terrorism.

Meetings with the president generally render more sympathetic, pro-Israel comments from the White House than normal. Because the public comments have been so positive of late, however, Monday's meeting was simply a reinforcement.

"He was very clear that the pressure at this moment is on Arafat, not on Israel," Tom Neumann, executive director of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, said of Bush. "He spoke quite extensively, without equivocation."

The relationship between the Bush administration and the American Jewish community had been on shaky ground immediately after the Sept. 11 terror attacks in New York and Washington.

While many expected the United States to have empathy for Israel's plight, Jewish leaders believed the administration was unfairly pressuring Israel to win Arab support for the coalition against terror. The Bush administration was called hypocritical

MIDEAST FOCUS

Jerusalem kindergarten torched

A Jerusalem kindergarten was set ablaze Monday night. Firefighters found Arabic graffiti sprayed on the building, which sustained heavy damage in the fire.

The kindergarten is in Neveh Ya'akov, a northern Jerusalem neighborhood located near several Arab neighborhoods. Several other kindergartens in the vicinity have been burned down in recent months, Army Radio reported.

P.A. blasts Afghan 'aliyah'

Voice of Palestine Radio reportedly is accusing the United States of flooding Israel with Afghan Jews. Citing Lebanese sources, last Friday's report on the official Palestinian Authority station says the U.S. government is using its victory over the Taliban to send "more than half a million Afghan Jews" to Israel.

In fact, only two elderly Jews are believed to live in Afghanistan. Despite that, the report appeared aimed at discrediting the U.S. military success in Afghanistan by suggesting that U.S. officials are conspiring to harm Palestinian interests.

Sharon recalls Sept. 11 attacks

Ariel Sharon attended a Jerusalem ceremony marking three months since the Sept. 11 attacks. "At this hour, three months ago," the Israeli prime minister said at Tuesday's solidarity rally, "the clock of history came to a standstill at the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington."

Also attending the rally were the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Daniel Kurtzer, and the U.S. peace envoy, Gen. Anthony Zinni.

In New York, a rabbi joined other religious leaders who spoke at a service near the site of the World Trade Center.

"They took down those structures, but they will not take away the spirit," said Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, a Fire Department chaplain.

for criticizing Israel's policy of targeted killing of terrorist leaders, while the United States pursued a similar strategy in Afghanistan.

The recent suicide attacks have again changed the landscape and placed the White House and the Jewish community on the same page.

"We've come full circle," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "What we believed would be at Sept. 12 has finally come about."

Many of the Jewish community's lingering concerns were considered too insignificant to mention at the meeting. Those include the U.S. view on Israel's policy of "targeted killings" of Palestinian terrorists and the role of Syria and Iran in the coalition against terror.

"It's hard to be critical that he hasn't done 100 percent when he has done something close to that," Rosen said of Bush.

One contentious issue addressed was the issue of military tribunals. Bush assured the leaders, many of whom are concerned about violations of civil liberties, that the tribunals would be used rarely.

The president said more action needs to be taken to educate Arab and Muslim children about freedom and democracy, a reference to school textbooks and media in the Middle East that bash Israel and foment anti-Semitism.

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice also attended Monday's meeting, which was part of a daylong celebration of Chanukah. The day included the first-ever lighting of a menorah in the White House residence, as well as a party that included renditions of Chanukah favorites by the U.S. Marine Corps band and choir.

A former White House liaison to the Jewish community said such meetings with the president almost always are marked by good feelings.

"Almost invariably, the Jewish community became putty when they actually saw the president," said Marshall Breger, who served in the Reagan administration and is now a law professor at Catholic University in Washington.

But Jewish leaders say there was something different about Monday's meeting. "I don't think anyone walked out disagreeing" with Bush, said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organization. "This is a guy who is intent on translating intentions into results." □

(JTA correspondent Tom Tugend in Los Angeles contributed to this report.)

Holiday festivities in Jerusalem are a light in the intifada darkness

By Shoshana Kordova

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With this year's Festival of Lights falling just a week after Palestinian terrorists turned the center of Jerusalem into a killing field, residents are struggling not to let their fear deter them from their holiday celebration.

Ben Yehuda Street, the scene of a double suicide bombing on Dec. 1 that killed 11 people, is an odd mixture of Chanukah festivities and bombing memorial.

A little boy stood at a table Tuesday cutting pink cellophane into a dreidel shape, while a little girl in a silver-colored crown moved her arms in imitation of the storyteller sitting across from her.

A few feet away, technicians were setting up a sound system on a portable stage for a concert. In large letters, the stage bore the message, "We came to banish darkness," words from a popular Chanukah song that also reflect something of the public mood as the Palestinian intifada bleeds through its 15th month.

Tuesday was the first of five days of Chanukah performances and art projects funded by the Jerusalem municipality, said Rachel Ben Asher, director of mobile art for the city. Following the Dec. 1 bombing, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert decided to organize holiday festivities in the center of town, both in memory of the victims and to raise people's spirits, Ben Asher said.

At the bottom of Ben Yehuda, next to Zion Square, dying flowers and the empty tins of memorial candles commemorate the site of one explosion.

A sign propped in a nearby tree reads, "The nation of Israel is alive and strong." The sound stage sits on the site of the other explosion. "It's a lot nicer to pass by and create, listen to music and watch performers, than to pass by and look at all the candles and feel an ache in the heart," Ben Asher said. □



Daily News Bulletin

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

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JEWISH WORLD

Jews moving to 'Sin City'

Las Vegas has the fastest growing Jewish population in the United States. Some 75,000 Jews lived in Las Vegas in 2000, an increase of 35 percent from 1995, according to a survey published in the American Jewish Committee's 2001 American Jewish Year Book.

Seattle has the second fastest growing Jewish community, up 27 percent since 1991. Miami-Dade County reported an 8 percent drop from 1999.

Nine temples go Reform

Nine U.S. synagogues have joined the Reform movement. With the admission of the synagogues — which include four from California and two from Arizona — there are now 914 Reform temples in North America.

The Reform movement is the largest stream of Judaism in North America, with approximately 330,000 member households.

Ukrainian Jews go to the palace

The president of Ukraine praised the role the Jewish community is playing in his country. In a meeting Monday with Lev Levayev, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of the Former Soviet Union, Leonid Kuchma also pledged to help return Jewish communal property.

After the meeting at the presidential palace in Kiev, Kuchma lit a Chanukah menorah as 35 Lubavitch rabbis looked on. "To see the president light the menorah together with Mr. Levayev in the presidential palace" is a "miracle of Chanukah in our days," said Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetzki, the chief rabbi of Dnepropetrovsk.

In Hungary, meanwhile, a menorah is being lit every night of Chanukah in front of the Parliament building in Budapest.

Polish Jewish leader re-elected

Jerzy Kichler was re-elected president of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland.

Kichler, from Wroclaw in southwest Poland, was chosen for a second term at a meeting in Warsaw over the weekend of 74 delegates representing eight organized Jewish communities around the country and several local communal branches.

Nazi deportation commemorated

Students in the German city of Kempen marked the 60th anniversary of the deportation of the city's Jewish community.

The Nazi deportations were commemorated Monday with a program of readings and discussions.

Kempen's Jews were deported to Latvia where they arrived in mid-December 1941, one week after the last of 43,000 Latvian Jews had been killed.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israel tries to dry up funding for West Bank and Gaza terrorists

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has taken a major step to halt the flow of funds from Israeli Arabs to Palestinian terrorists.

In a move that Israeli hopes will harm the finances of Hamas, Israel's High Court of Justice recently turned down an appeal filed by an Arab-owned investment company, Al-Manar, seeking the return of \$1 million Israel had confiscated.

In its ruling last week, the high court said the funds had been lawfully confiscated because Al-Manar transferred funds to Beit el-Mal, an investment company operating in Palestinian-controlled areas that allegedly is Hamas' financial arm.

Coming just days after President Bush froze the assets of three groups he said financed Hamas terror, Israeli officials called the court ruling a significant step in the financial battle against Palestinian terrorism.

"It is the first time that the state has confiscated such a large sum," said Shalom Harari, former Arab affairs adviser at the Defense Ministry.

"In the past, the defense establishment confiscated much smaller sums — here a thousand, there a thousand," Harari said. "The confiscation of" \$1 million will force Hamas and other terrorist groups to "re-evaluate their financial strategy."

Al-Manar's directors say the confiscation struck a death blow to their organization, whose capital, they maintained, does not exceed \$4 million.

Sources close to the organization charged that the confiscation was another government attempt to deprive Israel's Arab population of opportunities for economic independence.

According to Al Manar's director general, Mohammad Mustafa, the confiscation caused severe financial damage to people who had invested all their savings in Israeli Arab economic projects.

Al-Manar invested in projects such as the construction of a shopping mall in the Israeli Arab city of Umm el-Fahm, the development of an Internet company and the construction of a solar energy project, Mustafa said.

The court's ruling followed the American freeze on the assets of three groups — Beit el-Mal among them — that allegedly fund Hamas terrorism. Another was the Texas-based Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, and the third, based in Palestinian-ruled areas, was the Al Aqsa International Bank.

"Those who do business with terror will do no business with the United States — or anywhere else the United States can reach," Bush said Dec. 4.

After Bush made the announcement, officials in Canada and Italy also froze the groups' assets.

Such measures may represent an important chapter in the battle against international terrorism, but Israeli experts believe there still is a long and difficult road ahead in efforts to "dry out" Islamic terror groups financially.

With funds filtered from a variety of sources into dozens of financial institutions in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and eastern Jerusalem, these experts say it is almost impossible to cut the flow of money. Most of the money, they say, comes from sources in the Persian Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Israeli intelligence officials recently passed on to their U.S. counterparts detailed information about how terrorists in the Middle East and around the world get their funding. Israeli officials also met recently with financial officers of Citibank — one of the banks the Holy Land Foundation allegedly used to transfer funds to the West Bank and Gaza — to discuss ways of stopping such transfers.

Israel's decision to confiscate the \$1 million from Al-Manar came after officials said they traced illegal transfers to Beit el-Mal.

On the face of it, there is nothing unusual about Beit el-Mal, which invests in hotels, banks and a number of industrial projects in the West Bank and Gaza.

Four years ago, however, Israeli officials declared Beit el-Mal an illegal group, charging that it is part of Hamas' infrastructure.

By contrast, Al-Manar is a legal Israeli-Arab investment company. It is headquartered in the Israeli Arab city of Umm el-Fahm, a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Reform leader: End 'castor oil' approach to religious schools

By Julie Wiener

BOSTON (JTA) — After generations as the whipping boy of the American Jewish community, Hebrew schools have become the latest cause of the Reform movement.

In his Shabbat sermon at the Union of American Hebrew Congregations' biennial conference here last week, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the president, said congregational schools "have fallen victim to the plague of low expectations."

Yoffie's sermon is usually viewed as the centerpiece of the biennial, where major priorities for the following two years are announced.

The last two biennial sermons have focused on adult Jewish literacy and revitalizing prayer services.

Both became major initiatives for America's largest stream of Judaism, which boasts 914 congregations and 330,000 households across North America.

For many parents, Yoffie said, religious school is "the castor oil of Jewish life, a burden passed from parent to child with the following admonition: 'I hated it, you'll hate it, and after your Bar Mitzvah, you can quit.'"

Yoffie acknowledged that "a quality religious school alone cannot guarantee that our children will be Jewish."

But since religious school serves "the largest number of children for the longest period of time," Yoffie said it is "the key that opens the door to the grand adventure of Jewish learning and Jewish life."

Yoffie called on Jewish philanthropists to create a "Jewish Marshall Plan for the religious school" and urged the Reform movement to invest in improving its congregational schools, which enroll 120,000 students.

But while money is important, he said, vision and commitment are more important.

"Faced with a hunger for Torah and schools adrift," he said, Reform Jews must "mobilize ourselves for religious education as we have in the past for the State of Israel and the fight against discrimination."

Yoffie announced the development of a new Reform curriculum called "Chai Learning for Jewish Life."

He said it offers a full course in Hebrew, focuses on "text and celebration" and de-emphasizes "the Holocaust and history of Jewish suffering."

He also called for increased teacher training and said the UAHC will exempt from temple dues to the movement all expenses related to teacher training.

In addition, Yoffie urged the following steps to revitalize Hebrew schools:

- Engage lay leaders in the work of the religious schools, particularly in overseeing policy and evaluation;
- Recruit and train synagogue members and parents to help teach, and make such work an "obligation of synagogue leadership";
- Require all religious school parents to attend school with their children at least six times per year; and
- Impose standards — "flexible standards, to be sure, but standards nonetheless. Even the youngest children should know

that Reform Judaism makes demands on us; it does not mean doing whatever you please."

Yoffie emphasized that he supports Jewish day schools as well, an area that has boomed in recent years.

There are 18 Reform day schools in North America.

But he noted that the majority of non-Orthodox American Jews do not — and likely never will — attend day schools.

Yoffie's announcements were well-received at the biennial, generating frequent applause.

"He's really nailed the problem," Jane Jacobson of Congregation Havurah in Buffalo, N.Y., reflecting the views of many.

Paul Flexner, who recently staffed a task force on improving congregational schools for the Jewish Education Service of North America, praised Yoffie for making this issue a priority.

However, he said that improving schools will require a local as well as a national commitment.

Yoffie's speech "raises the level of importance and significance of this agenda item on the local agendas," Flexner said.

"By his making it the main thrust of the movement, he's giving a push to the local institutions to say we better do something."

Congregational schools have not yet attracted the kind of mega-philanthropic support that other Jewish renaissance efforts, such as day schools, campus Hillels and synagogue transformation efforts have garnered in recent years.

But Yoffie's push for congregational schools comes amid several other national efforts to strengthen Hebrew school education.

JESNA is sponsoring a 50-person "think tank" this week to look at "critical success factors in congregational education," develop "new strategies for advancing congregational education and creating a more dynamic system," Flexner said.

The Conservative movement is also revamping its Hebrew school curriculum.

And the Experiment in Congregational Education, a synagogue transformation initiative operated out of the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, is launching a pilot project early next year in San Francisco and Kansas City aimed at improving congregational schools.

The experimental initiative is also working to help synagogues replicate the successes of several innovative congregational schools.

Among the models are family programs that meet on Shabbat; Keshet, an after-school day care program in Cambridge, Mass., that incorporates Jewish learning and camp-like activities, and several programs in which students can choose their own schedules.

Robert Weinberg, executive director of the initiative called Yoffie's new focus on congregational schools "terrific."

"The notion of putting more attention into congregational education is vital," he said. □

Candles lit for religious divorces

LONDON (JTA) — British campaigners held a candlelight vigil Sunday in London for Jewish women whose husbands have denied them a religious divorce.

The Agunot Campaign had designated the first night of Chanukah as "Agunot Awareness Day."

Agunot is the term used for women denied gets, or religious divorces. □