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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Palestinians ignore cease-fire call

Palestinian gunmen in the West Bank and Gaza Strip ignored Yasser Arafat's call to stop firing at Israeli targets.

In one incident, gunmen seriously wounded an Israeli driver near the West Bank city of Ramallah. The victim was shot in the stomach and leg, according to Israel Radio.

On Sunday night, gunmen fired a mortar at an Israeli settlement in Gaza and, in another incident, fired an anti-tank grenade at an army outpost. There were no injuries in either of those incidents.

Bush suspends embassy move

President Bush postponed moving the Israeli Embassy to Jerusalem on Monday for an additional six months.

The Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 requires the United States to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

But presidents have been suspending the initiative for national security reasons every six months since the law was enacted.

Bush, who said as a presidential candidate that he would move the U.S. ambassador to Jerusalem as soon as he took office, has been strongly supportive of Israel in recent weeks.

But few expected him to move the embassy — which the Palestinians consider a provocative move — in the midst of the current violence.

Poll: U.S. Jews distrust Arabs

Seventy-three percent of U.S. Jews believe the Arab world wants to destroy Israel, according to a poll.

The American Jewish Committee's annual survey also found that 44 percent of U.S. Jews agree with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's assertion that Yasser Arafat is Israel's Osama bin Laden, while 50 percent disagreed.

Fifty-six percent of the 1,015 respondents have a favorable view of the United Nations, with 20 percent holding an unfavorable view.

Neo-Nazis rally in D.C.

Some 50 neo-Nazis rallied at the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

Saturday's National Alliance rally attracted about 150 counterdemonstrators. [Page 3]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Arafat calls for end to violence, but Sharon has heard it all before

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Trick or treat? That slightly out-of-season challenge reflects Israeli reaction to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's dramatic call on his people for "a complete stop to all armed activities, especially the suicide attacks."

Analysts noted that it was Arafat's strongest call yet — in Arabic, on Palestinian television — to end Palestinian terror.

He also mentioned mortar bombing of Israeli settlements which, he claimed, give Sharon a pretext to strike at the Palestinian Authority. That showed that Arafat's call extended to the territories as well — and not, as some chagrined Palestinians claimed, only to Israel proper.

However, after Arafat has voiced support for so many cease-fires that never materialized, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon did not even deign to react.

Indeed, within hours of the speech Sunday, Palestinian gunmen were again shooting at Israelis in the West Bank and firing mortars in the Gaza Strip. Three Israelis were injured Monday, one seriously, in shooting attacks.

"Israel's patience with empty words and false promises has run out," Sharon told French President Jacques Chirac in a phone call Monday. "Israel wants to see actions and results."

Just 10 days earlier, at Sharon's behest, the Security Cabinet formally declared Arafat "irrelevant" and ended further dealings with him.

But in the army and the intelligence community, there is a view that Arafat's speech might — just might — be a turning point, representing his belated realization of just how precarious his position has become.

Arafat spoke from his office in Ramallah, with Israeli tanks parked less than 300 yards away. Other Israel Defense Force armored units had entered Palestinian-controlled areas in the West Bank and Gaza over the weekend on search-and-arrest missions that made a mockery of Palestinian pretensions to sovereignty in these territories. Israeli helicopters continued to destroy Palestinian security installations.

Perhaps even more sobering, from Arafat's standpoint, was the fact that the United States was not publicly criticizing the Israeli military moves. It was as though Sharon had a green light from the Bush administration to mangle Arafat's state-in-the-making.

Worse yet, Arafat's standing in the international community, which plummeted drastically after a wave of suicide bombings in early December, showed no real signs of recovery.

At the U.N. Security Council on Saturday, Britain and Norway pointedly abstained on a Palestinian-sponsored draft calling for international observers to be sent to the region. The United States vetoed the resolution — and, beyond the Arab world, there was virtually no criticism of the veto.

Even within the Arab world, Arafat could feel his isolation growing. Egypt and Jordan signaled that they, too, are fed up with Arafat's prevarication and want to see real action against terrorists such as those from Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

For Egypt and Jordan, it is not just a matter of the peace process with Israel: The rise of Islamic fundamentalism can spill over into their countries, putting their regimes at risk.

Some Israeli observers therefore say Arafat may have reached a watershed and will finally take meaningful action to quell violence. If he does so, however, he surely will demand a diplomatic quid pro quo — from Israel, the Americans and the international

MIDEAST FOCUS

Hamas member killed in Hebron

Israeli troops shot and killed a Hamas member in Hebron. Israel said the troops opened fire Monday when 28-year-old Yakoub Dakidak tried to escape arrest. Israel accused him of "involvement in terrorist activity." A Hamas official in the Gaza Strip vowed revenge for the killing.

In another incident, Israeli forces killed a Palestinian gunman near the West Bank city of Nablus. Palestinian officials said the victim was a plainclothes policeman.

Palestinian boy killed in Gaza

A 12-year-old Palestinian boy was killed Monday during a gun battle in the Gaza Strip. The boy was caught in the crossfire between the two sides, Israel Radio reported, citing Palestinian sources.

Israel detains Palestinian official

Israeli police briefly detained the top Palestinian official in Jerusalem. Sari Nusseibeh was detained when he tried to hold a reception with diplomats in eastern Jerusalem, in violation of an Israeli ban.

Israel called the planned event an attempt by the Palestinian Authority to assert sovereignty over eastern Jerusalem. The U.S. State Department called the detention "provocative" and "counterproductive."

Two Israelis wounded in shooting

Palestinians lightly wounded two Israelis in the West Bank. Monday's drive-by shooting of a father and his 3-year-old son took place near Ramallah.

Israel cuts next year's budget

Israel's Cabinet approved a proposal to cut \$1.46 billion from next year's budget.

By a vote of 14-13 Sunday, the government also revised the forecast for domestic economic growth next year from 4 percent to 2 percent.

community. Palestinian officials said early in the week that they had shut dozens of Hamas and Islamic Jihad facilities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and arrested 180 activists.

Sharon's circle gave little credence to such claims, or to Arafat's call for an end to violence.

"All bluff," Finance Minister Silvan Shalom said. "Anyone putting any faith in it will quickly be disappointed."

Close aides say Sharon wants to resume negotiations with the Palestinians, but not with Arafat. After endless "last chances," Sharon has concluded that the veteran Palestinian leader is committed to a "strategy of terror."

Arafat "is not the guy to talk to," Sharon's aides say.

In Sharon's book, Arafat made his strategic choice back in 1993, as soon as the Oslo peace process began. He doggedly built up illegal armed groups alongside the Palestinian Authority police force — which itself was allowed to grow far beyond its legal size — and stockpiled weapons for them.

These groups — like the Tanzim, the militia of Arafat's Fatah Party — now are involved alongside Hamas and Islamic Jihad in a constant terror war against Israel. Elements of the Palestinian security forces, as well as Arafat's Force 17 presidential guard, also take part, according to Israeli security sources.

Moreover, Sharon sees the Hamas and Islamic Jihad activity as part of Arafat's strategy. Ostensibly in opposition to the Palestinian Authority, the fundamentalist factions are, in effect, active members in Arafat's "coalition of terror," Sharon says, a means of bleeding Israel while leaving Arafat ways to profess his innocence.

On Monday, Hamas activists protested Israel's assassination of a senior militant, Yakoub Dakidak.

As Dakidak's body was paraded through the streets of Hebron, the more militant Palestinian organizations seemed in no mood for peace.

In a manifest released Monday morning, Hamas and Islamic Jihad called upon all Palestinians to continue violence against Israel. Moreover, in interviews with Arab television networks, the groups announced that they refuse to obey Arafat's order against suicide bombings.

The premier's aides concede that Sharon promised President Bush not to harm Arafat physically or drive him out of the country. That, they say, is the meaning of the Cabinet's "irrelevancy" resolution: Arafat will not be attacked directly, but will simply be ignored and rendered meaningless.

The frustration with Arafat now affecting Washington, Europe and Jerusalem is shared even among some in Arafat's close coterie, Sharon's aides say.

"We are not going to intervene in who leads the Palestinians," the aides say. "But we hope he will be succeeded by someone ready to abandon terror, someone we can speak to. Meanwhile, if Arafat does not do the work of stopping terror, Israel will do it instead of him."

With this kind of mood at the top in Israel, there is little time left for Arafat to prove to the rest of the world — above all to Washington — that this time he is serious. Knowledgeable sources said Arafat's speech was sent to Washington for approval hours before it was recorded and broadcast.

Despite the U.S. veto on the stationing of international observers in the West Bank, America has myriad means to determine whether, at last, the Palestinian Authority is acting forcefully against terrorist groups.

"Revolving-door" jails — in which terrorists are imprisoned with great fanfare, then quietly released shortly afterward — are no longer featured only in Israeli rhetoric; their existence has been confirmed by American, British and other diplomats who will be watching to see if the latest wave of Palestinians arrested actually remain behind bars.

This is a defining moment, both for Arafat and for the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Sharon may be earnest when he talks of his desire to see the last of Arafat. But at the end of the day it will be difficult for him to effect that outcome if the American administration does not agree that Arafat has become dispensable.

Arafat's speech was his way of heading off that determination by Washington, but his word has become virtually worthless.

Now he will have to produce actions to convince the international community — if not Sharon — that this time he means business. □

(JTA correspondent Aaron Lightner in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)



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JEWISH WORLD

Refugees receive payments

Jewish refugees mistreated by Switzerland during the Holocaust began receiving compensation. Ninety-five people who were expelled or turned away at the Swiss border, or were abused in Swiss refugee camps, received the payments Monday from a Swiss fund.

The Claims Conference plans to make more payments as it processes nearly 4,400 applications.

Those denied entry to Switzerland or who were expelled from Switzerland during the war will receive \$2,500 each.

Those admitted to Switzerland but mistreated in refugee or labor camps there will receive \$500 each.

The payments come from a \$1.25 billion fund set up by Swiss banks in 1998 to settle a variety of Holocaust-related claims.

Jewish vets may be honored

The U.S. Congress passed a bill that would require the Defense Department to review the records of Jewish American servicemen.

The review will be made to see if any Jewish veterans are eligible for the Medal of Honor.

The bill, which passed both houses last week as part of the Defense Authorization Bill, addresses criticism that some Jewish servicemen were denied the medal because of their religion.

If President Bush signs the bill into law, the leaders of the Army, Navy and Air Force would be required to review the records of Jewish recipients of the Distinguished Service Cross, the Navy Cross and the Air Force Cross.

Lawmaker seeks Egyptian action

A U.S. lawmaker urged Egypt to clamp down on anti-Israel incitement in the Egyptian media. Rep. Steve Rothman (D-N.J.), who met with Egyptian leaders last week in Washington, also said Egypt needs to do more to control violence in the Middle East.

"The U.S. Congress will no longer tolerate Egypt's turning a blind eye to their anti-Israel media and the lack of visible and positive leadership in achieving a just and fair two-state solution," Rothman told JTA.

A member of the House's foreign operations appropriations subcommittee, the New Jersey representative said Egypt's lack of action "places into question the basis on which billions of dollars" of U.S. aid is given to the country.

Author Stefan Heym dies at 88

German Jewish author Stefan Heym died in Israel of heart failure. He was 88 years old.

Heym died while staying at a Dead Sea spa where he was to attend a conference on German poet Heinrich Heine.

American neo-Nazis link Israel to September attacks

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — An American neo-Nazi group is trying to foment anti-Semitism by linking Israel with the September terrorist attacks in the United States.

But Jewish and civil rights groups say the strategy of the National Alliance, a white supremacist group, isn't working.

Some 50 neo-Nazis rallied at the Israeli Embassy in Washington on Saturday, citing U.S. support for Israel as the reason for the terror attacks in New York and Washington.

An Israeli flag was shredded at the rally, but signs with slogans such as "Jews Control the Federal Reserve" showed the other messages of the hate group.

Anti-globalization and socialist groups challenged the neo-Nazis at a counter-demonstration.

The counter-demonstration was not organized by the embassy or by Jewish organizations.

Local Jewish and civil rights groups had asked community members to stay away from the protest and instead donate to causes that counter the message of groups that promote hate.

Thousands of dollars already have been raised by the effort so far, said David Bernstein, the Washington-area director of the American Jewish Committee.

Bernstein said the National Alliance is using the Palestinian cause as a pretext to blame Jews and Israel for terrorism in the United States.

"If they can create linkage between Israel and the World Trade Center attacks, they can foment hostility toward Jews," he said.

The hate group rallied at the same site in November and reportedly is planning future rallies as well.

The tactics of the National Alliance are not surprising since the group includes Israel in many of its conspiracy theories, said David Friedman, the director of the Washington regional office of the Anti-Defamation League.

They are seizing on the events of Sept. 11 because they want to manipulate and co-opt any issue they can, he said.

"Any way they can find to blame Israel, they'll pursue," Friedman said.

Friedman said the strategy the group is employing is not new but just gaining more media attention.

He also dismissed any notion that the group's strategy merits any rethinking of Jewish response.

On its Web site, the National Alliance has issued a list of demands to the Israeli government, such as stopping the use of torture, assassination and murder as a matter of state policy.

The site says, "The freedom-loving people of the world are adamant that the Jewish state immediately cease its barbaric treatment of the people whose lands it occupies illegally! Israel's continued genocidal actions leave us no alternative but to call for a total end to all American economic and military aid to Israel!"

There are 180 active neo-Nazi hate groups in the United States, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups.

The National Alliance, headquartered in Hillsboro, W. Va., is one of the largest, with over 40 chapters across the country and some 1,000 members.

According to Heidi Beirich of the Southern Poverty Law Center, the National Alliance has not significantly increased its membership since the Sept. 11 attacks.

Other groups expressed outrage against Israel and Jews just after the terrorism, but the National Alliance is the only group that is rallying specifically on that basis, said Beirich, a senior writer for the center's Intelligence Report, a publication that tracks activities of hate groups.

But the National Alliance's effort to link Israel to the U.S. terrorism has not been very successful, she said.

Beirich said the group had planned a more widespread campaign to protest at different Israeli consulates around the country, but could not get enough participants to support the rallies. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Women of the Wall prepare to fight bill that would outlaw their prayer*By Jessica Steinberg*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A bill preventing women from conducting prayer services at the Western Wall has been postponed, but it's only a matter of time until the controversial issue explodes once again.

The legislation, crafted by members of the fervently Orthodox United Torah Judaism bloc, is an amendment to an existing bill forbidding mixed prayer at the Wall.

In the past, the issue has galvanized American Jews, who generally support religious pluralism in Israel. The new bill comes at a time when Israelis and Diaspora Jews are stressing the need to stand united as Israel faces Palestinian violence and diplomatic attempts to isolate the Jewish state.

The new legislation would forbid any religious ceremony at the Wall that involves women taking out a Torah scroll and reading from it, blowing the shofar or wearing a prayer shawl or tefillin.

According to the bill's original wording, violators would be imprisoned for seven years.

However, legislator Avraham Ravitz, one of the bill's sponsors, told JTA he thought imprisonment was "superfluous" and provocative. He said he encouraged the bill's author, Knesset Finance Committee chairman Ya'akov Litzman, to get rid of the imprisonment provision.

The Knesset was to vote on the bill Dec. 4, but the vote was postponed after a series of suicide bombings in Jerusalem and Haifa killed 26 Israelis. The vote is now slated to be held in the coming days. Even if it passes an initial vote, the bill would need three subsequent votes, known as readings, before becoming law.

The group has been fighting since the late 1980s for their right to pray in the manner they want at the holy site. Given the tense security situation now in Israel, they eschewed the type of public demonstrations they have mounted in the past.

"The last thing we wanted to do is demonstrate opposite the Knesset," said Jerusalem Council member Anat Hoffman, a leading member of Women of the Wall. "Israelis were too worried about a million other things to focus on this."

This time, Hoffman and several others launched a fax and letter campaign — primarily from American Jews — to key Israeli officials. Some 1,000 faxes were sent to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Justice Minister Meir Sheerit and Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg.

Officials from the Labor Party threatened to leave the government if the bill came to the Knesset.

The bill was postponed, but only temporarily. Women of the Wall and their supporters are taking credit for the deferment.

"Litzman caved," Hoffman said. "This isn't a victory, but we taught something to the bully of the Knesset."

As Ravitz sees it, he and fellow party members are not trying to be bullies, but they consider the spectacle of women reading from the Torah and donning religious articles typically worn by men as an affront to Jewish tradition.

"There are plenty of other places to pray, places to pray with a pure heart, places where God hears your voice," Ravitz said. "Why tease and bring up hatred and fighting?"

He said he does not necessarily want to pursue legislation, "but if we have to create a law, we will."

After years of legal wrangling, Israel's High Court of Justice issued a landmark ruling in May 2000 recognizing the right of Women of the Wall to hold prayer services at the Wall.

The government was given six months to implement the ruling. Instead, it asked the court to reconsider.

Nineteen months later, the sides continue to argue over whether the women must be allowed to pray right at the Wall, as they are demanding, or whether the ruling can be construed to have the group pray in a corner of the huge Western Wall plaza or at Robinson's Arch, on the southern side of the Wall.

For their part, the fervently Orthodox legislators who proposed the bill do not want Women of the Wall anywhere near the area.

In the meantime, the women meet once a month, praying quietly together at the Wall, without prayer shawls or tefillin.

When it's time to read the Torah, they retire to a courtyard in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City.

The latest prayer session came Sunday, when about 50 women gathered for a 7 a.m. service at the Wall to usher in the month of Tevet. Police call the group before the start of each Hebrew month to learn if they are planning to gather at the Wall.

Standing close together, huddling against the chill morning air, the group of women attracted little attention aside from a group of photographers and a knot of police there for protection.

"Nothing's happened, because everyone's getting used to us being here," a spokeswoman for Women of the Wall said. "There's a discreet understanding between the court and the police and us — and slowly, slowly people are not so harshly against us."

In order to prevent tensions, the women pray in low voices, their singing almost inaudible.

"We're barely singing," one young woman complained. "So what's the point? Just to stand together here as a group?"

An older woman told her to be patient.

Hoffman, however, said the group may win some battles but ultimately will lose the war.

"This law will be passed," she said. "I'm sure of it."

When the bill comes up again, political observers predict that many Likud legislators will absent themselves in order to distance themselves from the issue and avoid conflict with the fervently Orthodox politicians.

The bill has "a good chance of passing, at least through the first reading," said Rabbi Andrew Sacks, director of the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly of Israel.

Ravitz said he didn't know about the campaign, but thinks it is a good idea to involve the greater Jewish world in the issue.

"I think the Knesset needs to think about the Jews of the world, and how matters here concern them," he said. "We don't need to do what they think, but to realize that we're all partners in what happens here."

To help with the fax and letter campaign, Sacks had access to some 700 rabbis, most of them in North America, through Ravnet, the e-mail database of the Rabbinical Assembly, as well as to some 4,000 subscribers to the movement's newsletter in Israel.

Also involved in the campaign were Rahel Jaskow, an American who made aliyah in 1991, and Hinda Gross, a former president of Hadassah Israel.

"I e-mailed everybody I knew," said Jaskow, a singer who manages a Web sites for women's prayer groups. "It went out amazingly quickly to a huge number of people."

For Jaskow, her involvement in Women of the Wall is about prayer, not politics. "I'm the one who reminds everyone that even with all the politics, we are still a prayer group," Jaskow said. □