



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 79, No. 236

Tuesday, December 25, 2001

84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Arafat blasts Israel on Christmas

Yasser Arafat said Israel's refusal to permit him to go to Bethlehem for Christmas is a "crime."

The Palestinian leader said the "aggressor's oppressive guns" are preventing him from attending Midnight Mass in the West Bank city where tradition says Jesus was born.

Israel said it didn't allow Arafat to attend because he has not done enough to rein in terrorism.

Sharon admits he OK'd talks

Ariel Sharon said he approved recent high-level contacts with the Palestinians.

In a joint statement with Foreign Minister Shimon Peres on Monday, the Israeli prime minister said he agreed to Peres' contacts with leading Palestinian officials.

The aims of the talks, the statement said, were to bring a halt to terrorism and then work toward resuming diplomatic negotiations.

U.S. pressing Arab states

The United States is reportedly pressing Syria and Lebanon to crack down on terrorism.

U.S. officials have informed Syria and Lebanon that they must end all support for Hezbollah and for Palestinian terror groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, that operate within their borders.

U.S. pressure is expected to intensify as the war in Afghanistan winds down.

Israeli shot in West Bank

An Israeli was seriously wounded by Palestinian gunmen in the West Bank.

The attack near Nablus was the first such attack in a week.

At that time, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat called for an end to violence.

Members of Yasser Arafat's Fatah Party claimed responsibility for the attack.

A spokesman for the group said the attack came in response to Israel's refusal to allow the Palestinian leader attend Midnight Mass in Bethlehem.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Wednesday, Dec. 26.

NEWS ANALYSIS

With revelation of new peace plan, Sharon struggles to bridge left, right

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's high-wire act was exposed in all its fragility this week by revelations of a new peace plan devised by Shimon Peres and the speaker of the Palestinian Parliament.

When details of the plan leaked over the weekend, Sharon blasted it as "seriously harmful to Israel." Right-wing ministers who remember how Peres, the foreign minister, foisted the Oslo accords on Yitzhak Rabin — accords that the right regards as an unmitigated disaster — demanded that Peres be fired.

Yet it was Peres who finally brought Sharon around.

Threatening to pull his Labor Party out of the national unity government, Peres forced Sharon to admit on Monday that he had been aware all along of the talks with veteran Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Karia, and that he had approved them.

Fighting to control the damage, Sharon's office said Monday that the talks were intended only to promote a cease-fire between Israel and the Palestinians.

The flap over the peace plan highlights the political balancing act Sharon is engaged in as he tries both to keep his coalition together and deal with the Palestinians.

In any case, that disagreement came amid an international controversy over whether Israel would allow Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to attend Christmas Eve celebrations in Bethlehem, an event watched by the entire Christian world.

Since taking office last March, Sharon has insisted that Israel will not conduct diplomatic negotiations with the Palestinians as long as attacks on Israel continue.

Peres, on the other hand, argues that Israel must show the Palestinians the promise of diplomatic gains if it wants them to stop attacking Israel.

In this case, it seems that Peres' worldview has trumped Sharon's.

The talks that Sharon claims were limited only to a cease-fire instead produced a diplomatic plan that is roiling Jerusalem.

Under the plan, as leaked Sunday to the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot, the two sides would enforce a cease-fire outlined by CIA Director George Tenet and begin immediately to implement the recommendations of the U.S.-sponsored Mitchell Committee.

That committee called on Israel to end its closures on Palestinian areas, freeze settlement activity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, transfer frozen funds to the Palestinian Authority and stop "targeted killings" of terrorists.

The Palestinian Authority is expected to crack down on terrorist groups, collect illegal weapons and create a single armed body in place of the current multiple factions whose lines of authority are unclear.

All this would take place within eight weeks, according to the Peres-Karia plan. Israel then would recognize a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and on the 42 percent of the West Bank where the Palestinians already exercise full or partial control.

That represents a turnaround from the traditional Israeli bargaining position, which had dangled the possibility of a Palestinian state as the end product of negotiations, thereby inducing the Palestinians to sign a final peace deal.

Under the new plan, statehood would become an immediate benefit to lure the Palestinians off the battlefield and back to the negotiating table.

Talks would then commence on the issues that derailed previous efforts to reach a peace accord — final borders, Jerusalem, refugees and other issues.

Israel would like to conclude those negotiations within one year, and then have two

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel nabs militants

Israel arrested two members of a Hamas cell allegedly responsible for a Haifa suicide bombing earlier this month.

The Shin Bet revealed Monday it had arrested two brothers from a village near the West Bank city of Jenin who are suspected of supplying the bomb used in the attack, which killed 10 people.

Mohammed and Yusuf al-Karam also are suspected of helping smuggle the suicide bomber into Israel. In addition, two Palestinians allegedly planning another suicide bomb attack in Haifa were arrested Monday.

Israeli Cabinet OKs budget

Israel's Cabinet approved a budget that includes nearly \$1.5 billion in cuts.

The budget, which passed the Cabinet by a 22-6 vote, now goes to the full Knesset.

Meanwhile, a majority of Israelis oppose the plan, according to a poll released Monday.

'Targeted killings' called illegal

Israel's policy of "targeted killings" of suspected Palestinian terrorists is illegal, a group of Israeli lawyers said.

The Israeli Bar Association's committee for civil rights likened the policy of assassinating Palestinian terrorists to executions without trial.

Afghans to welcome Israeli aid

Afghanistan's deputy president said her country would welcome Israeli humanitarian aid.

But Sima Samar said she would prefer that the aid come from nongovernmental agencies.

Samar, the only woman in Afghanistan's new government, said her country likely would consider diplomatic relations with Israel if Israel and the Palestinians come to a peace agreement.

years to implement the agreement. The Palestinians demand a shorter timetable: Nine months for talks, 18 months for implementation.

Peres told his Labor Party colleagues he believed the agreement could win full endorsement from both Israeli and Palestinian leaders "within weeks."

Others were not so sure, however.

Leading Labor dove Yossi Beilin called the plan "an idea that Arafat already rejected a month ago. Sharon has agreed with many things that he knows will not be implemented, because he has a tremendous interest in keeping Peres inside the government."

On the Palestinian side, Karia effectively confirmed the existence of the negotiating channel.

Other Palestinian sources, however, said their side demanded more than 42 percent of the West Bank even in the interim phase.

For public consumption, at least, Palestinian officials continued to insist that they would accept nothing less than the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip and half of Jerusalem.

Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo told the Jerusalem Post that the plan was just another means of "legalizing the occupation."

"This is another form of the prolonged interim solution, which will reinforce the present situation and enable Israel to annex most of the Palestinian territory," he said.

In his party briefings, Peres insisted that Sharon was fully apprised of the negotiations, despite the premier's initial protestations.

Peres was so incensed at Sharon's lying that he reportedly threatened to have Labor vote against the budget. Failure to pass a budget by Dec. 31 is considered a major sign of weakness in a prime minister, and can mark the beginning of the end for a government.

The budget ultimately passed the Cabinet on Monday night, but the prime minister's about-face followed the noises from the Peres camp.

Israel Radio reported that top Sharon aides claimed they had been "forced" to attack the Peres-Karia negotiations in order to curry favor with "other elements" in the coalition. Such accusations seemed likely, in turn, to arouse anger on the far right, which also threatens Sharon.

There is a steady drumbeat of support within the rightist National Union-Israel, Our Home faction to secede from the government, and the latest Peres affair is likely to reinforce that demand. Binyamin Elon, the tourism minister and leader of that party, demanded that Peres be fired.

But it is from the left that Sharon is likely to face his most serious threat right now.

If — and it still a big if — Palestinian violence continues to subside, and if Arafat continues to convince American and European observers that he is at last taking meaningful steps against terror groups, the onus will be on Sharon to show that he is serious about pursuing peace.

If Sharon hesitates, the secessionist pressures in Labor may grow too strong for even the most pro-unity elements in the party to resist.

Sharon's turnabout Monday appeared to avert the immediate danger of a split in the government.

But seasoned observers suggested that the tensions exposed by news of the Peres-Karia negotiations had brought a split much closer.

For example, Avraham Burg, the Knesset speaker and a leading Labor dove, called Monday for his party to secede from the coalition at once.

Until now, Peres has been reluctant to join the doves demanding secession. The fact that he allowed himself to be quoted Monday uttering such a threat might indicate a sea-change in Labor's internal balance of power.

Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, who also has consistently supported Labor's presence in the unity government, warned Sunday that he would resign "if Arafat makes serious and effective efforts to curb the terror and the government ignores them."

On Monday, Ben-Eliezer told the Cabinet that Palestinian attacks had declined sharply.

Still, Ben-Eliezer was not yet prepared to say that Arafat had made a "strategic decision" to rein in the terrorists and prevent attacks both inside Israel and against Israelis in the territories. □



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

Searching for God on the Net

One in four American Internet users use the Web for religious purposes.

Some 28 million Americans have looked for spiritual information online, according to a study released Sunday.

Religious uses are more popular than online activities such as banking, gambling and stock trading, the poll said. In addition, one out of four users sought online information on Islam after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Hate music lands producer in jail

A right-wing extremist was convicted of inciting racial hatred by producing anti-Semitic music.

A German court sentenced a 26-year-old man to two years in jail for producing 10,000 CDs of banned neo-Nazi music.

Prosecutors said the song lyrics promote racial hatred and call for the murder of Jews and Turks.

S.F. attack under investigation

An Orthodox Jew in a liberal San Francisco suburb says he was punched on his way to Shabbat services.

Jason "Yakov" Ashworth says a man dressed like a black Muslim attacked him on a recent Friday afternoon in Berkeley, Calif.

Police are investigating the incident. Ashworth is a kosher overseer in for the Va'ad Hakashrus of Northern California.

Moldovan Jews fight missionaries

Moldovan Jewish leaders formed an anti-missionary organization. The Magen League of Moldova in Kishinev was created last week after similar groups formed earlier this year in Russia and Ukraine.

Jerusalem Post gets new editor

The Jerusalem Post newspaper named a new editor. Bret Stephens, an editorial page writer for the Wall Street Journal Europe, will become the new editor of Israel's largest English-language daily.

The current editor of the Post, Jeff Barak, will become deputy editor of the Jewish Chronicle in London.

French Bible gets hip

A rap translation of the Bible is No. 5 on France's best-seller list.

The 3,200-page book is translated in a French similar to rap music, according to London's Electronic Telegraph. The new translation, which has sold 140,000 copies, is reportedly the first new translation of the Bible in 30 years.

Sept. 11 gives extra meaning to ceremony at Wall Street shul

By Amy Sara Clark

NEW YORK (JTA) — Usually dedicated to recently deceased loved ones, services at the Wall Street Synagogue marking the completion of studying a Talmud section are moving under any circumstances.

But last week's ceremony was even more poignant because it was dedicated to victims of the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

The gesture was particularly appropriate: The Orthodox synagogue, located just four blocks from Ground Zero, lost several congregants in the attacks. The synagogue also has close relations with its next-door neighbor, a firehouse that lost four men in the attacks.

At the Dec. 17 service, attended by 30 men in the tiny synagogue, the last few lines of the tract, Berachos, were read and discussed.

Synagogue members who were lost on Sept. 11 were mentioned, and an extended eulogy was given for Herman (Chaim) Shlomo Sandler, the founder of the law firm Sandler O'Neill and a longtime member and supporter of the shul.

Shalom Berger, who read the conclusion of Tractate Berachos, said he was glad the service was dedicated to the attack victims.

"We smelled the smells from 9-11 every day since that time and it hangs over us a great deal," he said. "I think it added an extra dimension to this siyum," as the service was called.

In addition to backing the synagogue, Sandler also supported several other causes, including Jewish federations, the American Jewish Committee and the Rainforest Foundation.

The synagogue also lost Jeffrey Chernoff and Thomas Glasser from Sandler O'Neill and William Spitz and David T. Weiss of the bond-trading firm Cantor Fitzgerald, who were all financial supporters of the shul.

The congregation also lost the son of Sheldon Rosenberg, one of its members.

Hager says he had had a special fondness for the Twin Towers since 1981, when he held a ceremony to make a "birkas hachama" on the center's observation deck.

Birkas hachama is a blessing made when the sunrise, sun, moon and planets are aligned in exactly the same position they were believed to be in at the time of Creation. Such a celestial alignment happens every 28 years.

"It was felt that it has more meaning when you're close to the sun," Hager said, explaining his decision to hold the birkas hachama service atop the towering World Trade Center. Hager also used to conduct a menorah-lighting ceremony each year in the lobby of Two World Trade Center.

On Sept. 11, Hager was standing outside — soon after morning services had ended — when the first plane hit. When the first tower collapsed, "the whole street became full of ashes and it was like a snow, exactly like a snow," Hager said.

Throngs were already streaming past the synagogue, and many had already come in to use the telephone and bathrooms.

Hager, who had pre-existing respiratory problems, found it difficult to breathe, so he began walking away from the site, leaving the shul unlocked.

Many people also came to the synagogue that morning to pray, until the lights went out and people had to leave.

The synagogue itself remained intact, though it couldn't function because it lacked electricity and phone service. Despite the difficulties, the rabbi was determined to hold Shabbat services for congregants who lived across the street. Rosh Hashanah was tough.

"People had bought seats and were counting on us," Hager said. Con Edison, the local electric company, hooked up a generator so the shul could hold services — not just for Rosh Hashanah, but until regular electrical service could be restored.

Since the attacks, attendance at daily services has risen by about 20 percent, Hager said.

Despite the memorial service, the rabbi said he does not yet feel a sense of closure about the tragedy of Sept. 11.

"It's hard to have closure when people are not found," Hager said, "but it's part of the mourning process." □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Economic crisis turns dreams into nightmares for Argentine Jews

By Florencia Arbiser

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Like the more than 2 million Jews who came to the United States at the turn of the 20th century in search of the American dream, thousands went further south — to Argentina — hoping to find a brighter future.

Now, with Argentina in the throes of a wrenching political and economic crisis, the immigrants' descendants find their dreams shattered.

Israel has responded with a plan to encourage immigration to the Jewish state, and the first wave of Argentine emigrants since the crisis arose were expected to arrive this week.

But it is not clear how many of the 220,000 Jews in Argentina — 50,000 of whom live below the poverty line — will take advantage of the incentives.

Ironically, a major conference on Jewish poverty concluded here just days before the president of the country, Fernando de la Rúa, was forced out amid charges of a corrupt government and a collapsing economy.

A caretaker president, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, took over Sunday, after several days of rioting and civil unrest. A special election has been slated for March.

The conference earlier this month, "Confronting Poverty: Solutions, Experiences and Projects," was organized by the Latin American Jewish Congress, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Tzedaka Foundation and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Several Jewish organizations are assisting families in economic need, but the resources are limited, aid workers say.

Most of the families seeking assistance are considered "new poor," people who used to belong to the middle class but were harmed by the economic and political policies the government implemented in the 1990s.

These policies — while they led to some short-term gains — had negative longer term effects. Many middle-class Argentines lost jobs, closed shops, went into debt and auctioned off their houses. Small businessmen, small industrialists, state employees, professionals — all were affected.

"Members of the Jewish community are the test case of these policies, as they were on the front line of these politics and measures" because they are disproportionately represented in the middle class, said Bernardo Kliksberg, head of the Inter-American Initiative for Social Capital, Ethics and Development at the Inter-American Development Bank.

"In the 1990s, 7 million middle-class Argentines became poor," Kliksberg said, adding that only 25 percent of today's Argentina is middle class, as opposed to 53 percent in 1960.

At the unemployment office of the AMIA community center — the most important in the country for the Jewish community — the situation is changing dramatically. AMIA has received 500 work applications a month in 2001, compared with 1,000 for all of 2000. Some 70 percent of the applications are coming from the young generation, according to Kliksberg.

"The situation is alarming — in the last two years, social assistance grew from 4,000 cases to 20,000," he said.

Tzedaka, a Jewish organization dedicated to social assistance, estimates that it will help 3,553 families this year, with another 80

families on a waiting list to receive help. AMIA is helping 1,500 families this year, said Elida Kisluk, director of AMIA's social action department, said. The JDC and Chabad-Lubavitch also are helping with special programs.

The organizations provide credit for building or repairing houses, paying rent, buying food and medicine and getting psychological assistance, as well as grants for clubs, schools, recreational and cultural events. But that often isn't enough, which is leading many Argentine Jews to consider emigration.

So far this year, about 1,500 Argentine Jews have immigrated to Israel, a 30 percent increase over last year. Jewish Agency for Israel officials estimate that number may double next year, depending on how the situation in Argentina plays out.

Meeting in emergency session Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Sallai Meridor, head of the Jewish Agency, decided to offer Argentine immigrants a package of special benefits, valid for the next year.

Each immigrant family will receive financial aid of up to \$20,000 for purchasing an apartment. Two-thirds of the sum will be given as a loan; the rest will be a grant.

In addition, each family will receive a \$2,500 relocation grant, in addition to the regular benefits new immigrants receive.

Some 63 new immigrants were expected to arrive in Israel on Tuesday.

Susana and Ricardo Schatz, far from achieving the dreams that they and many Jewish Argentines once had, hope that Israel will provide them new opportunities.

The 1980s were good years for the Schatzes, who are in their 40s. They ran their own clothing business and employed a small staff. They traveled around Argentina and to Brazil.

At the beginning of the 1990s, however, their business went into the red. They lost clients because of competition with bigger shops, and started to write checks that couldn't be covered by the funds coming in. They took on more debt until they had to close the business. When their mortgage payments became too high, they lost the property at auction.

They moved in with family members and now sell manufactured goods to retail shops. But the factories they work for are behind on their payments to the Schatzes. They pawn whatever jewelry they have. Their children go to Jewish schools on grants.

With almost no income, the Schatzes cannot even accept a grant to start renting an apartment, because they won't be able to make subsequent payments.

Yet they rejected the food box Tzedaka offered.

"We know we are poor from here," Susana said, putting her hand on her pocket. "But we couldn't accept a donation."

Other families opt for other places, like the United States or Canada. Cynthia and Javier Szkop, both in their mid-30s, are one of many families with children at the Jewish Emanul-El school that has decided to leave Argentina.

Cynthia Szkop trained as a kindergarten teacher and Javier has a degree in computers.

She was laid off from a Jewish school, along with 100 other employees, in a downsizing last March. Javier feels he doesn't have good professional horizons in Argentina.

"We are tired of arguing between us at the end of every month because we don't know how to do magic and pay the bills," Cynthia said. "We could send our kids to a worse school, but we don't want to reduce our standards for a good Jewish education."

When their papers are ready, the Szkops are planning to move to Canada. □