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84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Six Palestinians die in clashes

Israel killed six Palestinians in two separate incidents in the Gaza Strip.

In one of Sunday's incidents, Israeli anti-terror forces killed three Palestinians who were attempting to cross a border fence that separates Gaza and Israel.

The Palestinians reportedly refused a call to stop and began shooting.

The three, who had explosive devices strapped to their bodies, according to Israel Radio, were killed by return fire.

Earlier in the evening, Israeli forces killed three armed Palestinians in a gun battle in northern Gaza.

Envoy may return to Mideast

U.S. envoy Anthony Zinni is expected to return to the Middle East soon.

The Palestinians want Zinni to declare an end to the seven-day quiet period that Israel has demanded as a condition for implementing cease-fire agreements.

Palestinian sources said Zinni could return as soon as Wednesday, but Israeli sources do not expect the envoy in the region before the weekend.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell discussed Israeli-Palestinian violence in phone calls last Friday with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

Sharon told Powell that despite a recent decrease in violent incidents, Arafat has not yet decided to clamp down on terrorism.

Book burners suspended

The Israeli principal and sixth-grade teacher responsible for burning a New Testament at their religious school were suspended.

Israel's Education Ministry said the two will remain suspended until a disciplinary committee makes a final decision on the matter.

The director general of the Education Ministry, Ronit Tirosh, said she is "shocked by educators lending a hand to book burning, especially a religious book."

Because of the New Year's holiday, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Wednesday, Jan. 2.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Nazareth mosque dispute leaves Israel in an uncomfortable position

By Aaron Lightner

NAZARETH (JTA) — A long-standing dispute between Muslims and Christians here over the building of a mosque next to the Church of the Annunciation is fast entangling the Israeli government, whose attempts to mollify the situation have served only to ignite it.

The implications may be grave as this Muslim-Christian conflict reignites now, while Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon weathers international criticism for barring Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat from Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem. And they stretch far beyond this sleepy Galilee city of 70,000.

Virtually all the Christian denominations in Israel convened in Jerusalem two weeks ago to present a united front against the building of a mosque on a plot originally slated to become a municipal square. In addition, the Vatican has condemned Israel's decision to allow the mosque to be built.

The dispute comes as the Jewish state and the Palestinian Authority, which is predominantly Muslim, spar for the title of protector of Christian holy sites in the Holy Land. If built, the mosque will sit at the foot of the Church of the Annunciation, one of the holiest sites in Christendom and a Nazareth landmark since its completion in 1968.

"This is the first time in 500 years that the churches posed a united front on any one issue, so grave is the situation," said Danny Kopp, a spokesman for the Coalition of Churches.

To varying degrees, almost every Christian denomination is involved, from the Catholic representative of Palestinian nationalism, Michel Sabbah, to the Christian Zionists.

"At first," Kopp said, "Sharon was promising that this project would be scrapped only over his dead body, but when" the Islamic Movement in Israel "began to build, we were forced to regroup."

Two weeks ago, after an intense letter-writing campaign to the U.S. Senate initiated by the coalition's American chapter, a court order was issued to stop the building.

Preceding this move were two conversations President Bush held with Sharon urging him to stop the mosque project. The pressure seemed to have worked.

Despite the court order, however, building continued on the Nazareth mosque even on Christmas Day, according to a JTA investigation.

Fearing a Muslim backlash, Israeli police refused to intervene, even after the Coalition of Churches filed numerous complaints, Kopp said.

The government's greatest fear is that the churches would not support it even if construction was halted and rioting started, said Raphael Israeli of the Hebrew University, one of four members on a 1998 commission of inquiry that studied the dispute.

Riots last October in which police killed 13 Israeli Arabs only intensifies the fear.

The sad fact is that failure to stop construction "will bring unrest to all of the Christian organizations in the world," Israeli said. "But the Muslims would also despise Israel, because it used force and because it had once submitted, which is a sign of odious weakness" in Muslim eyes.

Israeli, the only commission member to vote against construction of the mosque, believes that Israel must remove the Islamic Movement from the lot, "even by force, even if the cost is high."

Elana Kaufman, an expert on Arab political behavior at Tel Aviv University,

MIDEAST FOCUS

Report: Ze'evi murderers arrested

The Palestinian Authority arrested four suspects in the October murder of Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi.

The four members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were arrested in the West Bank.

The Popular Front has demanded their immediate release, Israel's Army Radio reported. The Israeli government last week banned Yasser Arafat from attending Christmas Mass in Bethlehem, saying the Palestinian Authority president must arrest Ze'evi's murderers.

Israel said the four arrested over the weekend were involved in the assassination, but were not the killers.

Negotiations with Syria?

Israel reportedly sent several messages to Syria recently regarding the possibility of resuming peace negotiations.

The messages were passed via Arab and Muslim leaders during the past few months. They called on Syria to rein in Hezbollah and return to peace talks, the Ma'ariv newspaper reported.

In the wake of the messages, Israeli sources detected a "slight shift" in Syria's attitude toward Hezbollah. The paper said that while Syria did not agree to renew negotiations, intelligence information that reached Israel indicated that fewer arms are being transferred from Iran to Hezbollah via Damascus.

Israeli body found in cave

The body of a Jewish settler was discovered in a West Bank cave. Israeli security forces arrested three Palestinians suspected of involvement in the murder of Zion Ohana, who went missing two weeks ago. Police believe Ohana was killed during an attempt to steal his car, the newspaper Ma'ariv reported.



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believes that realpolitik, not legality, informed the government's decision.

"In a way, the government thought the Muslim list would throw some precious votes their way. Or they thought the favor would somehow be returned, perhaps by a pacification of rhetoric," she said. "But apparently that is not the case."

The man in charge of the mosque has vowed to see the construction through at any cost. Salman Abu Ahmad, the city's deputy mayor and the head of the Islamic Movement's political wing, sits in an easy chair in the Islamic Movement tent on the disputed lot. Abu Ahmad sees only one catalyst for the controversy — "international pressure" born of growing anti-Islamic sentiment in the West.

"What, is Bush crazy?" Ahmad asked. "What does Bush or the pope have to do with local building policies? Are we the only city in the world that has a mosque near a church? The way they are treating this issue it is as if we are going to be the next target after Afghanistan or Iraq."

When asked why construction continued, despite the court order against it, Abu Ahmad said, "it's not construction. It's nothing more than maintenance."

Abu Ahmad claims the land has been in Muslim hands for centuries.

"What, did the Jews bring this land with them from Poland?" he asked. "No, this land belonged to the Wakf," the religious trust that administers Islamic holy sites. "It was Palestinian land before 1948. There was a Muslim school here, which I attended, and inside that was always a mosque."

Not so, claims Uri Mor, former director of the Christian communities department at the Religious Affairs Ministry. Until the municipality planned the city square in 1997, the site was a dilapidated lot of no interest to the Islamic Movement, Mor said.

"Only 200 of the 700 meters of that plot belong to the Wakf. That is a fact, and it is for the government only to decide what to do with it," he said.

The government's most grievous mistake was its failure to consult the Christian community until it had already ceded the land, Mor said. When the Islamic Movement launched a "pogrom" against the Christian community in Nazareth in March 1999, the government should have clamped down, and "kicked the Islamists out," he said.

Kaufman believes the Islamic Movement's efforts to build a mosque on the site are politically motivated.

"It is not about religion, which is used as a battle standard by the Islamic side of the conflict," she said. "This is a sectarian dispute in which the Muslims fill the middle and lower classes, and finally felt powerful enough to take control of the city from the upper-class Christians."

Kaufman says the mosque is becoming the battle standard of the Islamic Movement in Israel, and that Arab Knesset members, who might otherwise have been sympathetic to the Christian cause, are being swept away by their increasingly radicalized electorate.

Abu Ahmad expressed amazement that international pressure from the church coalition could overturn the findings of a ministerial committee, headed by Internal Security Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami when Ehud Barak was Israel's prime minister.

"Both the right-wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu and the left-wing Barak government agreed to this, so I ask you, why is our permit being blocked, why do we have to appeal before the High Court of Justice?" Abu Ahmad asked. "Is this the first mosque to be built near a church?"

For the Coalition of Churches, the issue has nothing to do with building mosques.

"The main issue is that a group known for its violent practices and suppression of Christians and moderate Muslims is given a governmental kosher stamp for stealing land," Kopp said.

"This an obvious green light for them to continue bullying and intimidation, and the police do nothing," he said. "If we don't stop this Taliban-like group, it will be encouraged to continue abusing Christians, who are a minority within a minority."

Revoking the "kosher stamp" for the mosque will not be easy.

"If someone threatens to take away our land, that we cannot accept. We will launch a 50,000 person general strike, we will sit in front of the Prime Minister's Office, we will do everything — everything — in our power to stop that," Abu Ahmad warned.

Implicit in his words is a threat that the backlash from ending the mosque project could be used as a platform for another riot of Israel's Arab citizens, Mor said.

"Israel is stuck in the middle, with the Muslims and Christians breathing down its neck — and the whole world watching in anger." □

JEWISH WORLD

Saudis: Jews taking over world

A Saudi government paper accused the Jews of a "hellish plan to take over the world."

One article in the two-part series, which appeared earlier this month in the government-controlled newspaper *Al-Watan*, ran under the headline, "The Jewish organizations are implementing their strategic hellish plan to take over the world."

The Anti-Defamation League criticized Saudi leaders for "giving free reign to anti-Semitic canards and fostering hatred."

"Despite all that has taken place in the world since Sept. 11, the message apparently has not gotten through to the Saudi leadership," ADL National Director Abraham Foxman said.

Meanwhile, the *Al-Ilm* scientific journal, which is sponsored by the Egyptian government, accused "Jewish tourists infected with AIDS" of "traveling around Asian and African countries with the aim of spreading the disease."

Guilty plea in nuclear trigger case

An American man pleaded guilty to exporting potential nuclear triggers to Israel.

Richard Kelly Smyth, 72, who skipped bail in 1985, was discovered living in Spain and extradited to the United States in November.

Last Friday he pleaded guilty in a U.S. court to illegally shipping some 800 krytrons — two-inch-long glass bulbs, whose applications range from high-speed photo copying to nuclear bomb triggers — to Israel in the early 1980s.

Israel returned most of the krytrons after Smyth's 1985 indictment, and has maintained that they were never intended for nuclear weapons.

Child survivors may miss money

Thousands of Israeli child survivors of the Holocaust may not receive reparations money because of bureaucratic incompetence.

The Union of Organizations of Holocaust Survivors failed to inform the child survivors that they were eligible for a German fund established in August 2000.

Howard Squadron dead at 75

Howard Squadron, a former president of the American Jewish Congress, died at age 75.

Squadron, who died Dec. 26, served for two years as chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

An influential lawyer in New York, Squadron represented media mogul Rupert Murdoch and served as an adviser to former mayor David Dinkins and Donna Shalala, then president of Hunter College, who later became secretary of health and human services in the Clinton administration.

French Jews strike a blow against denying the Holocaust

By Andrew Diamond

PARIS (JTA) — French Jews have won an important victory in their struggle against Holocaust deniers. On Dec. 20, a coalition of five Jewish organizations — including the Union of French Jewish Students, or UEJF; the League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism, known as LICRA; and Memory 2000 — reached an agreement with France's most popular encyclopedia about its use of the work of Robert Faurisson, the father of French Holocaust denial.

The Jewish groups had filed a motion in a Paris court to force the editors of *Quid* to remove its reference to Faurisson from future editions. The two parties managed to arrive at a settlement before the court could decide the issue.

According to the arrangement, *Quid* will remove Faurisson's account of the number of Jewish deaths at Auschwitz from all future print editions and from its Internet site.

A former professor at the University of Lyon 2, Faurisson was condemned in a French court and removed from his post for disseminating scholarship radically minimizing the death count at Auschwitz and arguing that Jews there died of typhus and malnutrition, not at the hands of the Nazis.

According to the arrangement, *Quid* will drop its mention of these ideas in its historical section on the Holocaust, but will continue to present Faurisson's work in a more general description of Holocaust revisionism. However, the encyclopedia will include a reminder of Faurisson's condemnation as an addendum.

In addition to these revisions, *Quid* also must publicize the agreement by posting announcements in its 100 most important points of sale and in advertisements in the daily *Le Figaro* and in *Le Monde de l'Education*, a publication aimed at teachers and educational administrators.

The campaign against *Quid* is part of an ongoing battle waged by UEJF, LICRA, the anti-racist group *I Accuse* and a host of other organizations against Holocaust revisionism and neo-Nazism on the Internet and in French schools. A number of these groups pressured Yahoo France to bar the sale of Nazi memorabilia from its auction site.

More recently, an alliance of Jewish groups sought to force French Internet providers to stop users from accessing the American neo-Nazi Web portal *front14.org*, which supplies links to over three hundred neo-Nazi and xenophobic Web sites.

Following proceedings involving technicians, legal scholars and philosophers, the court decided that blocking the site would violate the Internet providers' "obligation of neutrality."

Quid represented a particularly important target of the groups' efforts, because the single volume encyclopedia is a fixture of French households.

"It's where French students go to find answers," commented Philip Aim, president of the Lyon section of the UEJF.

Aim and the rest of his group were especially pleased about removing Faurisson's theories. The Lyon chapter of the organization has led the charge over the last year to investigate the influence of extremist scholars at the University of Lyon, where Faurisson served as professor. Several weeks ago, the Ministry of Education yielded to their pressure by assigning an outside scholar to render a judgment on the situation. □

Holocaust remarks spark fight

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli Cabinet minister caused a furor when he said assimilation was worse than the Holocaust.

In remarks before world Orthodox leaders, Shas Party minister Nissim Dahan said assimilation, and not the Holocaust, was the worst catastrophe to beset the Jews. Dahan later defended his remarks on Israel Radio, saying that while the Holocaust was the greatest disaster in terms of human suffering, more Jews had been lost through assimilation. Yosef Lapid, leader of the Shinui Party, condemned Dahan's statements as a form of Holocaust denial.

That Dahan remains a government minister after making such remarks is a "terrible stain" on Israeli government and society, Lapid said. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

New Labor head Ben-Eliezer faces challenges within, without

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Benjamin Ben-Eliezer passed his first test as Labor Party leader on Sunday: He met privately with Shimon Peres, the foreign minister and Labor's elder statesman, and didn't quarrel with him.

"The question of who is Labor's 'representative minister' in the Cabinet? It didn't even come up," Ben-Eliezer remarked disingenuously after the meeting. "I'd be the last man in the world to harm Shimon's status and position."

It's not clear whether Peres will retain the title or whether — as Ben-Eliezer's aides suggest privately — Labor might have two "representative ministers" in the Cabinet. Either way, Peres will keep his prestige and Ben-Eliezer, without stirring up ill will, will assert his role as the new boss of the dispirited Labor Party.

The next test, though, might be harder to pass. If the recent decline in Palestinian violence continues and the U.S. peace envoy, retired Gen. Anthony Zinni, returns to the region to pursue a cease-fire agreement, matters could quickly come to a head between the two main parties in Israel's unity government.

Ben-Eliezer and Peres remain committed to the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

But the pressure from those in Labor who want the party to leave because of Sharon's handling of relations with the Palestinians might become too strong to resist.

In that case, Ben-Eliezer might find himself leading Labor into the opposition earlier than he wants, and preparing for new national elections.

Ben-Eliezer, 65, is a former brigadier-general in the Israel Defense Force who now serves as defense minister and the third member of the Inner Cabinet with Sharon and Peres. He assumed the Labor leadership last week amid an anemic show of support from his party's top echelon of ministers and Knesset members.

Dalia Rabin-Pelosoff, Ben-Eliezer's deputy at the Defense Ministry, was the only Labor leader who bothered to turn out for Ben-Eliezer's victory celebration Dec. 25.

A revote was held last week in some 50 polling stations after the initial September election was marred by allegations of fraud. When the Druse and Arab sectors decided to boycott the revote, Ben-Eliezer took the polling stations by a margin of 80 percent to 20 percent over Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg.

The margin may have been wide, but the turnout was tiny. The voters's message seemed to be apathy or, worse, antipathy toward the two candidates. Burg made matters worse by an ungracious speech at the party's Central Committee on Dec. 27, when he offered Ben-Eliezer mealy-mouthed congratulations.

He also urged Ben-Eliezer to "prepare the party" for another primary in one year's time, meaning that Burg plans to run when Labor chooses its prime ministerial candidate for national elections scheduled for 2003.

By Sunday, as Ben-Eliezer and Peres met, the sour-grapes sentiment about Ben-Eliezer's victory was dissipating.

Key party figures who had not supported Ben-Eliezer, such as Transport Minister Ephraim Sneh and former Interior Minister Haim Ramon, called for Labor to give Ben-Eliezer "a decent chance" to prove his mettle.

"Talking about a one-year temporary period is not the way to

heal and rebuild the party," Sneh said of Burg's comment. "It's not constructive, but destructive."

Ben-Eliezer, who was born in Iraq, speaks fluent Arabic and goes by the Arabic nickname "Fuad," is Labor's first Sephardic leader. He entered politics two decades ago as a member of the now-defunct Sephardic party Tami, and is thus something of an outsider among Labor veterans.

Labor doves — men like Yossi Beilin and Shlomo Ben-Ami — deprecate him as a hard-liner. Others disparage the heavyset Ben-Eliezer as an intellectual lightweight.

When he first threw his hat into the ring, the conventional wisdom was that Ben-Eliezer was functioning as a stalking horse for ex-Prime Minister Ehud Barak. In the unlikely event that Ben-Eliezer won, pundits said, he would "keep the seat warm" for Barak to make a comeback when the time was ripe.

But at last week's Central Committee meeting, Barak offered generous praise and warm wishes to Ben-Eliezer. Just as he and Peres had been defense minister, party leader and then prime minister, Barak said, so, too, did he hope that "Fuad" would win the premiership for Labor.

For his part, Ben-Eliezer has moved discernibly leftward in recent weeks, aiming to position himself in the party's mainstream. He has mused aloud about the possibility that Labor might have to leave the government if it becomes possible to resume peace talks but Sharon drags his heels.

He has publicly supported Peres' ongoing negotiations with the speaker of the Palestinian parliament, Ahmed Karia, despite Sharon's reservations.

And he has said he would be among the most generous Israeli leaders in peace talks — provided he was convinced the Palestinians' wish for reconciliation was genuine. Ben-Eliezer has warned that Labor might not be able to support the prime minister's economic policies indefinitely.

But it is on the peace front that he will face his toughest in-house challenge.

Beilin has convinced enough Central Committee members to convene a special session on Jan. 17, and his supporters have plastered the country with posters predicting that Labor will leave the government then.

That prediction is probably premature. But the new Labor leader will face constant urgings, before and after that session, to formulate an alternative to Sharon's mantra of "no negotiations under fire."

To sharpen the differences and mount an effective challenge to Likud in the next election, pundits say Labor presumably will part company with Sharon sooner or later.

Ben-Eliezer's task will be to choose the right moment, and the right issue on which to walk out. □

Israeli officers fear charges

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli army officers fear traveling abroad over concern they may face war crimes charges.

Several senior officers have consulted the army's advocate general prior to taking private trips abroad because of concerns they may be vulnerable to legal action over their involvement in the current fighting in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Ha'aretz reported.

The concern comes after war crimes suits were filed in Belgium against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. An Israeli army spokesman said no officers were advised to avoid travel. □