



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 80, No. 19

Tuesday, January 29, 2002

85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Wall may cut Jerusalem in half

Israel's Cabinet is slated to consider Tuesday whether to build a wall through the center of Jerusalem to deter terror.

The plan, drafted by the National Security Council, would include a 6.5-mile wall separating eastern and western Jerusalem, as well as checkpoints and sensors to detect infiltrators.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Cabinet is unlikely to approve the plan, Ha'aretz reported, to avoid appearing to divide Jerusalem as it was before Israel conquered the eastern part of the city in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Middle East envoys to meet

Three Middle East envoys are expected to meet U.S. officials in Washington to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Andrei Vdovin of Russia, Terje Roed-Larsen of the United Nations and Miguel Angel Moratinos of the European Union will meet Assistant Secretary of State William Burns Thursday.

The envoys are likely to press the United States to resume high-level mediation in the conflict after the Bush administration's decision last week to suspend the mission of the U.S. envoy, Anthony Zinni.

Palestinian killed after car chase

A Palestinian man was shot dead after injuring three Israelis in hit-and-run attacks.

In what Israeli police say was a terror attack, the Palestinian burst through an Israeli army roadblock near Kalkilya early Monday, striking and moderately injuring a soldier.

Fire guts Detroit Jewish paper

The offices of the Detroit Jewish News, one of the largest Jewish newspapers in North America, suffered extensive damage in a fire Sunday. No one was injured in the accidental fire, which was caused by electrical wiring.

The 60-year-old weekly, which is based in a suburb northwest of Detroit, will publish this Friday as usual, with staff working from a nearby hotel, Editor Robert Sklar said. Owned by Jewish Renaissance Media, in which Jewish mega-philanthropist Michael Steinhardt is a partner, the paper has a staff of 50 and a weekly readership of 50,000.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Battered by terror, city center in Jerusalem struggles to survive

By Aaron Lightner

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Eight recent terror attacks in the heart of downtown Jerusalem have reduced a bustling economic zone to an economic no-man's land.

On Sunday, a Palestinian woman exploded a bomb near the crossroads of Jaffa Road and King George Street, killing an elderly man and injuring more than 125 people.

The force of the blast shattered the glass storefronts of 60 shops and sent merchandise ranging from diapers to diamond rings flying across shop floors.

As usual in Jerusalem, life returned to a tense normality on Monday. Pedestrians crunched on glass as they made their way past police barricades and battered stores that looked like beaten, toothless boxers.

Whatever bloodstains and bits of flesh remained after the cleaning crew's sandblasters had passed were washed away by the heavy winter rains.

In an effort to revive downtown Jerusalem's economy, Mayor Ehud Olmert held discussions Monday with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Finance Minister Silvan Shalom on possible rescue plans for Jaffa Road, the city's main thoroughfare.

Olmert demanded that businesses in the city center receive discounts on property tax or sales tax exemptions. Olmert also asked Sharon to provide Jerusalem residents with "income tax points" similar to those given to Negev and Galilee residents.

But for many with businesses in the heart of the city, the effort comes too late.

"For many of us, business is no longer profitable," said Zion Barsheshe, leaning heavily on the counter of the Coffee Time cafe. Barsheshe used to employ more than 60 people in his three stores near Zion Square, at the bottom of the Ben Yehuda Street pedestrian mall.

"Now I have five people working here. I've paid \$350,000 out of my own pocket to keep these places afloat since the intifada started" in September 2000, he said. "But now the banks are breathing down my neck, and I've had to close one of the places.

"Hell, I don't even let my own children come down here, so how can I expect tourists to come?" he asked.

Filling in for his boss, Micky Levy — who suffered a massive heart attack after the bombing — Jerusalem's deputy police commander, Ilan Franco, tried to soothe shopkeepers' frayed nerves on Monday.

Undercover and regular police are "maximally deployed in order to prevent another attack in this hard-hit area," Franco said on a visit to downtown.

Due to continued warnings of attacks, there seemed to be more border police patrolling the streets on Monday than customers. Soldiers armed with M-16s and wearing neon yellow winter gear prowled the rooftops of buildings, looking down upon what has become known as "the terrorists' intersection" at the corner of Jaffa Road and King George Street.

"Our preventive actions today are the same as they have been for some time," Franco said. "There is almost nothing we can do to stop terror without a buffer separating" Jerusalem "from the West Bank."

However, he told JTA that in addition to bolstering Jerusalem police forces with five new companies, the police and government are considering building a wall some 6.5 miles long that would separate eastern and western Jerusalem. They also would set up checkpoints and use sensitive electronic equipment to detect infiltrators from one side of the city to the other.

The plan was to be presented to the government on Tuesday. If implemented, it

MIDEAST FOCUS

Was woman a suicide bomber?

Israeli police said it was unclear whether the Palestinian woman who set off a bomb in Jerusalem on Sunday intended to kill herself as well.

Briefing the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Shlomo Aharonishky said it was possible the woman intended to plant the bomb somewhere, but the explosive went off prematurely. Israeli security officials said Sunday that if the woman was a suicide bomber, it would alter the profile currently used by forces to identify potential attackers. There was no claim of responsibility.

Israeli boy stabbed in his home

Two Palestinians stabbed an Israeli boy in his West Bank home. The boy, 8, was lightly wounded. He said he was attacked in his home in the West Bank settlement of Elon Moreh by two Palestinians, who then fled.

Suspected arms smuggler fired

Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat dismissed an official suspected of involvement in an illegal arms shipment. The Palestinian Authority said in a statement that Fuad Shubaki, in charge of military acquisitions for the Palestinian Authority, was dismissed following the recommendations of an internal inquiry into the arms smuggling operation.

The United States called the arrest a good first step, but added that the Palestinian Authority needed to do more to fight terrorism.

Earlier this month, the Palestinian Authority said Shubaki had been arrested, but Israel said he was still at large.

The Palestinian Authority said Arafat also ordered the arrest of two other officials suspected of involvement in the smuggling attempt aboard the Karine A ship, which was captured by Israel on Jan. 3 in the Red Sea.

would constitute the first division of Jerusalem since 1967 — and would contradict a generation of Israeli leaders who have pledged that the “unified” capital will never again be divided.

In Jerusalem last year, there were 66 attacks that left 33 people dead and 513 wounded, according to Police Commissioner Shlomo Aharonishky.

Like many of his competitors, Barsheshe invested huge sums in his stores in the midst of the peace process euphoria and in preparation for the year 2000, expecting hordes of tourists to descend upon Jerusalem.

But that gamble failed when the Palestinians turned to violence and streets once packed year-round with tourists became deserted.

Consequently, many store owners whose rents and property taxes have risen in the past year and a half are now mired in debt. The blank storefronts dotting Jaffa Road show how many have closed up shop.

The municipality hopes cultural events can draw tourists and locals to the downtown area.

“We are also helping them finance their debt payments, which is about all we can do considering the current recession,” Deputy Mayor Yigal Ademi said.

Barsheshe scoffed at the plan. He condemned both the government's inability to thwart the frequent terror attacks and, concurrently, the municipality's decision in recent months to raise property taxes by 8 percent.

“Now you tell me,” Barsheshe asked, “how is that supposed to help me recover my losses?”

In a conspiratorial whisper, Barsheshe confided that not a day goes by that he does not think of leaving Jerusalem for America.

To Zion Hasid, however, property taxes don't matter. His sole attention is focused on rebuilding Babah, his women's clothing store, which on Monday morning was cluttered with shards of glass and a coating of ash.

“This is hell, but where else will I go?” asked Hasid, who immigrated from Iran 30 years ago.

“I will open the store for business as soon as I can,” he said, scratching his white head underneath a Greek fisherman's cap. “Not that that means I'll sell anything.”

Standing beside Hasid, Mashiach Yazdi was directing contractors and insurance appraisers in and out of stores. Head of the Finance Ministry's Department of Hate Crimes, Yazdi and his team are responsible for cleaning up, rebuilding and reimbursing storeowners for damages incurred in terror attacks.

“In days like this my job is mostly to act as a psychologist,” he said. “More than anything it is our duty to assure those who have lost everything that there is hope and that the government will ensure that they will be on their feet in no time.”

After taking stock of the store, Yazdi turned to Hasid, held him by both shoulders and asked him if he wanted the government to restore his damaged goods or order new ones. Then, as the contractor and appraiser marched out of Hasid's store, Yazdi uttered words seldom heard by insurance appraisers.

“What you want, you can keep,” he said. “We'll do it anyway you want, just tell me.”

The damage to the 60 stores in the attack amounted to some \$2.5 million, Yazdi said, one of the largest sums in recent months. Cleaning and construction crews, paid for by the government and insurance companies, will require at least a week to “get this street back to normal,” a task that normally takes just one day after a terror attack. It will take longer this time because the bomb used was so powerful and because it exploded in an open area.

It's not only businesses whose storefronts are blown apart that are affected by terror here.

According to the daily Yediot Achronot, fully half of the tourism employees in Jerusalem have been fired, hotels are at less than 30 percent occupancy and store owners have seen income plummet by more than 80 percent since the intifada began almost a year and a half ago.

So great is the damage done to Jerusalem's tourism industry that a group of 55 Israeli hotels decided to sue the Palestinian Authority for hundreds of millions of dollars for intifada losses. The group's lawyer, Yehuda Raveh, believes the hotels have a good chance of winning the case — and obtaining the damages from P.A. tax money frozen by the Israeli government. □



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

U.S. pulling most of Sinai force

The Pentagon has decided to remove the vast majority of 900 American peacekeepers from the Sinai.

Following the withdrawal, the United States will leave behind a symbolic headquarters, according to the Jerusalem Post, which cited a senior defense official.

No date for the redeployment has been set.

The U.S. troops represent the majority of a peacekeeping force that was set up to monitor the Sinai following the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.

Jews, Catholics confer in Paris

Jewish and Catholic leaders from across Europe gathered Monday in Paris. Attendees at the meeting, organized by the European Jewish Congress, plan to discuss Jewish-Catholic relations.

"There has never been a meeting of this kind in Europe," said French Jewish leader Henri Hajdenberg, who is presiding over the event. "The war has been over between our religions for a long time, so now we can talk without getting angry."

Liberator marks Holocaust Day

The man who led the Soviet Army's liberation of Auschwitz attended Sunday's Holocaust Day commemoration in Moscow.

The ceremony attended by Gen. Vassily Petrenko, 90, was one of many in Europe marking the 57th anniversary of the death camp's liberation.

German Jew warns of racism

The leader of German Jews warned that racism and xenophobia should not be allowed to play a part when the nation holds general elections in September.

The growing number of public rallies by the far right is "more than worrying," Paul Spiegel said Sunday during a memorial for victims of Nazism. "Germany is not an anti-Semitic or radical right-wing country, and it should not be allowed to become one. It should not even give the impression of being one."

Texas Jewish publisher dies

Jessard "Jimmy" Wisch, a journalist and businessman who ran the Texas Jewish Post for 56 years, died in his sleep Saturday at 85.

As publisher and editor, Wisch was a fixture in the local Jewish community.

The Wisches founded the Texas Jewish Post in 1946, working from their one-bedroom apartment in Fort Worth.

Some acquaintances were skeptical about whether the Dallas area could support a Jewish publication. The weekly Post now has several thousand North Texas subscribers and offices in Fort Worth and Dallas, family members said.

After threatening to resign, Holocaust claims head remains

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The palace intrigue passed, the leader remained and the people are still hoping for a happy ending.

It may sound like a fairy tale, but in fact it's the real-life story of the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims.

The group's chairman, Lawrence Eagleburger, threatened to quit Jan. 22, during a heated meeting of the commission. Later he reversed course and decided to stay in his post, leaving many Jewish groups hoping that the claims process will continue and even accelerate.

A day after issuing his threat, Eagleburger met with the insurance regulators, insurance firms and Jewish groups who make up ICHEIC. They convinced him that he will be granted the authority necessary to complete the commission's work.

"We sat down and talked straight with each other," Eagleburger told JTA.

Had Eagleburger resigned, the claims process may have been in serious trouble. Jewish groups say tensions on the commission and its lack of progress largely are due to a lack of cooperation from German insurance companies.

Sources close to the negotiations said Eagleburger received written assurances that the insurance companies give him full authority to negotiate directly with the German Foundation — which was formed to deal with claims against German industry — and that they agree to accept his decisions.

Discussions continued after negotiators "set a new atmosphere," Eagleburger said.

Christopher Carnicelli, president and chief executive officer of the Italian insurer Assicurazioni Generali, said the insurance companies are strongly committed to resolving the issues.

Indeed, even as Eagleburger was in another room deciding whether to stay on, negotiators were carrying on discussions.

The new atmosphere may already be responsible for progress, as the commission on Jan. 24 extended the deadline for filing claims to Sept. 30.

The issues that nearly drove Eagleburger to leave the commission have been debated for nearly two years.

The German Foundation, the German insurance association and ICHEIC have to agree on procedures before money can be disbursed from a fund for payment of insurance claims.

Procedures include audits of claims, costs to the insurance companies and possible reimbursement, appeals and the publication of policyholder names.

Jewish groups and insurance regulators disagree with the insurance companies on how to implement these procedures.

Groups are frustrated and angry because the insurance companies have acted "too slowly and too grudgingly," said Elan Steinberg, executive vice president of the World Jewish Congress.

For example, the German insurer Allianz has received thousands of claims but has paid just six.

ICHEIC reports that 77,800 claims have been received, but approximately 80 percent of claimants do not know the name of the relevant insurance company.

In addition, the commission has found more than one-third of the claims have been denied because they relate to other Holocaust issues, such as slave labor.

Insurance companies dispute some of the numbers. They also say that some of the purported claims really are just inquiries, because claimants are unsure which company issued their policies.

U.S. lawmakers and Holocaust survivors have criticized the commission for being too slow and for not getting money to policyholders or their heirs.

At a hearing of the U.S. House of Representatives' Government Reform Committee in November, lawmakers called ICHEIC a "failure."

Lawmakers called for a quick end to the claims process, but Congress has no real jurisdiction over the commission's work.

The insurance companies in ICHEIC are Allianz, AXA, Generali, Winterthur and Zurich, and the Association of Insurers in the Netherlands. □

This Tu B'Shevat, focus is on managing Israel's water resources

By Jessica Steinberg

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Many Jews know that on Tu B'Shevat — the Jewish new year for trees, which fell this year on Monday — you can plant a tree.

In the future, however, you may be able to buy a water certificate.

Building water reservoirs has become JNF's rallying cry in the last decade. On Tu B'Shevat, you can plant a tree, or give money toward JNF's water development programs.

"We have a drought, we have a problem with water, and we're using more than we have," said Esther Weinstein, the JNF representative in the Negev, Israel's arid southern region. "So we need to become more efficient and find other sources and better storage methods."

Such a shift might have been in the offing anyway, but recent drought years have left Israel with no choice.

Though this winter has had its share of rain, hail, sleet and snow, there still isn't enough water in Israel's underground aquifers.

Three consecutive winters of drought have taken their toll on Israel's fresh water reserves.

Although it's been raining steadily since early December, filling the country's three main sources of fresh water — the Sea of Galilee and the coastal and mountain aquifers — those familiar with Israel's water resources say it won't be enough.

"We're in a psychological situation such that everybody is still living under the impact and threat of a drought," said Uri Shamir, a civil engineering professor and head of the Water Research Institute at the Technion.

Israel's largest natural reservoir, the Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Kinneret, needs another 600 cubic meters of water to be refilled. It has collected at least 20 cubic meters of water this winter, but the lake's level is far below the red line that marks an emergency situation.

Allowing for a growing population and rising standard of living, Israel needs 300 million to 375 million cubic meters of water each year.

If that capacity isn't reached by 2004, there is a more than 10 percent chance that water usage will have to be cut.

Clearly, the country is using more water than it receives and its reserves are in danger of being depleted, water experts agree.

In other words, Israel's water problem is about water management, not water levels. Part of the problem is that there aren't enough regional water systems in Israel.

There is the National Water Carrier, which pipes water from one area to another. There are also local sources in the Arava, the Jordan Valley and in the northern valleys.

Recycled sewage water from the Shafdan, the water recycling plant in the country's center, is already being piped to the Negev. And in the Golan Heights, where snowfall can be another source of water, a series of reservoirs store water from the melted snow and then pump it back into the Golan for agricultural use.

But there isn't always enough rain each winter season.

"We would need five to six winters like this one to begin to make a recovery," said Jack Gilron, a researcher in the desalination and water treatment research laboratory at Ben Gurion University's Institute for Applied Research.

"In the last decade, the trend is that you have to assume the average rainfall will be less as climates are getting drier."

Successive Israeli governments have contemplated potential solutions for the water shortage, from building seawater desalination plants to recycling treated sewage, purifying polluted wells or importing water from nearby Turkey.

The problem often is discussed in terms of cost. For example, the price of desalinated water is estimated at \$0.60 to \$0.70 per cubic meter. But there's also a quality issue, Gilron pointed out.

Experts point out that there's plenty of recyclable water out there, ranging from sea water to brackish ground water and municipal waste water. Coastal towns have unlimited access to the seawater, while the inner cities can work with brackish water.

The issue is how to properly desalinate, purify and store the water to make it useable for agriculture and drinking.

If the government doesn't build desalination plants, the economy will suffer, Gilron said. The costs of not desalting are much higher than the cost of desalination.

Another option, importing 30 million to 35 million cubic meters of Turkish water, is also expensive. The cost of the imported water, including transporting it into the national pipeline, could bring the total price to \$0.65 per cubic meter.

"It's a matter of competition with respect to technology and cost," Shamir said, adding that the government may want the connection to Turkey for political reasons.

"Importing water puts the competitive edge on desalination, but it'll only work if it's done faster and quicker."

In the meantime, one solution is to capture and store rain and flood water and store recycled water.

Some 60 percent of the nation's water is used for agriculture, which doesn't require fresh water; the farms can make do with recycled water.

That's where the reservoirs enter the picture.

The Jewish National Fund has built 120 reservoirs since 1990, including fish ponds that then recycle their water for farming purposes. The JNF is committed to building another 100 reservoirs over the next decade.

Reservoir water is used only for agriculture, but it frees up 6 percent of the fresh water in the aquifers for drinking purposes. It also lowers the cost of water by 18 percent for the moshavim and kibbutzim that use it.

In the Besor River Reservoir complex — a series of three reservoirs near Beersheba designed to capture the flash floods that flow through the usually dry river bed — several acres are covered with these three man-made dents in the ground.

The largest Besor reservoir is an expansive pond lined with heavy black plastic that can hold 4 million cubic meters of water. The plastic prevents water from seeping into the underground aquifer.

The basin is also filled with 50,000 fish that clean up any algae that accumulates.

The other two reservoirs are smaller, capable of storing 2.2 million cubic meters and 800 cubic meters of water. All told, they can hold a total of 7 million cubic meters of water.

The JNF is "all about sustainable development," said Weinstein, pointing out tamarind trees planted along the reservoirs and desert trees planted in soil embankments built to collect rainwater.

"It's a matter of economics and what you get and what you lose," said Shamir, referring to the water system options. "No matter what, it's a very good idea to try and catch as much water as possible." □