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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Tunisia explosion called terror

An April 11 truck explosion at a Tunisian synagogue was definitely a terror attack, according to Germany's interior minister. "Germany is now convinced that this was 100 percent a criminal, terrorist act," Otto Schily said Monday in Tunis after meeting with investigators.

Sixteen people, including 11 German tourists, died when a truck filled with natural gas crashed into the historic Ghriba Synagogue on the Tunisian resort island of Jerba.

European anti-Semitism blasted

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres equated Europe's repeated criticisms of Israel with anti-Semitism. "Where in Europe, at the beginning, anti-Semitism was against the individual Jewish person, today I am afraid there is anti-Semitism against the Jewish state," Peres said Sunday at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference in Washington.

Peres said he would feel lonely at a meeting of European and Middle Eastern foreign ministers this week in Spain: "I shall represent a lonely voice. Your lonely voice, our lonely voice — but the right voice."

50,000 attend Manhattan prayer

Some 50,000 Jews, according to organizers' estimates, gathered in lower Manhattan on Sunday to pray for the safety of Jews in Israel and around the world.

The gathering was organized by a broad spectrum of Orthodox groups. The program, which lasted approximately 90 minutes, was broadcast to at least a dozen other prayer gatherings held at the same time across North America.

New York postpones PLO hearing

The New York City Council bowed to U.S. government pressure to postpone a hearing on evicting the PLO mission to the United Nations.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage called the council speaker urging a delay of the hearing, which had been planned for Monday.

A spokesman for the speaker said the "sensitivity of the peace talks" was involved. The resolution had previously been rejected by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who cited New York's role as host city to the United Nations.

NEWS ANALYSIS

What really happened in Jenin?

Findings could prove turning point

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After the Israeli army's 12-day action against armed Palestinians in the Jenin refugee camp, a London Times headline read: "The Camp of Death," conjuring up a clear association with Nazi death camps like Auschwitz.

And U.N. special envoy Terje Roed-Larsen, as he walked through the rubble in the Jenin refugee camp last week, just three days after the fighting had died down, virtually accused Israel of war crimes and spoke of "a shameful chapter in Israel's history."

European hyperbole in condemning Israel comes easily and the historic reasons for it are many and complex. But it is a phenomenon of more than passing academic interest, for it feeds into a consistent Palestinian narrative aimed at delegitimizing Israel in the most fundamental way.

In this context, Jenin was a human tragedy waiting to happen from the moment Israel launched its military operation.

From day one of the intifada, Yasser Arafat's strategy has been to provoke Israel into overreacting to get the international community to step in and force concessions he could not otherwise get.

Characterizing the military operation of the past month, and especially the events in the Jenin refugee camp, as an indiscriminate and criminal use of military force is more than a P.R. exercise for the Palestinians — it is the essence of Palestinian strategy.

That is why the perception of what happened in Jenin is so important — and why Israel has lent its support to a U.N.-sponsored fact-finding team to determine what happened there. So what, as far as we know, did happen in Jenin?

First, it can be said that there was no massacre.

Second, that there was no deliberate targeting of civilians.

Third, that the Jenin refugee camp was a major center of Palestinian terror, used especially by Islamic Jihad to send suicide bombers into Israel on a regular basis.

About a quarter of the bombers since the beginning of the intifada in fall of 2000 set out from the Jenin refugee camp.

The fighting in Jenin started on April 3. According to Israeli soldiers who took part in the battle, Palestinian gunmen had taken up positions inside the buildings. Explosive charges were strewn all over the camp. Some of the buildings were booby-trapped.

In some cases, Palestinian gunmen forced civilians to remain holed up with them. Israeli soldiers entered the camp from four directions, forcing the Palestinian fighters away from civilians into a small central area.

Israeli soldiers, using loudspeakers, called on all Palestinians who did not want to fight to leave the camp peacefully. Some did and were not harmed. Israeli reservists, fighting from house to house, encountered fierce resistance and had to regroup.

The Israelis could easily have solved the military problem, as most other Western armies probably would have done, by sending in fighter planes or using heavy artillery.

In both cases, resistance would have been broken in hours. But civilian casualties would have been heavy. Israel chose instead the much more hazardous house-to-house ground combat, precisely to avoid causing civilian casualties.

It now appears that fewer than 100 Palestinians, mostly armed fighters, were killed.

When helicopters were called in, it was to silence heavy fire from precise locations. All the houses in the camp had code numbers and the pilots were able to make precise hits. But seven days after it started, the fighting was still fierce.

On April 9, 13 reserve paratroopers were killed when a booby-trapped building

MIDEAST FOCUS

Palestinian lynched in Ramallah

A Palestinian suspected of cooperating with Israel was lynched Monday by a mob in Ramallah. Two other Palestinians with him were wounded.

Israel Radio reported that armed Palestinians stopped a taxi the three were traveling in and shot them. A crowd then gathered and beat one of the Palestinians to death. The two others were taken by ambulance to a hospital.

Five Palestinians killed in Gaza

Five Palestinians were killed late Sunday night in clashes with Israeli troops in the Gaza Strip.

Israel Radio quoted Palestinian security sources as saying troops killed two Palestinian policemen during gun battles near the settlement of Kfar Darom. In Gaza's northern tip, Israeli security forces shot dead three armed Palestinians who approached the settlements of Dugit and Netzarim.

Burns, Arafat meet in Ramallah

U.S. envoy William Burns met Monday with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in Ramallah. An Arafat adviser later said little progress was made during the 90-minute meeting.

Murder suspects detained

Israeli troops arrested 14 suspected Palestinians terrorists in the Dehaishe refugee camp near Bethlehem. In addition, the army said that two Palestinians arrested in a round-up in the Kalandia refugee camp north of Jerusalem on Sunday are suspected of involvement in the murders of three Israelis.

One of the Palestinians is suspected of shooting Binyamin and Talia Kahane, son and daughter-in-law of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, in a West Bank ambush in December 2000.

Another is suspected of killing coffee factory owner Gad Rejwan in Jerusalem last February.

exploded and collapsed on them.

It was then that the Israelis decided to bring in the bulldozers to destroy potentially booby-trapped buildings as Israel Defense Forces soldiers closed in on the gunmen.

The soldiers say they did all they could to make sure the houses were empty before they bulldozed them.

During the fighting, Israel supplied truckloads of food to the camp, and a generator and oxygen to the Jenin hospital.

Israel also offered blood, which was rejected. Israeli army doctors and medics say they treated injured Palestinians.

Every stage of the Jenin operation was filmed and this material, Israeli officials say, will help prove the Israeli case.

The officials are confident the U.N. fact-finding mission, appointed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan after the U.N. Security Council voted for it unanimously on Friday, will corroborate their account and lay to rest the Palestinian claims of a massacre.

As for the question of humanitarian aid after the battle, the Israelis say it was the Palestinians who objected to the IDF burying the dead and refused Israeli offers of assistance.

International aid and relief agencies were not allowed into the camp for three days after the fighting, the Israelis say, because of fear for their safety. And they point out that several people were wounded by explosive devices and booby-trapped bodies after the IDF left.

The Israelis also intend to raise with the fact-finding team the fact that the refugee camp was administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. Yet a culture of terror and death was allowed to thrive in the camp.

Posters of suicide bombers adorned the walls everywhere. And the camps' young children were taught to emulate them.

Armed elements, who by international law should not have been allowed in the camp, actually controlled it.

Israeli officials are asking how the United Nations, so quick to point fingers at Israel, had not only tolerated this situation, but had never lodged a single complaint about it.

For the Palestinians, Jenin has spawned two new national myths, regardless of what the fact-finding commission reports: the myth of heroic resistance against a superior Israeli force and the myth of an Israeli massacre.

Both demonize the Israeli enemy and reinforce the Palestinian sense of heroic victimhood. Both militate against compromise and galvanize young Palestinians for further struggle and sacrifice.

For some Israelis, Jenin reinforces notions of Palestinian mendacity and international unfairness.

For others, it is evidence of the pressing need to find a political solution to stop a cycle of violence that can only have tragic consequences for both sides.

And precisely because it has the power to endorse or refute these very different perceptions, the U.N. probe could have far-reaching effects.

If unfavorable to Israel, it could lead to attempts by the international community to further restrict the military steps Israel can take to defend itself, while implicitly legitimizing the worst Palestinian excesses.

It could also lead to demands for an international force to separate Israel and the Palestinians, a situation the Israelis believe will do nothing to stop the suicide bombers but will greatly hinder the IDF's capacity to respond.

And it could start a process leading to attempts by the international community to impose a solution on the two recalcitrant parties.

By using Jenin to delegitimize Israel's use of force in self-defense, Arafat could get the imposed settlement he has been striving for all along — although in substance it might not be entirely to his liking.

Israeli officials, however, are confident the probe's report will, on the whole, be favorable.

Indeed, they hope it will lead to some rethinking in Europe.

Even more importantly, they hope it will undermine Arafat's authority, as his internationalization strategy will be seen to have failed, and help pave the way for a new Palestinian leadership more able to do business with Israel. □

(Leslie Susser is the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report.)



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JEWISH WORLD

AIPAC's costly security

The leading pro-Israel lobbying group in the United States spent some \$300,000 on security at its annual policy conference. The figure for the Washington conference is about 12 times what the American Israel Public Affairs Committee normally spends. The increased security measures include x-ray machines and guards.

On Monday, Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) told the conference that the United States must show consistent support for Israel. "Israel has always had fair-weather friends. What it needs now are foul-weather friends," he said.

20,000 at Ottawa rally

An estimated 20,000 people attended an Israel solidarity rally in Ottawa. More than 100 buses brought supporters to Parliament Hill on Sunday from Montreal, Toronto and other cities. Others flew in from as far away as Calgary and Vancouver.

A spokesman for the Canadian Jewish Congress, a co-sponsor of the rally, said it was the "largest demonstration the Jewish community has held in Ottawa since the struggle for Soviet Jewry."

Australian Jewish center hit

The National Jewish Center in Canberra, Australia, was firebombed Saturday morning.

The attackers tried to throw a firebomb through a window but it bounced back, setting fire to the grounds of the building. "Little damage was done," said the center's president, Gary Fellman. "We were very fortunate the windows didn't give way."

Jewish cemetery vandalized

As many as 135 gravestones were destroyed or damaged in eastern Slovakia. Slovak police are investigating whether the weekend attack in Kosice was linked to the April 20 anniversary of Hitler's birth.

The incident, in the Orthodox section of the cemetery, shocked local Jewish community leaders, who said it was the worst attack there in memory. Damage has been estimated at \$64,000.

Canadians rebuild terror sites

Canadian Jews are helping Israel repair damage from terrorist attacks. A first delegation arrived last week to visit the wounded and help rebuild shops and cafes destroyed in Palestinian terrorist attacks.

"These activists and those who will follow are doing much more than merely expressing solidarity with Israel," said Howard Weisband, director general of the United Israel Appeal Federation Canada. "They are the Jewish answer to the so-called 'human shields' who showed up from Europe to spin artificial headlines" by "protecting" Palestinians from Israeli troops.

Yoffie reaches out to Saudi prince, but other Jewish leaders not happy

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — In a move criticized by many Jewish leaders, the head of the Reform movement in North America has reached out to Saudi Arabia's leader, inviting him to a sit-down in Texas.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, says he hopes to promote understanding of the American Jewish community by asking Crown Prince Abdullah — who will be meeting with President Bush at Bush's ranch this week — to meet with Yoffie and other Reform leaders.

Abdullah had not responded by press time, and Yoffie was not optimistic.

Yoffie's invitation comes as some Jewish leaders have tentatively welcomed a Saudi peace proposal. The proposal — promising normal relations with Israel if it withdraws fully to its pre-1967 borders and offers a "right of return" to Palestinian refugees — was never extensively detailed, however, and the Saudis declined Israeli invitations to discuss the proposal further.

Critics said the peace proposal was insincere, intended primarily to improve the Saudis' tarnished image in America. In fact, apart from the proposal, Saudi Arabia, never known for its friendliness toward Israel or Jews, has appeared particularly hostile in recent months:

- Fifteen of the 19 hijackers in the Sept. 11 terror attacks were Saudi citizens, and the country has been a major financier of Islamic fundamentalism around the world.
- The Saudis have not only failed to condemn suicide bombings against Israeli civilians, but have raised large sums of money for the bombers' families.
- Official government newspapers are a frequent venue not just for criticism of Israel but for blatant anti-Semitism. A recent article revived ancient "blood libel" accusations against Jews, claiming that Muslim blood is an ingredient in Purim hamentashen.

- The Saudi ambassador to England recently published a poem lauding suicide bombers in a local Arabic newspaper.

Yoffie said he is not endorsing the Saudis' positions or actions, and sees a potential meeting as an opportunity to "express our concerns about Saudi policy." However, he said, "the reality is the president of the United States is meeting with the leader of Saudi Arabia and America has strong strategic interests there related to their wealth and oil."

A meeting with Jewish leaders, he said, might help "pave the way" for peace talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

But Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League called Yoffie's invitation a "mistake" and "inappropriate."

"Why reach out to them?" Foxman said. "There's nothing to be gained at this point except to give them credibility that I don't think they deserve."

In contrast, Foxman said, the ADL's visits to Saudi Arabia — which came at Abdullah's invitation, most recently two years ago — were "at a time when all the signals were that they were willing to support the peace process."

Even so, Foxman said he left disappointed that Abdullah "wasn't willing to step up to the peace plate." The group issued a critical statement upon its return.

Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, was stronger in his criticism. Yoffie's gesture is "immoral, wrong and sends a message of fear and appeasement," Klein said.

"I think they would have more respect for us as a people if they saw that we would have nothing to do with those who spew hatred toward us," Klein said. "We should not be meeting with those who promote hatred against Jews, whether they come from Louisiana, Ramallah or Riyadh."

However, Lewis Roth, assistant executive director of Americans for Peace Now, called Yoffie's effort "potentially a very positive gesture."

Reaching out to the Saudis might bring them "closer into the circle of peace and help ensure that they make positive contributions to stopping violence, rather than allowing them to remain on the outside without any recognition for some of the recent moves they've made to improve the situation," he said. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

In ironic twist, anti-Semitic acts helped French extremist at polls

By Andrew Diamond

PARIS (JTA) — The strong showing of far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of France's presidential elections holds some bitter ironies for the nation's Jews.

Notorious for the anti-Semitic views he has espoused, Le Pen until recently had seen support for his National Front Party waning.

But in a campaign dominated by France's rising crime and delinquency rates, the National Front's anti-immigrant and law-and-order rhetoric caught the attention of French voters.

On Sunday, Le Pen staged a huge upset, coming in second behind President Jacques Chirac, who won about 19.6 percent of the vote. With 17 percent, Le Pen edged out Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who finished third with 16 percent.

As a result, the far-right leader who once called the Holocaust a mere "detail" of World War II will square off against Chirac in the May 5 runoff.

In protest, up to 10,000 people marched in Paris shouting "Le Pen is a fascist" while riot police fired tear gas and drove back a crowd of hundreds of demonstrators who began throwing barriers in the historic Place de la Concorde.

Le Pen's surprise showing, not predicted during weeks of opinion polling before the election, was explained partly as a result of the attitude held by most Jews — and many other French citizens — that neither Chirac nor Jospin had done enough about what has become an epidemic of anti-Jewish aggression since the Palestinian intifada began in September 2000.

The fact that much of the violence was carried out by the children of North African immigrants played into the hands of Le Pen, whose platform was heavily laced with xenophobia, some political commentators said.

Other commentators considered the results a fluke, citing the record low voting rates among an electorate certain that Jospin and Chirac would be the candidates left standing for the runoff.

Also helping Le Pen were his campaign efforts to re-invent himself as a more "respectable" candidate.

During some three decades on the national stage, Le Pen has made no secret of his anti-Semitic views, a tactic that contributed to the strong support for his National Front Party in conservative areas of southeastern France. In 1987, on a national radio show, he called the Nazi gas chambers a mere "detail" of World War II.

The comment earned him widespread notoriety — and was followed by the strongest electoral returns of his career.

The 73-year-old founder and head of the National Front, Le Pen amassed 4.4 million votes, nearly 15 percent of the French electorate, in the first round of the 1988 presidential election.

When his support waned after that, a large contingent of National Front members defected in 1999 to form a new center-right party, the Republican National Movement, under the former secretary of the National Front, Bruno Megret. Le Pen also recently tried to reinvent himself as a candidate of the center-right.

Part of this involved abandoning his Jew-baiting tactics.

"I am not perfect," he responded recently when asked about his history of anti-Semitic remarks, which Le Pen now refers to as "unfortunate phrases."

Surprisingly, given some of those remarks, observers are divided over whether "xenophobe" or "anti-Semite" is the correct

term for describing him.

"Le Pen is a xenophobe first and foremost," Theo Klein, a former leader of France's Jewish community, was quoted as saying by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz. "His attitude toward Jews is a product of his theory that only someone who was born in France, and has no other affiliation, is French."

On the day after the election, Jewish leaders joined a chorus of critics, from the center-right to the far left, in decrying the strong show of support for the extreme right.

"This is a shock," said Roger Cukierman, president of CRIF, the umbrella group of secular French Jewish organizations. "But when we think about it more, we understand it as the result of French people's reaction to problems of insecurity."

In a further irony of the election, many Jews are now hoping that Le Pen's own mission to build walls within French society will help break down those existing between Jews and Muslims. The two communities now have a shared goal — to keep Le Pen from office.

Patrick Klugman, president of UEJF, a Jewish student union, called for a "republican tidal wave against xenophobia."

Others vowed to work to make sure not only that Le Pen loses the May 5 runoff, but loses by a margin large enough to restore France's standing in the eyes of the world.

Members of Jospin's Socialist Party said Sunday they would vote for Chirac in the runoff to ensure that Le Pen does not win.

The series of anti-Semitic attacks in Paris and other French cities in recent months was on the minds of many Jewish voters Sunday. Outside polling stations in the Jewish neighborhoods of Paris's 19th district, Jewish voters generally were pessimistic that there would be any significant change in the government's stance toward the violence if either Chirac or Jospin were elected.

Jonathan, a twenty-year-old software engineering student, described feelings of "indecision and apathy" among many of his Jewish friends.

"Nobody really knew how they were going to vote today, even up until the last minute," he said. "In one sense, Jospin seems more sympathetic to Israel, but his record on anti-Semitism here is not encouraging."

Sentiments like these appeared to have caused many Jews to look for alternative candidates in the smaller parties on the right.

Sitting at a local cafe after casting their votes, Elie Smadja, a business executive, and Catherine Taieb, a jeweler, explained why they voted for Alain Madelin, the candidate for the moderate right Liberal Democracy Party.

"Madelin was the only candidate who marched with the Jews" in a massive anti-violence demonstration in Paris earlier this month, and was the only one to call the repeated anti-Semitic attacks "acts of terrorism," Taieb said.

Madelin, who took only 3.9 percent of the vote nationally, garnered almost twice as much in Paris's 19th district.

Like most French voters, few leaving the polls seemed to take seriously the idea that Le Pen would surpass Jospin on Sunday — and in the process grab a spotlight he has always coveted. Now, with analysts expecting Chirac to win the runoff by a margin of 80 to 20, Le Pen has little to lose during the next two weeks.

What is certain is that he will continue advocating restrictions on immigration and calling for the repatriation of non-citizens found guilty of felonies or misdemeanors.

With Jewish immigration no longer a factor in such stances, it remains to be seen whether Le Pen will pull out all the stops and combine these calls with an anti-Jewish plank. □