



Daily News Bulletin

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85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel won't work with U.N. panel

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided that Israel will not cooperate with a U.N. panel making a fact-finding mission to the Jenin refugee camp. Sharon reached the decision because, among other things, the criteria for appointing the panel members differed from those agreed upon by Israel, and does not include enough persons with military background, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Yehuda Lancry, plans to inform U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan of Sharon's decision Tuesday night, the paper reported.

Sharon addresses AIPAC

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon reiterated Israel's right to protect itself from terrorists. In a speech transmitted by satellite to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee on Tuesday morning, Sharon equated Israel's military campaign in the West Bank to the United States war against terrorism. After Sept. 11, "everyone recognizes the danger of terrorism. Life, liberty and freedom can no longer be taken for granted," he said. "We have a moral right and obligation to defend ourselves."

On Monday evening, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card addressed AIPAC's annual conference, saying the United States and Israel are friends who "may not always agree with each other" but are joined by similar values and dreams.

European Jews focus on attacks

Jewish leaders met in Brussels to discuss the recent spate of anti-Semitic attacks across Europe.

Officials at the two-day conference, hosted by the World Jewish Congress, planned to call on European governments to beef up protection of Jewish sites and issue statements supporting local Jewish communities. The conference brought together officials from some 24 nations.

Shots fired at Belgian synagogue

Gunmen opened fire on a Belgian synagogue. No one was hurt in Saturday night's attack in the southern city of Charleroi.

The synagogue was empty when the attackers fired on the building with automatic weapons as they drove by, police said.

AIPAC mounts new offensive to display support of Congress

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The American pro-Israel lobby is mounting a new offensive to equate the U.S.-led war on terrorism with Israel's own battle against terror.

Timed to coincide with the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, U.S. lawmakers have introduced several pieces of legislation to display support for Israel in Congress and combat what is viewed as increasing pressure on the Bush administration's Middle East policy from Europe, Arab states and the United Nations.

"Israel is on the front lines of the war on terrorism, and she must have the resources to continue defending herself," said Howard Kohr, executive director of AIPAC.

Kohr touted the proposals in a speech at AIPAC's annual policy conference on Monday. The conference drew 5,000 delegates from around the country, double last year's attendance, in a sign that American Jews are revved up in the fight to ensure that the U.S. government stands behind Israel.

The bills, all introduced earlier this month at the urging of AIPAC, seek:

- additional aid for Israel to combat its war on terrorism;
- sanctions against the Palestinian Authority and its leader, Yasser Arafat; and
- the inclusion of Syria in the president's "axis of evil."

On Tuesday, AIPAC delegates were scheduled to lobby their members of Congress on the issues.

The mere introduction of these bills in Congress, which Kohr called "the firewall for Israel," is expected to show the Arab world the possible consequences of continued support for terrorism.

At the same time, even though the bills and initiatives may never be enacted, the aim is to pro-actively demonstrate the depth of congressional support for Israel as the Bush administration continues to reassess its policy in the Middle East.

One of the more substantive initiatives is a complete overhaul by the Senate of the Middle East Peace Commitments Act, which has been introduced several times before, but has never gone anywhere.

The new bill, introduced in the Senate and dubbed the "Arafat Accountability Act," denies visas to Arafat and other PLO officials, downgrades the PLO office in Washington, imposes travel restrictions on senior PLO officials at the United Nations, and seizes the American financial assets of PLO and Palestinian Authority officials, including Arafat.

The bill also requires the president to detail acts of terrorism engaged in by the PLO every 90 days, and if necessary, deem the group a foreign terrorist organization.

"We target this legislation at an individual whose behavior we find extraordinarily disappointing in so many different ways," said Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), who introduced the bill along with Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.).

"And so our legislation, we believe, is a way to give members of the Senate an opportunity to send him a message that now is the time to miss no more opportunities," McConnell said of Arafat.

Previous incarnations of the legislation, including the one introduced earlier this year in the House by Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), have required the White House to assess whether the Palestinians are complying with the Oslo accords and other agreements signed with the Israelis, and then enact sanctions if the Palestinians are found noncompliant.

But the new version already assumes that the Palestinians are noncompliant, and

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel assassinates Tanzim leader

The Tanzim militia leader in Hebron was killed in an Israeli helicopter strike. Two missiles fired around midnight Monday at his car killed Marwan Zaloum and his top aide, Samir Abu Rajoub. Abu Rajoub was a member of Force 17, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's personal security unit. Zaloum was believed to be responsible for numerous shooting attacks and bombings, including the March 2001 killing of Shalhevet Pass, a 10-month-old infant, in a sniper attack in Hebron.

Several hours after the Israeli helicopter strike, the bodies of three bound Palestinians, apparently suspected collaborators, were found shot to death.

E.U. plans new peace mission

E.U., Israeli and Arab officials agreed that there can be no "military solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A two-day conference in Valencia, Spain, ended Tuesday with calls for an end to Palestinian terrorism, an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, the dispatch of international observers to the region and pledges to fight terrorism.

Also Tuesday, E.U. ministers dispatched diplomat Javier Solana on a new peace mission to the Middle East. The conference got off to a bad start Monday, when Arab delegates walked out while Israel's deputy foreign minister, Rabbi Michael Melchior, spoke.

Bid to end Bethlehem standoff

Israeli and Palestinian officials met Tuesday trying to end the standoff between Israeli forces and armed Palestinians holed up in Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity. Israel said the Palestinian Authority was still trying to involve a third party in the negotiations.

Israel Radio quoted monks who fled the compound as saying that some Palestinian gunmen had damaged religious artifacts and stolen gold.

requires the punishments. This bill continues to carry a national security waiver, which allows the president to withhold sanctions in the interests of national security.

Feinstein and McConnell pulled back a similar proposal last year after receiving a request from U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, Powell said the bill would jeopardize the international war on terrorism.

State Department officials have said they were reviewing the legislation, and have refrained from commenting further.

McConnell said the sponsors had no intention of bringing this bill to a vote anytime soon, but wanted to introduce it and garner co-sponsors to send a message to Arafat.

Meanwhile, Syria is the target of a bill touted by House Majority Leader Dick Arney (R-Texas), seeking an end to terrorism and pressuring Lebanon to deploy its armed forces to assert sovereignty over its state.

"It is long past time for Congress to send a clear message that Syrian-backed terrorism must stop," Arney said recently when he introduced the legislation.

"We intend to give our president all the support and tools he needs to turn Syria away from using terrorist violence as state policy."

The bill, also sponsored by Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) and Sens. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), would prohibit the export of any item to Syria and restrict the travel of Syrian diplomats in the United States until the president deems Syria compliant.

It also requires an annual report from the president on Syria's actions.

The sanctions in the Syria bill would also carry a presidential waiver.

While some members of Congress are seeking to reprimand Middle Eastern entities, some colleagues in both houses of Congress are hoping to send a positive message to Israel, with nonbinding resolutions being proposed in support of Israel.

Reps. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) and Tom DeLay (R-Texas) introduced a bill on April 18 equating the American war on terrorism with the Israeli military incursions in the West Bank, and condemning the "ongoing support and coordination of terror" by Arafat.

The bill calls on Arab states to condemn terrorism, commends President Bush for his leadership "in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and requests additional aid for Israel's defense needs.

The nonbinding bill, which does not specify the amount of aid, was expected to be voted on by the House of Representatives this week.

A similar bill has been introduced in the Senate by Sens. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Gordon Smith (R-Ore.).

While the three initiatives highlight AIPAC's focus for the upcoming year, the organization's action agenda spells out additional priorities.

The lobby group delved into the national energy debate, supporting a plan that will reduce U.S. reliance on "unstable and unfriendly" Middle East sources of oil, including Iraq.

AIPAC calls on additional energy efficiency and the development of alternative sources of energy to balance the foreign reliance.

The group's executive committee also adopted resolutions calling on the United States to seek the capture of Palestinians who kill Americans, and urging the U.S. administration to refer to the West Bank and Gaza as "disputed territories" instead of "occupied territories."

Both of those resolutions were put forth by Morton Klein, national president of the Zionist Organization of America, who sits on AIPAC's executive committee.

Another amendment proposed by Klein, calling for support for the right of Jews to live in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights, failed to pass the executive committee and was not included in the action agenda. □

Fleischer pops the question

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The White House spokesman is now spoken for.

Ari Fleischer, White House press secretary and one of the most visible American Jews in politics, got engaged Sunday, The Washington Post reports.

Fleischer, 41, proposed to 26-year-old Rebecca Davis, a staffer in the White House Office of Management and Budget. Details of the proposal and the wedding date were deemed classified by Fleischer. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Rally outside AIPAC meeting

Hundreds of Palestinian supporters demonstrated outside a pro-Israel lobbying conference.

For several hours Monday night, demonstrators held signs reading "End the Occupation Now" and chanted "Long Live the Intifada" outside a hotel in Washington where the American Israel Public Affairs Committee is holding its annual conference. Police kept the protesters away from the hotel.

Berlin Jews to hide identity?

Berlin police gave mixed messages about whether they are advising Jews to hide their identity for fear of attack.

A police spokesperson told an Israeli reporter that Jews in Berlin might want to hide their Stars of David or avoid wearing yarmulkes because police can't protect all of them from possible attack. Later, the office of the city's police chief denied that police were giving Jews such advice.

Swiss Jews fear backlash

Swiss Jewish leaders decided not to hold any pro-Israel rallies, fearing they would provoke an anti-Semitic backlash. The decision came at a recent closed-door meeting of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, whose leaders confirmed reports that leaked from the session.

Appearing on Swiss Television, Jewish leaders said hate letters and threats related to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict have reached record levels. "I have never seen so many ugly letters," said Sigi Feigel, a veteran Jewish leader.

Harry Berg, president of the Zurich Jewish community, said in a television interview, "I sympathize with Israel, but I do not want to defend myself for decisions made by the Israeli government without my participation." According to Dennis Rhein, secretary-general of the Federation, most synagogues in Switzerland have 24-hour surveillance to prevent attacks.

Funeral home accused of deceit

Connecticut's attorney general is suing a Hartford funeral home for "illegal business practices" as well as for conducting several procedures for observant Jews that were in violation of Jewish law.

In a lawsuit against Weinstein Mortuary Inc., Connecticut's Department of Consumer Protection alleges that the company deceived customers about burial procedures and overcharged them for services. The allegations also include failing to properly perform the Jewish ritual of tahara, or cleaning the body, and using a metal casket for an Orthodox Jewish burial, contrary to Orthodox religious beliefs. Weinstein officials did not return phone calls seeking comment.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Le Pen vote shows rightward trend while Europe grapples with changes

By Ruth E. Gruber

BUDAPEST (JTA) — The stunning success of extreme right-wing leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of French presidential elections was the latest and most clamorous step in a recent, escalating shift to the right in Europe.

A perennial candidate who has been marginalized for decades because of his anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic views, Le Pen came in a surprise second out of a field of 16 presidential hopefuls in Sunday's vote.

He will face incumbent President Jacques Chirac, a mainstream rightist, in a runoff on May 5.

Le Pen's success confirmed anti-immigrant sentiment and law-and-order concerns among the electorate, and moved these issues from the fringes to the center of mainstream political debate.

His showing also demonstrated a deep-seated popular disillusionment with mainstream political forces and their ability to deal with voter concerns.

It also reflected a clear trend on a continent facing major transformations as the European Union attempts to do away with borders and revamp traditional political, social and economic relations.

How to deal with an increasing influx of refugees, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants from the developing world has become a key — and still unresolved — issue across Europe.

Linked to this is the impact of a large and growing Muslim population in many countries.

Friction has increased in the wake of the Sept. 11 terror attacks against the United States and the revelations that Al-Qaida terrorist cells apparently had operated with impunity in several Western European countries.

Right-wing populists appeal directly to grassroots fears linking crime, terrorism and job insecurity with immigration, E.U. expansion, globalization — and the mainstream parties' inability to address these issues.

Britain's Orthodox chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, called Le Pen's success "a disturbing result in the light of Mr. Le Pen's racist past, and it should trouble all those with long political memories."

The far-right, anti-immigrant Freedom Party entered the Austrian government two years ago, thanks in large part to a protest vote by Austrians fed up with the stagnation of mainstream political forces.

In Belgium, the extreme right Vlaams Blok Party won 15 percent of seats in the Flemish Parliament and 9.5 percent of seats in the federal Parliament in 1999.

Far-right parties running on nationalist, law-and-order, anti-immigrant and sometimes anti-E.U. platforms also have made gains in Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, Italy and elsewhere.

Rightist leaders in small countries greeted Le Pen's success with a sense of glee. In Belgium, Vlaams Blok leader Filip Dewinter said he was "very, very pleased that Le Pen scored such a large victory. It's not surprising that French voters are moving to a far-right party. They have the same problems of insecurity, of immigration and political corruption" as do other countries.

Paradoxically, many Jews share the right wing's distrust and concerns about immigrants and the Muslim presence.

And, ironically, at least some right-wing leaders profess themselves to be friends of Israel and the Jewish people.

While most French Jews are expected to vote against Le Pen in the runoff, his unofficial adviser on Jewish affairs, Sonia Arrouas, who is Jewish, said a Le Pen victory might be in the Jews' interests.

"Le Pen is opposed to the Arabs and is, therefore, good for the Jews," Arrouas told the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

"Le Pen is pro-Israel and believes it is the only Western state in the Arab East, and this is why Israel's security and existence is important to him." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

In Bethlehem turmoil, Palestinians play for sympathy from Christians

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Palestinians played a very delicate card at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity — and seem to be getting away with it.

Palestinian gunmen and terrorists took over one of the holiest sites in Christendom shortly after Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield in late March. Israel surrounded the church with tanks but refused to attack, hoping to spare the religious site and avoid antagonizing the Christian world.

Yet that restraint has won Israel few supporters: The international community has condemned Israel's siege, while expressing hardly a word of censure for the Palestinian gunmen.

Wadia Abu-Nassar, former political adviser of the Latin Patriarch Michel Sabah, said that may stem from the biblical tradition of finding shelter at places of religious worship. "It is perceived as perfectly legitimate by the church," Abu-Nassar said.

But the standoff also demonstrates the delicate balance of forces between Israel, the Muslim-dominated Palestinian Authority and the Christian world, especially the Vatican.

Some 200 Palestinians fleeing the Israel Defense Force offensive shot their way into the Church of the Nativity, which Christian tradition identifies as the birthplace of Jesus. The gunmen of the Palestinian Authority — which used to boast that it was the protector of the Christian sites in the Holy Land — instead have turned the holy sites into their protectors.

Palestinian officials often try to portray themselves as the inheritors of Jesus — "the first Palestinian," in Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's phrase — who, they frequently note, also was persecuted by the Jews.

As bizarre as it may seem, the analogy is gaining some traction in Europe, where an Italian newspaper recently ran a cartoon showing Israeli tanks surrounding a baby Jesus. The caption made clear the intended connection between Jesus' tribulations with the Jews and the plight of the Palestinians in the Church of the Nativity.

Some 30 to 50 of the Palestinians inside the church are believed to be armed, among them wanted terrorists.

Also inside are several dozen priests and about 20 children. Israel says the priests are being held hostage, though some have said they are there of their own free will.

Five civilians fled the church on Sunday. They were immediately seized by IDF soldiers and interrogated, describing harsh conditions inside, though Israel has allowed aid workers to bring food, water and medical supplies into the church.

Israel has withdrawn from all the other cities it occupied during Operation Protective Wall, continuing to maintain a siege only on Arafat's compound in Ramallah and at the church in Bethlehem.

The terrorists inside the church show no signs of turning themselves in, however. In fact, Palestinian sources say the gunmen have declared they would rather commit suicide than surrender.

On the face of it, Israel has the upper hand. IDF soldiers encircle the holy compound, and the Palestinians are locked in.

But time is against Israel. Spearheaded by the Vatican, the Christian world has exerted heavy pressure on Israel to let the terrorists leave and move to Gaza. In any case, Sabah said at a

demonstration Sunday, Israel would face the men in other battles soon and could settle scores with them then.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has presented a solution to the crisis: The gunmen can either surrender and face prosecution in Israeli courts, or accept permanent exile from the Palestinian territories. The Palestinians have rejected the offer.

With Israel facing a very delicate propaganda fight over the battle in the Jenin refugee camp, it can hardly afford further complications over Bethlehem.

"The entire confrontation could have been averted," suggested Yisrael Lippel, former director general of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and an expert on the Christian community in Israel and the territories. "The pictures of a confrontation at the church are not worth the possible gain of laying hands on a number of terrorists."

"For a year and a half Israel has known how to avoid the trap," agreed reserve Col. Shalom Harari, former adviser on Arab Affairs at the Defense Ministry, "and yet now it fell right into it."

The Vatican — which has tried to mediate the conflict through a converted Jew, the Rev. David Jaeger — is caught in a delicate situation.

Its prime interest is to preserve the holy site. Its secondary interest is not to anger the Arab world, where the Catholic church has congregations, property and other interests.

Therefore, it seems, the Vatican will take no measures that the Arab world might see as sympathetic to Israel — certainly not at a time when Israel's international stock is plummeting.

Leaders of the Arab community in Israel and heads of various Christian denominations staged a protest Sunday at the checkpoint just north of Bethlehem.

"The fighters who are inside have to go away," Sabah said. "Let the fighters get free from there." The Israelis, he said, "will meet them at another struggle anyway."

In his weekly Sunday sermon, Pope Paul II again urged the parties to put an end to the Bethlehem standoff.

Israel's interests are last on the Vatican's list, even though the government recently bent over backward to please the Holy See.

Due to heavy pressure from the Vatican, the Sharon government halted all construction work on the Shihab a-Din mosque in Nazareth, which had infuriated the pope because of its proximity to the Church of the Annunciation.

The Israeli government preferred a possible confrontation with its own large Muslim community to a diplomatic row with the Vatican — but apparently its concession didn't earn Israel any good will.

Symbolically, the Bethlehem gunmen took hostage not only the priests in the church but the entire Christian establishment. The Christians long ago lost their hold on the "Christian triangle," as Bethlehem and some of its adjacent towns are known.

In the past, the Christians constituted a majority in the triangle, a prosperous community of businessmen who made the region one of the few economic success stories in the Palestinian territories.

But since the Israeli withdrawal, the Christian population has been decimated through intimidation from the Muslim-dominated Palestinian Authority and, consequently, emigration.

Israel's strategy for now is to stay put and continue the siege on the terrorists in the church.

On the face of it, the IDF has more time and patience than the terrorists, whose conditions inside the church are said to be grim. In reality, the longer the standoff continues, the better are the prospects that heavy pressure to let the fugitives go will be brought to bear on Israel. □