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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

White House retreats on state

The White House backed away from supporting the creation of a provisional Palestinian state.

Reflecting divisions and uncertainty in U.S. policy, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer made clear President Bush had not approved the idea.

He issued the comment after U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell told a London-based Arab-language newspaper on Wednesday that it "might be necessary to set up a temporary state as a transitional step."

Fleischer added that a provisional state was one of many ideas Bush had heard in talks with Arab and Israeli leaders.

In the latest such meeting, Bush and the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, talked for 20 minutes Thursday in the Oval Office and "exchanged a variety of ideas on how to move forward," Fleischer said.

Palestinians wound 5 soldiers

Five Israeli soldiers were wounded Thursday in incidents in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In the West Bank village of Tubas, near Jenin, two soldiers were wounded during a clash with Palestinian gunmen.

In the Gaza Strip, three soldiers were lightly wounded by shrapnel from a mortar shell.

In another incident in southern Gaza, soldiers arrested a Palestinian suspected of dispatching the terrorist who killed an Israeli woman and two soldiers at the settlement of Ganei Tal in February.

Group considers suing Arabs

The World Sephardic Federation will soon consider a lawsuit against the Arab League.

The lawsuit seeks restitution for 200,000 houses, 6,000 synagogues, and hundreds of schools, cemeteries and other community assets confiscated from Jews by Arab nations, according to Amram Attias, the president of the International Committee of Jews from Arab Lands.

"Our main goal is a moral recognition from the Arab world of what has been done to the Jews and their descendants," Attias said.

The proposal, put forward by the American Sephardic Federation, will be considered June 17 during the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem.

NEWS ANALYSIS

To exile or not to exile? With Arafat, that seems to be Israel's big question

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Since the intifada began, Israeli officials have declared Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat "irrelevant," a "terrorist," an "enemy" and a "pathological liar."

Now, after more than 20 months of relentless Palestinian terror, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is said to have made up his mind to expel Arafat from the Palestinian territories.

Sources close to Sharon say the prime minister is just waiting for an opportune moment, perhaps a "mega-terror" attack of the kind Israeli security officials warn the Palestinians are preparing.

"One more big suicide bombing" and Arafat "is out of here," an Israeli official close to the premier declared last week, after a massive bus bombing that killed 17 Israelis.

For months, Sharon has been encouraged by the Israel Defense Force chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz.

During Operation Protective Wall in April, Mofaz was caught on camera whispering to the prime minister, "We must throw him out."

But others, including Labor Party leaders and some top intelligence officials, are staunchly opposed.

The heads of the Mossad, military intelligence and the Shin Bet all have warned the government of dangerous local, regional and international repercussions if Arafat is exiled.

Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, the Labor Party leader who was one of the first to suggest circumventing the Palestinian leader, maintains that expelling him would do more harm than good.

Transport Minister Ephraim Sneh, a close associate of Ben-Eliezer's and one of the more hawkish Labor leaders, also says exiling Arafat "would solve nothing."

Sharon, however, is convinced that as long as Arafat is around, the violence will continue, reform of the Palestinian Authority will be a sham and there will be no chance for the long-term process of accommodation between Israel and the Palestinians that Sharon envisages.

Aides close to Sharon concede that he is particularly worried about Arafat abusing two essentially positive developments to rehabilitate himself internationally: the demand for reforms in the Palestinian Authority and the renewed peace process the United States is trying to launch.

Sharon fears that Arafat will pretend to carry out reforms, fool those members of the international community who want to be fooled and then enter an American-sponsored peace process as a seemingly legitimate partner.

According to his aides, it was partly to pre-empt this scenario that Sharon made the decision to try to expel Arafat.

President Bush, who declared after his White House meeting with Sharon on Monday that real and deep reform must precede a peace process, may have allayed some of Sharon's concern on this score.

In addition, Bush was noncommittal when asked directly whether he was for or against Arafat's expulsion, and Sharon might have taken his silence as tacit acquiescence.

However, shortly after the president spoke, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer

MIDEAST FOCUS

Arafat's new Cabinet meets

Yasser Arafat convened his newly reshuffled Cabinet. At the start of the session, held Thursday after Israeli troops lifted their siege of the Palestinian Authority president's headquarters, Arafat said the date for new elections would be announced soon.

Under domestic and international pressure to institute reforms, Arafat trimmed his Cabinet from 31 to 21 members earlier this week.

Shin Bet criticized over killing

Israel's Shin Bet domestic security service was criticized for shortcomings in protecting slain Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi. Ze'evi was shot dead by Palestinian assassins in a Jerusalem hotel in October 2000.

A legislative subcommittee said that the Shin Bet's VIP protection unit had not warned Ze'evi of the potential danger of repeatedly staying at the same hotel and not altering his routine. It also found that the Shin Bet apparently did not correctly interpret information it received prior to the assassination.

Israeli bank official indicted

A bank official and her father were indicted in one of the biggest embezzlement, fraud and money-laundering cases in Israel's history.

Over a period of five years, Esther Alon and her father, Avigdor Maximov, stole more than \$44 million from the Trade Bank to pay the debts of her brother, the prosecution told a Tel Aviv court Thursday.

Bets placed on next attack site

Israeli police are investigating reports that an illegal Israeli gambling ring is taking bets on where the next Palestinian suicide bomber will strike.

The ring, which operates in the town of Kiryat Malachi, is distributing betting sheets with the odds for various locations, according to the reports.



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repeated the official American position that reform and peacemaking should proceed on parallel tracks.

That could reopen the door for the kind of Palestinian duplicity, stage-managed by Arafat, that Sharon fears and seeks to prevent.

In what appears to be a calculated attempt to prepare public opinion, the Prime Minister's Office has been leaking information since early June on Sharon's intentions regarding Arafat.

Unqualified support for the prime minister's position came in an editorial in the Ma'ariv newspaper, which argued that the Jewish state has nothing to fear from expelling Arafat.

"We have long been warned that his absence would create a dangerous anarchy in the territories, with Israel the prime loser. But what's happening there now, under his leadership?" the paper asked.

"We must not panic at the idea of expelling Arafat," it said. "The sky won't fall on us, and it will teach the Palestinians, the world and ourselves that an arch-terrorist like him cannot be let off the hook."

The IDF's strike last Friday at Arafat's headquarters, in which a shell penetrated the Palestinian leader's bathroom, was meant to show Arafat how vulnerable he is and to prepare world opinion for the next step.

As one Western diplomat put it, by going further each time, Sharon is "making the unthinkable banal."

Backing Sharon's expulsion plan, Mofaz argues that Arafat is the driving force behind Palestinian terror. If Arafat were removed from the scene, the chief of staff says, the level of violence probably would drop.

Likud Party legislators such as Yuval Steinitz contend that Arafat's international standing limits Israel's capacity to respond to Palestinian terror. If Arafat were expelled, Steinitz says, the army would have an easier job.

On the far right, politicians like Benjamin Elon from the Moledet Party and Israel, Our Home's Avigdor Lieberman actually welcome the chaos that might ensue, as it would give Israel a chance to "really crack down on Palestinian terror."

Israel also would be freer to advance political plans like Lieberman's proposed cantonization of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or Elon's transfer of Palestinians to neighboring Arab states.

Among Labor politicians, however, there is consensus that expelling Arafat would be a huge blunder.

They argue that it is simplistic to personalize the conflict as if the only problem were Arafat, and to claim that if only he would go away the rest of the Palestinians would fall into line.

Moreover, Arafat wandering the world would be free to stir up trouble against Israel, while still pulling the strings in the Palestinian territories.

The Laborites also make another, more subtle argument: Part of the struggle with the Palestinians, they say, is over images and perceptions.

Expelling Arafat and allowing him to play the victim would be a public relations coup for the Palestinians.

Finally, they say, even if Arafat is the problem, the only way he can effectively be replaced is through an authentic internal Palestinian process, in which Israel is plainly not involved.

Expelling Arafat would defeat the purpose of the exercise since no Palestinian would dare claim the exiled president's mantle, at least while Arafat is still alive.

Several months ago, in an unusually candid interview, Sharon said he regretted not having killed Arafat 20 years ago when the PLO was expelled from Beirut, and that he regretted having promised Bush last year that he would not harm the Palestinian leader physically.

Realistically, that leaves Sharon only with the option of expulsion.

But, as the internal debate in Israel shows, the prime minister is stuck in a Catch-22.

What he wants to get rid of is not so much Arafat as Arafat's influence, but any action he takes against Arafat could well backfire and increase the Palestinian leader's sway. □

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

JEWISH WORLD

Swedish group accuses Sharon

The youth group associated with Sweden's ruling party filed a complaint against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The Social Democratic Youth of Sweden accused Sharon and the Israel Defense Force on Thursday of violating the rules of war by using excessive violence against the Palestinians.

A rarely applied law allows Swedish courts to try alleged war crimes committed in other countries, but it would require government approval. Foreign Minister Anna Lindh opposed the initiative, saying it could aggravate the Middle East crisis.

ADL blasts anti-Islam speech

The Anti-Defamation League criticized a speech by the former president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

In the speech, the Rev. Jerry Vines, the former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, called the prophet Mohammad "a demon-possessed pedophile" and asserted that Islam is not "as good as Christianity." Vines also blamed many of America's problems on religious pluralism.

Abraham Foxman, the ADL's national director, said of the recent speech, "Unfortunately, such deplorable, divisive rhetoric is not surprising coming from the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention, which has a track record of denigrating and delegitimizing other religions."

Prince Charles visits Jewish sites

Britain's Prince Charles toured Jewish sites in Krakow, Poland. Wearing an embroidered blue kippah, Prince Charles toured Krakow's centuries-old Remuh synagogue and Old Jewish Cemetery on Thursday. He also met with local Holocaust survivors, including a man who was on Schindler's list.

Guided by Tadeusz Jakobowicz, the 63-year-old head of Krakow's 200-member Jewish community, Charles spent about 30 minutes in the cemetery, which dates back to 1551 and where the great sage Rabbi Moses Isserles is buried. The adjoining Remuh Synagogue, which also dates from the mid-16th century, is still in regular use. Charles also visited Krakow's old Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, which in recent years has become a popular tourist quarter featuring the ghetto's Jewish history.

Greek museum spotlights Jews

The archaeological museum on the Greek island of Rhodes is mounting an exhibit about the once-thriving local community. The exhibit, running June 20 to July 15, focuses on the history and daily lives of those who once lived there. Before the Holocaust, the island had a Jewish population of 1,900 people. Only 200 survived. There are now fewer than 50.

Is U.S. too supportive of Israel? Yes, many Americans say in poll

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A growing number of Americans say the United States is too supportive of Israel, according to a new poll.

For the first time since last October, a plurality of Americans — 43 percent — say the United States is too supportive of Israel, while 40 percent say the country gives Israel the right amount of support.

However, 10 percent still feel the United States is not supportive enough, a Gallup poll shows.

Gallup characterizes the figures as "a significant decline in a pro-Israeli point of view" over the last eight months.

In the month after the Sept. 11 attacks, Americans said the United States was giving Israel the right amount of support — rather than too much — by a 2-1 margin, or 58 percent to 29 percent. In April, the figures dropped to 49 percent and 35 percent.

The numbers reflect confusion in the American public, according to Jason Isaacson, director of government and international affairs for the American Jewish Committee.

Americans naturally are allied with and supportive of Israel, but they don't understand the whole nature of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, Isaacson said. "It's not surprising that people give knee-jerk responses based on inadequate information," he said.

The results are from telephone interviews with 800 adults conducted June 7-8. The margin of error for the poll is 3 percent.

One poll does not tell the entire story, and it's more instructive to examine how Americans have responded over a period of time, said Rebecca Needler, spokeswoman for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

"There are many examples across the country that show American support for Israel," Needler said, pointing to rallies and demonstrations in recent months expressing solidarity with Israel.

The difference between political parties is more explicit. Forty-seven percent of Republicans say the United States supports Israel the right amount, and 36 percent believe the United States is too supportive. Among Democrats, a majority — 51 percent — say U.S. support is too high, and 32 percent say it is just right.

Some 12 percent of Republicans and 10 percent of Democrats say the United States is not supportive enough of Israel, according to the poll.

Republicans clearly identify with and support Israel, said Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition.

"The traditional alliance between support for Israel and the Democratic Party is showing signs of age and wear and tear," he said.

David Harris, deputy executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council, dismissed any decrease in support for Israel within the Democratic Party, noting that Terry McAuliffe, the head of the Democratic Party, visited Israel in February.

He also played down the significance in the difference between the Republican and Democratic numbers in the poll. "None of those numbers — for Republicans or Democrats — are very encouraging," he said. □

Cafe Moment reopens

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A prominent Jerusalem cafe reopened, three months after it was destroyed in a suicide bombing.

Eleven people were killed and more than 50 others injured in the March attack at Cafe Moment, located just 200 yards from the prime minister's official residence. Tuesday night's reopening took place as a suicide bomber struck at a falafel stand in the Israeli coastal city of Herzliya, killing a 15-year-old girl and wounding more than 10 others.

The bombing victim, Hadar Hershkowitz, was the daughter of Aryeh Hershkowitz, director general of the Hapoel Tel Aviv soccer club. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Lone Jew in Lithuanian town spends life preserving the past

By Adam B. Ellick

PLUNGE, Lithuania (JTA) — Jacob Bunka is stumped: The 79-year-old cannot recall how many Jews from his hometown survived the war and returned home.

So the feisty man begins rummaging through his desk drawers, frantically searching for a document. Papers, once meticulously organized in bulky folders, now form a chaotic clutter on his desk.

The mess mounts. Bunka is told by a visitor not to bother. He doesn't listen. "I need to know for myself," he says, waving his arms dismissively.

His doggedness is pardonable. After all, Bunka is a product of prewar Jewish Lithuania, a persistent culture that survived 600 years of unrest. Plus, his native village, Plunge, rests in Zemaitija, a region whose inhabitants are known for "sticking to things."

Bunka, who stands no more than 5 feet tall, is the last Jew in Plunge, a once-vibrant Jewish community that at one point had 2,500 members.

Lithuania's only Jewish folk artist, Bunka has dedicated his entire adult life to fulfilling a promise he made to himself in 1941 while fighting the Nazis: to immortalize the annihilated Jewish community of Plunge.

As part of his ambitious crusade, he has created memorials at 10 different mass murder sites, where his wooden sculptures dominate the scene. He also restored the local cemetery and founded the Plunge Jewish community — which consists of himself and 13 non-Jews, and which has taken possession of the local synagogue and adjacent prayer houses after the city returned them to the community.

Along with turning one of the prayer houses into a museum, Bunka wrote a book on the history of Plunge's Jews.

"When I was fighting on the front, I was thinking how to memorialize Plunge. I was constantly plagued with the thought that if I survive, I will never forget those who died," he says. "Everyone knows about the biggest towns, but the little provincial towns stayed unknown."

Today, Plunge is an eerily silent, run down, post-Communist town of 30,000 with little resemblance to its former heterogeneous mix. The town's biggest employer churns out frozen crab sticks, a far cry from the bagels and fresh herring that filled the marketplace some 60 years ago.

"Everyday I go on the street. I see Jewish houses and I feel some bitterness in my soul, but I understand there's nothing I can do about it," Bunka says. "The most important thing is to make others understand and learn about Jews."

After the war, Bunka opted to remain in Plunge, unlike his mother and two sisters, who emigrated to Israel.

"I made a promise to myself," he says. "I made much more here for the Jewish people. In Israel, I'd just be a simple artist."

For two decades, Bunka's mission to build Jewish monuments was shunned by the Soviet regime, which suppressed religious activity. But in 1976, Bunka got his big break: A former mayor of a nearby town asked Bunka to create a sculpture to honor the town's 100 murdered Jews.

Bunka fashioned a 4-yard-high cedar sculpture of a man with bound hands. They erected it secretly at night.

This gave Bunka the impetus to create monuments in Koshan, a forest two miles from Plunge. In the middle of the 1980s, with the Soviet grip loosening, he created "Born to Live," a sculpture of a family surrounded by branches and roots representing growth. It was made from oak, a symbol of strength.

In 1986, Plunge's mayor, an art lover who was serving his final term, had 60 Soviet soldiers install the monument.

For the next three years, Bunka worked alone and created eight more vertical oak statues for the memorial. The municipality of Plunge added paths, fences, stairs, asphalt and parking spaces.

Bunka's fight to preserve the memory of a lost community also includes a book, "Plungyan: A Memoir," a detailed account of Plunge's Jewish history. Excerpts will be published in the town newspaper this summer.

Tourists from more than 20 nations, including Korea and Zimbabwe, most of whom have roots in the region, have recognized Bunka's efforts.

Along with serving as Plunge's unofficial Jewish guide, Bunka spends his days crafting wooden figures — rabbis, shoemakers, milkmen — recalling the lost community. Creativity is in Bunka's blood. His sister is a poet and his father recited witty poems in Plunge's streets. His grandfather was a cantor.

After attending rabbinical school, Bunka learned carpentry. He worked at a furniture factory, where his creative urges remained silent. He retired in 1983, then embarked on woodcarving as a full-time hobby.

In 1950, he married Dalija, a Lithuanian woman with whom he had three children. The two live in a small apartment in a Stalinist-era housing complex. His children have pledged to continue his endeavors after he dies.

"There is no chance to keep the tradition here, but they are proud that their father is Jewish," he says. "In the house we celebrate Purim, Pesach."

Plunge's history is both festive and horrid.

Jewish immigrants first arrived in 1348 after being forced to flee Serbia, Moravia and Hungary. By 1900, more than 2,500 Jews — including merchants, businessmen and craftsmen — constituted over half of Plunge's population.

There were Jewish sport clubs, Jewish orchestras, Jewish scientific organizations. From 1918 to 1931, there was a Jewish mayor. Then came the Holocaust. Now only Jacob Bunka is left.

Bunka was 19 in 1941, when the Germans neared. With 300 other Plunge Jews, the Bunkas fled to Russia.

Those who tried to escape days later and those who remained in the town suffered a cruel fate at the hands of the Germans and their Lithuanian collaborators. By the time the bloodletting ended, 2,234 Plunge Jews were murdered.

Bunka and the other Plunge Jews who fled to Russia were somewhat luckier. He worked on a collective farm in Siberia and then joined the Russian army. Of the 72 Plunge Jews who joined the army, 42 died in combat, including Bunka's father and brother.

Now, back in his home, Bunka has found the document he so doggedly was searching for.

He tells his visitor that 138 Plunge Jews survived the war and returned from Russia. After the war, most emigrated to Israel, South Africa and the United States.

By 1970, he says, Plunge had 45 Jews.

But Bunka prefers not to get tangled in demographics.

"Wherever you live, wherever you are," he says softly, "you are always Jewish in your heart." □