



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 80, No. 124

Wednesday, July 3, 2002

85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Fatah denies issuing threat

Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement denied any connection to a leaflet calling for attacks on American and Israeli targets.

The denial came after groups affiliated with the movement called Monday on all Palestinian organizations to strike at the targets in response to U.S. opposition to Arafat's leadership.

The Palestinian news agency later put out a statement in which Arafat distanced himself from the statement, saying it was not made in his name.

Peres: Israel needs new partner

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said he no longer considers Yasser Arafat a peace partner.

Addressing Labor Party members Monday, Peres said that in the wake of President Bush's speech last week, which effectively rejected Arafat's continued leadership, Israel must seek or create a new Palestinian partner to fight terrorism and seek peace.

Peres, who was one of the architects of the Oslo peace process, clarified his remarks Tuesday, saying Israel cannot determine the Palestinian leadership or give the impression of doing so.

Pro-Israel voice retires

A leading pro-Israel voice in Congress is retiring. Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), often the lone Republican Jewish member in the House of Representatives during his 30-year career, said Tuesday he is leaving his seat "with great remorse."

Gilman was a staunch supporter of Israel and took a hard line against aiding the Palestinians.

A leader on foreign policy issues, Gilman served for six years as chairman of the House International Relations Committee, and currently serves as chairman of the House subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. Gilman faced an uncertain political future because of redistricting.

Saudi blasts Jewish lawmakers

Saudi Arabia's defense minister lashed out at Jewish members of the U.S. Congress.

According to the London-based Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, when asked about U.S. criticism of Saudi Arabia, Prince Sultan bin Abd Al-Aziz replied, "It is enough to see a number of congressmen wearing Jewish yarmulkes to explain the allegations against us."

FOCUS ON ISSUES

As shul missions fall, movements offering more joint trips to Israel

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — Every day, Sue Schwartz tells herself she'll mail the check and the registration form to join her synagogue's summer mission to Israel — yet somehow she never gets around to it.

The check and the form "are going today, I hope," says Schwartz, who lives in Philadelphia.

Fearing for her safety during the Palestinian intifada, Schwartz checks the news daily to anticipate the level of volatility in Israel. After listening to President Bush's Mideast speech on June 24 — in which he supported Israel's battle against terrorism and essentially called on the Palestinians to oust their leader, Yasser Arafat — Schwartz says she feared Americans might become targets.

"Really funny feelings go through your mind," says Schwartz, 50, who has never visited Israel before.

Her synagogue's trip is focused on meeting terror victims and terror experts, so Schwartz may not have time to see the tourist sites she has dreamed of visiting.

It might seem like an odd time to take a first trip to Israel. But Schwartz, the assistant dean for student affairs at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Dental Medicine, believes that right now is when "Israel needs us most."

She takes courage and comfort from the prospect of visiting Israel with her synagogue, suburban Philadelphia's Conservative Beth Am Israel.

If fellow congregants have mustered strength for the mission and her trusted rabbi has agreed to lead it, she can reflect on her fears and say, "Get over it," Schwartz says.

Unlike the United Jewish Communities, the federation umbrella organization that fill its missions from Jewish communities across North America — cutting into synagogues' target populations — individual congregations recruit from smaller pools.

The UJC has sent nearly 10,000 Jews to Israel on some 100 solidarity missions since the intifada began in September 2000.

But as fear trumps the desire to visit Israel for many Jews, synagogue missions — once a staple of congregational life — are becoming rare. Instead, synagogues are sending delegations through movement-wide or inter-synagogue trips.

While no Jewish leader is able to quantify current and past synagogue trips to Israel, all confirm that synagogue missions are down.

Before the intifada, ARZA/World Union sent more than 50 synagogue groups — with a total of more than 1,000 Jews — to Israel each year.

"Now it's a trickle," says Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, the executive director of ARZA/World Union, the Zionist arm of Reform Judaism.

In general, those going on synagogue missions these days are singles or parents of adult children.

"Congregational missions took a real serious nose dive," because of the intifada, says Rabbi Gerald Skolnik of the Conservative Forest Hills Jewish Center in New York. Skolnik also is the Israel committee chair of the Rabbinical Assembly, the rabbinical organization for Conservative rabbis.

Even "in good times, most American Jews don't go to Israel," Skolnik says. And given the conflict, there isn't a "critical mass" of participants to make a synagogue mission viable, he says.

Synagogues like Skolnik's that historically have sent missions to Israel now are joining larger trips. The "goal is to create a trip that will not get canceled," says Skolnik,

MIDEAST FOCUS

Terrorist implicates P.A. official

The head of Palestinian intelligence dispatched a terrorist to carry out an attack, according to the terrorist himself.

Amar Mustafa Maradi made the allegation against intelligence chief Tawfik Tirawi while he was being questioned by Israeli security officials. According to Maradi, Tirawi provided him with a Kalashnikov rifle and instructions to carry out attacks against Israeli targets in the Ramallah area.

Tirawi denied Maradi's allegations.

'Quartet' officials meet in London

Officials from the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia met in London on Tuesday to discuss President Bush's recent call for a new Palestinian leadership.

Israeli troops leave Kalkilya

The Israeli army pulled out of Kalkilya on Tuesday, but warned troops were prepared to return if necessary. A curfew imposed on the West Bank city was lifted as Israeli army troops took up positions in a blockade around the city.

Israeli reservists get call

The Israeli army on Tuesday began calling up thousands of reservists to serve in the West Bank.

Israel Radio reported that the call-up will focus on officers and commanders, with other soldiers being summoned by next week.

Israel bars Palestinian supporters

Israel barred 18 Americans who came to the region to show solidarity with the Palestinians.

"The State of Israel is in a state of war at the moment, and no other country would allow its enemies or those who support its enemies to enter," a spokeswoman for the Interior Ministry said Tuesday.



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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who expects to send up to 20 people from his 850-member congregation on the Rabbinical Assembly's October mission.

Ahavath Achim, an Orthodox synagogue in Fairfield, Conn., also found it worthwhile to cooperate with a neighboring synagogue.

Ahavath Achim publicized a mission through flyers and sermons, but only five members — including the rabbi — signed up. The group decided to join forces with another local congregation.

During the intifada, both the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, a congregational group, have sponsored missions, which are relatively new initiatives for the groups.

The Orthodox movement hired a new professional in January to coordinate joint missions through its congregational and rabbinical arms, and to help congregations that want to plan missions. The movement-wide missions were developed because they may have more clout than smaller groups in arranging high-profile meetings, says Rabbi Steven Dworken, executive vice president of the Orthodox movement's Rabbinical Council of America.

The new staff person also helps interested congregations connect so they can merge their missions.

"We have decided that we need to do more in terms of offering movement-wide missions, precisely for this reason that individual synagogues" are struggling to reach "requisite numbers," says Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform congregational organization.

ARZA also is reviving its rabbinic missions and initiating a new program to encourage missions for congregational leadership.

While "rank-and-file" congregants will be encouraged to attend as well, the program is based on the assumption that they aren't as eager to visit Israel now, Hirsch said. But for many nervous travelers like Schwartz, going to Israel with congregants from one's own synagogue can make the difference between committing to a trip or taking a rain check.

"The reason I chose to go now is because B.J. is sponsoring this trip," says Toby Baldinger, referring to the popular Manhattan Conservative synagogue, Congregation B'nai Jeshurun.

Repeating a program begun last year, three congregations — B'nai Jeshurun, the Manhattan Jewish Community Center and the Orthodox Lincoln Square Synagogue — are combining to send some 35-40 members on a weeklong learning program at the pluralistic Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

"I have a very strong attachment to the synagogue and a strong attachment for the importance of Israel," said Baldinger, 40, a former investment banker who volunteers at B'nai Jeshurun. Still, the decision wasn't easy for her.

"There have been some difficult days," Baldinger says. "The days of the bombings, it's been harder to stay with it."

Fearing for Baldinger's safety, her family has not supported the trip, she says.

Yet Baldinger, who was so afraid to fly after the Sept. 11 terror attacks that she was "completely grounded" in New York for months, said something inside is pushing her toward Israel. Among the various options out there, seeing Israel "on a synagogue trip is a more personal way of going," she said.

While all the current missions stress the theme of solidarity, synagogues offer their own spin on standing with the Jewish state.

"UJC doesn't have a monopoly," and "neither do we, on what's the best trip to Israel," says Rabbi Rolando Matalon of B'nai Jeshurun. The key is "for people to go there to be a witness" to and support Israel in crisis. "As a rabbi, I'm more inclined to a week of study with Israeli scholars and teachers," he says.

For Reconstructionist Rabbi Marc Margolius, who is leading Schwartz and 16 other congregants on the July mission, his trip merges compassion with analysis of the situation. A lot of Jews aren't attracted to the large missions and want to see Israel with their immediate community, Margolius said.

Meeting with a broad range of political and military experts along with terror victims, the group's goal will be to understand Israelis' perspectives on the situation.

Primarily, the point is to say, "We want to be here with you. You're family," he says. □

JEWISH WORLD

Hitler used in anti-euro ad

A Hitler impersonator is featured in a campaign being launched in Britain against the euro.

An actor dressed as Hitler gives the Nazi salute and says "Ein Volk. Ein Reich. Ein Euro," in an ad slated to appear in cinemas this month.

Campaigners denied Tuesday that the sketch could prove offensive. "Anyone who doesn't laugh, I think, should get a life," said one of those appearing in the campaign, legislator Kate Hoey.

Vandals strike in Czech town

Vandals defaced a Jewish memorial Monday in a Czech town. Vandals poured red paint over the memorial in Karlovy Vary.

The memorial stands on the site of a former synagogue burnt down by the Nazis in 1938. An anti-Semitic message was also left at the site.

Local officials vowed to find the perpetrators and offered a \$600 reward for information leading to the arrest of those responsible. "Karlovy Vary has always been a cosmopolitan town in which members of all races and religious and political beliefs have met in absolute quiet and peace," said a city spokesperson.

Lawsuit charges man is Jihadist

A Florida man is suing a controversial academic, alleging he is the No. 2 man in Islamic Jihad. John Loftus also says in his lawsuit that Sami Arian is a member of Al-Qaida.

Last month, a judge dismissed a different lawsuit that Loftus filed against Arian. A computer science professor at the University of South Florida, Arian is on paid leave for controversial statements he made about terrorism following Sept. 11.

The university's president has said she will decide next month whether to fire him.

Hillel moves to new HQ

Hillel has moved into a new headquarters in Washington. The Charles and Lynn Schusterman International Center is located in the Chinatown neighborhood of Washington. The building is the first Hillel-owned headquarters in the group's history.

S. African rabbis visit Israel

Some 40 Orthodox rabbis from South Africa are making a solidarity visit to Israel.

"The purpose of the trip is to show our wholehearted support of Israel," said South Africa's chief rabbi, Cyril Harris. "We moved our annual rabbinical conference last year from Johannesburg to Jerusalem. The situation unfortunately hasn't improved — if anything, it has deteriorated — and we simply want to show our faces to demonstrate solidarity."

Hackles rise when Zimbabwe paper runs 'repugnant' anti-Semitic diatribe

By Moira Schneider

CAPE TOWN (JTA) — "Vile, repugnant, racist rubbish" was how one Jewish leader reacted to an anti-Semitic article that appeared recently in a Zimbabwe newspaper.

A Johannesburg-based journalist, Samu Zulu, prompted Jewish criticism with an Op-Ed piece he wrote for Zimbabwe's Sunday Mail.

In the article, Zulu wrote about 19th-century British colonialist Cecil Rhodes, for whom Rhodesia — as Zimbabwe formerly was known — was named.

After describing Rhodes as "the most detestable two-legged white man ever to set foot in Zimbabwe," Zulu went on to say that Rhodes was not a "Briton of Anglo-Saxon extraction, but a Jew whose surname is derived from an island in the Aegean Sea, where his forefathers lived until the 17th century."

Zulu also wrote: "Like other Jews in Israel, America, South Africa and even Zimbabwe itself, Rhodes also became a shameless oppressor in his search for wealth and absolute power." The piece prompted Ivor Davis, a former journalist residing in Zimbabwe, to fire off a letter to the Sunday Mail.

Davis, a past president of the Hebrew Congregation in Zimbabwe's capital of Harare, refuted Zulu's claim that Rhodes was Jewish and then demanded an apology and a retraction for Zulu's "offensive and repulsive attack on the Jewish people."

Attacking Zulu's reference to Jewish oppressors in the region, Davis then dashed off a list of prominent Jews who had fought against South Africa's apartheid regime.

Davis is one of about 800 Jews remaining in Zimbabwe — 500 in Harare and 300 in Bulawayo. Two decades ago, the country had a population of 6,000 Jews.

Zulu subsequently wrote a letter to the Sunday Mail in which he made no further anti-Semitic comments. But he persisted with his contention that Rhodes indeed was a Jew, quoting from "Rhodes of Africa" by Felix Gross and citing as proof the phrase "the prominent large Rhodes nose."

In the same letter, he took a swipe at Davis, referring to him as a "Rhodesian racist."

Davis in turn wrote a letter to another newspaper, the Harare Independent, under the headline "Cecil Rhodes a closet Jew?" In this letter, Davis wrote that he had seen "Jewish" noses on many non-Jews, including the present pope.

Referring to Zulu's swipe, Davis wrote, "I am 'a Rhodesian racist' — like Cecil Rhodes was Jewish!" Davis, who hails from London's East End, has lived in Africa for the past 45 years — 33 in Kenya and the past dozen in Zimbabwe.

He always has been a fervent letter-writer when he finds an injustice, he told JTA.

"Had it been purely about Rhodes being Jewish, then all of us would have had a good laugh," he said. "But the anti-Semitism aspect of it got me going. I feel that it is important to answer these kinds of attacks."

Commenting on Zulu's anti-Semitic allegations, Mervyn Smith, chairman of the African Jewish Congress, said: "This is vile, repugnant, racist rubbish written with only one object — and that is to portray Rhodes as an even bigger villain to the black people of Zimbabwe by labeling him a Jew as well."

"One has to ask what causes this hate speech," Smith said. □

S. Africa aid shipment delayed

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel is delaying a medical aid shipment from South Africa to the Palestinians. South African officials were angered after Israel asked for the cargo to be insured for \$65 million out of fear that the shipment might contain dangerous substances.

An Israeli diplomat in South Africa, Daniel Pinchasi, said the issue was technical rather than political because the request for insurance had been made by the Israeli Aviation Authority, not the government. "We understand the struggle of the Palestinians. We want to solve this as soon as possible," he said. □

Critics pressing U.N. agency, despite little progress on case

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — Efforts to investigate the United Nations Relief and Welfare Agency, which is accused of allowing terrorism to flourish in the refugee camps it services, are falling flat on Capitol Hill and in the United Nations.

But those pressing the issue, including Jewish groups, say they will persevere.

Scrutiny of the U.N. agency began with Israel's Operation Protective Wall, launched earlier this year to root out terrorism in the West Bank.

One-third of Palestinian suicide bombers have come from the refugee camp of Jenin, serviced by UNRWA.

Israel's operation confirmed an elaborate terrorist infrastructure in the camp and set into motion a clamor for an investigation into the negligence or even abetment by the U.N. agency that gets 30 percent of its funding, or nearly \$90 million a year, from the United States.

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) sent letters to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan calling for an investigation into UNRWA. Lantos' harsher, more detailed letter calls the agency "complicit in terrorism."

Staff of the House of Representatives' International Relations Committee have made investigative tours of the UNRWA camps.

And Alan Baker, legal adviser to Israel's Foreign Ministry, visited Washington last week to raise the issue with the State Department, members of Congress and the media.

In the last month, two senior UNRWA staff members have defended the agency in closed-door briefings to staff of the House International Relations Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

While the efforts have resulted in dialogue, there are no State Department or legislative plans to withhold funding from the agency. And Capitol Hill insiders say a congressional hearing on the subject is unlikely anytime soon.

It would not be politic for the United States to withhold the paychecks for the 11,000 Palestinians working for UNRWA in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, according to one House of Representatives' staffer.

"We think we're making some of our points by having a dialogue with UNRWA," another congressional source said. The "hearing process is not always the best way" to "move the ball on this."

For his part, Annan responded to the lawmakers' letters, defending UNRWA and blaming local authorities for security matters.

"The United Nations has no responsibility for security matters in refugee camps, or indeed anywhere else in the occupied territory," Annan wrote Lantos.

"Depending on whether a camp lies in Israeli or Palestinian-controlled areas, either the government of Israel or the Palestinian Authority is responsible for preventing unlawful activities," he continued.

"Far from being complicit with terrorism, the United Nations is striving to alleviate human suffering in the area" and "help the parties renew their negotiations on a permanent status agreement," Annan wrote.

In his letters to Lantos and Specter, Annan included a detailed explanation by UNRWA's commissioner general, Peter Hansen, who reiterated that UNRWA does not "supervise" the camps, and stated that the agency has won approval by Israel and the United States.

Israel concedes that UNRWA does important humanitarian work on behalf of the refugees.

But Israel has been long concerned about certain aspects of UNRWA, said Mark Regev, spokesman of the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

"Events in Jenin led to a heightened awareness" of UNRWA's failure to halt terror and pushed the issue into "higher gear," he said.

Israel was particularly incensed by "U.N. officials giving credence to Jenin massacre rubbish," Regev added, referring to the rumors, since proven unfounded, that Israel carried out a massacre during its military operation there.

But Israel's outspokenness has little "bearing on this issue," according to one Hill staffer.

"You may not like what UNRWA does or doesn't do but their mission is very clearly defined," she said, referring to the popular complaint that UNRWA — unlike the U.N. High Commission on Refugees, which seeks a "durable solution" for the world's refugees — keeps Palestinians in refugee status.

Any change to UNRWA's mandate, which is providing humanitarian relief without a role in finding a solution to the refugee problem, will have to take place at the U.N.'s General Assembly, where Israel and the United States are likely to find few supporters, she said.

That mandate, along with the low financial contribution by Arab countries to UNRWA, remain "ongoing concerns" for Lantos, one of his spokesmen said.

However, Lantos, at the helm of the congressional crusade of inquiry into UNRWA, has no immediate plans to sponsor legislation on the subject.

For its part, a State Department official said, "The Department of State is working with UNRWA to ensure that they are taking every possible measure to protect their facilities and assistance programs from misuse by criminal elements."

However, she said, "We note that ultimately it is the responsibility of the local authority" and "we've urged the Palestinian Authority to act effectively in the camps where it has responsibility."

But passing the buck to local authorities is disingenuous, according to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which has been pressing the issue.

"They're trying to shirk their responsibility," said AIPAC's press secretary, Joshua Block.

The UNRWA refugee camps are "the shelter for terrorist groups that launch attacks against Israeli civilians," Block said.

AIPAC will continue to push for hearings on the U.N. agency, he said, adding that members of Congress are interested in pursuing the issue.

The World Jewish Congress, which is also lobbying members of Congress to examine UNRWA, agreed the issue is not over in Washington.

The WJC wants Congress and the Bush administration to take a "closer look" at UNRWA.

That look could include an internal investigation or open hearings in Congress, a WJC official said. □