



Daily News Bulletin

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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Sharon: Israel not pushing on Iraq

Israel is not urging the United States to accelerate its military action against Iraq, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Sunday.

Reacting to media reports that Israel urged the U.S. to act against Iraq as soon as possible, Sharon was quoted as telling Cabinet ministers that Israel is not advising the Americans on any course of action.

Sharon said that in his last phone conversation with President Bush, he only stressed Israeli support of whatever course the United States pursues.

Earlier reports quoted Israeli officials as saying that American should not delay taking action against Saddam Hussein because the Iraqi leader is speeding up production of biological and chemical weapons.

Report: Sharon OK'd Arafat exile

Israel's prime minister approved a plan in April to deport Yasser Arafat from the West Bank, but it was rejected by the Cabinet, Israeli television reported last Friday.

The Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz described the intended destination for Arafat as "a neighboring Arab state that does not have diplomatic relations with Israel nor close ties with the United States."

The army and a spokesman for Sharon refused to comment on the report.

Havel tours flooded Jewish sites

Czech President Vaclav Havel visited several historic Jewish sites in Prague damaged by recent flooding. Havel expressed sympathy for the Jewish community while touring the 13th-century Old-New Synagogue and the Pinkas Synagogue on Sunday.

Both sites took in several feet of water, and experts are still examining the extent of the damage.

Meanwhile, the basement of Dresden's new synagogue was flooded last Friday, but the sanctuary was still dry and Torah scrolls had been secured.

Bus company to sue Arafat

Israel's national bus company is planning to sue Yasser Arafat over damages from bombing attacks. An Egged official said Sunday that the company has lost \$86 million since the Palestinian intifada began in September 2000. More than 100 passengers have been killed and 600 wounded in terror attacks on Egged buses since then, the company said.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Are Palestinians going hungry?

It depends whom you ask, and how

By Gil Sedan

BALATA REFUGEE CAMP, West Bank (JTA) — "We will never go hungry," Ahmad Zughayer boasted as a truck from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency unloaded sacks of flour, sugar, oil, rice and milk powder in the Balata refugee camp near Nablus.

"We will never go hungry, but not for the reason you think," he added. "We simply stick together. Whenever anyone misses anything, someone will help out, be it family or neighbors."

As a U.S.-funded survey reports growing levels of malnutrition among the Palestinian population, Israelis and Palestinians have differed over just how severe the socioeconomic crisis is in the Palestinian areas, and who bears the blame.

Palestinians say Israeli security closures are intended to strangle the Palestinian economy and impose collective punishment. Israel says many innocent Palestinians are paying the price of their compatriots' belligerence and the Palestinian Authority's ineptitude and corruption.

Before the intifada, tens of thousands of Palestinians worked in Israel and maintained a decent standard of living.

For 20 years, Iyyad Maher, 45, also from the Balata camp, worked as a truck driver distributing dairy products in Israel. Since the intifada began in September 2000, he has been sitting at home, unemployed.

According to the World Bank, 35 percent of the Palestinian labor force is unemployed, but the situation in the refugee camps is worse, with unemployment figures at 50 percent or higher. The obvious result is that family income has fallen sharply, and there is less money to buy basic commodities.

Israel has imposed a curfew in the West Bank and a closure that prohibits movement between Palestinian cities and towns.

Israel says it would like to ease the predicament of the general Palestinian population, while trying to maintain its own security. When Israel does relax its closures, Palestinian groups often exploit the freedom to send terrorists to attack Israel.

Israel and the Palestinians held high-level talks last week to discuss security cooperation and ways to ease Palestinian hardships. So far, no dramatic improvement has been felt. Zughayer, however, sounded confident.

"Don't worry about us," he said. "We can always settle for bread and olive oil."

His comments conflicted with a recent survey conducted by Care International, which was designed by Johns Hopkins University's School of Public Health and funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The preliminary results of the study, carried out among 1,000 Palestinian households, showed that 9.3 percent of Palestinian children up to 5 years of age suffer from acute malnutrition, meaning they weigh less than they should for their age or height. The study surveyed nutrition levels, availability of food and household consumption.

The result was an accusing finger pointed at Israel, as the study's authors sought to tie the rise in malnutrition to Israeli-imposed restrictions on movement and the dismal economic situation in Palestinian areas, rather than to Palestinian violence or Palestinian Authority mismanagement. Maj. Gen. Amos Gilad, Israel's coordinator of government affairs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, denied the accusations. He admitted that the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Terrorists' homes destroyed

Israel destroyed the houses of two Palestinian terrorists in the West Bank. Israeli officials said the houses destroyed last Friday belonged to suicide bombers, including Iyad Sawalha, who blew himself up next to an Israeli bus in May, killing 17 people.

Israeli soldier wounded

An Israeli soldier was lightly wounded Sunday in an exchange of fire in the Gaza Strip.

The clash occurred in the Gush Katif settlement bloc in southern Gaza. In the West Bank, Israeli troops arrested 15 Palestinians wanted for suspected terrorist activity near Ramallah, Israel Radio reported. Over the weekend, bombs were detonated near Israeli army vehicles near Jenin and Tulkarm. A mortar was fired at an Israeli settlement in the Gaza Strip.

Former PLO official blasts Arafat

A former PLO treasurer accused Yasser Arafat of corruption.

Jaweed Ghussein, who previously criticized the Palestinian Authority president for supporting Saddam Hussein in the early 1990s, accused him of pocketing aid money earmarked for the Palestinian people, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported Sunday. Ghussein had been under house arrest in the Palestinian Authority for alleged corruption and failure to pay back a personal loan, a claim he disputes.

Israel's deputy foreign minister, Rabbi Michael Melchior, said Israel intervened for humanitarian reasons to help Ghussein leave the West Bank and travel to Britain for medical treatment.

Infant's killer nabbed?

Israeli troops captured a Palestinian sniper believed responsible for killing 10-month-old Shalhevet Pass in Hebron in March 2001. Sudki Zaro was arrested last Friday, Israeli officials said.

standard of living in the territories has dropped considerably, but denied categorically that the population was suffering from hunger.

The truth may be somewhere in the middle. There is no hunger because of a high level of mutual aid among the Palestinian population and the continued supply of food rations by UNRWA, and also because the Israeli army — despite closures and curfews — allows for the regular supply of food to the Palestinian territories.

On the main street of the Balata camp, in fact, fresh fruit and vegetables were piling up on the produce stands. Lumps of meat were hanging in the butcher shop, and the falafel stands were as busy as ever.

To all appearances, the population here is not suffering from hunger.

Still, they could be suffering from malnutrition. With unemployment in the territories at an all-time high, few families can afford to buy a pound of grapes for 35 cents, not to speak of meat and dairy products.

Indeed, the USAID study found that 36 percent of Palestinian families in the West Bank and Gaza Strip do not have enough money to feed their families consistently.

The figures put the Gaza Strip on par with the poverty-stricken African countries of Nigeria and Chad for acute malnutrition.

But Gilad told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee recently that the issue of hunger is partly a matter of definitions.

"Hunger is when there is a lack of basic commodities. Hunger is when people have swollen bellies and fall over dead," Gilad said. "There is no hunger now."

If foreign humanitarian aid to the Palestinians declines, the Israeli army is preparing for the contingency that it will have to establish a military government and resurrect the civil administration that governed Palestinians from the 1967 Six-Day War until the formation of the Palestinian Authority under the Oslo accords, Gilad told the committee.

Jacob Adler, a medical adviser to the Israeli military authorities in the West Bank and Gaza, admitted that "there is a certain problem of availability of food," but argued that malnutrition already had increased in the mid-1990s under Palestinian Authority management.

Not all Palestinians blame only Israel for the crisis.

A few weeks ago, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in Gaza demanding that the Palestinian Authority supply "bread and work."

Even inside the Balata camp, residents openly blame the Palestinian Authority.

"Don't tell me that the P.A. has no money," said Maher, who used to earn more than \$1,000 a month from his dairy delivery job in Israel. "I remember the days when the Israeli military governor came to his office with a beat-up Sussita," a type of Israeli car produced in the 1960s. "Our leaders all drive Mercedes."

Gilad, too, told the Knesset committee that the Palestinian Authority under President Yasser Arafat is "extremely corrupt," with its leadership "driving fancy cars, hiring maids from Sri Lanka and not bringing up its children to become suicide bombers."

"Sometimes," he added, "I think we care about the Palestinians more than Yasser Arafat and his gang."

Maher would not elaborate how, after two years unemployed, he still managed to make ends meet. "I have burned out all our savings," he said. "Now I'm considering selling the refrigerator." □

Report: Mandela sympathizes with Barghouti

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Nelson Mandela reportedly said he sees similarities between his trial and Marwan Barghouti's.

Mandela called for the Fatah leader to be treated fairly, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Khader Shkirat, a lawyer for Barghouti, relayed that South Africa's most famous political prisoner said, "What is happening to Barghouti is exactly the same as what happened to me. The government tried to delegitimize the African National Congress and its armed struggle by putting me on trial." Barghouti, the head of Fatah's Tanzim militia, was charged Aug. 14 in the Tel Aviv District Court with murder. Israeli officials say he was behind scores of terrorist attacks that killed dozens of Israelis. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Charity's offices raided

German police raided the offices of a charity accused of supporting Palestinian terrorists. The German Foreign Ministry said it seized computers and documents last Friday belonging to the Al-Aksa charity.

The group, believed to have ties to Hamas, was banned two weeks ago for allegedly helping the families of suicide bombers.

Former slave laborers get help

Hundreds of former slave laborers will receive help from the German government.

Ukrainian officials announced a new humanitarian program to provide health care to nearly 400 elderly Kiev residents whom the Nazis forced to work as slave laborers in Munich during World War II.

The residents will receive packages containing medications prescribed by their doctors, as well as other medical equipment. Ukrainian authorities currently register over half a million Nazi victims as eligible for German government compensation.

Money to help Israeli schools

Some \$20 million raised by North American Jewry will go to improve security in Israeli schools this year. The money was raised by the United Jewish Communities, the central fund-raising arm for North American Jews, as part of the Israel Emergency Campaign to help Israel during the ongoing intifada.

Death of Hitler deputy marked

Thousands of German extremists marched to commemorate the death of Hitler deputy Rudolf Hess. In one of the largest demonstrations, in the Bavarian town of Wunsiedel, 500 counterdemonstrators turned out in protest. No violence was reported.

The anniversary of the death of Hess, who is believed to have committed suicide in the Spandau prison in 1987, long has been a rallying day for German neo-Nazis.

Jewish student leaders meet

More than 100 Jewish students across North America met to develop pro-Israel leadership skills for college campuses. Chabad Lubavitch, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia and the Jewish Heritage Programs, a private foundation, sponsored the weekend event in Pennsylvania.

In a related development, a Jewish fraternity held its first annual Israel advocacy day. Some 300 students and alumni of Alpha Epsilon Pi participated in the day, which was also sponsored by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation.

The day was held at AEPi's 89th anniversary conference last week in Orlando, Fla.

Relatives of Hebrew U. victims say White House has ignored them

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA)—Relatives and friends of the Americans killed in the July 31 terror attack at Hebrew University are disappointed that President Bush hasn't sent personal condolences.

The White House, they say, should have made more of an effort to reach out to the families of the five Americans who died in the attack, which killed a total of nine people.

Lisa Magnas, president of the university's American alumni association and a friend of victim Janis Coulter, called the Bush administration's inaction "unfortunate and tactless."

"These are American families who deserve to hear from their president," she said.

Coulter was the assistant director of admissions for overseas students at Hebrew University's Rothberg International School.

Based in New York, she had just arrived in Israel to accompany 19 graduate students beginning intensive Hebrew language classes when the bomb went off in a crowded university cafeteria.

Marla Bennett, another victim, was doing joint graduate work at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies and the Hebrew University. She had planned to take a leave from school to attend a friend's wedding and a Bar Mitzvah in the United States, and to spend the High Holidays with her family.

"My cousin was murdered, and you didn't even make a phone call or write a letter to her family," Stephen Bennett, a cousin, wrote Bush, according to The Washington Post.

Bennett's family, as well as relatives of Coulter and Benjamin Blutstein, a friend and Pardes colleague of Bennett's, said they had received calls from congressmen.

The president did make public remarks following the terror attack, saying he was "furious" about the attack.

"This country condemns that kind of killing, and we send our deepest sympathy to the students and their families," Bush said.

White House spokesperson Mercy Viana noted that the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Daniel Kurtzer, attended a memorial service in Israel.

The White House plans to respond to any private correspondence from victims' families, one White House official said.

Nevertheless, families and friends feel ignored, seeing the White House's response as tepid and insensitive.

Norman Greene, a Bennett family friend, lamented the lack of human touch.

"A mother and father sitting shiva didn't hear a public statement," he said. "Some human, compassionate act would have been really welcome."

The administration gives the impression that it doesn't care, he added.

Richard Blutstein, Benjamin's father, is taking another tack, saying he is not focused on political protocol but on what he could do to catch the killers of his son.

"I don't care whether or not Bush should have taken time off from his golf game," he told JTA. "What I do care is what he's going to do."

Blutstein is trying to drum up support in his hometown of Harrisburg, Pa., to pressure Congress to pass the Koby Mandell Act, legislation named after a U.S.-born teen-ager who was murdered in a terrorist attack in the West Bank last year.

The bill calls for an office in the Department of Justice to monitor Palestinian terrorist attacks and offer rewards for information on the perpetrators.

Blutstein and Sherri Mandell, Koby's mother, are asking the State Department to publicize the rewards programs beyond the department's Web site and place notices in Arab-language newspapers in order to publicize the information to the Arab world.

The Zionist Organization of America has been pressing the issue for years, arguing that the U.S. government makes far fewer efforts to track down the perpetrators when Americans are killed abroad by Palestinians than when they are killed by people of other nationalities. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Righteous Gentiles in Belarus part of local Jewish community

By Adam B. Ellick

MINSK, Belarus (JTA) — Vanda Skuratovich is rambling on about her favorite subject: her unyielding devotion to Catholicism.

She refers to Mother Mary as her savior and she dwells on the importance of baptism.

All of this seems normal enough until the 76-year-old Belarussian proudly unveils a poster-size family photograph of 64 Jews. "This is my family," says Skuratovich, gazing at the photo with her glassy blue eyes.

The smiling faces are descendants of four Jews whom Skuratovich rescued during the vicious Nazi occupation of Belarus in 1941.

Her heroics earned her a Righteous Gentile designation from Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in the early 1990s.

Last year, her Jewish "family" flew her to New York so they could personally thank her for the gift of life. "Those four Jews became so dear to us that I feel Jewish, but in reality I'm a strong practicing Catholic," she says.

Her story is moving indeed. But here in a crammed Minsk apartment filled with Soviet-era furniture, Skuratovich is hardly the lone hero.

She's one of 12 Righteous Gentiles in this dreary Belarussian capital who convene twice a month in each other's homes for dinner and socializing, courtesy of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

The club, known as Warm Homes, serves as a small yet symbolic expression of gratitude to elderly folks like Skuratovich who performed good deeds 60 years ago.

In addition to a traditional Belarussian menu — roasted chicken, boiled potatoes, herring, open-faced sandwiches topped with egg, cheese and garlic, two cakes and the obligatory vodka — the JDC also provides the group with medical care throughout the year.

Such gifts are highly valued in this poverty-stricken nation, where most pensioners rarely receive more than \$150 per month.

They also partake in various JDC community activities for the elderly — like Jewish-themed excursions around Belarus, and a creative intelligentsia club featuring guest lectures. They celebrate Jewish holidays with local Jews, and many of them cook traditional Jewish foods for Easter, like stuffed pike and tzimmes.

More than 1 million Jews lived in Belarus before the war, and cities like Minsk, Gomel and Pinsk were vibrant Jewish centers with populations that were more than half-Jewish.

In the late 1920s, the Soviet regime began suppressing religious activity, and in 1941 the Nazis occupied Belarus and murdered most of its Jews. Today there are only 28,000 registered Jews, although Jewish communities here insist the actual number nears 80,000.

Twenty-seven of the 400 Righteous Gentiles of Belarus reside in Minsk. Those who are too old or ill to attend the events receive meals delivered to their homes.

"We're thankful for those who help us with food and for our organization. And I say our organization because we also belong to this community center. Maybe it was late, but we finally feel

sincere attitudes and good care," says Roisa Sermashko, 72, who sheltered two of her Jewish classmates from 1941 to 1943.

In 1941, Skuratovich was home with her parents in Minsk when four Jews — a father, mother and two children — knocked on her door. Skuratovich recognized the family as one that had owned a nearby shop before the war.

Without hesitation, Skuratovich and her family removed a section of the wood floor and dug a pit below, where the four hid for 18 months. The pit was covered again by panels and a sofa so suspicion would not be aroused.

One night, the Skuratovich family hosted a party to intentionally silence any rumors. "The Jews were under the floor waiting all night for the party to end," she says nonchalantly.

As a precaution, Polish names were fabricated for the hidden Jews. Daughter Hava was Basya and son Srul became Leo, a name he still uses today. In the pit, Basya knitted socks, and at night the father came out to cook.

In 1959, Leo and Hava landed in Canada and wrote to Skuratovich. They have remained friends ever since.

"After the war, some neighbors called our family a ghetto," says Skuratovich, who stands about 4-feet-5-inches tall.

The Minsk Ghetto was an enclosed area of the city where 100,000 Jews lived in close quarters. They left the enclosure during the day and toiled in forced labor throughout the city before returning at night.

No more than 3,000 Ghetto residents survived the war.

Some Jews, especially children, managed to escape from their working stations and desperately fled to the homes of their Belarussian friends. If the Germans discovered either fleeing Jews or the Belarussians who harbored them, the result was almost always death.

"Those people who survived the Ghetto survived only with help of Belarussian citizens," says Maya Isakovna, now 64, who with 40 other youths survived the Minsk Ghetto when they were hidden by a Belarussian in a village south of Minsk.

Unlike citizens in the neighboring Baltic nations, where locals willingly collaborated with Nazis, Belarussians acted with more decency. Many hid Jews in their homes, while others prepared false documents permitting Jews to move freely within Minsk.

"What do you do when a person comes out of a fire? You cannot just say no," says Dr. Zoya Servoa, a feisty 73-year-old with wide eyes whose family saved 10 Jews.

This group of Righteous Gentiles went completely unrecognized during communism, when religious activity barely breathed.

In fact, many hid their heroics from friends in fear that their stories would reach authorities, and they'd be labeled as religious sympathizers and given jobs that pay less.

In 1989, with communism on the verge of collapse, such fears were extinguished. That prompted Isakovna to embark on a personal pledge to honor Righteous Gentiles.

She is largely responsible for locating most Righteous Gentiles in Belarus and has worked diligently to obtain approval by Yad Vashem, a process that requires substantial evidence. She also erected a monument to Righteous Gentiles in Porechie, where she was saved.

Even in today's independent Belarus, these Righteous Gentiles have been ignored by their own government.

"Only Israel canonized us as heroes. No one else thinks of us as heroes," Servoa says. □