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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Likud-Labor gap closes

The Likud-Labor gap is closing in the wake of corruption allegations involving Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, according to opinion polls. A poll published Thursday in Ha'aretz predicted Likud winning only 27 seats in the Knesset, down from 40 a month ago. The poll showed Labor gaining slightly, from 22 to 24 seats.

At a news conference Thursday, Sharon said the allegations were an "old issue" that "has nothing to do with me." The chairman of the Central Election Committee chairman, Justice Mishael Cheshin, pulled the plug on the news conference while Sharon was speaking. Cheshin said Sharon was violating the law because his remarks were election propaganda — a charge Sharon denied.

Iraq told to create suicide squads

A Hamas official called on Iraq to create a "suicide army" to counter any U.S.-led attack.

"Iraq must train convoys of martyrs," Abdel Aziz Rantissi wrote on Hamas' Web site, according to a translation by the Washington-based Middle East Media Research Institute.

Court OKs Israeli Arab candidates

Israel's Supreme Court overturned the Central Election Committee's decision to bar Israeli Arab legislators Ahmed Tibi and Azmi Beshara from participating in the Jan. 28 election. In Thursday's session, the panel of 11 justices also upheld the committee's decisions to allow far-right activist Baruch Marzel to run, and to disqualify Likud Party candidates Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and Moshe Feiglin.

Tibi praised the court for blocking the "anti-democratic avalanche" led by right-wing forces that had sought to block the Israeli Arab candidates.

Report blasts Syria terror support

A report commissioned by Congress attacks Syrian support of terrorism. According to the report, Syria is the second biggest sponsor of terrorism in the world.

"After Iran, Syria is the most active state sponsor of terrorism and is included in the U.S. State Department list of state sponsors of terrorism," the annual Gilmore Commission report said. It added that Syria is far more active than Iraq in supporting terror.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Tel Aviv bombing saves Arafat from making some tough choices

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The bombs that ripped through crowds of Israelis and foreign workers in Tel Aviv on Sunday may have saved Yasser Arafat from making some tough decisions.

Internal and external pressures have been building on Arafat to allow comprehensive reforms of the Palestinian Authority — reforms that effectively would undermine the P.A. president's grip on power.

But after the deadly attack by the Al-Aksa Brigade, a terrorist group from Arafat's own Fatah movement, Israel refused to allow Palestinian officials to attend a conference on P.A. reform in London or congregate in Ramallah to consider a draft of a Palestinian constitution.

Israeli Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday that there is no need for Palestinian officials to travel abroad to conferences when they have the power at home to end terrorist attacks, but don't use it.

Unintentionally, however, the Israeli moves may have allowed Arafat to dodge a political bullet, at least temporarily.

The PLO Central Council was scheduled to convene Thursday for what Palestinians described as a "key step in reforms," ratifying a Palestinian Authority constitution.

The Central Council is made up of 128 members and serves as the bridge between the PLO's executive branch — chaired by Arafat — and its parliament, the Palestine National Council.

It would have been the PLO council's first meeting in two years. The draft constitution calls for a series of reforms, most notably the appointment of a prime minister to serve alongside the president.

The Central Council also was scheduled to study the latest draft of a "road map" toward Israeli-Palestinian peace prepared by the diplomatic "Quartet" of the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union.

The plan calls for an independent Palestinian state by 2005 — provided the Palestinians end terrorism and establish an accountable government.

After Sunday's double suicide bombing, which killed 22 Israelis and foreign workers and wounded more than 100, Israel decided not to allow the PLO members to convene. It also blocked other Palestinian officials from traveling to London for the conference on reform.

The message was clear: Israel will not allow normal political life to continue in the Palestinian Authority when terrorism disrupts normal life in the heart of Tel Aviv.

Yet the postponement was only temporary.

"Sooner or later, the council will convene and deliberate," said Res. Col. Shalom Harari, a research fellow at the Inter-Disciplinary Center in Herzliyah. "The question will be, of course, what kind of decisions it will reach, and how they will be implemented."

The draft of the constitution largely is the product of Nabil Sha'ath, the Palestinian Authority minister of planning. Sha'ath heads a committee that has been working on a Palestinian constitution for three years, with little result until now.

The current draft was prepared under heavy international pressure for reform, primarily from the United States.

"The Americans seem to be saying that if we cannot get rid of Arafat, and if we

MIDEAST FOCUS

Mitzna meets Blair in London

Israeli Labor Party leader Amram Mitzna traveled to London on Thursday for talks with British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Their meeting came against a backdrop of international criticism of Israel for barring a Palestinian delegation from attending a British-sponsored conference on Palestinian Authority reform.

Israel barred the delegation as a response to Sunday's deadly terror attack in Tel Aviv.

Mitzna reportedly told Blair that while he may not necessarily agree with the decision to bar the Palestinians, he understood why Prime Minister Ariel Sharon did it.

Mitzna, who advocates talks with Palestinians without preconditions, shifted somewhat rightward on Wednesday.

He told students that Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat is indeed "irrelevant," but that Israel must speak with whatever leadership the Palestinians choose.

Hezbollah says it won't attack

A Hezbollah official in Lebanon said the organization did not plan to attack Israel in the event of a U.S.-led strike against Iraq.

The chairman of the Hezbollah faction in Lebanon's Parliament on Wednesday dismissed as propaganda Israel's warnings of Hezbollah plans to exploit an American campaign against Iraq and launch attacks on Israel.

21 Palestinians arrested

Israeli troops arrested 21 Palestinians wanted for questioning in the West Bank on Thursday.

The arrests were made in Kalkilya, Nablus, Bethlehem and Jenin.

In Tulkarm, a bomb went off near Israeli army troops but caused no injuries, Israel Radio reported.

cannot guarantee his defeat in the projected elections, then kick him upstairs and sideline him constitutionally by rendering him symbolic or titular, and by appointing a legal prime minister in accordance with the new constitution," Hanan Ashrawi, a longtime Palestinian critic of Arafat's style of governance, wrote recently.

Though Arafat says he supports reform, he has been eager to stall the appointment of a prime minister, which could leave Arafat as a figurehead president.

The Palestinian Authority also indefinitely postponed presidential and parliamentary elections set for Jan. 20, saying it was impossible to conduct a vote while Israeli troops occupy West Bank cities and enforce curfews.

Arafat also faced a challenge over his appointment of a new prosecutor-general. The Palestinian Lawyers Union was incensed by Arafat's decision to appoint his crony Khaled Qidra by presidential decree.

Qidra was the chief prosecutor in the P.A.'s state security court, which has passed several death sentences on Palestinians accused of collaborating with Israel. Many of the trials began and ended within several hours, without proper defense for the accused and no right of appeal, according to human rights groups.

Palestinian lawyers struggling to set up a proper legal process in the Palestinian Authority say Qidra is one of the officials largely responsible for the legal chaos apparent even before the outbreak of the intifada two years ago.

"The appointment is a flagrant constitutional violation," the lawyers wrote to Arafat in late December. The lawyers resolved to fight the appointment, warning that Palestinian society was being destroyed because it lacked an authentic judicial system.

The internal political struggle finds Arafat already busy on two other fronts. One is a fragile dialogue in Cairo among representatives of Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Some statements have said the talks are aimed at temporarily halting terrorist attacks against Israelis or at least limiting them geographically, while others have said the aim is to improve coordination among the various terrorist groups.

The talks have been tenuous.

But even if they were meant to achieve a temporary cease-fire — bolstering the Labor Party's chances in Israel's Jan. 28 elections, as several Arab politicians have urged — terrorist attacks and attempted attacks are only escalating, Israeli security sources say.

Israel has accused Arafat of sabotaging previous attempts at a cease-fire. This time, though, he would seem to have a vested interest in preventing attacks: Labor Party leader Amram Mitzna has declared that if Labor wins the elections he will negotiate with the Palestinians "without preconditions."

For Arafat, who has been completely boycotted by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a Labor win could be a new lease on life.

Indeed, the Palestinian Authority condemned Sunday's attack in unusually harsh terms. The fact that his own group carried out the bombing doesn't necessarily mean Arafat was behind it, Israeli officials say, but rather shows the extent of his impotence: He can't enforce his will on his own people in Ramallah and Gaza, let alone on his negotiating partners in Cairo.

But Israeli military restraint right now might help the Palestinian groups agree to at least scale back their attacks, Ziad Abu Ziad, a member of the P.A.'s legislative council, told JTA this week. "Cairo could lead to a positive result, if the Israelis contribute to calming down the atmosphere," he said. "The Israelis have an influence on our politics, just like we influence your politics."

What now? Suppose the PLO Central Council does eventually convene? Abu Ziad estimated that it would take at least several weeks before the draft constitution would move on to its next destination, as the Palestinian political community is divided over whether the final draft should be ratified by the Parliament or by a popular plebiscite.

But Harari of the Inter-Disciplinary Center was skeptical.

"Had they really wanted a constitution they would have passed one a long time ago," he said. "It's simply that so far Arafat managed to prevent the reform."

Besides, he added, "the question is not what will be decided, but whether it will be implemented."

The bottom line is that the constitution, and the accompanying reforms, will have to wait. It will take at least until after the Israeli elections, possibly until after the war in Iraq — and probably until Arafat is no longer around. □



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JEWISH WORLD

White supremacist arrested

The Anti-Defamation League applauded the arrest of the leader of the virulently anti-Semitic World Church of the Creator.

Matthew Hale was arrested on charges that between Nov. 29 and Dec. 17 he attempted to get someone to murder U.S. Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkowitz.

"Hale has been outspoken, even praiseworthy, of those followers who seek to violently act out their hatred against Jews, blacks and other minorities, so his arrest on charges of soliciting the murder of a judge is not surprising," said Richard Hirschhaut, Chicago regional director for the ADL. "We have long known his propensity for violence."

Debate to focus on CBC coverage

A leading news editor of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation agreed to discuss the CBC's purported anti-Israel coverage during a televised debate.

Tony Burman, editor in chief of CBC news, accepted an invitation from his own network to participate in a debate with Norman Spector, Canada's former ambassador to Israel. Spector has been outspoken in his criticism of the CBC's Middle Eastern coverage.

He says its policy not to use the word "terrorist" to describe Palestinian suicide bombers, and its recent description of Hezbollah as a "national liberation movement" are but two examples of its unfair editorial slant.

Burman and Spector are scheduled to debate Jan. 19 on CBC News Sunday.

Group presses Lithuanian leader

The Simon Wiesenthal Center called on Lithuania's president-elect to help bring those guilty of Nazi-era war crimes to justice.

In a letter to Rolandas Paksas, the director of the center's Jerusalem office, Efraim Zuroff wrote that in recent years, Lithuania has done "very little" to prosecute such criminals.

"Given the fact that this task will only be possible for several additional years, I urge you to lend your support to these efforts," Zuroff wrote.

Ex-Shoah council member dies

Siggi Wilzig, an Auschwitz survivor and a former member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, died Tuesday in New Jersey at 76.

He was also a founding director of Yeshiva University's Benjamin N. Cardozo Law School.

Wilzig immigrated to the United States in 1947 and then made his fortune by investing in the stock market.

He later became a banking executive.

Accord could lead to new records for deporting war criminals in the U.S.

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA)—An agreement between the U.S. government's Nazi-hunting unit and an unnamed European government could lead to more prosecutions of suspected Nazi-era war criminals living in the United States.

The agreement, scheduled to be announced later this month, could help the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations "identify previously unknown suspects," said Eli Rosenbaum, OSI's director.

The agreement comes after OSI recently announced it had initiated a record 10 prosecutions against suspected war criminals living in the United States last year.

"It was a very busy year for us," Rosenbaum said.

Since it began operating in 1979, OSI has stripped U.S. citizenship from 71 people who assisted in Nazi persecution, and has deported 57.

Another 160 have been blocked from entering the United States because of their wartime actions.

The previous record of nine prosecutions in a year was reached in 1981 and 1983.

The record-setting 10th case was typical.

The Justice Department asked a U.S. court to revoke the citizenship of Jaroslaw Bilaniuk, 79.

The department alleges that Bilaniuk persecuted Jews while serving as an armed guard at a slave labor camp in Nazi-occupied Poland.

The government maintains that Bilaniuk concealed his Nazi past to gain entry to the United States after World War II.

The record number of prosecutions gives lie to the notion that there aren't any Nazi-era war criminals left to prosecute, Rosenbaum said.

It's true that collaborators are slowly dying out, but it will be many years before they all will be dead, he said.

"The constant drumbeats of 'it's over, it's over, it's over' really lets the governments with the moral and legal responsibility off the hook," Rosenbaum said, excluding the United States from his condemnation.

In addition to a lack of political will, other countries, mainly in Europe, have difficulty prosecuting wartime-era collaborators because they attempt criminal prosecutions, instead of simply stripping them of their citizenship and deporting them, as the United States does.

There are a number of reasons for the record number of prosecutions in the United States, Rosenbaum said.

Among them are:

- increased cooperation from European governments, particularly in the former Soviet bloc, in providing access to documents — even as these governments refuse to prosecute Nazi war criminals themselves;

- enhanced understanding of Nazi operations and killing actions; and

- technological advances that allow easier identification of suspects.

As evidence of the latter, Rosenbaum pointed to the case of Michael Gorshkow, who is accused of participating in the killing of Jews in 1942 and 1943.

While doing research overseas, one of OSI's investigators came upon advance orders ordering a 1943 massacre of Jews in what is today Slutsk, Belarus.

A document listed the names of the men assigned to participate in the murders of 3,000 Jews.

OSI checked the names against U.S. immigration records from the period after the war, finding several Gorshkows.

After further investigation, the OSI centered its case on a man living in Panama City, Fla.

The U.S. government initiated a case to have Gorshkow's citizenship revoked on the grounds that he concealed his wartime past.

In July 2002, Gorshkow's citizenship was revoked. Gorshkow himself has fled the United States. □

Critics, rally force Paris school to back off Israel boycott threat

By Philip Carmel

PARIS (JTA) — Student protests on the Left Bank of the Seine River are almost as much a part of Paris as baguettes and cafe au lait, and have brought down their share of French governments.

So the recent demonstration in front of the Pierre and Marie Curie campus of Paris VI University was not, on the face of things, out of the ordinary.

This time, though, some of the regular assortment of protesters were on the other side of the barricades, watching — rather than carrying — the banners demanding academic freedom.

Monday evening's demonstration was called by France's Union of Jewish Students, together with the CRIF umbrella organization of French Jews and the League Against Anti-Semitism and Racism.

The rally followed the Dec. 16 adoption by the university's administrative council of a petition calling for the suspension of scientific cooperation agreements with Israeli academics.

"Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has made education and research impossible for our Palestinian colleagues," reads the petition, which also says that continued scientific cooperation between the European Union and Israel "will be interpreted as support for Israel's current policies."

The council's move provoked criticism across the political spectrum in France, with Education Minister Luc Ferry and Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë among those condemning the action as an attack on academic freedom.

Academics across Europe have signed petitions calling for boycotts of their Israeli colleagues, and two Israelis were dropped from academic journals published in England, where boycott calls have been especially popular.

In the United States, students and faculty members across the country have sponsored petitions calling on their universities to stop investing in companies that do business with Israel — sometimes sparking counter-petitions backing Israel.

On Wednesday, UNESCO, the U.N. agency for cultural preservation and education, criticized the boycott move at Paris VI.

"We must do everything possible to preserve the conditions for dialogue between the various scientific and academic communities throughout the world, as this dialogue is sometimes the last link between peoples divided by war and the first step toward reconciliation," UNESCO's director general, Koichiro Matsuura, said in a statement.

Monday's rally, which drew some 2,000 people despite sub-freezing temperatures, was addressed by CRIF and Jewish student leaders, as well as by two of the country's most widely respected philosophers, Alain Finkielkraut and Bernard Henri Levy.

Levy told the crowd that the petition did nothing for the cause of peace. He also accused the professors of double standards.

"We never heard the professors when the Russians razed Grozny or when the Chinese invaded Tibet," Levy said.

Jewish student leaders were pleased by a new motion Tuesday from the Paris VI council that overturned the boycott — though it also mandated the university president to seek closer cooperation with Palestinian universities.

Anny Dayan Rosenman, who had gathered 20,000 signatures for a petition demanding that the council scrap the boycott, hailed

the council's about-face. "It would be dangerous for a university to become a place for partisan battles when it should be dedicated to the free flow of knowledge," she said.

Still, academics at Paris VI adopted "a political position" calling on the European Union to "not renew its scientific cooperation accord with Israel."

The Paris VI boycott had been seen as a test case, as other universities in Paris and elsewhere in France were eager to adopt similar positions.

The neighboring campus of Paris VII had been scheduled to debate a similar boycott motion Tuesday. However, professors there ruled the motion out of order, voting instead to support cooperative projects with Israeli universities.

A statement from Paris VII said it was not empowered to debate political or religious issues.

"The university works for the objectivity of knowledge and it respects diversity of opinion," the statement added.

The leader of France's Jewish students, Patrick Klugman, welcomed the decision at Paris VII as "good news." But he is aware that Jewish students still face difficulties on French campuses.

Some of the worst examples of anti-Israel activity have occurred at universities in working class areas of Paris suburbs that have large populations of North African origin.

The student association at Nanterre, northwest of Paris, also tried to pass a boycott motion last year while organizing an official student conference on Palestine. "I am ready to blow myself up," a Palestinian speaker told students at the conference — who responded with wild applause. □

Jewish watershed in Budapest as an Orthodox rabbi is ordained

By Agnes Bohm

BUDAPEST (JTA) — An Orthodox rabbi was ordained in Budapest this week in what was described as the first such ceremony since the Holocaust.

Former Israeli Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu and one of Russia's two chief rabbis, Berel Lazar, attended the ordination Tuesday of Shlomo Koves at Budapest's Chabad Lubavitch synagogue.

Eliahu and Lazar joined Rabbi Baruch Oberlander, a Lubavitch rabbi who has been based in Budapest since 1989, in placing a prayer shawl over Koves' shoulders.

Born in Budapest, Koves graduated from high school in Pittsburgh before studying to be a rabbi in Paris, New York and Israel. Koves will work in Budapest, where he lives with his wife and son.

The president of Hungary, Ferenc Madl, and the mayor of Budapest, Gabor Demszky, attended the event.

Koves' ordination brings the number of Orthodox rabbis in Hungary to three, but only a small percentage of Hungary's estimated 80,000-100,000 Jews are Orthodox.

The Holocaust and communism closed Jewish schools and ended Hungary's once-proud tradition of Orthodox instruction.

Koves was educated by the Chabad Lubavitch of Hungary, which is celebrating 13 years of activity in Budapest since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"More than 50 years after the Holocaust, we are finally moving uphill," Oberlander said at the ceremony. □