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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Sniper kills Israeli officer

A Palestinian sniper killed an Israeli army officer near Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity on Tuesday night.

The army said soldiers were checking a suspicious vehicle when a Palestinian fired from a nearby alley and killed Capt. Shachar Shmul, 24, from Jerusalem.

Following the killing, Israeli tanks moved into Bethlehem on Wednesday and began patrolling the streets for the first time in months.

Sharon trial left possible

Belgium's Supreme Court ruled Wednesday that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon cannot be tried while in office for alleged war crimes, but left open the possibility of a trial once he steps down.

The court upheld Sharon's diplomatic immunity, but did say that charges could be brought against nonresidents of Belgium. That means that there could be further legal moves once Sharon retires.

Following the ruling, Israeli Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recalled Israel's ambassador to Belgium for consultations. Netanyahu, who called the ruling "scandalous," also set up a meeting Thursday with Belgium's ambassador to Israel, according to the Jerusalem Post.

Papon hearing begins

A Paris appeals court began hearing an appeal Wednesday against the release of convicted Nazi-era war criminal Maurice Papon.

Minister of Justice Dominique Perben had requested the hearing after Papon, convicted for his role in the deportation of more than 1,500 Jews in wartime France, was released last September after an appeals court ruled he was too old and sick to serve out his 10-year sentence.

House condemns vote on Libya

The U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a resolution Tuesday condemning the recent selection of Libya as chair of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights.

The non-binding resolution, introduced by Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), chair of the House International Relations Committee, notes human rights abuses by Libya and says it "will hold accountable countries who voted in favor of Libya's chairmanship."

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Anti-war but pro-Israel: What's a protester to do?

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Adam Teitelbaum was probably easy to find when he attended a protest last month in San Francisco against war on Iraq: He was one of only six people marching behind an Israeli flag.

Teitelbaum said he wanted to make clear that he believes war against Iraq will be bad for Israel, but he said he also wanted to distinguish himself from anti-Israel protesters at the rally.

His goal, he says, was to prove that you could be a "pro-Israel Jew who is against the war."

"I felt like I didn't want to let the pro-intifada people link their cause to the war," he said. "I didn't want to let them dominate the discussion."

Major protests against an anticipated U.S.-led war on Iraq are scheduled for this weekend in New York, San Francisco and cities around the world. Their sponsors include groups such as International A.N.S.W.E.R. and The U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, which call for an end to Israel's presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and curtailing or ending U.S. aid to the Jewish state.

Even a Jew as liberal as Rabbi Michael Lerner, the editor of Tikkun Magazine and a frequent critic of Israeli policy, claims organizers are forbidding him to speak at the San Francisco rally because he is too "pro-Israel."

That has left Jews who oppose war in a conundrum: Do they align themselves with an anti-Israel crowd, or stay home and miss a chance to show their opposition to U.S. policy toward Iraq?

But there may be a middle ground. Jewish leaders are attempting to meet the needs of pro-Israel Jews who want to speak out against war by meeting with protest leaders and asking them to keep the Iraq issue separate from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We're encouraging them to talk with people in the local communities who have connections to the anti-war leadership and educate them," said Hannah Rosenthal, executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an umbrella organization for Jewish community relations groups.

Among the anti-war organizers targeted for dialogue are the Protestant community, the ecumenical National Council of Churches, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Sierra Club.

Rosenthal said she wants local leaders to stress that Iraq and Israel are "nonrelated issues" and to prevent these protests from mirroring U.N. conferences, where anti-Israel forces often inject the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into virtually any discussion related to the Middle East.

In early anti-war protests, numerous signs were displayed that criticized Israel and U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rather than the Iraq debate that ostensibly was on the agenda.

Jewish groups have had some success in making their concerns heard and stifling some of the anti-Israel rhetoric. But the presence of International A.N.S.W.E.R. as one of the main sponsors of this weekend's rallies has left Jews feeling uneasy about the content of the protests.

A.N.S.W.E.R.'s Web site is consistently anti-Israel, calling Israel's presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip "the other apartheid."

A.N.S.W.E.R. is also the group that vetoed Lerner's speech at the San Francisco

MIDEAST FOCUS

Powell: Bush sensitive to Israel

Secretary of State Colin Powell said the Bush administration is "very sensitive to the difficult economic situation that Israel finds itself in."

Testifying before the House of Representatives' International Relations Committee on Wednesday, Powell said the White House will review Israeli requests for additional military aid and loan guarantees "with seriousness."

But he added that the administration is not ready to formally propose the additional aid.

3 Palestinians killed

Israeli soldiers shot and killed an 8-year-old Palestinian boy Tuesday night in the West Bank city of Kalkilya. The soldiers opened fire after Palestinians threw firebombs at a unit that had surrounded two houses in a search for terrorists.

In northern Gaza that night, troops shot and killed two Palestinians trying to breach a fence surrounding the Jewish settlement of Dugit. Soldiers later found knives and hand grenades on the bodies.

Resolution praises Israel

A bill praising the democratic elections process in Israel passed the U.S. House of Representatives by an overwhelming 411-2 vote Tuesday evening.

The nonbinding resolution expresses Congress' respect for Israel's democratic elections and reaffirms the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

Arab leaders could face fatwa

A group of Muslim clerics affiliated with Hamas and Islamic Jihad issued a fatwa against any Arab ruler supporting a U.S. war against Iraq.

The ruling declares that any Arab leader who condones an American strike on Iraq "violates Muslim law and will pay a heavy price," according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.



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rally, citing comments that Lerner had made against the group.

"I am a critic of Israel policy, but I also think Palestinian violence is destructive," Lerner said. A.N.S.W.E.R.'s "hostility is complete; they don't believe Israel has a right to exist."

While Lerner says he would not have criticized A.N.S.W.E.R. at the rally, other organizers honored a previous agreement allowing any organizer to veto a speaker.

A.N.S.W.E.R.'s San Francisco office did not return calls requesting comment.

Despite the Lerner incident, San Francisco Jews will be on hand at this weekend's protest, and again will carry Israeli flags.

"We're not under any illusions that they will be dissuaded from incorporating an anti-Israel agenda," said Rabbi Douglas Kahn, the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco, who is working with event sponsors to keep criticism of Israel out of the rally. "But we can reach mainstream groups that have joined in."

The strategy seems to be have been somewhat successful in Florida. One rally organizer in Miami hung up on Luis Fleischman, the director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County, when Fleischman called to talk about preventing anti-Israel messages.

But Fleischman did reach other local organizers, including some with Jewish backgrounds, and was able to make his case before a local protest last month.

"I just picked up the phone and called them," Fleischman said. "They were extremely nice and said they understood the issue and were very open to our request."

There was little mention of Israel at the local rally, and the organizer of a trip to the main Washington rally told Fleischman she would complain if she saw anti-Israel material.

Rosenthal says helping Jews who are against war find outlets to voice their opinions is not an endorsement of the anti-war movement.

"JCPA does not have a stand in favor of the anti-war movement or against it," she said. "But as a community relations umbrella organization, we are encouraging our partners to use community relations strategy."

There is concern that not speaking out against war with Iraq could hurt Israel. If the anti-war rallies are taken over by the anti-Israel crowd, Fleischman says, he fears people may be led to believe that the United States is attacking Iraq for Israel's benefit — as some critics, such as conservative leader Pat Buchanan, charged during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

United for Peace and Justice, the main group organizing this weekend's rallies, says the Israeli-Palestinian issue is distinct from a war on Iraq. But members of the group admit that individual protesters may try to muddy the issue.

"Obviously there are many people in the coalition, and I can't say what kind of signs everyone is bringing," said Leslie Cagan, the coordinator of the New York rally. "But we are not pitting people against each other."

Cagan said she has heard from Jewish leaders who wanted a Jewish voice at the protests. Ruth Messinger, the president and executive director of the American Jewish World Service, is speaking in New York.

"As a veteran of a large number of speeches and demonstrations, I recognize there will be a lot of people who express views I disagree with," said Messinger, a former Manhattan borough president. "Like all people, when I speak it will be to reach the audience and not in any way to give endorsement to any poster in the crowd."

Messinger said she has little control over who else would speak at the event, but is confident that United for Peace would keep the conversation focused on Iraq. □

Hamas, P.A. vie over 'subsidies'

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Hamas and the Palestinian Authority reportedly are vying over who offers more compensation to the families of suicide bombers.

Hamas offers a first payment of \$10,000, as well as monthly payments to families of suicide bombers or those who die in clashes with Israeli troops, according to the Jerusalem Post. The Palestinian Authority is offering a lump-sum payment of more than \$20,000. □

JEWISH WORLD

Jewish leaders go to Kazakhstan

U.S. Jewish leaders plan to meet with officials of Central Asian Muslim countries this week. The delegation from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, in conjunction with the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, intends to highlight the distinction between moderate Islamic nations and Islamic fundamentalism.

The Central Asian nations planning to send officials to the meetings in Kazakhstan include Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. The Conference of Presidents is then slated to travel to Israel for its annual meetings with top political and military officials.

More benefits for some survivors

Some Holocaust survivors will receive an increase in compensation payments as a result of an agreement negotiated Wednesday by the Claims Conference with the German government. The Article 2 Fund, which currently pays more than 46,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors in 40 countries, will now distribute monthly payments of approximately \$290, up from about \$275, according to the Claims Conference.

Monthly payments from the Central and Eastern European Fund, which pays 16,000 people in 23 countries, will increase from about \$137 to \$145. The programs are administered by the Claims Conference on behalf of the German government.

The negotiations also led to the expansion of eligibility criteria for the two programs.

As a result, some 4,000 additional survivors, including some people from Romania, Hungary and some Western European countries, may now get compensation.

U.S. school signs pact with Syria

Wayne State University in Detroit reportedly signed an academic agreement with Syria's Damascus University.

The agreement was signed by Wayne State's president, Irvin Reid, without the knowledge of the school's board of directors, according to the Detroit Jewish News.

Board members learned of the agreement at a Jan. 29 meeting.

A speaker at that meeting, Don Cohen, lashed out at the accord, according to the report. Damascus University is "not a state-sponsored university. It's a state-controlled university," Cohen said. Syria, he added, is "an anti-American country, an anti-Semitic country, an anti-Christian country."

The executive director of the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit, David Gad-Harf, said he plans to express his concerns about the agreement to Reid, the paper reported.

French entrepreneur uses cola to battle Israel and United States

By Philip Carmel

PARIS (JTA) — The latest weapon in the battle against American imperialism and Zionist colonialism may bear a resemblance to Coke, but its political message may leave a sour taste for some.

Since last September, Tunisian-born entrepreneur Tawfik Mathlouthi has already produced more than 3 million bottles of his Mecca Cola from a little bottling and manufacturing plant in the Paris suburbs.

Behind the trademark red-and-black bottles that can be mistaken for Coke lies a pro-Palestinian political agenda.

In France, Mathlouthi's message is reflected in a slogan that appears on each bottle, "Don't drink like an idiot. Drink with commitment."

The slogan was softened for English-speaking drinkers by Mecca Cola's marketing experts to read, "Be engaged, drink."

Purchasers of the product are reminded that 10 percent of the profits go to Palestinian causes, although Mathlouthi is reticent about specifying the names of the organizations he supports.

"I'm giving the choice between" Coke, "which is a symbol that is even stronger than McDonald's, and another one that combats it," he told the center-right daily *Le Figaro*. "My targets are American imperialism and criminal Zionism."

Similar beliefs can also be found in his other major business, a Paris-based radio station, Radio Mediterranean, which broadcasts to France's large North African community.

On the station, Mathlouthi treats his listeners to attacks against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, whom he brands "the war criminal."

For Mathlouthi, "Zionism is a racist anti-Arab ideology" and Yasser Arafat and the PLO have committed a grave error by accepting the existence of the State of Israel.

He and Arafat "are not fighting for the same Palestine," Mathlouthi told the leading daily newspaper *Le Monde* in a recent interview.

They may not even be fighting for the same cola, since the better-known U.S. brand has been one of the largest private employers in the Palestinian Authority, producing the drink in a Ramallah factory.

Mecca Cola has been distributed in 22 countries. Mathlouthi has orders for another 16 million bottles and hopes to reach more than a quarter of a billion by the end of the year.

Already on the streets in eight European countries and as far afield as Venezuela and Australia, Mecca Cola is soon to hit the United States after a supplier was lined up in California.

Mathlouthi says he hopes that Mecca Cola sales will help him launch another project — a Europe-based TV channel mirroring the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera, but broadcasting in English and French as well as Arabic.

For that, though, Mathlouthi is looking to cross the English Channel and run the network from London because, he says, "It's impossible to do it in France, where the decision makers have strong Zionist links."

Last year, he founded the National Observatory Against Racism and Anti-Semitism Toward Arabs and Muslims.

The group's stated goals include "fighting Zionist politicians and Zionists at the center of power" in France.

So far, Mecca Cola has been enormously successful in areas of France with large North African populations.

It is primarily stocked by local Muslim-owned shops rather than the large supermarket chains that dominate France's retail food trade.

And now, with anti-Americanism rampant in France on the eve of a possible U.S.-led war against Iraq, Mathlouthi is finding increasing numbers of people willing to buy his anti-imperialist alternative to Coke.

Not that Mecca Cola is without its critics even among French Muslims, some of whom object to the holiest city of Islam being used to market a brand of cola. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Many have heard of Osirak strike, but few know the risk and rewards

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA)—Millions of viewers watching coverage of the space shuttle Columbia catastrophe heard mention of Israel's 1981 bombing of an Iraqi nuclear reactor, in which Israeli astronaut Col. Ilan Ramon, then a fighter pilot, took part.

But viewers may not know the obstacles of the operation.

In an interview with JTA, retired Israeli Col. Zeev Raz, who headed the Israeli mission, recounts a victory that carried risks and rewards worthy of a Hollywood movie.

Raz explains how Ramon, the youngest and lowest ranking pilot — who, flying the last of eight F-16s jets, had the most vulnerable spot in the squadron — helped map the mission.

As America gears up for an anticipated war against Iraq, Raz also offers his insight about pre-emptive attacks.

In the late 1970s, Israeli intelligence learned that Iraq was building a nuclear reactor known as Osirak, 12 miles southeast of Baghdad.

Israel also knew that the reactor would be "hot" — radioactive — by the fall of 1981, and that bombing after that time would release huge amounts of radiation.

Iraq, which had ratified the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1972, claimed the facility was for scientific purposes only.

But the government of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin gave more credence to comments by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that the facility would be used to produce weapons to attack Israel.

"If Saddam Hussein is going to have a nuclear bomb," Raz says, it would be "very dangerous for Israel," which Hussein considers "his No. 1 enemy."

"Look what he tried to do to Kuwait and Iran," Raz adds. "We had to strike first, and that's what we did."

Israel received its first batch of F-16s under Raz's command in the summer of 1980. Due to their long range and precision, Israel planned to use them for the reactor attack.

Code-named Operation Opera, the mission originally was set for May 1981. But news of the attack leaked, prompting the army to postpone it to early June.

At the time, only 12 Israeli pilots — one of whom had been killed in an accident — had been trained in America to fly F-16s. Raz selected eight for the mission.

"Ilan was chosen because he was an excellent pilot," Raz says. He was also the first pilot Raz told about the target.

"Ilan was a very, very nice guy," the opposite of the prototypical "arrogant and aggressive fighter pilot," Raz says. "He was a humble person, smiling all the time," well-liked and cooperative.

Raz recalls the time when Ramon, 27, then a captain in charge of calculating navigation, approached him "with an embarrassed smile and said" the target "was slightly out of range" for the planes' fuel capability.

It was not until 1982 that Israel had the ability to refuel F-16s in the air.

To lessen resistance in flight and gain more mileage from the available fuel, the group employed "tricks" that the American military forbids its F-16 pilots to use, Raz says.

When the fuel in the planes' wing tanks ran out — fuel is stored in other parts of the plane as well — the fleet decided to drop the tanks en route to the target.

The maneuver carried a high risk, because the wing tanks' proximity to the bombs might have triggered their early release.

On June 7, the eve of the holiday of Shavuot, the eight pilots, each manning his own plane packed with two 2,000 pound bombs, took off.

Two F-15s escorted the group, and a handful of F-15s patrolled other parts of Iraq.

The group flew at a low altitude to avoid enemy radar, with a flight time of one and a half hours. It was Israel's longest mission over hostile territory.

According to Raz, most Israeli air strikes take place within a half-hour radius, and the additional hour was laborious.

"To fly such a long time for a target is very strange, and you know that the target is so important," Raz says. "It's a lot of pressure."

But "you don't let yourself be afraid," he says. And by handling one issue at a time, from the fuses to the maps, "suddenly you win the war."

Just before sunset, the fleet dropped its bombs on Osirak.

As for the wing tank maneuver, "it worked perfectly," Raz says.

On the way back, limited fuel forced the group to fly at a higher altitude of 40,000 feet.

"We were sure that at that altitude the Iraqis would try to intercept us," he says, "but they didn't for some reason."

More than 20 years later, Iraq still lacks nuclear capability.

Raz believes Israel's attack set Iraq back about 12 years, although Israel had only projected that it would gain six or seven years.

Raz credits U.N. sanctions for further restricting Iraq's capabilities.

The attack on Osirak was the first successful pre-emptive strike on a nuclear reactor, and it announced Israel's willingness to attack to prevent its enemies from acquiring nuclear weapons.

The attack was condemned around the world, including by the United States, which withheld another shipment of F-16s for several months.

With the benefit of hindsight, opinions have changed. In fact, Vice President Dick Cheney thanked the Israelis for the strike — many years later.

Now, as the Bush administration prepares for an anticipated pre-emptive strike against Iraq, much of the world is criticizing the United States — but Raz believes the U.S. plans are justified.

"What Bush is doing now is inevitable. He has no choice," Raz says.

"After Sept. 11, we all understand certain people are very, very dangerous, and you have to strike first," he says. "We cannot afford" to let Iraq have nuclear capability.

With its biological weapons and drive toward nuclear capability, Iraq is the greatest external threat to Israel, Raz says.

But he believes the chief problem for Israel is its internal demographics, with an Arab population that may soon outnumber the Jewish one.

As for Ramon, Raz can't help but note the irony in his death.

"It's very sad that he came back from such a dangerous mission" at Osirak, yet "lost his life in a research mission in space," he says. "It was not supposed to be so dangerous in space." □