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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Sniper kills Israeli soldier

A Palestinian sniper killed an Israeli soldier Sunday in the Gaza Strip.

The soldier was shot in the back while manning his position at an army post and died on the way to the hospital, according to the Jerusalem Post.

5 killed in Gaza operation

At least five Palestinian gunmen were killed and 21 wounded during an Israeli military operation Sunday in northern Gaza.

An Israeli soldier was lightly wounded in the operation, which involved tanks backed up by helicopters.

During the operation, bulldozers demolished five homes belonging to terrorists.

Israeli officials ordered the raid in Beit Hanoun after Palestinians fired rockets last week from the area at the Israeli town of Sderot.

On Sunday, the Cabinet decided that a special assistance plan would be drawn up for Sderot because of its special security needs.

Palestinians fired two rockets Sunday at the Negev town, but there were no injuries, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Labor balks after NRP joins gov't

Israel's Labor Party said it was halting all talks about joining the government after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud Party signed a coalition agreement with the pro-settler National Religious Party.

As a result of Sunday's agreement, the NRP will be given the Housing Ministry, which among other things oversees settlement construction.

Another deal was expected to be finalized with the secular-rights Shinui Party, giving the future coalition at least a 61-seat majority in the 120-member Knesset.

In intensive talks involving Likud, Shinui and NRP members last week, understandings were reached on a number of divisive secular-religious issues.

They included cancellation of a law on draft deferrals for yeshiva students within a year of the new government's taking office.

Meanwhile, Labor leader Amram Mitzna said Sunday it is not possible for Labor to join a government whose guidelines would not ensure progress in the peace process, Israel Radio reported. [Page 3]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israelis debate regional picture of Middle East bereft of Saddam

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Will a post-Saddam Middle East herald a new promise of regional peace or dire consequences for the Jewish state?

As the anticipated American showdown with Iraq nears, the Israeli defense establishment is sounding increasingly optimistic about the outcome.

Not only will war on Saddam Hussein remove a potential nuclear, biological and chemical threat to Israel, they say, it will also open up possibilities for peace with the Palestinians, the Lebanese and possibly even the Syrians.

Skeptics, however, warn that America's grand plans for the Middle East might prove to be overly ambitious, and, if the United States bogs down trying to do too much, the results for Israel could be disastrous.

And even if things don't go badly wrong, the skeptics say, the end result of U.S. military action could be far less dramatic than Israel's leaders hope.

The debate is significant as Israelis grapple not only with the immediate implications of a war against Iraq, including the possibility that such a war could prompt attacks against Israel itself, but the long-term impact as well.

The most upbeat assessment of the future so far has come from Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's national security adviser, Ephraim Halevy.

In a Feb. 9 address at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, the former Mossad chief spoke of "shock waves" from a post-Saddam Baghdad that would have "wide-ranging effects in Tehran, Damascus and Ramallah."

He also envisaged a post-Yasser Arafat Palestinian leadership negotiating in good faith with Israel, a progressive and prosperous Iraq rejoining the family of nations, and Syria, no longer feeling a need to compete with Iraq, loosening its ties with Iran.

This, in turn, Halevy said, could lead to a weakening of the Iranian hold in southern Lebanon, a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the disarmament of Hezbollah and an eventual peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel.

"Syria could feel comfortable in allowing Lebanon true freedom, withdrawing the 30,000-odd Syrian soldiers from Lebanese territory and opening an embassy in Beirut for the very first time since Lebanon's independence," Halevy said.

"The departure of Syrian and Iranian forces from Lebanese soil, accompanied by the disarmament of Hezbollah, could enable Lebanon to make peace with Israel."

Halevy is not the only top Israeli security official to speak in such an optimistic vein.

The Israel Defense Force's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, foresees a "regional earthquake" creating a "new regional order" and predicted the end of the Palestinian intifada.

"Remember," he said in an interview earlier this month with Yediot Achronot, "the last Palestinian intifada ended in 1991, with the last Gulf War."

Amos Gilad, Israel's "national commentator" on the war with Iraq, called the imminent American strike a "miracle."

But how likely is the anticipated American attack to have the kind of impact Israeli leaders are hoping for? Among the skeptics is Maj. Gen. Ya'akov Amidror, a former head of army intelligence research, on retirement leave from the IDF, and just back from a stint in the United States as a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank. Although a hawk, Amidror argues that American plans for remaking the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israeli diplomat dies at 74

Israeli diplomat Shlomo Argov, who was the target of an assassination attempt that launched Israel's 1982 war in Lebanon, died Sunday at the age of 74.

Argov, who served as Israel's ambassador to Britain, was shot in the head by Palestinian gunmen from the Abu Nidal group in London on June 3, 1982. Several days later, Israeli forces entered Lebanon. Argov, who was paralyzed in the attack, had required hospitalization ever since the shooting.

Palestinian killed near settlement

An armed Palestinian was killed in a gunfight with Israeli troops Sunday near the Gaza settlement of Netzarim. The army said the gunman had approached the settlement and fired on troops guarding the area.

In the West Bank city of Nablus, Israeli troops withdrew from the city's center after four days of searches for terrorists. At least seven people died during clashes there.

Reuters cameraman arrested

Reuters filed a letter of protest after Israeli soldiers arrested a Palestinian cameraman working for the media organization. The army said it suspects that Ahmed al-Khatib, 34, who was arrested Sunday in Gaza, was involved in "terrorist activities," according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Ohio man detained in Israel

An Ohio man detained in Israel last week for carrying two pistols claimed he was heading to Afghanistan to find Osama bin Laden.

The lawyer for Daniel Chick, 81, said Chick was searching for bin Laden "for the adventure" and with hopes of obtaining the \$25 million bounty offered by the United States. Chick was released on the condition that he leave Israel. He subsequently flew to Athens.

Middle East through a war in Iraq may be too optimistic and fail to achieve the hoped-for results.

In particular, he is skeptical about American plans to democratize Iraq and through a ripple effect based on a successful Iraqi model, democratize the Middle East as a whole.

The deep, underlying goal of the American move against Iraq, Amidror says, is to neutralize global terror by turning the Middle East, the region where it flourishes, into a conglomeration of more open, Western-oriented societies in which Al-Qaida-style terror would have no breeding ground.

But this grand scheme, Amidror argues, is unlikely to succeed, and its failure could exacerbate tensions between the Arab world and the United States — and by extension, between the Arab world and Israel.

Others go further in their pessimism.

Former Mossad chief Shabtai Shavit reportedly warned officials in the United States that a failed attempt to democratize the Middle East could lead to major regional instability.

It could prove to be a recipe for all-out war between the United States and the Muslim world, and a nightmare scenario for Israel, he said.

Shlomo Brom, a senior researcher at Tel Aviv University's Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, gives an example of how things could start to go wrong.

"U.S. military government in Iraq," he says, "would strengthen the perception of the war as Western colonialism in new clothing. The result will be similar to the Israeli experience in Lebanon in 1982, which started with the population throwing rice and flowers, and ended with Hezbollah."

Even the skeptics don't deny that taking out Saddam and his weapons of mass destruction would be a major strategic boon for Israel.

But they would like to see the United States move out of Iraq as soon as the job is done.

Moreover, the skeptics don't deny that a regime change in Iraq could put considerable pressure on the Palestinians to move forward in negotiations with the Jewish state.

Indeed, many Israeli analysts believe that Palestinian efforts to re-engage Israel in cease-fire and diplomatic peace talks, and to establish a more pragmatic leadership, stem from a fear of being steamrolled by the United States and Israel in a post-Saddam Middle East.

The key, American, European and Israeli leaders believe, is whether Arafat, the Palestinian Authority president, steps aside.

But some Israeli officials are brushing aside Arafat's promise last Friday to appoint a prime minister who would assume most of the day-to-day operations of the Palestinian Authority.

They point out that although the new Palestinian Constitution provides for the appointment of a prime minister, it leaves most of the key powers in the hands of Arafat, who would still have the final say on foreign policy and remain the commander in chief of the Palestinian armed forces.

With Arafat still at the helm, skeptics like Amidror say, nothing will go forward even after Saddam is removed from power in Baghdad.

Similarly, Amidror questions Halevy's vision of quick progress in a post-Saddam era on Israel's northern border, with Syria, Lebanon and Hezbollah.

"Why should toppling Saddam weaken ties between Syria and Iran, their presence in southern Lebanon and their support for Hezbollah?" he asks.

On the contrary, should things go wrong in the war with Iraq, Amidror foresees potential for an armed showdown between Israel and Hezbollah.

Then, he says, Hezbollah — with an estimated 1,000 Katyusha rockets trained on Israeli targets — could be encouraged to attack.

The truth may turn out to be somewhere between Halevy's rosy optimism and Amidror's bleak caution.

But one thing is certain: War in Iraq would create new conditions in the Middle East and unleash new forces.

How they affect Israel's position in the region remains to be seen. □

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



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JEWISH WORLD

N.Y. rabbi in sex bust

A leading New York rabbi was arrested for allegedly trying to solicit a 13-year-old girl for sex on the Internet.

Rabbi Israel Kestenbaum, 54, of Highland Park, N.J., is director of the Jewish Center for Spiritual Care of the New York Board of Rabbis.

He allegedly began a sometimes lurid online chat with an undercover detective posing as a teen-age girl and was arrested after arranging to meet her at a New York Starbucks.

Following his arrest, the board issued a statement saying Kestenbaum was immediately being placed on administrative leave.

"We are extremely troubled by the seriousness of the allegations, and we will cooperate with the authorities to the fullest extent possible," the board said. "Our prayers are with Rabbi Kestenbaum and his family during this difficult time."

Daniel Pearl's murder marked

The father of slain journalist Daniel Pearl publicly commemorated the first anniversary of his son's death.

"Hatred killed our son and hatred we will fight for the rest of our lives with vengeance and tenacity," Judea Pearl told 350 people last Friday at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

The consul general of Pakistan, along with Buddhist and Muslim leaders, also spoke at the commemoration for Pearl.

In a videotape released last year, Pearl affirmed his Jewish heritage before being executed by his terrorist abductors in Pakistan. Services are also being held in Jerusalem, New York, Toronto, London and Paris.

Campus assailant sentenced

A Michigan high school student was sentenced for ethnic intimidation.

Last July, Ghassan Issa, 18, whose father is Palestinian, threatened a Jewish student at the University of Michigan with ethnic slurs and also threw a bottle at him.

The victim, Daniel Aghion, who was wearing a skullcap and a T-shirt supporting Israel at the time of the incident, said he filed the lawsuit because "this kind of stuff happens on campus all the time" and he hoped would-be offenders would "think twice about doing something like that again."

Issa was found guilty of a felony on Feb. 19 by a local court.

He was sentenced to 100 hours of community service with a Jewish organization, two years of probation, an anger management course and to write a paper on anti-Semitism.

Sharon brings NRP into coalition; Labor says won't rejoin government

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is starting to build his new coalition — one that will apparently not include the Labor Party.

Israel's Labor Party said it was halting all talks about joining a unity government after Sharon's Likud Party signed a coalition agreement this week with the pro-settler National Religious Party.

As a result of Sunday's agreement, the NRP will be given the Housing Ministry, which among other things oversees settlement construction.

Another deal was expected to be finalized with the secular-rights Shinui Party, giving the future coalition at least a 61-seat majority in the 120-member Knesset.

Meanwhile, Labor leader Amram Mitzna accused Sharon on Sunday of working behind Labor's back to reach an agreement with the NRP and an impending one with Shinui.

"I was ready for a historic move, but Sharon was not prepared to pay the price," Mitzna told the Jerusalem Post.

In a reference to the NRP's advocacy of settlement building and opposition to a Palestinian state, Mitzna said Labor could not enter into a government whose policy guidelines would not enable any progress toward peace with the Palestinians.

The leader of Shinui, Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, expressed regret over Mitzna's decision.

Lapid, who had lobbied Mitzna to enter into a unity government that would exclude all religious parties, described the NRP as a "moderate religious party."

The Likud-NRP agreement follows a series of unproductive talks between the prime minister and Mitzna about the possibility of Labor rejoining a Likud-led unity government.

Sharon had hoped to bring Labor into the government in order to help strike a centrist balance — especially because Israel is likely to come under U.S. pressure to advance the Palestinian track after war in Iraq.

Labor's withdrawal from the previous government — the move that triggered Israel's Jan. 28 elections — was propelled in part by its opposition to settlement spending in the budget, as well as power struggles within the party.

In the elections, Labor lost six Knesset seats, giving it 19 seats in the new Knesset. Many political observers attributed Labor's poor showing to its tacit support for Sharon's policies for dealing with the Palestinians while Labor, under the leadership of Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, was part of the Sharon government.

Both before and following last month's elections, Mitzna sought to shore up the Labor Party's traditional base of support by stating he would not rejoin a Sharon-led government.

Just the same, under heavy pressure from within his party, Mitzna agreed to engage in talks about rejoining the government.

He said he wanted to clarify whether there was any substance to indications from the Prime Minister's Office that it is willing to make compromises for peace with the Palestinians.

But while Sharon has publicly stated his willingness to make "painful concessions for peace" and voiced backing for a Palestinian state, Labor officials said Sunday that the prime minister had refused to put down in writing a commitment to a "continuation of the peace process, establishment of a Palestinian state and evacuation of settlements within the framework of a permanent peace deal."

Sharon reportedly told Mitzna during a phone conversation Sunday that Labor and Likud were in a position where they could "make history together" and that "it would be a shame to miss" the opportunity.

The agreement reached between the Likud and NRP features a guarantee that before any negotiation on a political agreement, including the establishment of a Palestinian state, the matter would be brought before the Cabinet for a decision.

In addition, the NRP would be granted the ability to oppose, and even take steps to lobby against, the establishment of a Palestinian state. □

Document: Jewish-born nun urged Vatican to halt Nazis' persecution

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Catholic leaders urgently called on Pope Pius XI to intervene against the Nazi persecution of the Jews — and some Vatican officials tried to work behind the scenes to do so, according to documents from newly opened Vatican archives.

Published in the Italian media, the documents represent the first few files to surface from the huge trove of pre-World War II material unsealed by the Vatican Secret Archives on Feb. 15.

The most dramatic revelation was an impassioned appeal for papal action written in April 1933 by Edith Stein, a German Jewish convert to Catholicism who eventually was murdered in Auschwitz and in 1998 was declared a saint.

A 1934 memorandum from German Rev. Friedrich Muckermann to the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli — the future Pope Pius XII — criticized the Vatican's "silence" and "lack of courage" in the face of Hitler.

An April 1933 letter signed by Pacelli, however, indicated that the Vatican instructed its representative in Berlin "to see if and how" it could intervene.

Without providing a full text, the Catholic news agency Zenit said this letter "gave precise instructions" to a Vatican official in Berlin "to warn the National Socialist government not to persecute the Jews."

David Kertzer, the author of the book "The Popes Against the Jews," said the emergence of contradictory material was to be expected.

And he predicted a sort of "war of dribbled documents" as scholars sift through thousands of pages of newly declassified material.

"It is now clear that with the opening of the Pius XI archives we are going, for the next couple of years, to see a periodic trumpeting of selected documents by one side or another in the debate over the Vatican's role in the Holocaust," Kertzer, a professor at Brown University, told JTA.

"It will probably be only in two to three years that the first systematic studies of the available documentation will begin to make possible a thorough understanding of what happened," he said.

"This is all the more true since most of the Vatican documentation on the period is still not available and will not be entirely available to scholars for another two years."

The newly released documents were unsealed six years ahead of schedule in response to the bitter debate over the Vatican's role in the Holocaust — and particular over the role of Pius XII, whom critics have long accused of allowing Jews to die because of his silence.

The material concerns the Vatican's relations with prewar Nazi Germany.

Mostly correspondence, the released documents all date from the reign of Pius XI, who reigned from 1922 until his death in February 1939.

During this time Pacelli, who became Pope Pius XII on March 2, 1939, served both as Vatican ambassador in Berlin and as Vatican secretary of state.

So far, the letter to Pius XI from Stein, written less than three weeks after Hitler took power, has grabbed the biggest headlines.

Scholars had long known of its existence — in her 1938 autobiography, Stein herself wondered what had happened to it.

In 2000, a team of Jewish and Catholic scholars charged with examining the Vatican's role in the Holocaust listed the letter as one of the documents they wanted to see to help determine the Vatican's wartime record.

The team collapsed in 2001 because it was not granted full access to unpublished archival material.

In her letter, Stein described a "war of extermination against Jewish blood."

She warned that responsibility for what was happening "also falls on those who remain silent" and implored Pius XI to take action.

"Not just the Jews, but thousands of faithful Catholics in Germany — and, I believe, in all the world — have been waiting and hoping for weeks that the Church of Christ let its voice be heard against such abuse of the name of Christ," she wrote.

She added, "All of us who are watching the current situation in Germany as faithful children of the church, fear the worst for the image of the church itself if the silence is further prolonged. We are also convinced that this silence cannot, in the long term, obtain peace from the current German government."

Kertzer described Stein's appeal as a "powerful statement" that appeared to have gone largely unheeded.

"She could not have been more prescient, and her call for the pope to make a firm public protest against the Nazi persecution of the Jews could not have been more eloquent," he said.

"That the pope chose not to listen to her but to try to stay on the good side of Hitler for the next several years is a shameful chapter in church history, one unfortunately that the Vatican has yet to recognize and, indeed, is currently doing all possible to deny," he said.

"Fortunately, there are many in the Catholic Church who are embarrassed by the Vatican stance and are working on behalf of their church to shed light on this uncomfortable past." □

Haider's party wooed in Austria

NEW YORK (JTA) — Austria's conservative People's Party said it would agree to have Jorg Haider's Freedom Party join the government.

The People's Party of Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel said it hopes to have an accord with the anti-immigrant Freedom Party in a matter of days.

The two parties formed a coalition in 2000 after the Freedom Party earned more than one-quarter of the country's vote, a record showing.

After Haider's party joined the government, Israel withdrew its ambassador to Vienna.

The coalition made up of Schuessel and Haider's parties collapsed last year, prompting early elections.

Haider announced his retirement from national politics after his party won only 10 percent of the vote last November.

But political observers warned that Haider could easily return from his self-imposed political exile.

Several years ago, Haider praised Hitler's "decent employment policies" and described Nazi Waffen SS troops as "men of character."

He later apologized for the remarks. □