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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Two Palestinians die in Gaza fight

Two Palestinians were killed during a gunfight with Israeli troops in the Gaza Strip early Sunday.

Israeli troops entered Khan Yunis and tore down at least three structures the army said were used by Palestinian snipers to launch attacks. The raid came in response to last week's killing of an Israeli army soldier by a Palestinian sniper.

Shalom promises to push peace

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom promised to work toward peace with the Palestinians.

Speaking at a ceremony Sunday in Jerusalem, Shalom said he will pursue every chance to advance peace with the Palestinians.

But, he added, the Palestinians must halt terror and institute reforms for there to be a renewal of negotiations. Shalom, who switched jobs with Benjamin Netanyahu, said it was no secret he wanted to remain in the Finance Ministry.

Rep. named to Holocaust council

Rep. Eric Cantor (R-Va.), the only Jewish member of the House Republican caucus, was named to the U.S. Holocaust Museum Council.

The appointment was made last week by House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.). Cantor said he hopes to help advance the Washington-based museum's goals — "to educate visitors about this unprecedented tragedy, to preserve the memory of those who suffered, and to encourage the museum's visitors to reflect on the questions raised by the events of the Holocaust."

Palestinians to discuss premier

Palestinian officials plan to convene the Palestinian legislative council next week to begin the process of appointing a prime minister.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat has come under pressure from the United States and Israel to share power as part of reforms required before peace talks can resume.

Ra'anan Gissin, an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, said Sunday that Israel is reviewing the names of the more than 200 Palestinian officials planning to attend the session and will deny permits to those involved in terror attacks against Israel.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

E.U. man behind P.A. funds probe seeks insight from American Jews

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — In the eyes of some Jewish leaders, Francois Zimeray did the impossible.

Last month, the French representative to the European Parliament was able to garner signatures from more than 170 other legislators calling for an official inquiry into how the Palestinian Authority uses aid from the European Union.

Given the growing anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment in Europe — and frustration over a possible attack on Iraq led by Israel's American ally — Zimeray's accomplishment was no small feat.

"It really shows that even in the European Parliament there are undercurrents that should be explored that could bring changes in policy," said Avi Beker, secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress.

Zimeray was in the United States earlier this month to learn how the American Jewish community influences U.S. politics, hoping to apply the lessons in Europe.

He met with leaders of the World Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee, as well as Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.). A planned meeting with congressional staffers in Washington was canceled because of snow.

U.S. Jewry "is a professional, organized community that has determined to play a political role," said Zimeray, who is Jewish. "Such is not the case in Europe, and that has to change."

The WJC and other Jewish groups support Zimeray's idea of a Jewish lobby for the European Parliament.

"There is a need to create something that works directly with European institutions" to address problems such as anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment, Beker said.

Zimeray hopes the European Union can take a larger role in fostering Israeli-Palestinian peace if it take a more balanced view.

"If the Europeans had the will to change the situation, we have the means to do it," Zimeray told JTA in a telephone interview. Instead, he said, the European Union has been "blinded by the Palestinian Authority. We have refused to see that the reality was not in accordance with our idea of the reality."

Europe has continued to support the Palestinian Authority, even after the United States cut ties to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat because of his alleged support for terrorism. Hoping to prevent fraud, U.S. aid for the Palestinians is distributed to nongovernmental agencies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip through the United States Agency for International Development. Europe, however, gives aid directly to the Palestinian Authority.

Since the Oslo peace accords with Israel, the European Union has provided the Palestinian Authority with about \$1.4 billion in various forms of aid.

Since the intifada began more than two years ago, the European Union has been providing about \$10 million a month in special assistance to help the Palestinian Authority meet its budgetary obligations — including salary payments for members of the various Palestinian security services, many of whom have been involved in terrorism, Israel says.

Israeli officials argued that E.U. funds deposited in the P.A. treasury could be part of the money the Palestinian Authority president has funneled to terrorists or to the families of suicide bombers. "If we had, in the past, been more demanding with the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel's housing minister chosen

Israel's National Religious Party unanimously elected party leader Efraim Eitam as housing minister. The four other candidates for the position withdrew before Sunday's vote at the request of the party's Central Committee. As part of its coalition agreement with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the party could select one of its own to run the ministry.

Israel to respond to 'road map'

A senior aide to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is expected to travel to the United States soon to submit Israel's response to the U.S.-sponsored "road map" for achieving Middle East peace. A team appointed by Sharon recently completed drafting the Israeli response, Israel Radio reported. Israel has requested some 100 changes to a draft of the road map.

Patriots to be deployed

In a possible sign of an approaching U.S. attack on Iraq, Israel plans to begin deploying Patriot missiles in the Tel Aviv area in the coming days. The Patriots are to serve as a backup in case Israel's Arrow anti-missile system fails to intercept any missiles Iraq may fire on Israel. Meanwhile, an Israeli defense official said the chances of Iraq attacking Israel are slight. The source said there is no intelligence information that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein plans to launch missiles at Israel in response to an American military strike, the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot reported.

Officials: Attack on Sharon foiled

Israel foiled a recent plan by Hamas to attack Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's convoy. The Shin Bet domestic security service said Sunday that the plan to place a bomb near the convoy was foiled after security forces arrested cell members planning the attack in a raid on the Bethlehem area last month.



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Palestinians, we would have saved lives," Zimeray said. He specifically cites the anti-Israel propaganda in Palestinian textbooks, prepared by the Palestinian Authority but largely funded by the international community.

"It is clear that all of the children that received this education do not become suicide bombers," he said, "but all suicide bombers received this education."

Despite the signatures Zimeray garnered, the E.U.'s presidential commission declined to call for an official inquiry into how the Palestinian Authority spends E.U. funds.

Still, the Parliament will conduct an informal inquiry into the matter, and the E.U.'s anti-fraud agency is launching its own inquiry.

"One month ago, when you" talked about "corruption in the Palestinian Authority, it was blasphemy," Zimeray said. "Now it is considered a serious issue."

Zimeray already is setting his sights on new challenges, such as quelling the growing anti-Semitic and anti-Israel sentiment across Europe.

"Israel is seen as an American state in Europe," he said, at a time when "Europeans define themselves as non-Americans."

In fact, hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in European cities earlier this month against an impending U.S.-led war on Iraq. Zimeray says he anticipates that anti-Israel sentiment will grow if the United States does go to war without European support.

For 50 years, European policy toward Israel was based on compassion because of the atrocities of the Holocaust, he said. In recent years, however, Europe has gone from the days of the Nuremberg trials against Nazi leaders to the Sharon trials, he said, referring to charges filed in Belgium that accuse Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of crimes against humanity.

"My observation is that Europe does not know anymore the real Israel," Zimeray said. "We have to take the initiative to make the link between Europe and Israel."

Zimeray envisions a Europe-Israel Strategy Center, an independent agency that would work to improve perceptions of Israel both at the level of the European Union and in individual countries. It is important to make clear that the people of Israel and the United States are not single-minded, and it would be beneficial to bring Israeli leaders to Europe who could articulate alternative points of view, Zimeray said.

Given the number of calls in Europe to boycott Israeli products, Zimeray said it also must be stressed that both Israel and Europe benefit from their economic ties. □

Desecration of Joseph's Tomb prompts protest by Jewish official

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — The Simon Wiesenthal Center has petitioned a U.N. agency "to vigorously protest the barbaric desecration of Joseph's Tomb" by West Bank Palestinians.

Shimon Samuels, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Paris office, wrote a letter of protest after a group of Jewish chaplains found last month that the site "is now destroyed, the building cracked open with hammers, a huge hole in its dome, and the grave littered with trash and car parts."

In a letter to Francesco Bandarin, director of the U.N. World Heritage Committee, Samuels also wrote, "Palestinian claims that Joseph's Tomb is also sacred to them have been vividly discredited." Samuels noted, "In October 2000, under the pretext of the intifada that had been launched a few days earlier, Palestinian violence willfully desecrated the tomb of the biblical patriarch in the vicinity of Nablus. The compound was set on fire and sacred Hebrew texts were burned."

Samuels also wrote to the committee, which serves as UNESCO's watchdog for the protection of the world's cultural sites and historic monuments, "We would have expected global expressions of outrage had Islamic or Christian sites been deliberately vandalized."

Recalling that the committee had condemned the destruction by the Taliban of two giant Buddhist statues in Afghanistan, Samuels concluded, "We would expect a similar condemnation of this new crime against cultural heritage." □

JEWISH WORLD

France to tackle school racism

France's education minister announced a package of measures to combat the growing wave of anti-Semitism in the nation's classrooms.

Anti-Semitism has become a "true danger" in French schools, Luc Ferry said Feb. 27 when he announced the initiative.

Ferry said the government is setting up committees to monitor and respond to racist activity among students. Teachers and principals will no longer be allowed to turn their heads when it comes to harassment of Jewish students, Ferry said at a news conference. "No forms of racism, even verbal, will be tolerated in French schools."

Haider's party joins Austria gov't

Austria's conservative People's Party created a new government with Jorg Haider's extreme-right Freedom Party. The new government was sworn in last Friday.

It is the second time that the People's Party of Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel is trying to lead the nation with the anti-immigrant Freedom Party. A government of the two parties collapsed last year, prompting early elections.

Slovenia gets new shul

For the first time in nearly 500 years, the capital of Slovenia has a synagogue, a Torah scroll and an official rabbi. Government officials, diplomats, and representatives of local Christian and Muslim communities joined local Jews and visiting Jewish leaders at a recent ceremony in Ljubljana formally installing Ariel Haddad as the nation's chief rabbi.

Attendees also welcomed a Torah scroll donated by members of a British-Slovenian friendship society.

Earlier last month, Shabbat services were celebrated for the first time in the community's new synagogue. They were the first synagogue services held in Ljubljana since the Jews were expelled in 1515.

Russian city fights hate

The Russian city of St. Petersburg passed tougher legislation aimed at fighting the spread of Nazi symbols and paraphernalia. According to the new bill adopted last week, companies and individuals involved in producing articles featuring Nazi symbols could face fines of up to \$600.

Kiev synagogue to reopen

The Great Choral Synagogue of Kiev is slated to have its official reopening this week. Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma will attend Tuesday's ceremony at the century-old red-brick synagogue, which has undergone multimillion-dollar renovations and reconstruction.

For West Point's Jewish chaplain, war in Iraq would be part of his duty

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — Rabbi Carlos Huerta is redeploying for a possible war against Iraq — but he doesn't want to be considered a hero.

"I'm just sand on a beach of heroes," he says of the soldiers who will be fighting if the United States attacks Iraq as part of its war on terrorism.

Maj. Huerta, who since July 2000 has been the Jewish chaplain at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., left last week along with the 101st Airborne Division, which was immortalized in the Stephen Spielberg miniseries "Band of Brothers."

As at West Point, Huerta will be catering to the spiritual needs of the soldiers in the division, no matter what their religion.

"God forbid I look at a soldier of a different faith and say, 'I don't want to serve you because I don't believe what you believe,'" he says.

Huerta, 52, is one of 27 Jewish chaplains in the U.S. military, says Rabbi Nathan Landman, who is the deputy director of the Jewish Welfare Board Jewish Chaplains Council.

The council provides prayer books and food to Jewish servicemen and women around the world to help them celebrate holidays.

On certain holidays, such as Rosh Hashanah and Passover, some of the chaplains travel around the world — wherever there are Jewish members of the armed forces — to help lead holiday services.

There are no precise numbers of Jews in the U.S. military, but it is believed to be less than the Jewish proportion — some 2 percent — of the overall U.S. population.

After 9/11, several rabbis wanted to join the chaplaincy, but all were too old, Landman added.

Men and women who are interested in becoming military chaplains must generally be younger than 40, physically fit and ordained by a recognized seminary or its equivalent.

Huerta, who was ordained at Jerusalem's Yeshiva Or HaTorah, came to the rabbinate after a career in the military.

Born in Brooklyn, he joined the army as a field artillery officer in 1972 and served in Korea, Turkey, Germany and Italy.

He joined the military chaplaincy in 1994 on the advice of Rabbi David Zalis, the chief of army reserve chaplains.

Zalis told him, "Listen man, you know how it is to be a soldier without a rabbi," Huerta says.

During his time as a military chaplain, Huerta has served at Fort Sill, Okla., and in Heidelberg, Germany.

He also has written a paper on religious accommodation in the military.

The match between Judaism and the military suits Huerta.

"When you look at traditional Jewish values, they overlap very well with American traditional values and the army's traditional values: loyalty, duty, selfless service, honor, integrity, personal courage, respect. That translates 100 percent Jewish," Huerta says.

He's circumspect when asked if he feels a special determination regarding Iraq because it may affect Israel.

"There are many countries — Muslim, Christian and obviously Israel — fighting in the war against the disease" of terrorism, he says. "I am proud to be serving not just as an American, but as an American Jew."

But he's much more direct when addressing the loneliness that soldiers and their families face.

Like many of the soldiers he will be serving, Huerta left family behind to head overseas.

He and his second wife — he is widowed — have 12 children between them, ranging in age from four months to 31 years old.

Those left behind should also be thought of as heroic, he says.

"I took an oath; my children and wife didn't," he says. □

Anti-Sharon newspaper cartoon provokes charges of anti-Semitism

By Richard Allen Greene

LONDON (JTA) — The Israeli Embassy in London has accused a British newspaper of perpetuating the blood libel against Jews after it ran a cartoon that depicted Prime Minister Ariel Sharon eating a baby.

The cartoon in the Independent newspaper showed Sharon crouched in the ruins of a village, biting the head off a baby as helicopters circle overhead broadcasting the message "Vote Sharon."

"What's wrong . . . You never seen a politician kissing babies before?" Sharon asks in the drawing.

The embassy filed its complaint via celebrated lawyer Anthony Julius, who successfully defended scholar Deborah Lipstadt when Holocaust denier David Irving sued her for libel in a highly publicized case in London in 2000.

"The complaint concerns neither politics nor art. It is instead about anti-Semitism," Julius argued.

"The cartoon associates Prime Minister Sharon, a Jew, with a particularly dreadful crime allegedly committed by Jews — indeed, habitually and exclusively by Jews. It associates him with the blood libel."

Describing it as "a gruesome, appalling image," Julius says the cartoon "has an implicit politics, one which supposes Israelis to be murderous brutes, and Palestinians, martyred innocents."

The cartoon has provoked protests ever since it was published on Jan. 27, which was Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain and other European nations — and the day before Israel's general election.

About 30 complaints about it have come in to the Press Complaints Commission, a commission spokeswoman said.

The Board of Deputies, the umbrella organization representing most British Jews, was among the first to lodge a protest with the commission.

"Such a caricature goes way beyond acceptable political commentary," said the board's director general, Neville Nagler. "Jews all over the world are facing the increasing threat of anti-Semitism. To see such a blatantly anti-Semitic caricature in a mainstream British newspaper is a matter of grave concern."

The commission has not yet responded to the board's complaint, a board spokeswoman said.

But it has already rejected two complaints on the grounds that they did not come from Sharon himself, the object of the cartoon, the commission spokeswoman told JTA.

"The cartoon made reference to a named individual, but as he has not complained, the commission cannot take up a third-party complaint," she said.

The commission has asked the Israeli Embassy whether it is acting on behalf of Sharon.

The embassy's complaint charges that not only Sharon, but also the Israeli army and electorate, are the targets of attack.

The Independent rejects the charge that the cartoon is anti-Semitic.

Its editor in chief, Simon Kelner — who is Jewish — declined to speak to JTA. But he told London's Jewish Chronicle newspaper: "I am Jewish myself, so I would be sensitive to anything

anti-Semitic. This was a very powerful cartoon and it is clearly anti-Sharon.

"However, that is very different [from] being anti-Semitic."

The cartoonist, Dave Brown, also rejected the charge of prejudice. "Not only did I have no intention of being anti-Semitic; I had no desire to make anti-Israel comment. At a time when the Israeli Labor Party was offering the choice of a settlement, I sought only to target a man and a party I consider to be actively working against peace," Brown wrote.

Norman Lebrecht, a former Jewish Chronicle columnist and now the assistant editor of the Evening Standard newspaper, also dismissed the allegation that the cartoon was anti-Semitic.

He told JTA it was important to consider the image in the context of what he called the Independent's "stridently anti-Zionist, though not anti-Semitic, line."

"I thought the cartoon was unpleasant and unimaginative, but not overtly anti-Semitic," he said.

"Taken out of context, the cartoon might appear more offensive than it does in its intended placement and purpose. On the pages of the Independent, it supports an editorial line which, however much it may annoy the Israeli Embassy, does not make the cartoon, or the newspaper, anti-Semitic," he said.

But Winston Pickett of the London think tank the Institute for Jewish Policy Research said the cartoon could not be separated from a broader context — the history of the blood libel — no matter what the artist or editor intended.

"In the framing of this particular cartoon, there are anti-Semitic stereotypes: the eating of children," he told JTA.

"I have no problem with criticizing Sharon — that's open territory — but to bring in these motifs that are so clearly reminiscent of the blood libel, a medieval worldview, makes it dangerous," he said.

"There are red flags that should go off in your head: You don't put Jews eating babies. You wouldn't put a black Sambo on your front lawn," said Pickett, who writes about the cartoon in the forthcoming book "A New Anti-Semitism? Debating Judeophobia in 21st-Century Britain."

Pickett said the image was reminiscent of cartoons that appear in Arab newspapers: "I was able to locate a cartoon in Al-Quds that has the same image — Sharon eating babies out of a bowl with a spoon and blood running down his face.

"I am not accusing the [Independent's] editor or the artist of being professional anti-Semites, but these themes are dangerous," he said.

Cartoonist Steve Greenberg, who has won the past two American Jewish Press Association awards for cartooning, is also concerned that the image could cause problems.

"The cartoon, while technically well drawn and very powerful, is shrill, rather excessive and could very well stir up some anti-Semitism on a visceral level," he told JTA by e-mail from California.

"I can see how the cartoonist uses the image and the 'baby kissing' twist to strong effect, but by ignoring the historic context of 'blood-libel' anti-Semitic cartoons, he wittingly or unwittingly perpetuates a dismal area of cartooning that plays to the worst instincts in some people." □

The controversial cartoon can be viewed at http://www.independent.co.uk/images/editorial_images/2003-01/sharonbig.gif.