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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

French Jews beaten

Two French Jews received hospital treatment after anti-war protesters attacked them outside a youth movement building in central Paris. [Page 3]

Israel defends mask instructions

Israel defended its decision to have citizens open their gas mask kits after the United States attacked Iraq last week.

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said the instructions were necessary because the chance of an Iraqi missile attack on Israel, while minimal, still exists. Mofaz's comments, made Sunday, came after Israeli army officials criticized the decision to order residents to open their gas-mask kits when the war on Iraq began.

"This is one big scandal. The country wasted billions of shekels over such a small possibility that it would be attacked," one senior source in the army's Home Front Command told the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Shalom, Powell to meet

Israel's foreign minister reportedly will meet with Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington to discuss the "road map" for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The two plan to meet when Silvan Shalom is in Washington for the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which will be held March 30-April 1, Israel's Channel 2 television reported.

Israel fears that the road map, developed by the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia, demands concessions of Israel without demanding similar steps from the Palestinians in return.

Jews in jeopardy?

Jews in Muslim countries may become vulnerable during the U.S. attack on Iraq, a U.S. Jewish official warned.

"There are indications that angry and instigated crowds could turn violent and direct their anger and aggression toward individual Jews and Jewish communal installations," said Steven Schwager, executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

In anticipation of war with Iraq, the JDC in recent months has been working with vulnerable Jewish communities to minimize dangers and assess risks.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

In Israel, economy more scary than prospect of Iraqi missiles

By Matthew Gutman

TEL AVIV (JTA) — So bad is Israel's economic situation that some children in the Negev town of Sderot welcomed the Kassam rockets Hamas recently fired at the town as if they were much-needed rain.

"It's actually a good thing the rockets hit here," said a smiling Shiran Avraham, 17, surrounded by a half-dozen tittering teen-age girls. "No one would pay any attention to this place without them, and we certainly would not have gotten the benefits of a city on the 'front line.' "

Avraham's statements came just days before Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Israelis that a \$6 billion deficit has left state coffers empty. To combat Israel's economic woes, Netanyahu unveiled a new austerity plan that promises to be as painful as it is drastic.

A rocket recently missed, by about 30 feet, the Ulpana Girls School that Avraham attends in Sderot, a city that suffers both from constant barrages of Kassam rockets and chronic unemployment and poverty.

Avraham, toting a faux designer handbag, was unfazed, like most people in town.

Avraham explained that her family — like most Sderot residents — needs the added benefits allotted to residents of cities the government considers on the "front line." The benefits include lowered income and land taxes, and increased budgets for infrastructure, social services and education. So important are the benefits in these times of crisis that Mayor Eli Moyel proudly considers his success in securing the benefits recently as the centerpiece of his tenure as mayor.

A poll released by the Israel Forever Foundation indicated that nearly twice as many Israelis — 20 percent — are concerned about the economic situation as about a possible Iraqi attack (11 percent).

To remedy Israel's economic implosion, Netanyahu's plan is designed to cut the ever-decreasing fat in the national budget. If cuts already passed in December 2002 are included, Israel's per annum budget will be sliced by about \$4 billion dollars, or some 8 percent of the total budget.

Every ministry but the Defense Ministry will lose 2 percent to 3 percent of its budget.

The protracted war with the Palestinians, plus breakneck preparations for a possible attack from Iraq, have sent the defense budget soaring while knocking the economy into recession. According to Netanyahu's plan, the public sector will be hit hardest. With a progressive salary cut ranging from 6 percent for low-wage earners to 12 percent for higher earners, no one will be spared.

The plan also reportedly includes mass layoffs, and tens of thousands of public sector employees could lose their jobs in coming years. Netanyahu has particularly targeted the Education Ministry, reducing the number of administrators and teachers and amalgamating certain positions and authorities. The cuts also will reduce Social Security and child benefits, while raising the pension age to 67.

Even before the cuts are approved, the country faces a social services gap that some people are trying to fill. "You see," said Moshe Levkowitz, director general of Meir Panim, Israel's only chain of soup kitchens, "the State of Israel has no system of soup kitchens."

Each one, he explains, is independent. Levkowitz, whose blue eyes, ruddy cheeks

MIDEAST FOCUS

Report: U.S. to host Palestinian

The United States will reportedly invite the Palestinian Authority's new prime minister to Washington as soon as he takes office.

According to the Daily Telegraph, the invitation to Mahmoud Abbas would come as part of the Bush administration's efforts to jump-start Israeli-Palestinian peace talks after the war in Iraq.

Israel: Mais non, merci

Israel reportedly rejected a French proposal to convene an international conference on Middle East peace.

A senior Foreign Ministry official told Israel Radio that Israel prefers the United States to continue to lead efforts toward Israeli-Palestinian peace, and that there is no need for any other peace initiatives.

Airlines resuming flights

Several airlines that had cut back flights to Israel ahead of the U.S.-led war in Iraq will resume service. Lufthansa announced last Friday that it would resume one flight to and from Israel beginning Saturday, the Jerusalem Post reported.

The decision came as U.S. forces were reported to have seized airfields in western Iraq from which Iraq could have lobbed missiles at Israel.

Austrian Airlines also announced it would resume flights to Israel beginning Saturday, two days after cutting them back.

Prisoners' families want move

The families of Palestinian security prisoners being held at an Israeli prison in the Negev are seeking international backing to have their relatives transferred to a facility in northern Israel. They argued Saturday that being held in jail near the Dimona nuclear facility exposes the prisoners to the danger of Iraqi Scud missiles targeting the area.



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and sandy hair give him the appearance of a cherub with a beard, prides his organization for "not only filling their bellies with food, but their hearts with pride."

Meir Panim, named after founder David Kochmeister's son Meir, who died of a rare pancreatic disorder at age 13, operates in the fashion of a homestyle restaurant.

By keeping its premises clean and "restaurant-like," it aims to remove any feelings of shame from accepting donated food.

"Because of a policy that requires respect, we get about 40 percent women here. This is totally unprecedented in soup kitchens, where often women feel too ashamed to go," Levkowitz said.

There are tens of thousands of hungry people in Israel, but not everyone who comes to the soup kitchen is necessarily starving, Levkowitz said.

"Many people are either mentally ill, or have no one who might prepare them a hot lunch," he said.

Meir Panim, a nonprofit inspired and run by fervently Orthodox Jews, has grown tremendously — largely, and unfortunately, due to increasing demand, Levkowitz said.

Meir Panim soup kitchens now feed some 2,500 Israeli adults and 800 students a day in five national centers.

While the organization receives only 6 percent of its funding from the government, 85 percent of Meir Panim's recipients are referred to its soup kitchens by state social workers.

Most funds come from private donations, Levkowitz said.

"People will call and say they want to sponsor 10 or five or 100 meals. Others say they have a bed, or a fridge, or an oven, even sewing machines to give away," he said.

During lunch hour the day before Purim, the scene was both amusing and surreal. Fervently Orthodox men, joined by Israeli Arab volunteers, acted like stereotypical Jewish mothers, bouncing from table to table cajoling "clients" to eat more and constantly ladling additional food onto people's plates.

"Take this," one of the Arab workers said, shoving a loaf of bread into the arms of a homeless man already laden with leftovers.

"But I don't need it," the man replied, clutching his soup.

"Just take it, it's good for you," the volunteer responded, still holding the loaf.

Unlike most of Israel's for-profit businesses, Meir Panim is growing. By the end of the year it is slated to open an additional four branches in Israel's poorer cities, part of an effort to better serve "periphery cities" like Sderot.

In addition to food, the organization provides legal counsel and medical services twice a week.

But there are many Israelis who fall through the cracks and find themselves unable to take aid even from groups like Meir Panim.

"We represent those people," slurred Mark Elazar, one of the 30 or so residents of a trash-filled camp called "Bread Square" in Tel Aviv.

The new residents of Bread Square — officially Tel Aviv's swank Hamedina Square — are a ragtag group of the chronically ill, former addicts and simply the very poor with nowhere else to go.

They live in tents and a pair of abandoned buses, spray-painted with graffiti, that have been there since July.

Elazar was stabbed in the neck in 1982 by an escaped criminal. Since then he has been unable to hold a steady job due to an inability to concentrate.

"I am not stupid, but simply cannot function like everyone else," he said. "But the government has forgotten me."

Turning to comrades munching on donated chocolate-covered eclairs, he said, "We don't want people's donations. We want to be able to support ourselves."

The group has refused to leave the area, technically designated as a city park, and has issued rather nebulous demands.

"Something has to change, the government has to recognize our existence," Elazar said.

Across the street from bakeries catering to Tel Aviv's most expensive tastes, and stores such as Armani and Polo, lies a refrigerator.

"The fridge is empty — we want work," reads the sign on its open door.

Back in Sderot, before trotting off with her friends, a world-weary Avraham concluded, "Here it's all about the bottom line. That is what's really scary." □

JEWISH WORLD

British soldiers mute religion

British Jewish soldiers serving in Iraq are being allowed to erase mention of their religion from their dog tags in an attempt to escape torture if captured.

The British Ministry of Defense made the decision to allow the removals following concerns expressed by the British Jewish community about possible torture. There are an estimated 15 Jewish soldiers among the 45,000 British soldiers aiding the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

Belgian criticizes Sharon case

Belgium's foreign minister criticized a lawsuit filed against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon under a controversial human rights law.

Using a "universal jurisdiction" law that allows charges of crimes against humanity to be brought in Belgium, no matter where the actions occurred, a group of Palestinians filed a lawsuit against Sharon over his indirect role in the massacre of Palestinians by Lebanese Christians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps during the 1982 Lebanon War.

The lawsuit has led to a severe rupture in Israel-Belgium relations. "It's not up to us, Belgium, to judge these people," Louis Michel said last Friday on Belgian radio.

"It's true that there is something absolutely provocative" and "foolishly moralizing to want to try and prosecute people who originate from democratic countries and where the separation of powers exists."

Jews hail Kazakh appointment

Jewish leaders welcome Kazakhstan's appointment of an ambassador to Israel.

Last week's appointment of Kairat Abd Rakhmanov came after a recent visit to Kazakhstan by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, where the group urged the government to appoint an envoy to Israel.

"This appointment takes on special significance at this time. As we saw during our visit, the government of Kazakhstan, led by President Nazarbayev, is fostering close ties with the United States as well as Israel," conference leaders said in a statement. "The presence of the ambassador will enhance that relationship."

New Mexico passes hate bill

New Mexico's House passed a hate crimes bill.

The bill, passed March 20 by the state legislature, would provide additional prison time to offenders whose crimes are motivated by hatred. The state Senate has already passed the measure.

The state's governor, Bill Richardson, has said he would sign the bill into law.

The bill has been passed twice before, but the state's previous governor, Gary Johnson, vetoed the measure.

Two French Jews beaten at anti-war protest in Paris

By Philip Carmel

PARIS (JTA)—Two French Jews are recovering after anti-war protesters attacked them here over the weekend.

Yoni Odonnat, 17, was watching the anti-Iraq war demonstration Saturday from outside the headquarters of the Zionist youth group Hashomer Hatzair when a group of around 30 protesters from the Action Committee for Peace and Justice in the Middle East, or CAPJPO, attacked him.

Odonnat was pushed up against a wall, beaten and then pushed to the ground by demonstrators described by onlookers "as Arabs wearing kaffiyehs."

Together with two other Hashomer Hatzair members, Odonnat was chased by a crowd shouting anti-Semitic obscenities before taking refuge inside the building.

Odonnat was taken to Paris' Hotel Dieu hospital where he was treated for eye injuries.

Not far from the attack, Noam Levy, 24, was hit on the head with an iron bar as he gave an interview to a television camera crew. Levy was taken to the hospital and then released.

According to the television crew, those involved in the attack were all from CAPJPO.

Hashomer Hatzair spokesman Yoni Smadjar told JTA that the movement regularly holds activities on Saturday afternoons and there had been around 150 children inside the building at the time of the attacks.

Smadjar said the group would be filing an official complaint against the demonstration organizers who, he pointed out, included a number of left wing, anti-globalization and pro-Palestinian associations.

"They saw Yoni's kippah and attacked him," Smadjar said. "There were around 30 of them and they were shouting 'Death to the Jews.'"

Edith Lenszner, a spokeswoman for the CRIF umbrella organization of French Jews, condemned the attack.

Lenzner said her group "held no position on the Iraq war" — and that it is unacceptable for Jewish organizations to be targeted during anti-war demonstrations such as Saturday's.

CAPJCO, however, denies that its activists were involved in the attack.

The organization's president, Olivia Zemor, told JTA that her members had "once again, been attacked by Jewish extremists from Betar," referring to the right-wing Zionist group.

"We are going to be speaking to the police and asking for protection," Zemor added.

Asked by JTA to specify the number of injured from her own organization, Zemor said she did not know the "exact figure" before admitting that there had been no CAPJPO injuries. □

Saddam pays Palestinians

JERUSALEM (JTA)—Even as the war on Iraq was beginning, Saddam Hussein gave \$210,000 to families of Palestinians killed fighting Israel.

Saddam distributed \$10,000 checks to families of 21 Palestinians, including a member of Hamas, through a pro-Iraqi group in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on March 20.

One of the group's leaders told the families that Saddam would continue to support them.

"Even in this crucial time, President Saddam has not forgotten his people in Palestine and he insists on making payments to the families of the martyrs," said Ibrahim Za'anen of the Arab Liberation Front.

Iraq has paid more than \$35 million to the families of Palestinians killed in the conflict. □

WAR IN IRAQ

For Israeli reservist, the key is to keep citizens informed and calm

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — Around 9 o'clock on the night of March 19, Jeff Kaye got a phone call tapping him for Israel's reserve duty.

The 43-year-old Scot, who made aliyah 22 years ago, asked his daughter Adi, 13, and son Eldan, 17, to help retrieve his army uniform from its perch in the closet and pack his bag for an early morning departure.

In a phone interview with JTA on March 20 from his army base, Kaye admits his immediate reaction was a "sunken-hearted feeling."

But soon after, he said, "I realized that the great import of what I had to do far outweighs my personal comfort."

A big part of living in Israel is contributing to it, says Kaye, director of financial resource development for the Jewish Agency for Israel, an overseas partner of the federation system that handles Israel's immigration and absorption.

"Whether at my desk" at the Jewish Agency or "wearing this olive green uniform," he said, pitching in for the Jewish state "is really why I'm in this country in the first place, why I came here."

Called up along with 12,000 other reserve soldiers for various duties, Kaye is stationed in the army's Home Front command.

While Kaye couldn't disclose his location for security reasons, he said he was near a densely populated part of the country's center.

"That's where we're needed most," he says, since population centers are likely targets.

The Home Front Command is charged with telling civilians how to prepare for and respond to an attack, and will serve as rescue squads if need be.

For now, Kaye's unit of a few hundred people is busy manning phones — answering civilian questions from how to protect their pets to what to do if their children resist wearing gas masks — finalizing contingency plans with hospitals, fire and police brigades, and helping to formulate policy.

For his part, Kaye is writing public messages.

"The rumors and misinformation and disinformation are all over," Kaye says.

For example, there already have been several cases in which Israelis, presumably out of panic or confusion, prematurely injected themselves with atropine, an antidote for chemical weapons that comes in Israelis' gas mask kits.

Atropine causes severe dehydration.

It's up to Kaye's group to provide "the right information at the right time," he says.

The high sensitivity of the Home Front Command's detection equipment means those bases will be among the first to learn of any trouble.

That has created a sense of tension among Kaye's unit.

"Everyone is very much on high alert," he says.

But Kaye says Home Front Command is a "well-oiled machine" with elaborate coordination.

"All of the soldiers have been briefed and know exactly what their assignments are," he says. "We seem to be very prepared for all likelihoods."

In a conference call last Friday with leaders of the American Jewish federation system, Kaye reiterated that point.

Kaye stressed the military advances Israel has made since the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

"I think we're light years ahead of where we were due to the advanced warning system that would be made available." The system is designed to allow Israel to intercept incoming missiles.

Personal emergency equipment also has been improved.

That's due in part to funds raised through the federation system's Israel Emergency Campaign, Kaye says, noting rotating beepers for the deaf and gas masks for children.

For Kaye, who has been working professionally with the Israel Emergency Campaign, it's "quite fitting that I should be here at this point as part of the" Israel Defense Force, he says.

Meanwhile, in his unit, "there's this spirit of camaraderie which comes from the responsibility of the tasks at hand," Kaye says. "When it's your job to deal with a civilian population, you have to be composed" and "speak with authority and confidence."

Apparently that goes for personal business, too.

Members of his unit are frequently on their cell phones, reassuring their children that they'll be home soon.

Kaye spoke March 20 with his daughter — who was more rattled than his son by Kaye's departure — asking about her first day toting her gas mask to school.

Adi said it was "a pain" to carry the cumbersome cardboard box around, Kaye says.

Yet "personal concerns and issues are not in the forefront of our thoughts at the moment," Kaye says.

Rather, it's "getting through the next night without Israel being attacked, and future nights."

"Everybody wants to be at home and be with their families," says Kaye, who does not yet know when he will be allowed to go home.

Still, "if there's a role to be played in a time of conflict, I want to be where I can be useful." □

Jewish man portrays Saddam

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Jerry Haleva, Hollywood's favorite Saddam Hussein double, firmly denies that he spoke over Baghdad television on the opening day of the war.

"I would never wear such ugly glasses," he protests.

Haleva bears a striking resemblance to the Iraqi dictator, especially when he strides into a diplomatic reception complete with beret and full uniform.

"Only in America could a nice Sephardic boy get paid to make fun of Saddam," he marvels.

Haleva is a pro-Israeli activist who serves on the national executive board of AIPAC and chaired the Jewish federation of Sacramento, Calif.

In his daytime job, he is a successful business and industry lobbyist in the California state capital.

As an actor, his film career took off with the first Persian Gulf war; he has played you-know-who in "Hot Shots," "Hot Shots! Part Deux," "Mafia!" "The Big Lebowski" and last year's HBO mockumentary "Live From Baghdad."

The busy lobbyist, who at 56 is 10 years younger than Saddam, has put his other persona on hold during the Iraq war.

"This is too serious a time for America and Israel to trivialize the situation," he says. □