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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

2 Israelis killed in West Bank

Two Israeli soldiers were killed and nine wounded in a shooting attack in the West Bank.

Two Palestinian gunmen cut through a fence surrounding an army base Thursday and opened fire. Israeli troops killed one of the attackers on the spot; the second was killed in a chase.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestinian and the Al-Aksa Martyrs Brigade, an offshoot of Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Rightist Le Pen tossed out

Jean-Marie Le Pen was stripped of his status as a European legislator.

The Court of European Communities stripped the French far-rightist of his status with the European Parliament on Thursday after a five-year process.

Le Pen, who as leader of France's National Front party received almost 20 percent of the vote in last year's presidential elections, was suspended from the Parliament for a year in 1998 after assaulting a Socialist opponent near Paris.

At the time, the French government notified the European Parliament that Le Pen's mandate would run out in October 2000. However, Le Pen appealed to the European court for a stay of execution.

Palestinians mourn Saddam's fall

Hamas and Islamic Jihad expressed sorrow over the fall of Saddam Hussein.

An official with Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip said the resistance to U.S. forces in Iraq eventually would be victorious, according to Israel Radio. Palestinian Authority newspapers also expressed their displeasure over the Iraqi leader's fall, according to Palestinian Media Watch.

The daily Al Ayyam published today's headline of the fall of Baghdad with a black frame of mourning. The official P.A. daily, Al Hayat Al Jadida, published a political cartoon saying the entire "Arab Nation" is mourning Baghdad. The editorial page of Al Hayat Al Jadida advised the Iraqi people to act against the American "occupation" by taking "the Palestinian experience as an example."

Saddam gave millions of dollars to relatives of suicide bombers and other Palestinians killed in the past 30 months of Israeli-Palestinian violence.

NEWS ANALYSIS

As 'road map' presentation nears, Israel presses case for revisions

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Ariel Sharon's extended honeymoon with the Bush administration may fast be approaching its end, pundits here warn.

It could come down to the issue of settlements, which has long been a bone of contention in the Israel-U.S. relationship.

The trigger is the impending presentation of the "road map" toward Israeli-Palestinian peace, which U.S. officials say should be presented in the next few weeks, as soon as the new Palestinian Authority prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, names his Cabinet.

The government of Sharon, the Israeli prime minister, wants the highly charged issue of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip deferred from the first phase of the road map to the last, which deals with final-status issues.

And that is precisely why government critics say the road map is bound to fail. Ha'aretz columnist Danny Rubinstein wrote that, given the right-wing composition of the Israeli government, "it will take a social and political earthquake in Israel" to freeze settlement growth early in the process, as the road map demands.

Several pundits believe the settlement issue not only will sink the road map but will lead to a showdown with Washington.

"The rift could be only weeks away," Yehuda Litani wrote in the Yediot Achronot daily. "After deploying Patriot air defense systems in Israel to protect us from Iraqi missile attacks, and after clearing air bases in western Iraq to preempt such attacks, the Americans won't hesitate to get on their hind legs and bare their claws. The smiles will quickly become scowls, the endearments threats. The crisis is almost upon us."

Indeed, a recent diplomatic message from Washington suggested that since America's war in Iraq and its subsequent plans for the region were in Israel's interest, Israel should reciprocate by softening its position on settlements.

Jerusalem has plenty of other concerns about the road map, too, not the least of which has to do with timing.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom told the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Monday that Israel would not accept the road map until the Palestinians make an effort to prevent terror and cease incitement.

"We are not prepared to compromise our security," he was quoted as saying.

Israel also wants to rule out from the start the possibility that Palestinian refugees and their descendants will return to Israel as part of a final peace deal.

It must be made explicit that the refugee problem will be resolved in the Palestinian state the road map envisions, the Israelis say.

Hard-liners in the Sharon government — such as Likud legislator Uzi Landau, Housing Minister Effi Eitam and Tourism Minister Benny Elon — have called the plan "a map to national disaster." They are exerting pressure on Sharon to torpedo the whole idea.

For his part, Sharon is dispatching his aide, Dov Weisglass, to Washington with 15 proposed Israeli amendments. The trip, scheduled for this week, has reportedly been postponed until next week, due to scheduling conflicts.

At the least, Sharon:

- Wants to drop all reference to the Saudi peace plan mentioned in the road map's preamble, on the grounds that it was never presented to Israel. The Saudi plan calls for

MIDEAST FOCUS

Armed Palestinian killed

Israeli troops killed an armed Palestinian and wounded four others in the West Bank town of Tul-karm. Palestinian sources said an undercover unit opened fire Thursday on the five at a gas station in the center of the city, Israel Radio reported.

In other developments, Israeli troops detained three suspected would-be suicide bombers, including two women members of Fatah's Tanzim militia, Israel Radio reported.

Israeli army releases reservists

The Israeli army began releasing reservists called up because of the war in Iraq.

But the level of civil alert remained unchanged Thursday, and Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said the threat from Iraq had not yet been completely lifted. The decision to keep the civil alert in place defied expectations that the alert would be lowered in light of the allied coalition's advances in Iraq.

Terror victim's wife gives birth

The widow of an Israeli officer killed in a Palestinian terror attack in Hebron last year gave birth to her slain husband's son. Col. Dror Weinberg was killed along with other officers and some worshipers in Hebron on Nov. 15, 2002. Hadassah Weinberg gave birth on Wednesday. "This is the special gift Dror has left me," Weinberg said.

Charges in girls school attack

An Israeli settler was charged with preparing a bomb for an attack against an Arab girls school in eastern Jerusalem.

Amior Tsuruel, 23, was charged in the Jerusalem district court on Thursday. He is accused of aiding in attempted murder. Last year, Israeli police captured members of an alleged Jewish terror cell that planted a booby-trapped wagon next to a school.



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a complete Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders and a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem under a U.N. resolution that Arab states say recognizes the right of return.

- Demands that the Palestinians recognize Israel's right to exist as a specifically Jewish state.

- Objects to the symmetry implied in the phrase: "All official Israeli institutions end incitement against Palestinians." Israel contends that it is not guilty of anything like the incitement to violence prevalent in the Palestinian media and school system.

- Objects to the demand that Israel "end violence against Palestinians everywhere," which implies limits on Israel's capacity to fight any ongoing terror.

- Wants to strengthen language calling for the dismantling of Palestinian militias and formation of a single unified Palestinian security authority, ending incitement and forming a new Palestinian leadership "not contaminated by terror."

- Calls to include language placing limitations on Palestinian sovereignty — for example, by stating that the Palestinian state envisaged in the road map will be demilitarized and that Israel will control its air space and border crossings.

- Wants the United States alone, and not its partners in the diplomatic "Quartet" that authored the road map — the United Nations, European Union and Russia — to judge whether the parties have fulfilled their obligations at each stage of the plan. The other parties to the Quartet are biased toward the Palestinians, Israel charges.

American and British leaders have left no room for doubt that the first order of business after deposing Saddam Hussein would be the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But getting Israelis and Palestinians to move in tandem along the bumpy road map could prove far more difficult than crushing the Iraqi dictatorship.

The head of Israel's military intelligence told a Knesset committee this week that he believes Abbas is committed to fighting terrorism.

But Abbas won't find it easy to impose the cease-fire Israel demands before negotiations can begin. And Sharon says he won't "pay" in irreversible concessions to the Palestinians, just so Britain and America can more easily mend fences with Europe and the Arab world after the Iraq war.

There even was talk in diplomatic circles that the Europeans would "pressure the Palestinians" while America would "deliver Israel."

But U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell cautions against oversimplifying the issues, and implies that coercion will not work.

Beyond the diplomatic posturing, the real question is: Can the road map work?

Former U.S. peace envoy Dennis Ross thinks not.

In Ross's view, the road map is weighted against Israel: It satisfies Palestinian strategic goals by providing an end to occupation and recognition of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state. But it fails to satisfy Israel's most basic goal, the absolute cessation of violence.

Moreover, Ross says, experience has shown that disputes over whether each side has fulfilled its commitments will derail the process.

Another core problem is the diametrically opposed point of departure each side brings to the table. The Israelis want to focus on steps to end violence, while the Palestinians want guarantees on the shape of the final settlement before they will lay down their arms.

The road map tries to finesse this conundrum by laying down a series of interlinked steps, starting with a cease-fire and leading to full Palestinian statehood within three years.

But it leaves the Israelis uneasy about how the proposed cease-fire will be maintained. It also leaves the Palestinians suspicious about what kind of state they will be offered in the end, as well as what happens with other key issues like Jerusalem and refugees.

The road map hopes to solve the overarching problem by setting off a positive dynamic in which both sides reap tangible rewards. But Oslo, too, was an attempt to create an overarching structure, which would be filled in as the two sides developed more trust in one another — a process that clearly didn't work.

Not surprisingly, Sharon wants to rectify what he sees as the road map's imbalances before the new process starts. □

(Leslie Sussner is the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report)

JEWISH WORLD

Nazi-hunting program may expand

A Nazi-hunting program may be extended to other European countries.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center said this week that it may extend its Operation Last Chance program, which has been operating in the Baltics, to countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, Germany and Austria, an official with the center told Reuters.

The center announced this week that the program had led to tips on more than 2,000 suspected war criminals in Latvia and Lithuania.

Rep. Moran worried about Jews

Rep. James Moran (D-Va.) told local Democratic officials that Jewish organizations will raise money and take over a campaign to defeat him. Moran was chastised last month for saying the Jewish community is behind the Bush administration's push for war in Iraq.

He told the Alexandria, Va., Democratic Committee on Monday that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee is raising \$2 million for a campaign against him, including fund-raising in Florida.

AIPAC spokeswoman Rebecca Dinar said the organization does not raise funds for political races or endorse candidates.

Palestinian to serve U.S. jail time

A Palestinian man who firebombed a Jewish site in Jerusalem was found guilty of lying on his U.S. residency application. Jad Haref Hammad faces up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine after prosecutors found he did not admit to his criminal activity when he applied for residency in October 2002.

In 1992, an Israeli court convicted Hammad of firebombing the Tomb of Shimon Hatzadik in Jerusalem.

Seinfeld to honor Israel

Jerry Seinfeld and Tony Bennett will highlight next month's celebration in Washington for Israel's 55th anniversary. The "Israel@55" gala, scheduled for May 19, also will feature singer Norah Jones and Israeli singer Achinoam "Noa" Nini.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and President Bush are expected to attend.

Italy to get Shoah museum

The Italian government granted \$16 million for a national Holocaust museum. The move taken Wednesday would help build the museum in the northern city of Ferrara. The city was the setting for a novel and Oscar-winning film on Jewish life before and during World War II, "The Garden of the Finzi-Continis." The museum is expected to be completed within five years.

ACROSS THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

After meeting with Jewish leaders, Azerbaijan to legalize Jewish school

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — After months of apparent official opposition to the idea, the first Jewish day school in Azerbaijan will be allowed to operate legally.

In a meeting with Jewish leaders who flew in from Israel and Russia to express their concern over the matter, the nation's president, Heydar Aliyev, promised last week that the school will be granted the license that it sought to obtain for the last half-year.

Gennady Zelmanovich, chairman of the Jewish Ashkenazi Religious Community of Azerbaijan, said the decision marked a "big day" for many Jewish families in Baku, the country's capital where the school is located.

"Today was the first day when the school operated normally," Zelmanovich said on April 3 in a telephone interview from Baku.

The Or Avner Jewish Day School opened last September with an enrollment of about 100 kids but no official license. Jewish officials had hoped the license — a joint responsibility of the country's Ministries of Justice and Education — would be just a technical detail, as was the case with some other educational institutions opened in this country during the past few years.

But the licensing process was effectively blocked by both government agencies without any explanation.

"We rented a space, hired full staff, the classes were already on; so this was creating a tense atmosphere," Zelmanovich said.

The Baku school is part of the Or Avner network of Jewish day schools operating in most former republics of the Soviet Union. Israeli philanthropist Lev Levayev, who arranged a meeting with Aliyev, sponsors the network.

One of Russia's two chief rabbis, Berel Lazar, head of the Federation of Jewish Communities of the C.I.S., and Me'er Brook, a local rabbi, also attended the meeting.

Sources within the federation, an umbrella group that also lists Levayev as its prime donor, had indicated earlier that the official opposition to the school opening stemmed from Azerbaijan's desire not to irritate Iran — or perhaps even due to Iranian pressure.

Azerbaijan's policies are often said to reflect split loyalties between the West and Iran. Like its southern neighbor, Azerbaijan, home to an estimated 20,000 Jews among its 8 million people, is overwhelmingly Shi'ite Muslim.

Despite a complicated history of Azerbaijani-Iranian relations that involve some territorial disputes, Azerbaijan has consistently showed its reluctance to anger Iran.

One sign of such a policy is an issue that mars Azerbaijan's relations with Israel.

Soon after gaining its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan formally established full-fledged diplomatic relations with the Jewish state but never opened an embassy in Israel.

In the meeting with Jewish leaders this week, Aliyev repeated his earlier promise to open the embassy in Israel, saying it was now only a "matter of budget."

The Israeli Embassy in Baku has been in operation for nearly a decade now.

But Zelmanovich said the stalemate over the permission for the new Jewish school to operate was, paradoxically enough, rooted in Azerbaijan's fear of radical Islam.

The country's officials have refused to allow various religious and minority groups to open educational institutions in Azerbaijan, which largely follows the Turkish model of secular democracy.

Whatever the reason behind the opposition to the Jewish school, Jewish leaders praised Aliyev's move.

"It is important that in the current international situation, the leader of a Muslim country can stand up to protect the rights of its minority," said Avraham Berkowitz, executive director of the federation.

Aliyev has promised to attend the official opening for the Jewish school, which is scheduled for Sept. 1. Zelmanovich said Aliyev's attendance could add to the prestige of the school and the Jewish community in general.

Now that the school is likely to receive official recognition soon, Jewish officials in Baku expect the enrollment to rise to 300 by the next school year. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

CRIF leader assesses situation of Jewish community in France

By Philip Carmel

PARIS (JTA) — While the war in Iraq has increased tensions in France, even sparking a new wave of attacks on Jews, the government is serious about taking on the problem of anti-Semitism, according to the leader of France's main secular Jewish organization.

"Just over the past weeks, I have held meetings with the prime minister and the ministers of the interior, education and justice. They have all strongly expressed their opposition to anti-Semitism," Roger Cukierman, president of the CRIF umbrella organization of French Jews, said in a wide-ranging interview with JTA.

However, Jews in France remain concerned even if they are confident in the protection provided by the French state.

"The danger for Jews lies principally with Muslims here who represent around 10 percent of the French population," Cukierman said. "They feel a strong solidarity with the Palestinians, and today, they feel that same solidarity with Iraq."

According to a recent poll, in fact, more than a quarter of French Jews are considering leaving France in the wake of a serious wave of attacks targeting the country's Jewish community.

"The problem is that French Muslims are unable to distinguish between Jews and Israelis. Unfortunately, there's no word in Arabic for 'Israelis,' there is just 'Yahud,'" or Jew, Cukierman said.

The targeting of Jews is part of a wider social malaise in France, he said.

"There has been a lack of integration into French society by many in the Muslim population. While some are already second- or even third-generation French, many Muslims still live in poor suburbs and in difficult conditions," Cukierman said.

"There is a lack of jobs, and some are in a revolutionary mood. They blame many people but especially the Jews — and maybe there is jealousy, too, that Jews have been able to integrate successfully."

Cukierman regretted that there sometimes is a tendency, particularly in the United States, to link the problem of anti-Semitism in France with political differences between the United States and France over the war in Iraq.

"I appreciate the concerns of Americans when they perceive that France is taking sides with Iraq, and I understand that it is terrible for them because of the sacrifices that America made for France in two world wars. They feel frustrated and betrayed, and I fully understand that," he said.

"But they must make a distinction between the Jewish problems in France and the current differences between the U.S. and French governments," he added. "I told U.S. Jewish leaders last year that there is no problem with the French government, even if" French President Jacques "Chirac tends to be pro-Arab. This is a positive government which provides financial assistance to Jewish institutions.

"In 1995, Chirac recognized the responsibility of the French state for what happened in the Shoah, and then there is also one of the largest foundations in France set up by the government for preserving the memory of the Shoah with a budget of \$500 million," Cukierman said.

Although CRIF officially does not have a view on the Iraq war,

Cukierman told JTA that "personally, I support what the U.S. is doing, and most Jews in France are strongly against Saddam Hussein."

Nevertheless, he commented, while American Jewish leaders "have a right to criticize" the policies of France, this should not be allowed to affect relations between the two countries.

"Unfortunately, anti-Semitism is not an isolated problem which only exists in France. It's all over Europe and also in the U.S.," Cukierman said.

In addition, he said he believes that demands by certain American Jews to boycott French products were wrong and counterproductive.

"As a French citizen, I'm against a boycott, and, as a Jewish leader, I can tell you it's never effective," he said.

With regard to the results of a recent poll conducted by a U.S.-based organization that found that many French Jews are fed up with anti-Semitism in France and are thinking of packing their bags, Cukierman said the findings are far removed from CRIF figures.

"I've seen the poll and, frankly, I don't believe it," he said. People said when far-right leader Jean-Marie "Le Pen got 5 percent, they'd leave. Then they said, 'When he gets 10 percent.' Well, now he's got 20 percent, and they're still here."

There has been no denial, however, that French Jews are worried about anti-Semitism, Cukierman said.

"When you see children threatened and insulted, of course you're worried. You hear this negative linkage all the time as well," Cukierman said, referring to amalgams between Jews, Israel, Zionism and Nazis.

"They make this link between Israel and French Jews, but if there is a link then I'm proud of it," he said. "Most Jews in France are strongly in solidarity with Israel. Many have close family there, and we're the only Jewish community that has continued to send tourists to Israel. When I was in Israel recently, they told me that if it weren't for French Jews there would be virtually no tourists."

Israel naturally is interested in French Jews making aliyah, Cukierman said, and "some French Jews follow."

Nevertheless, "the vast majority of French Jews," are staying put because "the government continues to be strong and is prepared to fight anti-Semitism," he said.

Indeed, nobody should be in any doubt that Jews are respected in France and integrated in French society, Cukierman said.

"We are happy here. We have been here for 2,000 years and full citizens since 1791." The medieval scholar "Rashi lived here in 1050 and there was a thriving community in Avignon, 'the Pope's Jews,' in the 14th century," he said. "Napoleon set up the Consistorial system to give the lay community control over the rabbis and a say in the religious life of the community. In 1492, many came to France after the expulsion from Spain, and in the 1600s Jews came to Alsace from Eastern Europe.

He pointed out the long tradition of prominent Jews in France — including five Jewish prime ministers and famous writers such as Marcel Proust — but also noted problems such as the infamous anti-Semitic trial of Capt. Alfred Dreyfus and the collaborationist government of Henri-Philippe Petain in 1940.

"But we should not forget that three-quarters of French Jews survived the Shoah, the biggest proportion in Europe, larger than Holland and Belgium and certainly, Germany and Poland," he said. "And this was because of the people, not the elite. Simple French people helped the Jews escape the Shoah." □