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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Cease-fire imminent?

Yasser Arafat said a decision by Palestinian groups to suspend attacks on Israelis was imminent, but Palestinian terrorist groups denied it.

The rumors of a pending announcement came amid reports that Palestinian groups had agreed on a three-month halt to attacks on Israelis. [Page 1]

Jews mixed on gay ruling

Jews from across the denominational spectrum greeted the Supreme Court's rejection of prohibitions on gay sex with mixed emotions.

Liberal rabbis embraced the high court's reversal Thursday of a 17-year-old decision allowing states to punish acts such as sodomy, ruling that homosexuals have a right to privacy.

"It's one step farther out of Egypt and one step closer to the Promised Land," said Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum of the independent Congregation Beth Simchat Torah of New York, one of the country's largest synagogues for gays and lesbians.

But David Zweibel, executive vice president for government and public affairs for Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox group, blasted the ruling, saying it threatens to topple laws against incest, prostitution and other immoral acts.

"What happened today is the harbinger of challenges of laws that are designed to promote a vision of sexual morality," he said.

Argentina to probe Nazi past

The president of Argentina ordered an investigation into whether the country covered up Nazi links.

Responding to requests from the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the U.S. Congress, the government will investigate the history of Nazis who found refuge in Argentina.

Between 1946 and 1950, about 180 Nazi criminals arrived in Argentina, along with hundreds of people who collaborated with Hitler.

Then-President Juan Domingo Peron sympathized with the fascists, according to Reuters. "We are going to investigate and find these documents because we have the obligation to make them public," said Enrique Oteyza, director of Argentina's National Institute Against Discrimination, which said it will find immigration documents recently reported missing by an investigative journalist.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

In Hamas' chaotic universe, tough to know what a cease-fire means

By Matthew Gutman

GAZA CITY (JTA) — When Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab told reporters earlier this week that his group would be willing to accept a Palestinian state next to Israel, rather than in its place, the revelation shocked some people and filled others with disdain.

A disgusted Mahmoud Al-Zahar, another leader of the terrorist group, responded to reporters' queries by saying that the statement had been fabricated.

Abdel Aziz Rantissi, Hamas' most radical — and most popular — figure simply ignored the comments, sticking to his line that only when Israel withdraws from every inch of the land it conquered in the 1967 Six Day War would Hamas think about even a temporary cease-fire.

The difficulty in figuring out who really speaks for Hamas and who is telling the truth rather than spouting rhetoric was reflected in this week's rumors of a cease-fire that — according to different reports — was already concluded, was imminent, was several days off or was not even under consideration.

By Thursday, it seemed that the terrorist groups indeed would agree to a three-month moratorium on attacks against Israel. Palestinian officials said an announcement was expected ahead of the arrival this weekend of President Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice.

The cease-fire, which will apply to the West Bank and Gaza Strip as well as Israel proper, was negotiated by Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus and Marwan Barghouti, the jailed head of the mainstream Fatah movement's terrorist militia.

Palestinian Authority sources said the draft of an agreement was given to P.A. President Yasser Arafat on Thursday and would be given to P.A. Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas on Friday.

Palestinian legislator Kadoura Fares, who first announced on Wednesday that an agreement had been reached, said that if there were quiet for three months the truce could be extended, The Associated Press reported.

Israel and the United States are demanding that the Palestinian Authority go beyond a cease-fire to actively dismantle the groups and confiscate their weapons, as called for in the "road map" peace plan. Israel fears the groups will take advantage of a cease-fire to rearm for future attacks.

The very concept of a hudna, an Islamic term that often is translated into English as "cease-fire," has connotations of a temporary lull while the conditions of battle favor the opponent. Once conditions change to your favor, the hudna is broken and attacks begin again.

Israeli officials took heart from Wednesday's comments by President Bush, who scoffed at the notion of a cease-fire and said the only solution was to dismantle the terror groups entirely. However, Abbas has said he will not use force against the groups.

In the past, the goal of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations has been simple and overt: a steady, patient struggle to eradicate Israel. But Abu Shanab's interview on Tuesday was in some ways remarkable.

The Palestinians, including Hamas, have to be practical, he told reporters: "Israel's balance of power is much greater than the whole Arab world combined. It is strong enough to make for stability for the rest of our lives, and beyond that as well."

"I envision a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel," he said, adding that

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israeli killed near West Bank

An Israeli was killed in a shooting attack near the West Bank.

A Palestinian youth armed with a pistol walked up to a phone company vehicle Thursday and shot a technician in an Israeli Arab town next to the West Bank. An Israeli security guard chased down the terrorist, shooting and seriously wounding him.

Sharon addresses conversions

People who convert to Judaism in Israel should be granted immediate citizenship, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said.

According to Israel Radio, Sharon rejected the position of Interior Minister Avraham Poraz, who recently said that those who convert in Israel should not be granted immediate citizenship to prevent them from exploiting the process for financial benefit.

Inquiry: Activist death accidental

The bulldozing death of a pro-Palestinian activist in the Gaza Strip was accidental, an Israeli military investigation concluded.

Rachel Corrie, an American member of the International Solidarity Movement, was killed in March while trying to prevent an Israeli bulldozer from demolishing the home of a Palestinian terrorist.

Court rejects Ikrit petition

Israel's High Court rejected a petition by a group of Arab Christians to return to the village they fled following Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

The court accepted the government position that it is unable to meet the request of the residents of Ikrit, a village located near the border with Lebanon. In its response, the government maintained that it can offer the former residents either alternate land or financial compensation. The village was evacuated for security reasons following the war.



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once Israel evacuates all the territories conquered in the 1967 Six-Day War, "we will not need these militias; all the needs for attack will stop. Everything will change into a civil life."

According to Brig. Gen. Sa'eb El Ajez, head of the Palestinian National Security Agency and responsible for the northern half of the Gaza Strip, much of Hamas' popularity stems from its power.

"I truly believe that once we reestablish power here, half of Gaza will shave its beards," Ajez told JTA, referring to the beards that are a sign of Muslim piety and that often indicate support for fundamentalist groups like Hamas.

Ajez related that when he and other PLO leaders arrived from Tunis in 1994, he noticed that many former Hamas supporters shaved their beards. When he asked them why, they said, "Now we don't have to be afraid."

As far as Hamas' internal structure goes, with Yassin ailing and exhausted, Rantissi increasingly is taking the lead.

He bounced back from light injuries suffered in an Israeli assassination attempt two weeks ago, launching his most virulent rhetorical attacks against Israel: Hamas will continue attacking Israel "until the last Jew leaves Palestine," he vowed.

As evidenced by the thousands of posters depicting deceased fighters pasted along Gaza's streets, Hamas supporters love nothing more than a shahid, or martyr. A near-shahid such as Rantissi, who was almost taken out but lived to tell about it, is almost as good. While Abu Shanab and Zahar wield a measure of power in the upper echelons of Hamas, it is Rantissi that has captured the hearts of the Palestinian public.

During his interview Sunday, Abu Shanab also intimated that Rantissi might have crossed an invisible boundary in his political work for Hamas.

"From the beginning we made a strategic decision to completely separate between the political and military wings of this organization," he said. Much of the political leadership is completely unaware of the planning or execution of terror attacks, Abu Shanab claimed.

Until now, Israel seemingly has accepted this distinction, marking leaders of the military wing for assassination while sparing the political wing.

Yet all of this changed earlier this month: Communiques from the Defense Ministry, Foreign Ministry, army and Prime Minister's Office all claimed that Rantissi had crossed the line from political activist to terrorist through his open incitement, encouragement of and support for terrorist attacks.

Once the veil of immunity was lifted, wrote Ha'aretz columnist and satirist Doron Rosenblum, Hamas heads ran to negotiate a cease-fire with Abbas.

Yet Israel is not buying what one official called "fluffy statements," nor the notion that Hamas might emerge from the cease-fire reformed and pacified.

On Tuesday, an army intelligence official told the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Hamas appears to have decided "in principle" to declare the cease-fire, but that the group is interested in "blurring" its terms.

For a large segment of Hamas, this means continuing acts of terror against Israeli civilians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as guerilla attacks on army bases.

On Thursday, for example, even as reports of a cease-fire multiplied, a Palestinian teen-ager walked up to an Israeli telephone repairman in Baka al-Garbiyeh, along the boundary with the West Bank, and shot him dead. Hours later, two Palestinians carrying bombs were shot dead by Israeli security forces near Baka al-Garbiyeh. Two other men, apparently the bombers' handlers, were arrested. Another Israeli was wounded in a shooting attack on a West Bank settlement Thursday evening.

The attacks reflected Israeli officials' fear that despite any cease-fire, the Palestinians will keep up a "trickle" of terrorism that the international community does not consider grave enough to stop the road map, and Israel will be pressured not to respond.

In addition, Hamas continues to accumulate power on the Palestinian street. The director of the P.A.'s Ministry for Local Government in Beit Hanoun, Abdul Rahman El Masri, believes that much of the popularity — which spiked following the attempted assassination of Rantissi — stems from Hamas' image as a group "that actually does something. They act. And the people respect it, thinking they are doing something to help Palestinians get their rights." □

JEWISH WORLD

House backs Israel

The U.S. House of Representatives supported Israel's retaliation for Palestinian terrorist attacks.

A nonbinding House resolution, passed Wednesday, condemned attacks on Israel since a June 4 summit in Jordan among President Bush, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas.

It stated that violence in the region would end only when the Palestinians cease attacking Israel.

The House also unanimously passed a resolution Wednesday expressing concern about growing anti-Semitism around the world, urging the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to aggressively prosecute anti-Semitic actions and increase education on the topic.

Europe rejects 'right of return'

The Council of Europe passed a resolution urging that many Palestinian refugees be resettled outside Israel. The resolution, which was passed Wednesday at the group's Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg, France, stated that the question of refugees "should not be delayed until the political settlement of the Middle East conflict."

An Arab-led initiative to demand a "right of return" for Palestinian refugees to Israel was rejected, said the secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress, Avi Beker, who added that he was "encouraged by the pragmatic attitudes of the Council of Europe."

Reform blasts terror swoop

Tougher American police measures against terrorism threaten civil rights, the leading U.S. Reform synagogue group said.

The 270-member board of trustees of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations unanimously backed a resolution Wednesday criticizing the Bush administration for endangering constitutional rights to privacy and due process. The "investigation, prevention and prosecution of terrorism by law enforcement agencies" must "be conducted in ways that are consistent with fundamental principles of our justice system and Constitution," the UAHC board said.

Tax credits for Jewish education

Jewish groups in Canada are applauding an Ontario government ruling that will give tax credits to children enrolled in Jewish day schools. The credit for children enrolled in private schools will give parents up to \$3,500 a year.

The credit "goes a long way toward addressing" the issue of the high cost of day school education, said Rabbi Yisroel Janowski, founding and outgoing president of the Ontario Association of Jewish Day Schools.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Russian Jews open their pockets for fund for terror victims in Israel

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A Russian Jewish group is trying to send two messages with a fund-raising initiative to benefit Israeli survivors of terrorist attacks.

The primary goal of the campaign, launched a month ago, is to raise money to help young Russian Israelis who have suffered injuries and psychological trauma in Palestinian terrorist attacks.

The first beneficiaries are expected to receive their checks in July.

But campaign officials say that no less important is the campaign's second goal: to give ordinary Russian Jews a chance to contribute to an important Jewish cause.

The initiative is a "pioneering venture, and therefore we don't have any target figure" for the campaign yet, said Motya Chlenov, program coordinator and director of the Moscow office of the World Congress of Russian Jewry, the organization that started the campaign.

During the last decade of post-Communist Jewish revival, Russian Jewish leaders generally have focused their fund-raising activities on large donors able to give significant sums.

The new campaign seeks to break away from this pattern. Campaign officials say they believe that Russia's improved economy gives hope for a flow of small donations from a large number of people.

The initiative seeks to reach out to those who are able to give the ruble equivalent of anything from \$3 to \$100.

"We have come to the conclusion that our Jews have reached that point at which they can become donors" for various Jewish causes, said the 28-year-old Chlenov, sitting in the small one-room office of the WCRJ, which also has offices in New York, Jerusalem and Berlin.

Even if some places in Russia are not enjoying an economic upswing, at least the Jews in Moscow — the nation's largest Jewish community, estimated at anywhere from 100,000 to 250,000 members — have begun to approach Western standards of living.

"If someone can afford a cell phone, a once-a-year vacation abroad and a once-a-week outing at a Moscow restaurant or a club, then this package can be complemented with participation in a charity," Chlenov said.

By local standards, the campaign's first results have been impressive. Over just a few weeks, it raised about \$25,000 from more than 1,000 individuals in Moscow.

No figure for donations from outside of Moscow is available yet, as inter-city bank transfers may take significantly longer in Russia than in the West.

Nearly 30,000 brochures explaining the campaign's objectives were mailed to Moscow subscribers of *Evreyskoe Slovo*, or the Jewish Word, Russia's largest-circulation, Jewish-interest weekly newspaper.

The campaign will reach its maximum effect if we attain "an absolute transparency and precision guidance" of the aid, said Leonid Roshal, a well-known pediatrician and advocate of children's causes around the world.

The WCRJ sits on the project's board, which will oversee distribution of the funds. The campaign currently is holding consultations with social workers on the ground in Israel to determine the size of the recipient pool.

A 40-year-old Moscow doctor who gave his name as Georgiy donated \$400 — and wanted half the sum to go to the family of Kiril Shremko, a Russian-born security guard killed recently while stopping a suicide bomber at a mall in the northern Israeli city of Afula.

Chlenov said the average donation is much smaller — about \$10. Contributors can earmark their donations, but few do.

Eleonora Furmanova, 76, a former journalist, said she also helped because of her Holocaust-era experience.

"There were many among my family and friends who died in the Holocaust," she said. "I felt I should help those who lived through terrible things in their lives." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Memorial project in Poland sparks a lawsuit from Holocaust survivor

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — A concentration camp survivor is suing the American Jewish Committee to block part of a memorial the group is building at one of the most lethal Nazi death camps.

Norman Salsitz of Livingston, N.J., sued the AJCommittee in U.S. District Court in Washington on Monday. He is claiming that a \$4 million memorial the group is building to honor the estimated 600,000 victims of Belzec, in southeastern Poland, will disturb the remains of Jews that the Nazis burned, ground up and mixed into the camp's soil in a ghastly coverup effort.

The memorial is being co-sponsored by the Polish government. "What is a monument? A remembrance of a terrible thing," said Salsitz, 83. "You don't remember by stepping in the blood and the bones and the ashes."

At the heart of the battle is a 12-foot-wide pathway 30 feet below ground, envisioned by the memorial's Polish designers as an interstice running hundreds of feet through the camp "like a crack in the earth."

That pathway, which opponents call a "trench," has become the focus of a struggle that activist Rabbi Avi Weiss has launched against the AJCommittee and top rabbis from Europe and Israel.

It has sparked charges of Jewish desecration and cast shadows that reach even to Ground Zero in New York and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington.

An AJCommittee official denies the pathway will hurt Jewish remains, and several leading rabbis agree. Rabbi Andrew Baker, the AJCommittee's director of international affairs, who is overseeing the project, called the memorial a "powerful artistic statement that conveys a sense of what took place there."

Salsitz lost 23 relatives, including his mother and five sisters, in Belzec. The Nazis used carbon monoxide to kill prisoners at the camp and buried them in 33 mass graves between March and December 1942.

The next year the Nazis brought in a grinder and bulldozers, unearthed the corpses, burned and crushed them, then buried most of the residue.

By war's end, only a handful of inmates had survived Belzec, one of the most efficient of six Nazi death factories among 3,300 concentration camps.

Now a retired developer and author of five Holocaust books, Salsitz charges that the pathway will disturb the human fragments that remain in the camp, scattered across the site by wind and rain and buried in its soil.

Digging the pathway would require earth-moving equipment that is certain to disturb the remains of Jews, said Steve Lieberman, an attorney familiar with the case.

"Every square inch of that soil is permeated with body parts and is suffused with bone shards and ash," he said.

Enter Weiss, president of Coalition for Jewish Concerns-Amcha. Weiss, who led the fight against a convent at Auschwitz, has waged a year-long public campaign against the AJCommittee's plans, with op-ed columns in the Jerusalem Post and Forward and a full-page ad in the Forward addressed to the AJCommittee's executive vice president, David Harris.

Lieberman, who is Weiss' attorney, knew of Salsitz and told

him of the museum plans. Salsitz ultimately decided to sue.

Salsitz simply wants the pathway shifted outside the camp's ground, Lieberman said — though the suit also seeks \$75,000 in damages to meet the standards for federal court filings.

"We're seeing a terrible desecration taking place, the worst in Shoah memory," Weiss said. "It's a Vietnam-type memorial, and that disturbs me because the Shoah should have its own spiritual power."

The project's tortuous history also troubles him. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington launched the Belzec project in the early 1990s to remember camp victims. At the time the site was decaying, with only a Soviet-era memorial.

"Belzec was in awful condition," said Arthur Berger, a spokesman for the Washington museum.

Polish authorities conducted test boring at the camp in 1998 in an effort to map out a grid around the mass graves that would enable construction to begin without disturbing Jewish remains.

But the test boring "went into human remains," Weiss said. The lawsuit describes drills hitting bodies that have turned to wax, as well as bones and ash.

The grisly results were the opposite of what the museum wanted. "The whole purpose was to preserve, protect and memorialize the Jews who were murdered there," Berger said.

The Holocaust museum had raised half the money for the project — with the Polish government kicking in the rest — but decided to pull out because it felt the project didn't reflect the museum's mission to memorialize the Holocaust in the United States, Berger said. That's when the AJCommittee stepped in — and became Weiss' target.

Baker said he had been willing to meet with Weiss, but Weiss insisted on meeting with Harris, the AJCommittee's leader.

Harris wanted Baker to handle such meetings since Baker has led the project, he said.

Weiss's public campaign against the memorial sparked four responses to the AJCommittee, Baker said — two of them letters from sisters who escaped from a train on its way to Belzec, and who donated \$18,000 after learning more about the project from AJCommittee officials.

Baker said the pathway will not hurt Jewish remains.

"There is a fissure through an area in which it was determined there were no mass graves," he said. But the pathway will allow people to visit the camp in a "controlled" manner and keep them off the other grounds.

The soil excavated from the pathway will be placed atop the camp's mass graves some distance away, covered with an impermeable material and topped with gravel to contain any possible remains, AJCommittee officials said.

Along the way, the AJCommittee secured the approval of Israel's then-Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, as well as the London-based Committee for the Protection of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, headed by Rabbi Elyakim Schlesinger, an authority on Jewish law and burial issues.

In a May letter, the cemeteries panel said there was a "remote concern" that remains could be unearthed, but said the monument amounts to a "tikkun gadol," or great improvement, to the site.

Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the chief rabbi of Warsaw and Lodz, also defends the work.

Schudrich, who told JTA he has volunteered to aid the project, maintained that he has checked the work on many visits to the camp. □