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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Abbas to meet Jewish leaders

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas will meet U.S. Jewish leaders.

Invitations for Thursday's meeting in Washington, which will be attended by a wide variety of Jewish organizations, are being organized by the Israel Policy Forum and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, sources said.

Leaders of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations will not attend the meeting because of a previous commitment in New York, executive vice chairman Malcolm Hoenlein said.

U.S. pushes Iraq to accept Israel

Colin Powell said he hopes a new Iraqi government will make "peace with some of its neighbors," including Israel.

Speaking Wednesday in Washington after a meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, the U.S. secretary of state said he hopes the government being formed in Iraq will understand that it should live in peace with its neighbors.

Shalom: Deaths may spark peace

The killing of Saddam Hussein's sons might open the way for Arab-Israeli rapprochement, Israel's foreign minister said.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday in Washington, Silvan Shalom said he had told U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney that the killing of Uday and Qusay Hussein on Tuesday was "a happy day for America's friends and a sad day for its enemies. I hope that moderate leaders in the Arab world would now be more open and willing to make peace with Israel."

Crown Heights activist killed

A New York City Council member who worked to improve black-Jewish ties was killed in a shooting at New York City Hall. An unknown gunman opened fire in the City Council chambers Wednesday, striking James Davis twice in the chest.

Davis, 41, an African American and former police officer, had held an annual memorial for a black boy and a Jewish theology student killed in 1991 in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood. "As one who knows the work of James Davis, I know what a special soul he is," said Rabbi Avi Weiss, national president of Amcha Coalition for Jewish Concerns.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Is Gaza a simmering cauldron — or is it a model of coexistence?

By Matthew Gutman

GAZA CITY (JTA) — The reality of the Gaza Strip, it appears, is in the eye of the beholder.

Some officers of the Israel Defense Forces and the Palestinian Authority security organizations think it's a simmering cauldron bound, sooner or later, to boil over.

Others call it a model of how Israelis and Palestinians can live adjacent but separate lives.

While it's the center of a burgeoning cottage industry of arms building and smuggling, Gaza has produced no suicide bombers, Israeli security sources say — primarily because a fence around the area prevents bombers from crossing into Israel.

For its part, the Palestinian Authority is searching wildly for ways to include rejectionist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad — which are strongest in the Gaza Strip — without having to confront them in armed clashes.

In the meantime, Israel bites its nails while it waits for the end of the three-month hudna, or cease-fire, that the main Palestinian terrorist groups have declared. The cease-fire is due to expire in late September — at which time, as one IDF officer put it, "the real show begins."

Hamas reportedly is using the cover of the cease-fire to build an arsenal of 1,000 Kassam rockets that can fly a greater distance and carry a warhead, a senior IDF officer told JTA.

That has sparked concern that, should hostilities resume, "the opening of the next phase in the conflict will be much more violent," an IDF brigade commander in Gaza said.

The materials to assemble the rockets are smuggled under the Egyptian border through tunnels underneath Rafah, the major city in the southern Gaza strip.

From there, the senior IDF officer said, the weapons and bomb components are driven north along Tancher road — the strip's main north-south axis, which recently was reopened to Palestinian traffic — to Khan Yunis or Gaza City.

There, the senior officer said, Hamas is working on a new version of the Kassam that could reach about 10 to 12 miles, putting cities like Ashkelon and Netivot within range.

Some of the tunnels — whose "engineers" earn a handsome profit from material smuggled under the border — are believed to lie as much as 80 yards underground.

"Unfortunately, their digging of tunnels is much faster than our ability to stop it," the senior officer said.

Israel demands that the Palestinian Authority disarm the terrorist groups, destroy the Kassam lathes and arrest militants, as called for under the "road map" peace plan. For years it has said that the P.A. security forces are strong enough to do the job.

That perception increasingly is being challenged.

Asked whether the balance of weapons in the Gaza Strip tilts towards the rejectionist groups or the Palestinian Authority, an IDF brigade commander hesitated for a moment, then noted that — given the accelerated weapons smuggling believed to be underway during the cease-fire — the rejectionist groups might well achieve the upper hand.

"There have been so many arms smuggled in. We can tell by the sheer number that we capture that there must be much more that we don't" capture, he said. "In my view,

MIDEAST FOCUS

Committee approves releases

An Israeli ministerial committee authorized the release of 530 Palestinian prisoners, including members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

The committee made the decision based on a list drawn up by the Shin Bet security service, but referred the release of the Hamas and Islamic Jihad men to the government for further debate, reports said.

Some 400 of the prisoners are to be freed in coming days, including security prisoners, those convicted of criminal offenses and those held for being in Israel without proper permits.

In reaction, a senior Hamas official said Israel would pay a price if it does not release Hamas members during the three-month cease-fire the terrorist groups have declared.

Would-be bombers arrested

The Israeli army arrested two Palestinians suspected of planning to carry out a suicide attack. The two Islamic Jihad members were detained near Jenin on Tuesday night.

Meanwhile, police on Wednesday appealed to the public for help in locating a missing Israeli soldier.

Mordechai case reopened

Israel's Supreme Court agreed to reexamine evidence in a sexual assault conviction against former Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai.

Mordechai asked the court to reopen the case after one of his accusers said that, in retrospect, she did not consider Mordechai's actions sexual harassment, the daily Ha'aretz reported.

The court ordered the Tel Aviv District Court to determine whether the letter represents a retraction of the accusation, which would enable Mordechai to appeal the conviction.

It would not affect Mordechai's conviction on a second assault charge involving a different woman.



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there are simply more weapons in the hands of the rejectionist groups than the P.A."

For months, Israeli security sources have said that the Palestinian Authority has some 20,000 security personnel in the Gaza Strip alone.

"They are armed, have enough jeeps and cars, enough ammunition and enough courts to arrest those men and take them to court," the senior army officer said.

In private, however, IDF officials quote figures closer to those given by Palestinian security chiefs — perhaps 12,000 men under arms. Many of them are not nearly as motivated as their counterparts in Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al Aksa Brigades.

Pressed by reporters, the IDF brigade level commander — who works closely with his Palestinian counterparts in the field — admitted that, in an all-out battle, the Palestinian Authority might lose to the terrorist groups.

"The P.A. is aware of this," he said, "and so the challenge for the Palestinians is to disarm the militant groups peacefully. The P.A. believes that it can only resolve" the issue "by including Hamas in government."

The P.A.'s National Security Service, or NSS, the apparatus tasked with disarming Hamas and Islamic Jihad, is aware of the challenge.

"It's impossible to disarm Hamas," said Brig. Gen. Sa'eb Ajez of the NSS. "We can understand that they don't want a solution" to the conflict with Israel, "but our chronic weakness is the question of how to disarm or arrest them, especially in the past two years."

Yet Ajez notes what he calls some positive developments: The deal that P.A. Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas negotiated with Hamas and Jihad stipulated that the Palestinian Authority would not actively hunt militants, but would work to prevent attacks.

"More than that, there is little we can do," Ajez said.

At least, the cease-fire has brought some respite for Palestinian motorists who now are able to travel on the Tancher road without being detained for hours at checkpoints, Ajez said. More farmers now can reach their fields, though they still fear being mistaken for militants, Ajez noted.

The most startling development is occurring in towns next to Gaza's border with Israel: In Rafah last week, Ajez said, local residents pummeled terrorists who were attempting to set up a mortar to fire into Israel. Mortar attacks often bring an Israeli military response against the launching area.

For now, the Israeli brigade commander says, a tenuous coexistence reigns in the strip.

Motioning toward the traffic flow along the Tancher road at the Katif junction, he called it "a great example of how to implement separation."

Israeli settlers travel on a bridge that bypasses the road, reducing friction between settlers and Palestinians almost to nothing.

The Gaza Strip is a particularly good place to observe "separation at work," the brigade commander said. The 211-square-mile area has a "clearly demarcated and operating security fence. This allows all efforts to be made by both sides to prevent terrorists from leaving the strip."

A definitive separation allows for communication and, therefore, cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security officers along the separation fence, where Palestinian and Israeli outposts watch for potential infiltrators.

Asked how he approaches the next few months, the officer said, "Well, I suppose with cautious optimism." □

U.S. legislators press Belarus

WASHINGTON (JTA) — More than 20 U.S. lawmakers have called on Belarus to stop the expansion of a soccer stadium built on top of a Jewish cemetery.

In a letter written to Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, the lawmakers said that "any disturbance of the cemetery, especially to remains and tombstones, is considered an act of desecration of the most severe gravity."

The letter, penned by Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.), says work on the Neman Stadium in Grodno already has destroyed at least hundreds of graves, and that a halt to excavation would allow time to find a compromise solution. □

JEWISH WORLD

North Americans move to Israel

Some 350 North American immigrants arrived in Israel.

The planeload that arrived Wednesday represents the second mass immigration to Israel from North America in the past few weeks.

Federation center issues bonds

The United Jewish Communities launched a program to help federations and affiliated Jewish agencies issue bonds more easily.

The UJC, the umbrella organization for 156 Jewish federations across North America, launched the National Jewish Federation Bond Program, which will help streamline the bureaucratic process required to issue bonds and raise money for capital projects.

The Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago was the first federation to take advantage of the program, borrowing nearly \$50 million for capital improvements and debt refinancing.

Federations could save an estimated \$10 million annually by issuing bonds via the UJC program, according to program manager Jill Greer.

Charity ban lifted

A German court suspended a ban on a charity linked to Hamas.

The court said that the Al-Aqsa Foundation's work does not harm German security, and said the organization could resume its work in Germany pending a final ruling.

Several countries have recently banned the foundation as part of the worldwide crackdown on terrorism.

Canadian jury acquits IDF soldier

A Toronto jury found an Israeli soldier not guilty of manslaughter in the 1999 beating death of a Canadian teenager.

Daniel Weiz, 22, was acquitted in the killing of Matti Baranovski, 15, but Weiz's two fellow defendants were found guilty.

The verdict was announced late Wednesday afternoon after seven days of deliberation and a trial that lasted four months.

Concentration camp door theft

Polish police are looking for a German tourist who was arrested after he tried to steal a crematorium door from a concentration camp, but then fled.

The 60-year-old man said he thought the door at the Stutthof camp was scrap metal.

He was charged with theft and released a few weeks ago, but he failed to show up for further questioning this week. The Associated Press reported this week.

U.S. Senate postpones vote on controversial Mideast scholar

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON, July 23 (JTA) — The battle over the nomination of a controversial Middle East scholar for the U.S. Institute of Peace is intensifying.

A U.S. Senate committee postponed a vote on Daniel Pipes' nomination on Wednesday because a quorum was not present.

But several Democrats on the Senate's Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee blasted the selection of Pipes and criticized his writings on Muslims and Islam. "This is an individual who is a lightning rod," Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) said in a lengthy, impassioned address. "This is not the person who ought to be on the U.S. Institute of Peace."

Pipes, an author and lecturer who has spoken about the threat of Muslim fundamentalism, was nominated by the White House in April to sit on the board of the government-funded, nonpartisan think tank that promotes peaceful resolutions to international conflicts. Pipes, the director of the Philadelphia-based Middle East Forum think tank, did not attend the hearing and told JTA on Wednesday that he could not discuss the nomination.

Pipes' nomination has been vehemently opposed by Arab groups and backed by some prominent Jewish groups, including the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby, and the American Jewish Committee.

Several Democrats on the committee who are opposed to the nomination asked for a hearing on Pipes before a vote is called, saying more discussion is needed.

Sen. John Warner (R-Va.) said he was unsure how he would vote on the nomination, leading to speculation that Democrats could garner enough support to kill Pipes' nomination before it reaches the full Senate.

Only one lawmaker of the half dozen who remained for the discussion about Pipes at Wednesday's meeting, Sen. John Ensign (R-Nev.), spoke in favor of Pipes.

He called Pipes' positions "realities" and said his writing does not mean he can not participate in the diplomatic process. Pipes is being publicly supported by some Jewish groups, but there was no visibly pro-Pipes contingent attending the hearings.

The AJCommittee sent a letter to Bush in April, praising the appointment.

"You have selected an eminently qualified candidate with broad knowledge of the threats posed by extremist, anti-American interpretations of Islam — and with the wisdom not to confuse the militants who make up that movement with the vast body of decent, moderate adherents of a proud and vibrant faith," said the letter, signed by the organization's president, Harold Tanner, and executive director, David Harris.

After Wednesday's Senate meeting, Harris urged quick confirmation.

"Rejecting this nomination would have a chilling effect on the important political discourse about the threat of Islamic radicalism," Harris said.

"Through his careful research and insightful analysis, Dr. Pipes has for years played a crucial role in public discourse, alerting the American public to the dangers posed by extremist Islamism in this country and abroad. After Sept. 11, 2001, it became clear that Dr. Pipes' warnings over the years had been remarkably prescient."

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby, also supports the nomination and is "making sure the appropriate people know about it," spokeswoman Rebecca Dinar said.

The Arab American community, in contrast, has fiercely opposed Pipes' nomination, and Arab leaders, several of whom attended the committee meeting, say thousands of people called lawmakers Monday in a national call-day to express their opposition.

Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) said he believed that Pipes' written description of Muslim immigrants as "brown-skinned peoples cooking strange foods and not exactly maintaining Germanic standards of hygiene" was contrary to the institute's mission. Kennedy is the ranking Democrat on the committee known as HELP.

"The views of this nominee are longstanding, well known, and decidedly one-sided," he said. "And they are not the words of one committed to bridging differences and bringing peace." □

With new plaintiff, fight against Belzec memorial flares up again

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — The struggle over a \$4 million Holocaust memorial at the notorious Belzec death camp in Poland is flaring anew.

Activist Rabbi Avi Weiss and Rosa Sacharin, of Glasgow, are suing the American Jewish Committee, which is helping to finance the project, to block construction of a path through the Polish camp.

"This is an effort to stop the continued construction of a 600-foot long, 30-foot-deep trench through a graveyard of murdered Jews," said the plaintiffs' attorney, Steven Lieberman.

But the executive director of the AJCommittee, David Harris, derided the lawsuit as "frivolous."

"We are confident the New York court will dismiss this case simply because it is completely without merit," he said.

The Nazis gassed to death an estimated 600,000 Jews at Belzec in southeastern Poland during World War II, then burned and ground up many bodies and buried the remains, hoping to hide evidence of mass murder. Only a few people are believed to have survived the camp.

Critics of the memorial say the construction will unearth the buried ash and bone of the camp's victims.

The AJCommittee denies that, insisting that the planned walkway will prevent pedestrians from roaming the grounds as they've done for years.

The July 18 suit seeking an injunction against the AJCommittee was filed in the Supreme Court of the state of New York.

The lawsuit is just the latest chapter in Weiss's campaign to block the path through the camp, where he lost seven relatives in the Holocaust.

For more than a year Weiss waged a media campaign against the memorial. Last month, Holocaust survivor Norman Salsitz, 83, of Livingston, N.J., sued the AJCommittee in U.S. District Court in Washington, echoing many of Weiss' arguments.

Weiss's group, AMCHA-The Coalition for Jewish Concerns, sent out press releases touting the lawsuit. However, Salsitz, who lost 23 relatives at Belzec, withdrew his complaint earlier this month, saying his wife was ill and he could not proceed with the suit.

Salsitz insists he was acting on his own throughout the affair.

Asked how Sacharin, resident of Glasgow, got involved in the fight over the memorial, Lieberman said she contacted AMCHA after visiting Belzec. When pressed, he said that he had called Sacharin but couldn't remember who had provided her contact information.

Sacharin believes her brother perished in Belzec, the lawsuit states.

The only documentation she has about her brother's death is a 1942 Red Cross letter stating that he was living in the Polish town of Rzeszow, from which many Jews were believed to have been deported to Belzec, the suit states.

Sacharin will not speak publicly about the lawsuit, Lieberman said.

The AJCommittee assumed co-sponsorship of the memorial with the government of Poland last year after the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington ran the project for about a decade.

Dozens of excavations in Belzec between 1997 and 1999 pinpointed the existence of 33 mass graves, allowing construction on the memorial to proceed while avoiding Jewish remains, AJCommittee officials say.

Any remains that do turn up will be buried in the mass graves and sealed, the officials say. Rabbinic authorities have approved of the AJCommittee's plans.

The museum will revive a long-neglected site and mark the first time in 60 years an effort has been made to memorialize Belzec, they add.

"For decades the site has been totally and tragically neglected," said Harris, who added he visited the camp five years ago to find fields strewn with litter.

"This memorial will finally explain the full story of Belzec, pay tribute to the victims, provide a permanent protection for the mass graves, and serve as a reminder that we should never forget." □

Hungarian Jewish leader vows to renew community life or resign

By Agnes Bohm

BUDAPEST (JTA) — The new leader of Hungary's Jewish community is putting his money where his mouth is.

If his goals of strengthening Jewish life in Hungary and improving relations with foreign Jewish groups aren't met within a year, Andras Heisler says he'll step down.

"I'd like to see more people in the synagogues and not only during High Holidays," said Heisler, the new president of the Federation of the Hungarian Jewish Communities.

The son of Holocaust survivors, Heisler, 48, is an engineer by profession who became a successful entrepreneur. He is married to a psychologist, and has two sons.

He is not a newcomer to the community's leadership: His 85-year-old father is the president of the famous Dohany Synagogue's congregation, and Heisler, a Conservative Jew, himself has been part of the Jewish leadership for 10 years.

Heisler says the community leadership is now engaged in talks with the government to reach a new agreement on the issue of compensating for confiscated and/or nationalized public Jewish property.

Heisler acknowledged that the Hungarian authorities have agreed to pay more in compensation to the surviving family members for each victim deported from Hungary and killed during the Holocaust.

The new sum is 10 times higher than the one agreed to in a 1997 law.

"The authorities will start to pay the increased restitution sum from this summer on," Heisler told JTA.

Heisler also stressed his support for Jewish cultural life in Budapest.

The Jewish Summer Festival will take place in the Hungarian capital in August, with several local and international actors.

"These contacts are very important for our community. They improve our international ties and present Jewish culture to the non-Jewish audience here as well, and strengthen our Jewish identity."

After all, he said smilingly, "I would like to see my sons marry Jewish girls." □