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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S. deducts loan guarantees

The United States deducted \$289.5 million from loan guarantees to Israel, citing spending on West Bank settlements. The Israeli Embassy in Washington said that the amount announced Tuesday came from an Israeli proposal.

"Israel understands that the U.S. should not finance directly, or indirectly, activities with which it does not agree and, therefore, suggested that the U.S. deduct the agreed sum of \$289.5 million dollars from the \$3 billion in loan guarantees currently available," a statement from the embassy said. The deduction does not address U.S. concerns about the route of Israel's security fence, since the deduction deals only with activity "to date," while some of the most controversial parts of the fence have yet to be built.

Burns to Middle East

The top U.S. envoy to the Middle East is returning to the region to press Israel and the Palestinians to recommit to the "road map" peace plan. William Burns will travel to the region on Friday, his first visit since August, State Department officials said. He will meet with officials in Jerusalem and Ramallah.

Lawmakers want Bush off fence

Eight lawmakers are calling on President Bush not to pressure Israel on the security fence.

In a letter to the president, Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) and the other legislators said the pressure placed on Israel is misdirected and that the fence is based on Israel's need to prevent Palestinian terrorism. "Perhaps demanding meaningful changes from the Palestinians would be more productive than criticizing the Israelis for protecting themselves," the letter said.

Jews reject Medicare bill

Several Jewish groups are speaking out against the Medicare bill and its prescription-drug benefit for seniors.

Jewish groups — including B'nai B'rith International, Hadassah and the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism — say the bill has major flaws, including gaps in coverage and minimal protection for low-income seniors. The bill passed Congress on Tuesday and is expected to be signed by President Bush within a week.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sharon talks of 'unilateral steps,' but the meaning is up for debate

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After several years in office that have been characterized by ongoing violence and diplomatic stalemate, Ariel Sharon says he is determined to press ahead with new peace moves that could include "painful concessions" to the Palestinians.

The prime minister's remarks last week elicited scathing criticism from within his own Likud Party. But opposition leaders and senior Israeli pundits remain skeptical. Sharon has made similar bombastic announcements before, they say, but never delivered.

Sharon confidants have been dropping broad hints that the prime minister's grand plan includes dismantling some Jewish settlements to pave the way for the establishment of a mini-Palestinian state by next summer. Even if peace talks with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei's new government fail, aides say that Sharon — for profound strategic reasons — intends to carry out a unilateral withdrawal from some Palestinian territories to create a clear line of separation between Israelis and Palestinians.

The National Religious Party and the far-right National Union bloc are threatening to bolt the coalition if Sharon goes ahead, while leaders of the opposition Labor Party say that if Sharon is serious they'll be ready to join his government.

It all started with one enigmatic sentence. "I don't rule out unilateral steps," Sharon declared emphatically — but without elaboration — at an exporters' conference in Tel Aviv on Nov. 20.

That remark sparked a flurry of exegesis. One explanation was that the prime minister meant Israeli gestures to help bolster Qurei's position on the Palestinian street; another was the more radical notion of unilateral withdrawal if negotiations with Qurei failed.

Both ideas stung Likud politicians, who called a Knesset party meeting on Monday and demanded that Sharon explain himself. But the prime minister declined to retract his hints or spell out, in any detail, what he meant.

Sharon refused to deny reports that he intended to evacuate some settlements, and said he had spoken about "painful concessions" so that "people wouldn't wake up one day and say they didn't know."

"It is obvious," Sharon continued, "that ultimately we will not be in all the places we are in now."

As for the unilateral steps, he said he meant steps in "our favor" — in other words, "moves in which the Palestinians would get less than they could have got through negotiation."

Sharon also warned the Palestinians that Israeli patience was not endless, and that if the Palestinians did not work seriously toward a peace deal now, they should not expect to find the same offers still on the table in the future.

Critics within the Likud charged that unilateral moves meant giving in to terror, contradicting the party's official policy.

Despite the vehemence of the Likud clash, pundits remained unconvinced.

Ha'aretz's Yossi Verter argued that the party simply was playing the role assigned to it by Sharon's spin doctors, making Sharon look like a moderate.

It was, Verter wrote, a "shop-worn ritual" in which "Sharon goes to the Likud

MIDEAST FOCUS

A new peace plan

Right wingers in Israel are drafting an initiative aimed at countering other peace plans.

Backed by settler leaders and hawkish members of the Likud Party, the plan would create a binational state that would have a Jewish prime minister and, possibly, a Palestinian deputy prime minister. The plan would prevent a separate Palestinian state and dismantle the Palestinian Authority.

To prevent a Palestinian parliamentary majority, Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would be divided into cantons, whose representation would not necessarily be determined according to population.

The plan comes as two left-wing initiatives are being circulated and amid reports that Israel's prime minister may offer to evacuate some settlements.

Israel releases 10 Jordanians

Israel released 10 Jordanian prisoners in a gesture to mark the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. But a Jordanian official was quoted as saying the gesture was insufficient because Israel previously had agreed to release more prisoners. Israeli officials said none of the 10 released Tuesday were involved in killing Israelis.

Katsav clarifies religion remarks

Israeli President Moshe Katsav retracted comments that nonreligious people are "secular babies." But Katsav reiterated Monday that people raised outside of religion are less mature than religious people because they haven't known both ways of life.

Israeli missiles to go to India

An Israeli firm is expected to sign a \$100 million deal to sell missiles to India. The SS Barak missiles sold by Israel Aircraft Industries will protect Indian warships. The deal would be the third between the two parties.



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Knesset faction, which is comprised mainly of rightists, some ideological, some opportunistic. They jump all over him. He bangs on the table and reminds them that they owe their jobs to him, and once again earns the media's plaudits. And all without saying a single word in his own voice that would commit him to evacuating settlements."

But others say three factors are spurring Sharon to try to break the current impasse: U.S. pressure, grass-roots peace initiatives that are invigorating the Israeli opposition, and the so-called demographic problem — the fact that, within a few years, Israeli Arabs and Palestinians will outnumber Jews in the area between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea.

Now that Qurei is in place, the United States is stepping up pressure on Sharon. Bush's top Middle East adviser met with Sharon last week in Rome to discuss differences between Israel and the United States over the route of the planned security barrier and the dismantling of settlement outposts. Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, picked up the same themes in discussions Tuesday in Washington with Dov Weisglass, Sharon's top adviser.

In addition, William Burns, the top U.S. envoy to the region, is to meet with leaders in Jerusalem and Ramallah this weekend — his first visit since August — showing Bush's renewed commitment to peace making there.

So what does Sharon really have in mind? Is it all spin, or does Sharon really mean to act?

According to his aides, who insist that Sharon is serious, the prime minister has a two-tiered plan. The overall aim is to reach a clear division between Israel and a mini-Palestinian state by the summer.

Plan A is to do so through negotiations based on the "road map" peace plan. Plan B is to do so unilaterally if the road map negotiations fail.

Analysts say the demographic bogeyman should not be underestimated, as Jews soon could constitute a minority in the area including Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Then, instead of a two-state solution in which the states of Israel and Palestine coexist side by side, the Arabs may well demand a single "Greater Palestine" comprised of Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — with an Arab majority. That would mean the end of Israel as a Jewish state.

To preempt this situation, people close to Sharon for the first time are talking in terms of unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In mid-November interviews with Ha'aretz and Israel Radio, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert gave the first inkling of the new thinking.

Olmert, one of the ministers closest to Sharon, declared that if the road map negotiations fail — as he expects — "Israel will have the right to take unilateral actions to separate from the Palestinians through a fence or other measures."

To counter the demographic problem, he said, the line between Israel and the Palestinian areas should be drawn in such a way as to include the maximum number of Jews and a minimum number of Palestinians.

Sharon, too, apparently is concerned that failure to reach a two-state solution could expose Israel to demands for a binational state. That, his aides say, is partly why he is so intent on separating from the Palestinians, with or without agreement, by next summer.

All this, too, could be spin. But if Sharon really is serious, and if negotiations with the Palestinians fail, the big question will be where Sharon draws the dividing line between the two peoples.

Will it be a line that entails dismantling settlements and keeps open future chances for a two-state deal, as many on the right fear? Or does Sharon plan to leave the Palestinians with 50 percent or less of the West Bank, undermining prospects for a future agreement, as many on the left fear?

The pundits suggest a third option, that Sharon is merely playing for time, using feints and dodges to impress the Americans and the Israeli public, with no intention of making meaningful political moves.

As usual in the Middle East, what the future holds is anyone's guess. □

(Leslie Susser is the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report. JTA's Washington bureau chief, Ron Kampeas, contributed to this story.)

JEWISH WORLD

Morocco jails nine

Morocco jailed nine people in connection with the murder of a Jewish lumber merchant. Police believe the Sept. 11 murder of Albert Rebibo in Casablanca was committed by an Islamist cell.

One man, an ex-policeman, was sentenced to 20 years, the others for between two and 15 years, Reuters reported. None of those jailed is believed to have been among the gunmen, Moroccan officials said.

Jewish GI is Rhodes Scholar

One of the 32 Rhodes Scholars for 2004 is a Jewish GI facing deployment to Iraq.

Second Lt. Daniel Helmer, 22, of Colts Neck, N.J., who was among the U.S. winners of the prestigious scholarship announced Sunday, graduated from West Point Military Academy, where he studied military history and Arabic. Helmer was president of the school's Hillel and led a National Jewish Outreach Program course on the Sabbath called Shabbat Across America, the group said.

The son of two army officers and grandson of Holocaust survivors, Helmer plans to pursue international relations or peace and development studies at Oxford.

Conviction in synagogue arson

A man was found guilty of hate crimes in a temple arson in Syracuse, N.Y.

During Raussi Uthman's trial, a witness testified that he committed the attack on Temple Beth El in October 2000 because he was upset over the plight of Palestinians. Uthman could face up to 25 years in jail when he is sentenced on Dec. 8.

Groups: Release that survey

Jewish groups are pressing the European Union to release a survey on anti-Semitism in Europe.

Officials with the European Jewish Congress are slated to meet with E.U. official Romano Prodi next month to discuss the issue, which heated up with a Financial Times report this week that the survey was squelched because it found that Muslim youth were mainly responsible for anti-Semitic acts in Europe during May and June 2002. The Anti-Defamation League also called on the European Union to release the report.

WWII guard to be deported

A U.S. judge ordered the deportation of a man who served at a concentration camp during World War II. Johann Leprich, 77, lied about his service as an SS guard at Mauthausen in 1943 and 1944 when he immigrated to the United States in 1952. Leprich fled to Canada in 1987 after losing his U.S. citizenship because of his wartime activities.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Israeli officials downplay Geneva, while some Jews prepare to attend

By Philip Carmel

PARIS (JTA) — As supporters of an independent Middle East peace initiative prepare to gather in Geneva next week, Israeli officials and many European Jewish community leaders are attempting to downplay the significance of the plan.

But the initiative also appears to have mobilized many supporters both in Israel — where a recent poll suggested that more than half of the population supported the plan — and elsewhere in the world.

On Dec. 1, the Swiss city will play host to what officially has been titled "The Geneva Initiative: A Public Commitment," a wide-ranging statement of principles agreed to after more than two years of negotiations between Palestinian politicians close to Yasser Arafat and a group of Israeli peace activists, headed by Israel's former justice minister, Yossi Beilin.

The initiative, decried by Israel as contrary to the policies of the country's elected government, envisages Israeli withdrawal from virtually all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the division of Jerusalem and Palestinian sovereignty over the Temple Mount.

Opponents of the plan also claim that it is not specific regarding the right of return for Palestinian refugees and could leave the door open for them to settle in Israel.

Among those condemning the plan are Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who has called it more dangerous than the Oslo Accords, and former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who called it "delusional." Labor Party leader Shimon Peres also refused to endorse it.

However, the plan is widely backed in both the Labor and Meretz parties. And its supporters include a number of retired senior army officers, including former Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Amram Mitzna, who as Labor Party leader was trounced by Sharon in elections earlier this year.

The plan also has received strong backing from a number of European states, with both the French and Belgian foreign ministers meeting last month in Paris with Beilin and the principal Palestinian negotiator, former Palestinian Authority Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo.

The Bush administration, treading delicately on the issue, is sending a low-level official from the U.S. Embassy in Bern to attend as an observer, according to a State Department official.

While Secretary of State Colin Powell has praised the initiative as a way to help move the process forward, Bush doesn't want to get as close to it, observers say.

"He doesn't want a direct collision with Sharon," said Mark Rosenblum, founder and policy director of Americans for Peace Now, who will be in Geneva next week.

It is not yet clear which world leaders will be attending the event next week, since it was hastily arranged. President Carter has said he will be there.

The most important logistical and organizational support has come from Switzerland. Swiss Foreign Ministry spokesman Alessandro Delprete told JTA that the Swiss role was "to act as a facilitator in the promotion of peace."

"Our role is to bring together those in both societies who are searching for peace, but we do not influence the substance of the discussions between the parties," he said.

Both Israel and some Jewish leaders abroad strongly criticized the Swiss involvement.

The secretary-general of the European Jewish Congress, Serge Cwajgenbaum, said that while he was "not convinced about the manner" in which the Swiss had involved themselves in the negotiations, he understood that "it is in the interests of Europeans to help the Palestinians come towards peace."

But, he said, "it is not normal or supportable that one sovereign state interferes in the affairs of another."

That is one of the issues that has the Sharon government so upset about an accord whose principal Israeli negotiator is an out-of-office Israeli politician. The Israeli Embassy in Geneva said it would neither be protesting nor reacting to the Geneva event.

A senior Israeli official in Paris said Israel is not interested in "drawing too much attention to Beilin's solo effort." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

After bombings in Turkey, unease over ties with West and with Israel

By Yigal Schleifer

ISTANBUL (JTA) — In the days after the second set of suicide bombings that hit Istanbul in the span of less than a week, a thick fog often enveloped the city as the chilly waters of the Bosphorus cooled unseasonably warm air.

The fog was an almost painfully fitting symbol for the confusion that has gripped Turkey following the attacks on Nov. 15 and Nov. 20.

With officials here saying that the four suicide bombers were Turkish radical Islamists, many Turks are struggling to understand how four of their own could perpetrate attacks that killed nearly 60 people and injured several hundred.

The government, meanwhile, is being forced to confront the fact that local Islamists with ties to international terror groups may have managed to create a base in Turkey and, in the process, put the country on the front line of the war on terrorism.

Faik Bulut, an expert on Islamic fundamentalist groups in Turkey, said the country must now choose between increasing its cooperation with the West, particularly the United States and Israel — which could expose it to further terrorist attacks — or backing away from its traditional allies in an effort to minimize risk.

Indeed, an Al Qaida-linked group that claimed responsibility for the attacks issued a statement telling Turkey it has to choose “peace or America.”

“As for you, Turkey, isn’t it time you left the Crusader army and returned to the Islamic nation?” said the statement from the Abu Hafis al-Masri Brigades, one of several groups that has claimed responsibility for the attacks. “Isn’t it time you withdrew your army from Afghanistan, stopped all ties with the Zionist entity, stopped providing America with soldiers for Iraq, left the Crusader Atlantic alliance?”

Turkey, in fact, did not support the U.S.-led war in Iraq, as its Parliament refused to grant Washington permission to transport troops through the country. And though that same Parliament last month approved the sending of 10,000 Turkish troops to help in Iraq, the offer was quickly shelved in the face of stiff Iraqi opposition.

Overall, however, the government’s answer to suggestions that it change its political orientation appears to be a resounding no.

One of its strategies for dealing with the new terrorist threat is to strengthen cooperation with Israel, particularly in terms of intelligence sharing.

“The government is taking this very seriously and will take all necessary measures. It will look at the whole thing from the beginning and cooperate with Israel on this, which is already happening,” said Sami Kohen, a veteran political analyst and columnist with the Turkish daily newspaper *Milliyet*.

Ephraim Inbar, director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Israel’s Bar Ilan University, said the cooperation with Israel isn’t new but may now become more visible.

“Cooperation has been very close in terms of intelligence and fighting terror,” Inbar said. For example, Israel helped Turkey with intelligence when it was fighting the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party and was instrumental in helping Turkey capture the group’s leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in 1999. “The relations between Israel

and Turkey are very close and it’s hard to get closer,” Inbar said. Following the Istanbul attacks, “there’s been a demonstration that the common interests are still strong.”

Still, the bombings have raised questions in Turkey about the country’s relations with Israel and with the West, and whether those relations have made Turkey more of a target.

Not far from the Neve Shalom synagogue, one of two synagogues bombed on Nov. 15, the manager of an electric supply shop said the attack could be linked to Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. “Israel is doing all these terrible things to the Palestinians over there, and the revenge is being taken out on our citizens,” said Atakan Senel, 36.

Following the synagogue bombings, a leading Turkish daily asked in a headline, “Is Israel causing harm to the Jews?”

Boaz Ganor, director of the International Policy Institute for Counterterrorism in Israel, said the groups behind the bombs hoped to encourage such reactions.

“We’re not talking about a one-time event. After this, people will criticize the connection to Israel, the move toward the European Union, the relationship with the United States. It’s not an overnight process, but one that continues,” Ganor said. “Their objective is to create chaos, to strike at the stability of the government and to enable radical Islam to take advantage of that scenario.”

So far, Turks have united in condemnation of the attacks, but experts warn that the bombings present some domestic dangers.

Turkey currently is led by the Justice and Development Party, a new party that traces its roots to the country’s political Islam movement.

Though Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the party leadership have distanced themselves from the party’s Islamist past, Turkey’s secular establishment remains suspicious of them.

“The prime minister needs to make a very strong statement to not let these attacks polarize the secular-Islamic divide,” said Cengiz Candar, a leading political analyst. “These attacks, inherently and implicitly, can threaten the social fabric of Turkey.”

After the Nov. 20 attacks, which struck the British Consulate and the Turkish headquarters of the HSBC bank, Erdogan lashed out at the bombers and their supporters.

“Those who shed blood and killed innocents in these holy days will have to account for themselves in both worlds and will be doomed till eternity,” he said.

But Candar said Erdogan has to draw a clear line between his perception of an Islam that is compatible with democracy and the extremism that appears to be behind the Istanbul bombings.

“He must do this to justify the firm action that he will have to take,” Candar said. “This cannot only be defeated in Turkey through security measures. There has to be a strong ideological basis to it.” □

Israeli goods get a label

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel agreed to distinguish goods made in the West Bank from those in Israel proper.

The labels will allow the European Union to give tax breaks only to those goods produced within Israel’s pre-1967 borders, and not to goods made in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, eastern Jerusalem or the Golan Heights. The decision ends a dispute between Israel and the European Union that has simmered for several years. □