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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Eight die in Gaza raid

Israeli troops killed eight Palestinians during a raid on weapons-smuggling tunnels on the Gaza-Egypt border.

Palestinian witnesses said five gunmen and three male bystanders were killed in Tuesday's predawn action in the Rafah refugee camp.

Israeli military sources said the raid came amid intelligence warnings of stepped-up arms smuggling into Rafah through tunnels from Egypt, and that one secret passage was uncovered. No Israeli soldiers were reported hurt in the dashes.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan condemned the raid.

"Israel, as the occupying power, must protect the civilian population and desist from using disproportionate force," Kofi Annan said Tuesday.

Arrests in Maher assault

Seven Palestinians were arrested for assaulting Egypt's foreign minister in Jerusalem.

An Israeli police spokesman said the arrests took place hours after Ahmed Maher was pelted with shoes and assaulted by worshippers at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque on Monday.

Maher, 68, was treated for chest pains before departing for Egypt, ending a visit to Israel that aimed to jump-start the peace process.

In Cairo, Maher played down the incident. "What happened will only increase our determination to work for the sake of peace and Palestinian rights," he told reporters.

Palestinian religious officials said the assault on Maher was Israel's fault.

Tearful Holocaust reunion

Two siblings separated by the Holocaust and living in Israel were reunited after more than 65 years.

Benjamin Shilom and his sister Rozia November saw each other Saturday after the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial helped connect the two.

Each had been convinced that the other had died in the Holocaust. Shilom survived the war serving in the Soviet army, while November lived through Auschwitz.

"I still don't believe I have a brother," she told The New York Times on Monday, after meeting Shilom. "It is impossible."

Bush counsels patience on Mideast in Chanukah meeting with the Jews

By Ron Kampeas

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon may have set a six-month ultimatum for the Palestinians — offering them partnership or pullout — but President Bush is counseling patience and adherence to existing peace initiatives.

Bush met with Jewish lay and communal leaders at the White House on Monday for the traditional annual Chanukah celebration.

Participants said the meeting was warm and friendly, with the Jewish leaders congratulating the president on his recent foreign policy successes, including the capture of Iraqi despot Saddam Hussein and Libya's pledge to end its weapons of mass destruction programs.

Bush also initiated a discussion on the resurgence in Europe of anti-Semitism, saying he believed it was America's role to set an example in respecting the rights of the individual.

A central topic of conversation was Sharon's speech last week warning the Palestinians that unless they crack down on terrorist groups and return to peace negotiations, Israel would pull out unilaterally from parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and set its own border.

That border would be less favorable to the Palestinians than what they could achieve through negotiations, Sharon said.

A participant in Monday's hourlong meeting asked Bush if he thought Sharon's threat was sincere.

Bush nodded yes, saying he understood Sharon's position — even referring to the prime minister by his nickname, Arik.

"Arik has a job like mine: His job is to protect his people," the participant, who asked not to be identified, quoted Bush as saying.

Bush added, however, that he wants Israel to be patient and stick to the U.S.-led "road map" peace plan, which envisions a Palestinian state and an end to terrorism by sometime in 2005.

"We need to be patient and wait for a new Palestinian leader to emerge," Bush was quoted as saying, adding that he has high expectations of Ahmed Qurei, the new Palestinian Authority prime minister.

Israelis are frustrated with Qurei because he has been slow to distance himself from P.A. President Yasser Arafat, whom Israel and the United States reject as untrustworthy.

Qurei's predecessor, Mahmoud Abbas, attempted to isolate Arafat, but Arafat undermined Abbas and helped force his resignation.

Bush made clear that he wants Israel to wait for Qurei, and also that he won't venture too deeply into the peace process unless he's relatively sure of the outcome.

"You all need to be patient. Presidential capital is not to be wasted," a participant quoted Bush as telling the group.

The administration has avoided speculating on what might happen if Sharon makes good on his threat, focusing instead on Sharon's immediate promises to ease conditions for the Palestinians.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Tuesday that the administration had noted the "specific steps" Sharon had promised to take, but added: "We avoided speculating on some of the things he said might/could be down the road."

In his speech last week, Sharon said he prefers to follow the road map, and White

MIDEAST FOCUS

Iran warns Israel on strike

Iran warned Israel against striking its nuclear reactor.

"He made a damn mistake," Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said Monday of Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, who had warned that Israel could attack Iranian nuclear facilities if necessary but would try to avoid causing collateral damage.

Mofaz's comments came after Iran agreed to allow weapons inspections of its facilities.

Two Israelis injured in Gaza

Two Israelis were lightly injured when Palestinians fired rockets into a Gaza Strip community.

Tuesday's injuries occurred after Kassam rockets landed on a building in the Israeli settlement of Nissanit.

Israel to return envoy to Austria

Israel will send an ambassador to Austria for the first time in nearly four years. The appointment of Avraham Toledo awaits only Austria's official acceptance, according to news reports.

Israel recalled its previous ambassador, Nathan Meron, in February 2000 to protest the inclusion of Jorg Haider's far-right Freedom Party as a coalition partner in the Social Democrats' new government.

Terror victims to camp

Israeli children who lost parents or siblings to terrorism are going to camp this week in Eilat.

Some 400 children will visit Camp Koby and Yosef, an American-style camp launched by the Koby Mandell Foundation.

The camp honors the 13-year-old Mandell and Yosef Ishran, who were killed in a West Bank cave in 2001, the Jerusalem Post said.

The children, aged 9-17, are religious and secular, and include some Israeli Druse.



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House officials have said Bush was mollified by Sharon's commitment.

Bush also was adamant that Sharon not use Israel's West Bank security barrier, now under construction, to set the borders of a future Palestinian state.

"I understand the need for the fence, it's a security barrier, but part of the route is problematic," Bush was quoted as saying in the Monday meeting.

Referring to Libya's surprise pledge to cooperate with arms inspectors, Bush said Israel needs to be patient if it expects similar commitments from Syria and Iran — implacable foes with reported plans to obtain weapons of mass destruction.

The United States has imposed sanctions against both countries, Bush said, but nothing will happen until major trading partners of those nations — especially in Europe — join in.

"We need to bring the Europeans around when it comes to Iran and Syria," Bush was quoted as saying. "Everything with the Europeans is a process."

Bush has much on his plate headed into 2004.

The government has set a June deadline for conferring self-rule on the Iraqis, and the U.S. presidential election will heat up around March, when Bush's Democratic opponent likely will be apparent.

With such preoccupations, Bush has made clear that he won't be drawn into the Palestinian-Israeli conflict until he is assured of results — a stance not untypical for a president in an election year.

At the public Chanukah celebration after the meeting with the Jewish leaders, Bush never mentioned Israel. Instead, he lavished praise on U.S. servicemen and service-women in Iraq.

"We pray for the brave men and women of our armed forces, many of whom are spending the holiday season far from home and their loved ones," he said. "We are grateful for their service to America, we're grateful for the support and sacrifice of their families."

Two Jewish Marines, including one who served in the Iraq war, lit the menorah with their six-year-old sons.

Bush appeared relaxed and confident, watching with a bemused smile as the University of Maryland's Kol Sasson chorale attempted a gospel rendition of Maoz Tsur.

Participants said the mood was upbeat and festive.

"The man and his commitment to Israel were very much in evidence," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Hoenlein said participants were especially impressed by Bush's concern about anti-Semitism.

"He implied it's a U.S. responsibility to show Europeans the need to address it, he was forceful and talked about it as a fundamental value," Hoenlein said.

Bush also related anti-Semitism to the issue of anti-Israel incitement among the Palestinians.

David Kessel, Hillel director at the University of Texas at Austin, called the mood "intimate."

"It was a nice comfortable ambience," he said.

Still, it was clear that Bush wanted to remain in control of the relationship with the Jewish community.

About half the participants, who were unknown to mainstream lay leaders present, apparently were invited because of their support for Bush.

Bush also left only a few minutes at the end of the meeting for questions. □

Rock the jail cell

NEW YORK (JTA) — A German court sentenced three members of a neo-Nazi band to prison after they were found guilty of promoting hate.

The leader of the band known as Landser was sentenced Monday to more than three years in jail, while two other members received suspended sentences.

It is believed to be the first time members of a skinhead band were sentenced in Germany for inciting hate.

JEWISH WORLD

Mogul's jailing extended

Russian Jewish businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky will remain imprisoned. The oil baron was due to be freed Dec. 30, but a Moscow court ruled Tuesday that he should remain in jail for another three months, *The New York Times* reported.

Khodorkovsky, whose estimated \$8 billion net worth makes him the wealthiest person in Russia, is awaiting trial on charges of fraud, embezzlement, and tax evasion. He says the charges are politically motivated.

U.N. spying on Israeli fence

The United Nations is using satellite technology to monitor the security barrier Israel is building in the West Bank, the BBC reported.

The head of the United Nations' satellite agency, Alain Retiere, said Unosat is not taking a position on the barrier, but added, "There is an increasing degree of consciousness that this wall is not just about security."

Last week, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said he would be willing to establish temporary borders along the lines demarcated by the fence.

Auschwitz tombstones restored

An unknown person restored more than a dozen tombstones at the Jewish cemetery near the former Auschwitz death camp, less than two weeks after they were desecrated. Fred Schwartz, president of the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation in New York, called the mysterious repairs a "Chanukah miracle."

Hate crimes fall in L.A.

Hate crimes in Los Angeles County are down from peaks reported just after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The L.A. County Commission on Human Relations reported last week that crimes motivated by religious hatred dropped by 8 percent in 2002, from 129 to 119.

However, as in past years, the great majority of religious hate crimes — 66 percent of all cases — were aimed at Jewish targets.

An international Chanukah

The Indian and Moroccan embassies in Washington hosted Chanukah celebrations.

India's ambassador hosted a celebration Sunday night that was co-hosted by Ambassador Lalit Mansingh, B'nai B'rith International and the American Jewish Committee.

Meanwhile, Morocco's U.S. ambassador hosted a Chanukah celebration Monday as a symbol of hope for the Middle East. Aziz Mekouar joined the American Jewish Committee in hosting the menorah lighting in his suburban Washington home.

Reservists' refusal to serve shakes Israel's top leaders

By Dan Baron

TEL AVIV (JTA) — For decades they were Israel's shadow heroes, staging daring operations in places such as Entebbe and Lebanon and emerging into the limelight only when it came time to take top civilian posts.

But now even the Sayeret Matkal commando unit, made up of these elite military figures, has been touched by a new moral unease in the Israeli military after three years of conflict with the Palestinians.

Thirteen reservists from Sayeret Matkal — the General Staff Reconnaissance Company — went public on Sunday with a letter they wrote to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announcing that they would refuse to serve in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Their move has shaken — and has been roundly condemned by — the upper political echelons.

"We will no longer be party to an oppressive rule in the territories and the disregard for the human rights of millions of Palestinians," wrote the reservists, who ranged in rank from sergeant to captain.

"We will no longer serve to advance the Settlement Crusade."

In a nod to the heavy secrecy under which Matkal operates, the petitioners signed only the first letters of their last names. They insisted that their faces be obscured when making television appearances.

It served as a slick inversion of the mystique surrounding Israel's version of the U.S. Army Green Berets or the British Special Air Service, further enhancing the 13 reservists' appeal.

Israel's government and military brass, smarting from a similar declaration by 27 reserve combat pilots in September, was united in condemning the move.

Each of the signatories "will be called in to talk to his commander, the gravity of the situation will be explained to him and he will be given the chance to recant," the Israel Defense Forces' chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon — himself a former Sayeret Matkal officer — told Israel Radio on Monday.

"If he doesn't, he will be thrown out of army reserve duty."

His sentiments were echoed by a slew of fellow Sayeret Matkal veterans, including Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak and National Religious Party head Effi Eitam.

Even lawmaker Avshalom Vilan, who served in the commando unit in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and whose liberal Meretz Party is outspoken in its criticism of Israel's countermeasures against Palestinian terrorism, called the letter "inappropriate."

Rarely referred to by name and devoid of official insignia, Sayeret Matkal is the elite of Israel's elite, activated directly by the General Staff and its chief executive, Sharon.

The unit's activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been limited to top-priority swoops against terrorist leaders — but the reservists' sweeping critique of Israeli policies in the territories carry enormous political weight.

"We thought coming out in this way, rather than joining the grey ranks of conscientious objectors whose protest consists of simply not turning up to the next tour of duty, was better," a petitioner named only as Avner told Israel's Channel Two television.

Disobeying orders in Israel's military is punishable by up to 15 years in prison, but so far the Judge-Advocate General's Office has made do with handing out much milder penalties in dealing with so-called refuseniks.

When 27 reserve helicopter gunship pilots vowed in September that they no longer would take part in track-and-kill operations against Palestinian terrorists, several were dishonorably discharged.

According to Yuval Steinitz, chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the pilots' letter set a precedent that encouraged further insubordination.

"Refusing to serve is an ideological felony and should be treated as such," he told Israel Radio. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Israel stands alone at conclusion of tough U.N. General Assembly

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — This year's United Nations General Assembly ended as it began — with Israel standing basically alone.

In one of the last actions of the annual three-month gathering, Israel was the only country to abstain Monday when Ireland offered its annual resolution on religious tolerance.

"Given the upsurge in anti-Semitism, we cannot support a resolution on religious tolerance without mentioning anti-Semitism by name," said Arye Mekel, deputy permanent representative of Israel to the United Nations.

"We represent not just the Jewish state, but the Jewish people," Mekel said.

The session, which was slated to end this week, saw some of the most strident attacks against Israel in years — but at the same time, some of its most serious advances.

In addition to the customary passage of some 20 resolutions Israel considers hostile, the flurry of activity came in the form of many firsts:

- For the first time in a decade, Palestinians tried to challenge Israel's U.N. credentials, but failed;
- The first resolution explicitly condemning anti-Semitism was offered, but its sponsor, Ireland, later withdrew it due to lack of support;
- Israel sponsored a resolution for the first time in 25 years. Israel later withdrew the resolution, which expressed concern for Israeli children threatened by terrorism — a mirror image of a resolution passed by the General Assembly concerning Palestinian children — after what it termed a "hostile takeover" attempt by Arab states to co-opt the resolution.

For pro-Israel activists, it was a time of resolve and fatigue.

"This was perhaps the toughest General Assembly in years," Mekel said. It "showed more than ever the duplicity and the double standards of the United Nations against Israel."

He quipped that the ambassador to the Palestinian mission to the United Nations, Nasser Al Kidwa, succeeded in one thing — making "a Jew like me long for Christmas" — that is, the end of the session.

He specifically cited an unprecedented three emergency sessions called to discuss Israel — two to condemn Israel's security fence and one blasting Israel's talk of expelling Arafat.

But Israel's advocates also point to several victories.

For one, the Jewish state, which never before was elected to a U.N. committee, gained representation on more U.N. bodies than ever before, Mekel said.

From 2004 through 2007, Israel will serve on a committee on narcotic drugs, an environmental protection governing council, and Habitat, an organization that resettles people. Israel is currently vice chair of the U.N. General Assembly legal committee and will serve on a committee on international trade law for the next six years.

Israel also serves on a disarmament committee and earlier in the year, vice chaired a U.N. disarmament conference.

Israel's election to these posts was "one of the most important things that happened this year," Mekel said.

"What it actually means is that Israeli experts will participate

in these operations and make a contribution" beyond just defending itself vis-a-vis the Palestinians.

The positions came as a result of endorsements from the regional group Israel belongs to — the Western Europe and Others Group, or WEOG.

In May 2000, Israel, then the only country excluded from a regional grouping, was permitted to join WEOG. But countries can only apply for positions after serving as members in the regional group for two years.

In April, Israel will assume the rotating chairmanship of WEOG.

The United States, which almost always votes with Israel on the key issues, lobbied both for Israel's placement on a regional grouping and its recent appointments.

It also urged member countries to oppose or abstain from the myriad resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Our belief is that it has to be the two parties sitting down negotiating these issues, not resolutions here in the G.A.," said a U.S. official at the United Nations. "All these resolutions do is further harden the position of both sides."

In fact, the barrage of pro-Palestinian resolutions appear to have caused a backlash.

That was evident last week when the Palestinians failed at an attempt to displace Israel and obtain their own credentials to represent the West Bank, Gaza Strip and parts of Jerusalem.

After learning that Europe, which often influences others at the United Nations, would oppose the measure, the Palestinians chose not to bring the resolution to a vote.

And when the Palestinians pushed a resolution earlier this month calling on the Hague's International Court of Justice to assess the legality of Israel's security fence, European abstentions led to dozens more.

While the resolution still passed 90-8, with 74 abstentions, it was seen as a moral victory for Israel.

Still, the resolution worries Israel and Jewish activists.

Last Friday, the Hague determined it would hold hearings on the issue beginning Feb. 23.

Calling the resolution a "dangerous move," Amy Goldstein, director of U.N. affairs at B'nai B'rith International, said that "it would mark a deterioration of yet another humanitarian body and a very important humanitarian body because it's the highest court in humanitarian justice."

In addition, "the U.N. already has an apparatus with which to address these issues and that is the road map," she said.

Another key concern for Israel's proponents was a recent Security Council resolution endorsing the road map.

While Israel supports the road map, it worries that the resolution empowers the United Nations over the United States. The resolution also hands the Palestinians a tool with which to seek Security Council scrutiny of Israel's compliance.

Such episodes and others reveal the extent of Israel's struggle at the United Nations, say Jewish activists.

"The most shameful moments came in the fate of the Irish resolution, and also in the Israeli attempt to focus on the plight of the Israeli children as victims of terror," said David Harris, the executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

"Tragically," Harris added, "the U.N. G.A. is unwilling to face up to anti-Semitism as a separate and distinct threat, and to the plight of Israeli children who've been among the victims of terrorist acts." □