



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 81, No. 241

Tuesday, December 30, 2003

86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel targeted at U.N.

Syria offered a U.N. Security Council resolution to rid the Middle East of weapons of mass destruction.

The resolution, which comes after Libya's recent commitment to end its WMD programs, is a veiled attempt to target Israel, U.N. diplomats say. It's unclear, however, whether the resolution offered Monday will come to a vote.

"In terms of the U.S. position, obviously we share the same goal of a weapons-free zone for the Middle East" as for "any other zone in the world," said Richard Grenell, spokesman for the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. But "trying to score political points in the Security Council by highlighting or beating up on one country is not helpful."

Syria is in its final days on the Security Council as a rotating representative of the Arab group.

Long road to Damascus

Ariel Sharon said any new peace talks with Syria would have to start from scratch.

The Israeli prime minister was responding to recent comments by Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The Syrian leader said he is willing to resume peace talks only from the place they broke off when his father failed to reach an agreement with then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak in early 2000.

Damascus wants Israel to return all of the Golan Heights. Israeli leaders have expressed some willingness to do so, but talks have stalled over Syrian demands for territory beyond the international boundary that separated the two countries in 1948.

Three Palestinians dead

Israeli soldiers killed three Palestinians firing mortars at a wedding party in a Gaza Strip settlement.

The three were killed on Sunday, when the Israeli army reported an unusually high number of shooting incidents in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Israel worried about mega-attack

Terrorists are planning an unconventional attack in Israel on New Year's Eve, Israeli intelligence officials warned.

Police reportedly have been warned about an air- or sea-based attack or a multiple suicide bombing, the Jerusalem Post reported.

NEWS ANALYSIS

One step forward, one step back: Israelis ponder Egypt's puzzling role

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli leaders were heartened when, in late December, Egypt's foreign minister announced that he would come to Jerusalem for talks on promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace.

At the same time, however, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was moving in Cairo to galvanize international pressure on Israel to dismantle its nuclear arsenal.

These seemingly contradictory thrusts in Egyptian policy highlight the deep ambivalence that has characterized Egypt's attitude to Israel since the two countries made peace in 1979.

On the one hand, Egypt has been keen to encourage other Arab countries and the Palestinians to follow its lead in making peace with Israel — partly to prove that it was right in pioneering accommodation with the Jewish state, partly to reinforce its position as a major power broker in the Middle East, and partly to satisfy Washington.

Some believe that Egypt still is undecided about whether it really wants peace with Israel. Others believe Egypt simply sees Israel as a major rival for regional hegemony.

In either case, while seeking a wider, regional rapprochement, Egypt also strives to weaken Israel and keep it isolated.

Egypt therefore makes peace overtures but keeps Israel at arm's length. It fashions a model of "cold peace" — some might call it a war everywhere but on the battlefield — and implies that other Arab countries should adopt it. It carries out war games in which Israel is the named enemy, presses every possible button to pressure Israel to dismantle its nuclear stockpile and often leads the diplomatic charge against Israel in international forums.

For more than 20 years, this ambivalent policy has not changed. Nor, from Egypt's perspective, should it, since the policy has paid rich dividends.

First and foremost, it paved the way for Egypt to build close ties with the United States, including a huge annual aid package that Egypt has used to advance domestic goals and undertake a massive military reconstruction effort over the past two decades.

It also has put Egypt in a position to help other Arabs, such as the Palestinians or Syrians, forge negotiations with Israel. Egypt has been trying to play the "honest broker" over the past year, searching for ways to stop Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Since the Palestinian intifada was launched in September 2000, Egypt has worried about violent repercussions at home. Radical Islamic groups in Egypt could harness anti-Israeli feeling to attack the Mubarak regime for not doing more to help the Palestinians, conceivably sparking violence directed at the regime itself.

Last June, Egypt was able to get Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad to agree to a temporary truce, or "hudna," with Israel. But the truce quickly collapsed after a rash of targeted killings of terrorist leaders and a new wave of Palestinian suicide bombings.

Now the Egyptians are trying again, holding meetings in Cairo on a new cease-fire and sending Egypt's intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman, for talks in the Palestinian territories, so far without concrete results.

Syrian President Bashar Assad also is seeking Egyptian aid in paving the way for a renewal of peace talks with Israel. After Saddam Hussein's fall in Iraq and Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi's agreement to open his weapons programs to international inspection, Assad fears he could be next in line for "special treatment" by an American

MIDEAST FOCUS

Residency crime

A former Israeli government minister used a bribe to try to get Israeli residency for a Palestinian.

On Monday, an Israeli court convicted former Knesset minister Saleh Tarif of giving the Interior Ministry's population registrar \$2,000 with a request to allow a Palestinian businessman friend to live in Israel. The crime carries a maximum penalty of three and a half years in jail.

The court rejected Tarif's contention that because he is Druse, his prosecution was a form of racial persecution. Tarif was a minister without portfolio under Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

A rush on Sharon

Israel's decision to evacuate four illegal settlement outposts is not enough, two Cabinet members said. Justice Minister Yosef "Tommy" Lapid and Treasury Minister Meir Sheerit on Monday publicly called for Israel to step up removal of the outposts, as required by the U.S.-led "road map" peace plan.

The 100 or so illegal outposts in the West Bank are ruining Israel's relations with the United States and Europe, Lapid told Israel Radio.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz ordered the evacuation of four outpost. Residents have 10 days to appeal the decision.

Israelis hope to aid quake victims

An Israeli relief organization offered aid to victims of the devastating earthquake in Iran.

Latent officials said the group is willing to send relief to the victims of last Friday's quake in Bam, which killed an estimated 20,000 people.

Iranian officials have been quoted as saying they would not accept help from the "Zionist entity," but it's unclear whether aid from Israeli non-governmental organizations also would be rejected.



Daily News Bulletin

Howard E. Friedman, *President*

Mark J. Joffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*

Lisa Hostein, *Editor*

Michael S. Arnold, *Managing Editor*

Lenore A. Silverstein, *Finance and Administration Director*

Paula Simmonds, *Marketing and Development Director*

JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
© JTA Reproduction only by previous arrangement.

government that has shown little tolerance for Arab sponsors of terrorism.

Assad said recently that he wants to start a new negotiating process with Israel, and in late December he flew to Egypt to ask for Mubarak's aid.

Israel has been skeptical of Assad's intentions — most officials believe Assad merely is trying to duck U.S. pressure — but says it is exploring Assad's statement. Still, Israel is demanding strong Syrian action against terrorist groups in Damascus and Lebanon before any talks can begin.

While playing the "honest broker," however, Egypt also has been leading diplomatic moves against Israel in various international forums.

Egypt was active in getting the security fence issue referred to the international court at The Hague and, following Libya's startling commitment on weapons of mass destruction, Egypt worked closely with Syria to force a Security Council debate on ridding the Middle East of all weapons of mass destruction — a debate that is bound to focus primarily on Israel's presumed nuclear arsenal.

For years, the campaign against Israel's nuclear capability has been a cornerstone of Egyptian foreign policy. In 1995, Egypt threatened to scuttle international reaffirmation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by persuading Third World countries not to sign unless Israel did.

Five years later, Egypt repeated the same gambit. In both cases, however, strong American pressure forced the Egyptians to back down.

There is a huge disparity between Egypt's self-image and the reality on the ground: The truth is that Egypt no longer seems to have the clout of a great regional player.

For example, when Egypt's foreign minister, Ahmed Maher, visited the Al Aksa Mosque on Jerusalem's Temple Mount in late December, Palestinian radicals bombarded him with shoes, a display of contempt. And on that same trip, Egypt heeded Israel's demand that Maher not meet with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, whom Israel seeks to sideline.

Earlier, Palestinian terrorist groups disdainfully rejected Egyptian advice to accept a cease-fire with Israel.

The duality of Egyptian policy leads to suspicion and anxiety on the Israeli side. One of Egypt's sharpest Israeli critics is Yuval Steinitz, chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, who asks why Egypt needs such a huge, modern army when it has no apparent enemies.

Steinitz notes that Egypt has used huge amounts of American money to transform its army into one of the strongest forces in the Middle East, that it has many of the same weapons systems as Israel and that it even has American instructors to teach the Egyptians how to use the weapons.

Of all the Arab armies, Steinitz says, Egypt's is the one Israel has to take most seriously in the future.

Perhaps the case that best highlights the ambivalence of Egyptian policy is the abortive Camp David summit with the Palestinians in July 2000. Fearing that their regional influence would be diluted, the Egyptians blocked the resumption of multilateral peace talks with Israel in the run-up to Camp David. Then, as the Camp David summit was about to collapse, Mubarak turned down a request from President Clinton to do him a personal favor and pressure Arafat to sign an agreement with Israel that would postpone disputes over sovereignty of Jerusalem's holy sites.

At the time, American and Israeli officials found Egypt's spoiler role unbearable. Yet when fighting erupted two months after the collapse of Camp David, Egypt played a major role in containing the violence and preventing a full-scale regional war.

Though he pulled Egypt's ambassador from Israel — a violation of Egypt's peace treaty with Israel — Mubarak declared early on that Egypt "wouldn't fight to the last Egyptian" for the Palestinian cause. More than anything else, analysts say, Mubarak's levelheaded attitude prevented the spread of violence across the entire region.

Though Egypt continues to fire diplomatic broadsides at Israel and refuses to return its ambassador, trumpets its friendship with the United States while ignoring U.S. calls to democratize, and plays the regional superpower without regional respect, the bottom line is that most feel that Egypt's pragmatism remains a powerful, pro-Western force for regional stability. □

(Leslie Susser is the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report.)

JEWISH WORLD

U.S. presses for deportation

The U.S. Justice Department is seeking to revoke the citizenship of a World War II-era ghetto guard.

Osyf Firishchak, 84, a Chicago resident, is accused of involvement in the killing of Jews in the Lvov Ghetto through his participation in the Nazi-sponsored Ukrainian Auxiliary Police in 1941.

He rounded up Jews, imprisoned them in ghettos, terrorized them, oversaw forced labor, killed those attempting to escape and sent others to mass execution, according to a complaint filed Monday by the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations. The auxiliary police is responsible for sending 100,000 Jews in Lvov to killing sites, including the Belzec death camp. Firishchak entered the United States in 1949 and became a citizen in 1954.

Consulate in Bombay to reopen

The Israeli Consulate in Bombay will soon reopen. The reopening of the consulate, which closed in August as a cost-cutting measure, was announced this week by the president of El Al Airlines, Amos Shapira, on the 10th anniversary of El Al operations in India. No exact date was given.

Prague memorial delayed

Red tape apparently is holding up plans for a memorial to mark one of Europe's oldest Jewish burial sites.

The 750-year-old site on Prague's Vladislavova Street attracted international headlines several years ago after Orthodox groups dedicated to preserving Jewish heritage in Europe staged a series of protests against the construction of an office and garages on top of hundreds of Jewish graves.

In 2000, the Czech government brokered a deal with local and international Jewish representatives and an insurance company developing the land, allowing construction to proceed as long as the remains were left undisturbed.

Jew to head Chilean court

A Jewish judge was made president of Chile's Supreme Court. Judge Marcos Libedinsky, 70, was elected the new president of Chile's Supreme Court of Justice with 16 of 20 total votes.

Libedinsky, who is open about his Jewish background, will start his two-year rule on Jan. 6. Chilean papers praised Libedinsky, saying he is distinguished by his leadership capacity.

CORRECTION: The December edition of JTA's Community News Reporter contained an incorrect date for the Fast of the 10th of Tevet. The fast begins the morning of Jan. 4.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Controversy erupts in Israel over shooting at fence protest

By Dan Baron

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Talk about trading places.

Last month, Gil Na'amati finished his three-year stint of compulsory military service after serving in Israel's artillery corps and spending time operating in the West Bank. Now the 22-year-old kibbutznik is the poster boy for Palestinian grievances against Israel.

During a demonstration last Friday by Palestinians and Israeli left wingers against Israel's West Bank security barrier, Na'amati was shot by soldiers who until recently might have stood shoulder to shoulder with him at a checkpoint.

"I was in the military and am familiar with the rules of engagement. What I did was not even close to something that I think would warrant opening fire," Na'amati said Sunday from his hospital bed, where he was recovering from wounds to his leg and hip. "It's unbelievable."

The sentiments were echoed around the country after last week's incident, at a section of the security fence outside Kalkilya. It was the first time an Israeli Jew had been targeted by forces meant to protect Israelis from Palestinian terrorism.

The shooting was the latest incident to divide the country in the ongoing dispute over how to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinians and some left-wing Israelis have complained that the fence disrupts Palestinian civilian life and livelihood, while Israeli officials have maintained that it is a necessary bulwark against terrorism.

The army's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, ordered an investigation of the shooting, which came as Na'amati and fellow members of a fringe pro-Palestinian group called Anarchists Against the Fence, who were protesting along with the International Solidarity Movement, attacked the barrier with wire cutters. An American activist also was lightly hurt.

Police on Sunday questioned Na'amati under warning, meaning that his statements could be used against him if he is prosecuted for causing damage to the fence, unruly behavior and violating a military order prohibiting entry to the area next to the fence.

Na'amati's father, Uri, said he advised his son to exercise his right to remain silent and the investigator decided not to press him for answers at this stage in light of Na'amati's medical condition, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

Ya'alon made no secret of where he believed blame for the incident lay.

The protesters "masqueraded as Arabs, mingled with Palestinians and entered the Palestinian side of the fence illegally," he told Israel Radio.

The commander of the force involved reportedly told investigators that he thought it was a group of Palestinians trying to break through the fence into Israel and that it might be a diversionary tactic aimed at allowing a terrorist to infiltrate the fence at another location.

Deputy Defense Minister Ze'ev Boim said soldiers followed orders by first shouting warnings and firing shots over the protesters' heads before aiming at their legs. Witnesses disputed that account.

Television footage showed soldiers taking aim at the protesters from barely 50 feet away, despite clear appeals to them in Hebrew not to shoot. The footage had a major impact on public opinion.

Ami Ayalon, a former chief of Israel's Shin Bet security service, said any orders to shoot the unarmed protesters were illegal and should have been disobeyed. His viewpoint was endorsed by Avshalom Vilan, a former commando, member of the liberal Meretz Party and a founder of the Peace Now movement.

"In a proper country, you don't shoot civilians," Vilan said.

At least one newspaper said the issue wouldn't have been a matter of such great debate had it been a non-Jew who was injured.

"Let's not kid ourselves," an editorial in Israel's daily Yediot Achronot said. "If a Palestinian" had been shot, "it probably would not have merited even one line in the newspaper." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

It's Shabbat day? In France, that means it's time for school

By Philip Carmel

PARIS (JTA) — When French President Jacques Chirac recently announced his support for a ban on the wearing of religious insignia in public schools, Muslims from Tel Aviv to Tehran protested the decision. But Jews didn't.

While Jewish support for the school ban — which extends from Muslim head scarves to Jewish skullcaps — reflects concern in France about a rise in Islamic fundamentalism, it also masks the fact that life already is difficult for religiously observant Jews in state schools.

From preschool up through college, virtually all non-Jewish educational institutions in France hold classes on Saturdays and Jewish holidays — and French Jews are required to attend.

Around 60,000 Jewish children attend non-Jewish schools, about 60 percent of school-age Jews in the country, according to Patrick Petit Ohayon, education director for France's United Jewish Social Funds, the umbrella body for Jewish welfare and educational organizations.

Like other French students, they get Sundays and Wednesdays off, but not the Jewish Sabbath.

"If you're in a state school, you have to go, even if there are some Jewish children who just sit there and don't write," Petit Ohayon said.

The situation undoubtedly is one of the reasons why those interested in maintaining a high level of religious observance opt out of the state school system.

It also is why a ban on yarmulkes in state schools largely is irrelevant, since the vast majority of those who sport yarmulkes go to Jewish schools, not public ones.

Martine Ben-Samoun, a product of the state school system, sends her two children to private Jewish schools.

"I wasn't observant as a child, but there were others in my class who kept Shabbat and they didn't write when they came to school," Ben-Samoun said. "Sometimes the Jewish schools are very narrow-minded, but if I want my kids home on Shabbat and festivals I don't really have a choice."

Keeping religion out of the state sector long has been a central tenet of the French republic, the result of decades of struggle between the state and the Catholic Church.

That struggle came to a head in 1905, when the government ordered Catholic functionaries out of schools and expunged religion from public life.

For the most part, French Jews have supported the state's secular nature, believing it affords religious minorities protection, even though the law mandates Saturday school attendance.

In 1995, a group of Jewish parents applied for their children to be exempt from school on Shabbat. But their legal appeals were rejected on the grounds that regular absence from classes by Jewish students would disrupt the schools' routines.

When it comes to Jewish holidays, Petit Ohayon said, the situation is a little better, if less formal.

"The official school calendar marks Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as holidays, so Jewish children can be off school on those days," he said.

But there are no other informal arrangements when it comes

to other Jewish holidays, he said, even though teachers sometimes agree to let their Jewish students skip class.

Isabelle Feingold said she sends her two children to state schools "because it's part of my personal convictions and I don't want them growing up with a ghetto mentality."

Feingold pulls her kids from school on Yom Kippur, and on Passover when it does not coincide with the annual Easter recess.

Nevertheless, Feingold said the arrangement will work only up to a certain age. "I can probably get away with this because my kids go to primary schools, but I don't know whether I'd get away with it in high school," she said.

Conversely, the situation is easier for religiously observant teachers. With a 30-hour week, they are able to schedule Saturday as a regular day off from work. A 1967 legal ruling allows them to use annual vacation days to take off the Jewish holidays.

Like most French Jews, Feingold said she never had questioned the system in France. She viewed it as a natural result of the state's secular nature.

Aaron Schwartz, originally a native of the United States, is considerably more upset by the situation, however. Schwartz, who has lived in France for decades and whose grandchildren now attend state schools, heads an organization that campaigns for France to accommodate religious Jewish practices.

"A religious Jew in all good conscience can't participate in school on Jewish festivals," Schwartz said.

Schwartz's organization, Judaism in Society and in the Republic, recently submitted a report to the presidential commission on secularism — the body that recommended the ban on visible religious insignia in state schools.

In the report, Schwartz wrote that Jewish holidays were "a type of spiritual retreat within our secular world."

Those types of comments influenced the commission's decision to recommend national school holidays for Yom Kippur and Eid el-Adhar, the Muslim Festival of the Sacrifice.

But the proposal was rejected by Chirac. It also received a cool reception from France's chief rabbi, Joseph Sitruk, who feared it would lead to a formal ban on school absence for other Jewish holidays.

The move also was deemed politically problematic at a time when the government only recently scrapped a national holiday marking the Catholic Pentecost festival. Current legislation allows for individual teachers to make special accommodation.

"If you get lucky and find a tolerant teacher, you're OK," Schwartz said. "But if not, you've got tzuris."

Schwartz also said that because many religiously observant parents cannot afford to send their children to private Jewish schools, the issue of how public schools accommodate Jewish observances is very important. He also said Jewish community leaders are doing "nothing for kashrut" in state schools.

Generally, however, the issue of kosher food is less of a problem in France since most children — and all those outside Paris — eat lunch at home, Petit Ohayon said.

By contrast, Jews in the capital city enjoy certain benefits. Some schools in the Paris region are holding classes on some Wednesdays instead of on Saturdays. And while the Saturday attendance law still is applied strictly, there are some exceptions.

Dora Caen, who is busy preparing for her son's Bar Mitzvah at the end of January, did not forget to contact his school.

"I sent them a little note saying he needed that Saturday off for religious reasons and they said it was OK," she said. □