

IN THE NEWS

P.A. plans January elections

The Palestinian Authority plans to hold presidential elections on Jan. 9.

The date for a vote in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was set Saturday, corresponding to the end of a 60-day mourning period for Yasser Arafat.

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei called on the United States to press Israel to ease its closures in the territories and facilitate the election process. [Story, Pg. 3]

Gunmen open fire at Abbas in Gaza Strip

Two Palestinians were killed after gunmen fired at Mahmoud Abbas' entourage as it was visiting Yasser Arafat's memorial in the Gaza Strip. Associated Press footage showed about 20 men entering the mourning tent Sunday where Abbas, Gaza strongman Mohammed Dahlan and other key Palestinian leaders had come to mourn for Arafat.

The gunmen, clad in green, shouted, "Abbas and Dahlan are agents for the Americans." They then fired into a tent where Abbas and Dahlan were. [Story, Pg. 3]

UJC annual meeting opens in Cleveland

More than 2,000 participants gathered in Cleveland for the annual General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom will moderate a panel on responding to security threats in a post-9/11 world. The G.A., which goes through Wednesday, is the largest gathering of Jewish leadership, with participants representing Jewish federations and communities across North America, and from Israel and throughout the world.

Other speakers include Joshua Malina of NBC's "The West Wing"; political insiders James Carville and William Kristol analyzing the 2004 elections; Jamie Gorelick, a member of the 9/11 Commission; and Israeli Olympic gold medalist Gal Fridman.



WORLD REPORT

PUBLISHED WEEKDAYS BY JTA—THE GLOBAL NEWS SERVICE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE · WWW.JTA.ORG

Tension ratcheting up between Israel and U.N. refugee agency

By MICHAEL J. JORDAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — A month after a U.N. official suggested that some Hamas members are on his payroll, the issue is still reverberating in Washington.

JTA has learned that some two dozen members of the U.S. House of Representatives so far have signed a letter calling on Secretary of State Colin Powell "to suspend immediately all U.S. assistance to UNRWA until you can confirm that the agency no longer employs members of Hamas or other terrorist organizations and to work toward a new UNRWA leadership that is verifiably committed to countering terrorism and incitement to violence."

The letter refers to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, an agency serving 59 Palestinian refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank and elsewhere in the Middle East.

UNRWA chief Peter Hansen drew Israeli ire on Oct. 3 when he told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation that there were Hamas members on the agency's payroll.

"Hamas as a political organization does not mean that every member is a militant, and we do not do political vetting and exclude people from one persuasion as against another," the Danish official said.

Israeli media long have reported that the UNRWA teachers union, for example, is dominated by members of Hamas, which calls for Israel's destruction and the murder of Jews.

The United States and Canada — which together contribute 40 percent of UNRWA's budget — brand Hamas a terrorist group. The U.S. government is bound by law to ensure that no U.S. taxpayer dollars go to groups involved with terrorist activity.

Critics say the controversy is the latest example of Hansen turning a blind eye to terrorism and demonstrating anti-Israel bias.

The greater damage, they say, is to the effort by Hansen's boss, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, to work with Israel as an "honest broker" in any peace negotiations. Together with the United States, European Union and Russia, the United Nations forms part of the diplomatic "Quartet" that devised the "road map" peace plan.

An UNRWA spokesman later sought to clarify to JTA that Hansen meant to say "Hamas sympathizers." Hansen contended in a Nov. 3 interview with JTA that he meant "Hamas people."

Hansen works in Gaza together with 12,000 UNRWA employees, nearly all of whom reportedly are Palestinian refugees.

"Don't judge people by what you think they may or may not believe; judge them by what they do, in their actions and in their behavior," Hansen told JTA in an interview at U.N. headquarters in New York. "And there we get back to the very strict behavior code we have in the agency for what staff members are to do and not to do in their behavior."

All U.N. employees, including its leaders, are required to be neutral and impartial. But Hansen's explanation has not swayed signatories of the letter.

"The U.N. has a track record of anti-Israeli bias, and the continued employment of a man like Hansen is no exception," said Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.). "As long as Hansen is Annan's point man, Annan will have zero credibility in the peace process. You can't knowingly include members of Hamas on

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BEHIND THE HEADLINES

■ *Recriminations fly between Israel and the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees*

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your payroll and reasonably expect Israelis to treat you as an honest broker.”

A U.N. spokesman, Stephane Dujarric, rejected the charge.

“The U.N. expects all its employees to check their political affiliations or feelings at the door. When they come to the U.N., they are expected to come to work in a way that reflects the U.N. charter,” Dujarric told JTA.

Israel has pushed to reform UNRWA and moderate its public statements, but not to dismantle its operations. As the formal “occupying power” in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel would be legally obligated to care for the refugee and civilian population if UNRWA weren’t there.

The congressional letter comes amid a dispute between Israel and Hansen about his annual report to the world body, which some pro-Israel advocates have assailed as one-sided.

It’s not the first time Hansen has riled Israel’s supporters or that there have been threats to suspend UNRWA’s funding.

President Reagan cut off UNRWA’s funding for a spell in 1982 after weapons reportedly were found in an UNRWA camp in Lebanon.

Two years ago, Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) and others accused UNRWA of being “complicit” as its camps in Gaza allegedly were turned into terrorist bases.

That came on the heels of the April 2002 battle in Jenin, the culmination of several months in which Palestinian terrorism during the intifada reached its apogee.

“I had hoped that the horror stories of Jenin were exaggerated,” Hansen was quoted as saying on April 18, 2002, as he surveyed the destruction in the refugee camp. “Jenin camp residents lived through a human catastrophe that has few parallels in recent history.”

Hansen suggested that Israel’s attack in Jenin had killed “hundreds” of Palestinians. However, a U.N. report later rejected Palestinian propaganda of a massacre, corroborating Israeli reports that about 50 Palestinians were killed, half of them combatants. Israel lost 23 soldiers in the battle.

The latest dust-up began a month ago with Israel’s claim — which it later retracted — that it had video footage of an UNRWA staffer loading a Kassam rocket into the back of an UNRWA ambulance.

Hansen demanded a public apology from Israel, and UNRWA published an Oct. 4 letter sent to Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom.

“Given the technical means and military expertise at the disposal of the IDF,” Hansen wrote, “it is inconceivable that the IDF could have made this egregiously erroneous allegation in good faith.

“It is appalling that, with the serious conflict now raging in the Northern Gaza Strip,” he continued, “the Government of Israel would put out such deliberately inciteful, false and malicious propaganda, encouraging IDF soldiers on the ground” or in the air “to think that UNRWA ambulances and other humanitarian vehicles are transporting terrorists and weapons.”

Hansen also hinted that charges against UNRWA provide cover for Israeli incursions into Palestinian areas, and subsequent casualties.

The United Nations investigated, agreed with Hansen’s early assessment and accepted Israel’s retraction. But the United Nations won’t release its report on the incident, leading some critics to speculate that the conclusions may not be as clear-cut as portrayed.

Nevertheless, in an Oct. 27 statement about the report, Annan reiterated his “full

confidence in the integrity and impartiality of Mr. Peter Hansen.”

Just four days later, on Nov. 1, Hansen spoke to a U.N. Correspondents Association

breakfast. He suggested there was a smear campaign against him, and demanded an apology from Israel.

Later that day, Hansen presented his annual report of UNRWA activities to the U.N.’s Special Political and Decolonization Committee. In a nine-page statement, he detailed Israeli actions and Pal-

estinian hardships.

There was only a single reference to Palestinian-initiated violence: The largest Israeli incursion yet in the Gaza Strip followed Palestinian rocket attacks, some of which killed a number of Israeli civilians, including three children, he noted.

But the mention came with a footnote: “These rocket attacks came after earlier Israeli targeted killings of Palestinian militants, which were themselves attributed to earlier Palestinian actions, etc. etc...”

A few sentences later, Hansen wrote, “The dead include nine UNRWA pupils and two teachers. In the last two years, three young girls have been killed by IDF gunfire while actually sitting at their school desks. I doubt anyone would argue that such indiscriminate and disproportionate destruction, and disregard for life, do not constitute grave violations of humanitarian law.”

Felice Gaer, director of the American Jewish Committee’s Jacob Blaustein Institute for Human Rights, said Hansen distorted reality by leaving out context.

“If you were a man from Mars and you were to read his report, you would think that one fine day, the Israeli army woke up and decided to shoot Palestinian schoolchildren,” Gaer said. “There is one reference to Kassam rockets which is totally bland. This misrepresentation of the situation is both inappropriate for a senior U.N. officer and it’s counterproductive.”

Two days after his U.N. presentation, in his interview with JTA, Hansen called Israeli charges against UNRWA “beyond the pale” and “way over the top.”

Israel since has handed over a second videotape to the United Nations and said it has 29 new charges.



JTA WORLD REPORT

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JTA WORLD REPORT is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For more 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.
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THIS WEEK**MONDAY**

■ Secretary of State Colin Powell is also expected to host Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom in Washington. The two are expected to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian situation in the wake of the death of Palestinian Authority Yasser Arafat.

■ The General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities continues through Wednesday. The four-day annual conference of the North American Jewish Federation system addresses topics from global anti-Semitism and the aftermath of the U.S. presidential election to the needs of the elderly. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society will hold its board of governors meetings during the G.A.

■ Two complementary exhibits open in New York City for the centennial year of writer Isaac Bashevis Singer. "The Family Singer," a small exhibit drawn from the YIVO archival collection, will explore the stories of Singer's brother Israel Joshua and his sister Esther Kreitman, who was the first of the family's children to show literary talent. That continues through Jan. 30. "Becoming An American Writer: The Life and Work of Isaac Bashevis Singer," a traveling exhibition from the Singer archive at the Harry Ransom Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin, will include rarely seen documents, photographs and other memorabilia of one of the 20th century literary geniuses. It runs through Jan. 26.

WEDNESDAY

■ Yeshiva University's Association for Modern Orthodox Day Schools holds a conference for French Jewish Educators, featuring a round-table discussion between French Jewish educators and American Jewish educators, followed by a panel discussion with French students at Yeshiva University. The events are part of a conference for French Jewish day school educators that the university is holding, through its Association of Modern Orthodox Day Schools and Yeshiva High Schools division.

SUNDAY

■ Secretary of State Colin Powell travels to Egypt as part of a harder U.S. push for peace in the region following the death of Yasser Arafat. Powell may meet Palestinian leaders during the trip.

■ The sixth annual Children's Book Writers' Conference takes place in New York City. Sessions will focus on how to break into the Jewish children's book industry. The event takes place at the 92nd St. Y.

■ "Sting Like a Maccabee: The Golden Age of the American Jewish Boxer" opens at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. Between 1910 and 1939, there were 26 Jewish world boxing champions.

Palestinians set election date

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Palestinians have leapt into the post-Yasser Arafat era.

Just days after Arafat's death on Nov. 11, a national election was set for Jan. 9, when the 60-day mourning period ends.

The immediate post-Arafat period has been marked by international optimism that progress on the Israeli-Palestinian peace front would now be possible.

But an incident involving gunfire aimed at the entourage of Mahmoud Abbas, the late Palestinian Authority president's temporary replacement, made clear that, despite hopes for a smooth power transfer after Arafat's death, tensions over who will lead the Palestinians remained high.

The announcement of the Jan. 9 elections comes as President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair vowed last Friday to redouble efforts to achieve peaceful and democratic Palestinian statehood under the peace "road map."

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said Saturday he intended to meet Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei and Abbas in the near future.

Meanwhile, the United States has called on Israel to withdraw its forces from Palestinian population centers to facilitate elections, The New York Times said. An Israeli official denied that there was pressure from the Bush administration, but said the Jewish state would redeploy troops from some Palestinian areas if the Palestinian Authority shows it is serious about fighting terror.

For now, the West Bank and Gaza have largely fallen quiet.

The Israeli army's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, told Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Cabinet on Sunday that while Israeli troops enjoyed exemplary cooperation with Palestinian security forces during Arafat's funeral in Ramallah, terrorist attacks could resume when Ramadan ends Wednesday.

Violence already broke out Sunday, when Associated Press footage showed about 20 men entering the mourning tent where Abbas, Gaza strongman Mohammed

Dahlan and other key Palestinian leaders had come to pay respects.

The gunmen, clad in green, shouted, "Abbas and Dahlan are agents for the Americans." They then fired into the tent, killing two bodyguards.

For now, though, extremist groups are busy jostling for a place in politics.

Hamas called for wider elections during which it could capitalize on its clout among grass-roots Palestinians.

But for the time being, the ruling Fatah Party looks likely to maintain its grip on power. The faction nominated Abbas as its candidate for the Jan. 9 elections, although no one rules out a run by West Bank Fatah chief Marwan Barghouti, now serving five life sentences in an Israeli jail for orchestrating attacks on Israelis.

Barghouti's influence on the Palestinian street is not lost on Israel, which witnessed him using cell phones smuggled into his prison cell last year to broker temporary cease-fires between the various armed factions.

He is considered sincere about a two-state solution and, at 45, is

seen as far more dynamic than the 69-year-old Abbas, who quit last year after a short-lived stint as Palestinian Authority prime minister.

At least one member of the Sharon government said Israel could eventually go as far as freeing Barghouti, as he could help it implement the plan to "disengage" from Gaza and the West Bank next year without creating a power vacuum in which Hamas would thrive.

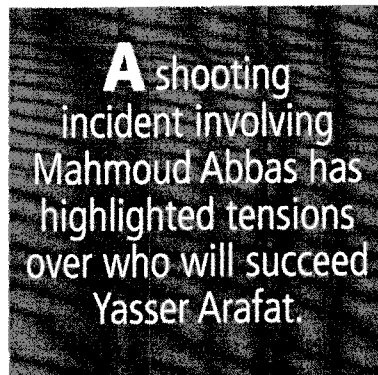
"As part of a future interim or permanent accord, it appears clear that freeing prisoners — including Barghouti — will be unavoidable," Interior Minister Avraham Poraz told Israel Radio.

The idea of clemency for Barghouti was dismissed by other Israeli officials.

Another divisive issue being discussed is whether to allow Palestinians living in Jerusalem to vote for Arafat's successor.

The jurisdiction squabble is a deal-breaker for the Sharon government.

But the Palestinian Authority sees the poll as an opportunity to cement its claim on the city.



NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

It's not the news

CBS News has fired the producer responsible for interrupting a crime drama with a special report on the death of Yasser Arafat.

CBS apologized to viewers for breaking into "CSI: NY," one of its top-rated shows, on the night of Nov. 10.

"An overly aggressive CBS News producer jumped the gun with a report that should have been offered to local stations for their late news. We sincerely regret the error," the network said in a statement Nov. 11.

According to the source, the producer failed to follow standard procedures that require a senior CBS News executive to be consulted before interrupting regular programming.

The fact that Arafat already had been reported near death for several days also figured in the network's decision.

Bush boosts Sharansky

Natan Sharansky's new book on democracy won him a meeting with an admirer — President Bush.

Sharansky, a former Soviet refusenik and current Israeli government minister, said Sunday that he received a call from the White House while in the United States last week to promote his book, "The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror."

Sharansky told Israel's Army Radio: "I met with Condoleezza Rice and then with President Bush. This is a subject very close to the president's heart. He believes that stability can be brought to the world through democracy."

Presbyterian Church threatened over Israel

The Presbyterian Church USA stepped up security at its headquarters and its churches after receiving a letter threatening arson attacks because of its policies in the Middle East.

The letter, received Nov. 10 at the church's Louisville headquarters, threatened to set churches on fire while people were inside in retaliation for "anti-Israel and anti-Jewish attitudes," said Jerry Van Marter, director of the Presbyterian news service.

The letter had no return address, but it was postmarked from Queens, N.Y., Van Marter said.

The letter gave a Nov. 15 deadline for the church to reverse its Middle East policies, he said.

In June, the church's General Assembly decided to begin selective divestment from corporations doing business in or with Israel.

Chabadniks gather in New York

More than 2,500 Chabad-Lubavitch emissaries are winding up their annual convention.

The five-day conference in New York City, attended by Chabad rabbinical representatives and communal leaders living in 65 countries, ends Sunday evening.

Among the topics discussed at the conference include expanding the horizons of college campus outreach and providing support to the growing number of special-needs children and their families.

Art exhibit under attack

A New York state assemblyman called on a local art exhibit to be canceled because it "promotes terrorism and violence."

Assemblyman Ryan Scott Karben called on the Westchester County Center to close the exhibit, which includes a piece that features a tent that is called a "Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948" and another that shows a kaffiyeh trapped in a Star of David made of barbed wire.

MIDDLE EAST

Time: Arafat skimmed money from gas trade

Yasser Arafat siphoned \$2 million a month from the gas trade last year in the territories, Time magazine reported.

The skimming by the now-deceased Palestinian Authority president was discovered last year during an audit conducted by Palestinian Finance Minister Salem Fayyad.

Discovery of the graft boosted the Palestinian Authority's treasury and cut gas prices for Palestinians.

Hezbollah aims high

Hezbollah threatened to attack Israel will bomb-laden drones. Speaking after his Lebanese militia recently managed to fly a spy drone into Israel, Hezbollah chief Sheik Hassan Nasrallah said Saturday that such forays would be stepped up if Israel continues its surveillance flights over the border.

"We are not only able to face any violation with a violation, we also have the capability to respond to any aerial aggression with an attack from the air," Nasrallah told a Hezbollah rally.

He said the drones could be loaded with explosives and sent on kamikaze missions against a "power station, a water station or a military base."

Israeli anti-aircraft batteries have been beefed up since the Nov. 8 drone incursion.

An Iranian official told an Arab newspaper that the country's Revolutionary Guard had supplied Hezbollah with eight drones.

According to Israeli estimates, the aircraft can carry 90 pounds of explosives.

Disengagement fracas in West Bank

Two Israeli settlers were arrested after confronting officials en route to inspect West Bank communities slated for evacuation.

Sunday's fracas took place when a convoy from the Disengagement Authority was stopped before it could reach Homesh and Sanur, two of four West Bank settlements slated for withdrawal next year.

The two men may face assault charges after a policeman who rushed to the scene was hurt.

Gay Israeli wins inheritance right

An Israeli court recognized the right of a gay man to inherit property from his partner.

Sunday's ruling by the Nazareth District Court in favor of the Kiryat Shmona man who wanted to inherit the home he shared with his deceased boyfriend, was seen by legal analysts as a step toward homosexual unions being recognized in Israel.

Currently gays married abroad enjoy limited common-law recognition in the Jewish state.

WORLD

German extremists rally

More than 1,000 right-wing extremists in Germany demonstrated at a World War II military cemetery today near Berlin.

The demonstration, which a court refused to ban, was intended to mark a day of mourning for fallen soldiers.

The day has been adopted by some right-wing extremists as a time to celebrate their heroes, members of the SS and German army.

There have been several neo-Nazi marches held in recent weeks, since two extreme right-wing parties managed to get just enough votes in former East German states last September to win seats in local Parliaments.