

IN THE NEWS

Israeli, terrorists slain in territories

An Israeli civilian and four Palestinian terrorists were killed in clashes in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for a landmine that tore through a jeep patrolling the Gaza settlement of Morag on Wednesday, killing a father of five and wounding three soldiers.

Troops fired back, killing two Palestinian gunmen at the scene.

In the West Bank, Israeli forces shot dead two Hamas fugitives at their hideout north of Ramallah.

Sharon gets budget boost

Israel's 2005 budget passed its first Knesset reading.

In a surprise to many political analysts, 64 lawmakers voted in favor of the budget Wednesday, while 53 were opposed.

Final ratification has not yet been scheduled.

Reform to Bush: clarify 'God' statement

The Reform movement called on President Bush to state that there should be no religious test for the office of the presidency.

In an interview published Wednesday in the Washington Times newspaper, Bush said he does not see "how you can be president without a relationship with the Lord."

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, called on Bush to clarify the remark.

"On its face, the president's comments imply that only people with faith in God would be suitable for the office of president of the United States.

"This would suggest that millions of Americans whose religious beliefs do not accept monotheism, and millions of non-believers, are unfit to be the president of our nation," Saperstein said in a statement.

WORLD REPORT

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Bush outlines expectations for both Israel, Palestinians

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — It was an invitation without an RSVP.

Come on over, President Bush told his newly elected Palestinian Authority counterpart — but let's wait to set a date. The check is in the mail — I'm just not sure how much.

The decisive election Sunday of Mahmoud Abbas, the moderate favored by Israel, the United States and the international community, has been followed by a flood of "What nexts?" that are decidedly less decisive.

That leaves open crucial questions about the coming year, including the long-term viability of Abbas and his commitment to ending violence, as well as his role in assuming control in the Gaza Strip and areas of the West Bank once Israel pulls out.

Bush called Abbas on Monday to congratulate him. "The president had a very good conversation with President-elect Abbas yesterday," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan.

Phone calls from Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon came after Abbas extended an olive branch to Israel, saying "We extend a hand to our neighbors. We are ready for peace, peace based on justice." That was just the message Bush and Sharon were waiting to hear before extending congratulations.

Bush's invitation to Abbas was dramatic, in that it was the first to a Palestinian Authority president since the Clinton administration. Bush's policy was to isolate Abbas' predecessor, Yasser Arafat, whom it linked to terrorism.

But it was also hedged: "I look forward to talking with him at the appropriate time," Bush said Monday. "I look forward to welcoming him here to Washington if he chooses to come here."

Bush's reluctance to set a time for a call and a date for a visit suggested that the pre-election hesitancy to openly embrace Abbas had not passed with his election.

"The United States has decided not to immediately invite him because if he comes to the United States now he'd have to go home empty-handed," said Stephen P. Cohen, a scholar with the Israel Policy Forum, which promotes greater U.S. engagement in the Middle East.

That's because the administration is looking to see what first steps Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, will take.

It is also in part because both Bush and Sharon are in the process of switching administrations.

Bush is clearing away much of his top diplomatic staff as he heads into his second term.

Sharon is consolidating a national unity government with the Labor Party and United Torah Judaism, having jettisoned his previous hard-line and secularist partners in order to win parliamentary support for his withdrawal plan.

U.S. officials have said that embracing Abbas during the Palestinian's tenure as prime minister without allowing him to show immediate dividends helped scuttle his bid to wrest power away from Arafat then.

A public embrace now without showing results could end the surge of Palestinian optimism that accompanied the elections.

And Palestinian officials say that Abbas

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NEWS ANALYSIS

■ *After Abbas' victory, Bush sets out expectations for both sides*

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needs results if he is to survive as a leader.

Diana Buttu, who has negotiated with the Israelis in the past as an official of the Palestine Liberation Organization, cautioned that Abbas should not be seen as Arafat's successor as the leader of the Palestinian people, but merely as leader of the Palestinian Authority.

"He is now the person responsible for a very small percentage of the West Bank" and the Gaza Strip, she said Monday in Washington, where she delivered a post-election analysis. "He is a president who is living under direct Israeli rules and conditions."

While Abbas got an official 62 percent of the vote, she said that only 70 percent of eligible voters actually were registered, and of those only 70 percent voted in the elections. That adds up to just a 50 percent turnout from the eligible population. This, suggested Buttu, is a sign that many Palestinians were going to wait and see with Abbas.

Turnout for last month's first round of municipal elections in the West Bank was much higher, she said, because power had devolved to local authorities, a fact she attributed to the ravaging of the Palestinian national infrastructure through four years of the intifada and Israeli military action.

"There is a realization, an awareness that power is no longer wielded on a national level," she said, suggesting that the Islamist Hamas group sat out the national elections but contended in the municipal elections because the local authorities offered more immediate powers.

"Palestinians are going to be looking to Mahmoud Abbas to change their conditions," she said. "If Israel squanders this opportunity, my fear is that it's going to get even uglier."

Israelis, naturally, pointed out that it is not only Israel that has an opportunity to seize — the Palestinians also have much to do.

"There's not going to be any disengagement with 10 missiles slamming into Israel every day," said an Israeli official, referring to the rockets being fired against Israeli targets in Gaza.

For his part, Bush made clear he had expectations of both sides.

"It's going to be very important for Israel to fulfill its obligation on the withdrawal from the territories that they have pledged to withdraw from," he said Monday.

"It is essential that Israel keep a vision of two states, living side by side in peace, and that as the Palestinians begin to develop the institutions of a state, that the Israeli government support the development of those institutions, and recognize that it is essential that there be a viable economy, that there be a viable health care system, that people be — that people be allowed to

start building a society that meets their hopes and needs."

Bush also emphasized his expectation that "the Palestinian leadership consolidate security forces, so that they can fight off those few who still have the desire to destroy Israel as a part of their philosophy."

As for the U.S. role, the White House appeared once again to be adopting a wait-and-see posture.

U.S. officials said funding for the Palestinians would be forthcoming — but how much depends on how events unfold.

"We're going to take a look at what action we might take as well as what funding," National Security Council spokesman Shawn McCormack told CNN.

Bush suggested that more answers would be forthcoming at a conference in London next month, which will be attended by Condoleezza Rice, his designated secretary of state.

He said he looked forward to helping the conference in London, aimed at helping the Palestinians develop their institutions, and to helping "Abu Mazen's vision of a peaceful, active, vibrant state to become reality."

Bush did not set a date for an Abbas White House visit 'because if he comes to the United States now he'd have to go home empty-handed.'

Stephen P. Cohen
Israel Policy Forum

Jewish group visits White House

By PETER EPHROSS

NEW YORK, (JTA) — When President Bush met this week with 19 nonprofit groups doing tsunami relief work, he emphasized the importance of providing long-term relief and building economic opportunity.

So it makes sense that the one Jewish group at Monday's meeting at the White House was the American Jewish World Service.

Southeastern Asia, where the tsunami has killed at least 160,000 people, is one of the regions where the AJWS has been involved for years.

The invitation marks a recognition of the AJWS, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Representatives of

CARE, Catholic Relief Services and Project HOPE were also at the meeting.

Bush focused on "efficient collaboration and the idea of staying for the long haul," said AJWS President Ruth Messenger, who represented the group at the White House.

The AJWS, which has collected \$6 million so far, expects to grant more than \$1 million to 34 groups in the affected area by the end of the week.

Meanwhile, a coalition of 34 Jewish groups from the Jewish Coalition for Disaster Relief have joined to form the Jewish Coalition for Asia Tsunami Relief. The coalition will coordinate relief efforts, using the experiences and resources of groups who already have done such work, to avoid duplicating efforts.

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Sharon gets his unity coalition — for now

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After months of parliamentary showdowns and back-room bargaining, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has finally cobbled together the coalition government crucial for his Gaza withdrawal plan.

The alliance between the ruling center-right Likud Party, center-left Labor Party and fervently Orthodox United Torah Judaism bloc was sworn in Monday, shortly after Mahmoud Abbas was elected Palestinian Authority president, a twin coup hailed by many as a new opportunity for peace.

But early indications are that Sharon's national unity government may prove short-lived.

It was ratified in the Knesset by a vote of just 58 to 56, with 13 Likud "rebels" siding with right-wing nationalists who have denounced Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank this year. The prime minister was saved by the sympathy votes of Yahad, a left-wing opposition bloc that supports the planned withdrawals.

Even Sharon's new Cabinet, which met for the first time Tuesday, is unstable.

The five-member UTJ was nowhere to be seen, having declined to accept

any government post for a three-month probationary period. The absence was a reminder of the fact that the faction officially opposes territorial concessions to the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, the eight new Labor ministers were quick to flex their partisan muscles.

Haim Ramon, a minister without portfolio, caused a stir by proposing that settlers who resist evacuation be prosecuted in military courts, a forum usually reserved for Arab terrorists.

"Keep the army out of this," Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz replied.

"I do not anticipate this government will last long. There'll be early elections soon enough" predicted Uri Ariel, a lawmaker from the far-right National Union bloc.

It was to avert snap elections that Sharon, who lost his parliamentary majority after firing recalcitrant National Union and National Religious Party members from his Cabinet last year, joined forces

with Labor under his old friend and political rival, Shimon Peres.

Peres had a new post — vice premier — invented for him. Apart from Ramon and Pines-Paz, the other Laborites in the Cabinet divvied up minor portfolios: Ben-

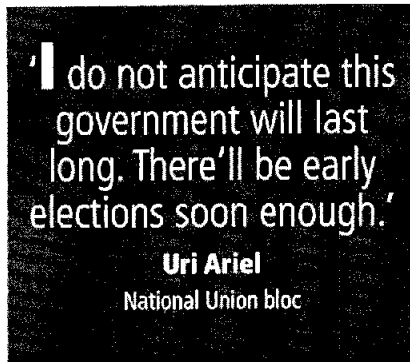
jamin Ben-Eliezer to national infrastructure, Dalia Itzik to communications, Isaac Herzog to housing and construction and Shalom Simhon to environment.

But although Labor backs withdrawals from lands the Palestinians want for a state, and Peres lends much-needed

diplomatic elan to Sharon's government, the alliance could prove abortive in another crucial area: the economy.

Some see the developments as signs of a new style of Israeli politics.

"The prime minister has proven himself to be a master at assembling the mini-coalitions he needs to pass decisions on an ad hoc basis," a Sharon confidant said. "It seems that a watershed event like disengagement requires these sorts of unconventional tactics." ■



Families of JCC shooter victims can sue gun makers

By TOM TUGEND

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Three families whose children were shot in the 1999 attack on a Jewish community center can pursue their lawsuit against the companies that made the weapons used in the shooting spree.

The U.S. Supreme Court on Monday let stand a ruling by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals that the suit could go to trial, and declined to hear an appeal for dismissal by two gun manufacturers and two distributors.

The suit grew out of the Aug. 10, 1999, attack by Buford Furrow Jr., a self-avowed anti-Semite and white supremacist, on the North Valley Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, near Los Angeles, which left three teenagers, one adult and three children wounded.

The lead plaintiff in the suit is the mother of Joseph Ilete, a Filipino-American postal carrier, who was killed by Furrow the same day in a separate attack.

Last May in San Francisco, the full 26-member appeals court, in a split decision, confirmed that the case could be tried.

At the time, Donna Finkelstein, whose daughter Mindy, then 16, suffered two gunshot wounds to her leg, told the reporters, "I am

so elated that we are finally moving forward."

Similar sentiments were expressed by Alan Stepakoff and Loren Lieb, whose son Joshua Stepakoff, then 6, also was shot in the leg.

Eleanor and Charles Kadish also are participating in the suit. Their son Benjamin, then 5, was the most seriously injured, with gunshots to his stomach and legs.

The large cache of weapons found in Furrow's car included an Austrian-made Glock 9-millimeter handgun and a 9-millimeter rifle, made by North China Industries. Both manufacturers are defendants in the suit.

In filing the original suit more than four years ago, attorney Joshua Horwitz of the Educational Fund To Stop Gun Violence said that Furrow, a convicted felon with a history of mental instability, should not have been allowed to amass an arsenal of assault-style weapons.

"It is not enough to let guns go out of your factory door and say, 'Sorry, we don't know where they're headed,'" Horwitz said.

The case now will return to the U.S. district court in Los Angeles for trial.

Congressional legislation that would have barred lawsuits targeting the gun industry failed last spring. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israeli communities exposed to rockets

Israeli authorities estimate that 46 communities inside Israel will be vulnerable to Palestinian rocket fire once Israel pulls out of the Gaza Strip.

The communities, all located in the western Negev region within four miles of the Gaza border, also will be exposed to potential terrorist infiltration, Col. Uzi Buchbinder, head of the civil defense department of Israel's Home Front Command, said Tuesday, according to Ha'aretz.

Islamic Movement leader sentenced

The leader of Israel's Islamic Movement was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in jail for funneling money to Hamas. Raed Salah was sentenced Wednesday in Haifa Magistrate's Court.

Four other leaders of the radical Islamist group were sentenced along with Salah to prison terms of between two-and-a-half to four-and-a-half years.

However, under terms of a plea bargain and because of time already served, Salah will be released six months from now, and three of the others sentenced will be released in the next few days.

Tehran threat up

Iran could develop nuclear weapons in two years, Israel's military intelligence chief warned.

In a rare break from Israel's official reticence on the Iranian nuclear program, Maj. Gen. Aharon Ze'evi-Farkash said Tuesday that the Islamic republic was striving to enrich uranium independently, which would give it weapons-grade material.

"According to our assessments, Iran is not now capable of enriching uranium to build a nuclear bomb, but it is only half a year away from achieving such independent capability, if it is not stopped by the West," Ze'evi said in a lecture at Haifa University's National Security Studies Center.

Syria's reach grows?

Israel reportedly is up in arms over a Russian plan to sell missiles to Syria.

The Russian newspaper Kommersant reported Wednesday that Russia intends to sell Syria a number of its Iskander-E missiles, which would bring most of Israel into range.

The deal prompted Israel to recall its ambassador from Moscow, according to the daily.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom did not confirm the report but told Reuters, "We held discussions on this here among ourselves a few days ago. We hope to reach the necessary understandings with the Russian government."

Sages split UTJ

United Torah Judaism, a key Israeli religious bloc, split into two parties.

The decision this week by Agudat Yisrael and Degel Hatorah, which had formed the five-man UTJ bloc, would not affect their participation in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's new coalition government, officials said.

The decision reportedly was made by Degel Hatorah sage Rabbi Yosef Elyashiv in protest after lawmaker Ya'acov Litzman of Agudat Yisrael became head of the Knesset Finance Committee, flouting a UTJ pledge upon entering the national unity government not to assume political posts for a probationary period of three months.

UTJ opposes Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank this year and agreed to join forces with the ruling Likud party in order to secure funding for religious causes.

NORTH AMERICA

U.S. to Russia: No sale

U.S. policy is against the sale of weapons to Syria, and Russia knows it, the State Department said.

Spokesman Richard Boucher said Wednesday that the department was seeking to confirm reports that Russia was planning to sell missiles to Syria, which is being sanctioned by the United States for sponsoring terrorism.

"U.S. policy on this is very clear. We're against the sale of weaponry to Syria, against the sale of lethal military equipment to Syria, which is a state sponsor of terrorism," Boucher said. "We think those kinds of sales are not appropriate. The Russians know about this policy. They know about our views."

Boucher said sanctions could be imposed if the sale is verified. "This is now speculation about something that may or may not occur," he said. "Let's see what does in fact happen, and we'll apply the law accordingly."

Are media sick of Israel-Palestinian fight?

Major media outlets are avoiding coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to avoid charges of bias from both sides, an ombudsman said.

Jeffrey Dvorkin, the National Public Radio ombudsman, suggested that NPR may have delayed a recent report on Palestinian Authority elections because the network is trying to avoid airing such reports altogether.

"Can it be that some journalists, along with some listeners, just wish this story would go away?" Dvorkin asked in his online column Tuesday.

"Most ombudsmen can attest that coverage of this subject draws constant allegations of bias. Anecdotally, I am told that some news organizations are now so battered that they tend to avoid the story as much as possible. Some of my colleagues at other news organizations say they report the story only when the outrages from one side or the other are too appalling to ignore."

WORLD

Jewish officials to meet Pope

A group of 160 Jewish leaders will meet with the Pope.

The group, including rabbis, cantors, diplomats and other Jewish officials from the United States, Israel and Europe, will meet Pope John Paul II on Jan. 18 at the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City.

Pave The Way, the ecumenical organization sponsoring the trip, is billing the papal audience as the largest-ever meeting of Jewish leaders with a sitting Pope.

"It is only fitting that we humbly thank him for all he has done for the Jewish people of earth and, in turn, making inroads toward true peace on earth," said Gary Krupp, Pave the Way's president and founder.

Among those taking part will be Rabbis Joseph Potasnik and Adam Mintz, executive director and president, respectively, of the New York Board of Rabbis; Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, chief rabbi of Efrat in Israel; and Oded Ben-Hur, Israeli ambassador to the Holy See.