

IN THE NEWS

Israel eases off in Gaza Strip

Israeli military action will be scaled back to encourage Mahmoud Abbas' efforts to win a truce from terrorist groups, Israel's national security adviser said.

"I think that in the next few days everything that it is not absolutely essential to carry out" right away "can be delayed," Giora Eiland told Army Radio on Monday.

Israel refuses to deal directly with Hamas and other terrorist groups, which want Israel to pledge to end all military action before they agree to call off attacks.

But recently Abbas, the Palestinian Authority president, has managed to secure an informal truce.

Letter blasts Russian Jews

Russian Jewish leaders criticized a letter signed by Russian public figures calling on the state to ban Jewish institutions as extremist organizations.

"We hope society will react properly to this statement," one of Russia's chief rabbis, Berel Lazar, told a news conference Monday in Moscow that was devoted to the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

The document, urging the prosecutor general to probe and possibly ban all Jewish institutions in Russia, was posted on a nationalist Web site earlier this month but became widely known only Sunday through a report on a popular Moscow radio station.

Cheney to lead Poland delegation

Vice President Dick Cheney will lead a delegation traveling to Poland for the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

The delegation, which will attend events Thursday in Poland, includes Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), the only Holocaust survivor in Congress; his wife, Annette, also a survivor; and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel.



WORLD REPORT

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

At special General Assembly session, United Nations remembers Holocaust

By RACHEL POMERANCE

UNITED NATIONS (JTA) — For the first time in its history, the United Nations allowed a prayer service on its premises. But perhaps even more surprising was the prayer itself — the Jewish hymn for martyrs — followed by the Israeli national anthem.

Sandwiched between a special U.N. General Assembly session marking the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the launch of an in-house exhibit commemorating that liberation, the prayer signaled the lengths to which the international body has gone this year to mark the Holocaust.

"The tragedy of the Jewish people was unique," U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan said at the special session Monday morning, leading a slew of speeches from diplomats and dignitaries.

"We must be on the watch for any revival of anti-Semitism and ready to act against the new forms of it that are happening today," Annan said, warning against "all ideologies based on hatred and exclusion."

Israeli and Jewish officials lauded the session and hoped that it would prove to be a watershed in the world body's traditionally anti-Israel attitude.

"This is an historic day," said Arye Mekel, Israel's consul general in New York.

"What will happen next we will wait and see," he said. "I hope that this is a turning point."

Annan took a leading role in lobbying for Monday's session, which Israel had requested. He is the first U.N. secretary-general to place the Holocaust in a Jewish context, said Eve Epstein, vice president of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy.

A movement is afoot to have a permanent Holocaust memorial at the United Nations, Epstein said.

Monday's session comes after the United Nations held its first major conference to address growing worldwide anti-Semitism in June.

At that time Annan addressed a crowd composed mostly of Jews and vowed to fight anti-Semitism. His resolve was bolstered by the principle that the United Nations — like Israel — was formed out of the ashes of World War II and the Holocaust.

For some in attendance, Monday's General Assembly session demonstrates the progress the United Nations has made since June. The session won written support from 152 of the United Nation's 191 member states and the room was roughly half full for the session, with most countries represented.

But others wonder whether a lasting connection will be made between the anti-Semitism of the past and what many consider a present-day manifestation in the form of intense anti-Zionism.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom used his speech Monday to connect the issues, as did an Italian representative.

"The question is will Kofi Annan take the next step" and support a resolution when the victims of anti-Semitism are Israeli, asked Anne Bayefsky, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and visiting professor at Touro and Metropolitan Colleges in New York.

Bayefsky wondered about the session's lasting impact, given the lack of any formal declaration or resolution. Still, she noted, "It's important that in the depths of the United Nations, people remember the Holocaust."

Jewish officials and Holocaust survivors

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■ *Annan speaks on Holocaust in General Assembly*

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in the audience Monday were hopeful and inspired.

"For me today, to be here at the United Nations, essentially representing my parents, who are no longer alive, and the murdered members of my family, is a tremendously emotional moment," said Menachem Rosensaft, founding chairman of the International Network of Children of Holocaust Survivors.

"We are at a critical stage of history, because this is a moment of the transfer of memory" from one generation to the next, he added.

Documenting the Holocaust in the halls of the United Nations is a major victory against those who deny that the massacre happened, he said.

"It's about time the U.N. will stand against evil," said Gila Almagor, an Israeli actress and author who attended the event as a guest of Israel's Foreign Ministry.

Almagor's mother survived the Holocaust but spent her life in and out of mental institutions. Consumed with guilt that she survived while her 13 siblings all perished, Almagor's mother constantly wrote numbers on her arms, simulating the tattoos burned into the forearms of concentration camp victims.

U.S. Congressman Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), the only Holocaust survivor in Congress, also played a role in bringing about Monday's session by lobbying for Annan's support.

After the morning session and before speaking to a B'nai B'rith-sponsored panel on the Holocaust, Lantos spoke with JTA.

"I am delighted with this session because it enables countries that wanted to focus attention on this issue to have a forum," and draws attention to discrimination against Jews and the Jewish state, said Lantos, who wrote legislation requiring the U.S. government to report incidents of anti-Semitism.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel prize

laureate Elie Wiesel also addressed the session.

"Sixty years later you may ask, why so late?" Wiesel said. "It's not too late for today's children. It is for their sake alone that we bear witness."

"I imagine you know what it would have meant to many of us in those years to realize that the world listened." ■

Anti-Semitic incidents up in Britain

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV (JTA) — The number of violent anti-Semitic acts in Britain is rising sharply, part of an overall trend in Europe, according to an Israeli government report.

Violent attacks against Jews and Jewish property in Britain rose from 55 reported incidents in 2003 to 77 in 2004, according to figures released Sunday in a report by the Global Forum Against Anti-Semitism, a joint project of the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

In France, which was singled out in last year's report for having the highest number of violent attacks against its Jewish population, there were 96 violent incidents in 2004, the same number as in 2003. The French government was commended in the report for taking stronger measures to tackle anti-Semitism.

The findings of the Israeli report overlap with some of the conclusions reached by a report on anti-Semitism released by the U.S. State Department late last year.

The American report also found that anti-Semitism had increased significantly in the last several years in Europe. The report cautioned, however, against making direct comparisons between different countries and regions, noting that some countries have more comprehensive reporting systems than others.

In addition to physical assaults against Jews, including stabbings and beatings, both American and Israeli reports found troubling anti-Israeli or anti-Jewish bias by some media outlets and intellectuals.

Both reports also commended some European governments, including those of France, Belgium and Germany, for taking effective measures to combat the threat of anti-Semitism and providing increased protection for their Jewish communities.

The Israeli report had harsh words for the governments of Ukraine and Russia,

where reported anti-Semitic attacks rose dramatically. In Russia the number of violent incidents increased from 4 to 55 and in Ukraine from 15 to 44 in the past year.

The response in those countries was "woefully insufficient," the report said.

The forum compiled its statistics from government agencies and Jewish organizations, noting that the findings were not authoritative.

"The figures indicate basic trends," the report noted, but added that "discrepancies may exist."

One of the trends noted in both the American and Israeli reports was the increasing role some Muslim elements have played in the attacks, notably in Western Europe.

The American report found that traditional far-right groups still accounted for a significant portion of anti-Jewish attacks but that "disadvantaged and disaffected Muslim youths increasingly were responsible for most of the other

incidents. This trend appears likely to persist as the number of Muslims in Europe continues to grow while their level of education and economic prospects remain limited."

In Eastern Europe, skinheads and others on the radical fringes of society were behind most anti-Semitic incidents, the American report said.

The Israeli report seemed to take aim at the claim that Israeli government policies have helped cause rising anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli sentiment in the world. Instead, the Israeli report found, the political position other governments took toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict affected the level of street violence against local Jews in their countries.

"A radical and violent Islam has become a pan-European problem and the position adopted by countries on Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict has an effect on anti-Semitism in that country," the report said. ■

(JTA Correspondent Daniella Peled in London contributed to this 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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Israelis wary as Russia plays disruptive role

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A projected billion-dollar arms sale to Syria is the latest sign of a major shift in Russia's Middle East policy — and analysts are asking how dangerous it might be for regional stability and for Israel.

In what they see as an ongoing bid to regain its lost global influence, Russia — like the former Soviet Union — has been developing regional ties as a counterweight to American influence in the Middle East, analysts say.

Israeli leaders are concerned that a Russian axis including Syria, Turkey and Iran could make peacemaking with the Palestinians and regional accommodation more difficult. Moreover, they say, the supply of missiles to Syria and nuclear technology to Iran constitutes a direct military threat to Israel.

Over the past year or so, partly as a consequence of the war in Iraq, analysts say Russia has been cultivating ties with Turkey, Iran and Syria. After losing the Mideast foothold provided by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, they say the Russians have been building a new axis of power based on those three key countries.

Russia is now Turkey's second-largest trading partner after Germany, with a volume of \$10 billion in trade per year. It has cemented ties with Iran by building a nuclear reactor at Bushehr and supplying other nuclear-related technologies. And it is contemplating bringing Syria more closely into the Russian orbit by selling it surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles.

Amnon Sela, an expert on Russia at the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center, maintains that the shift in Russian policy stems from a strategic decision by President Vladimir Putin to reassert Russian independence from the West.

Though the most important countries for Russia in this regard are China, Japan and India, Sela says the Muslim world provides another clear opening for Russian influence.

Sela fears Russia's moves in the Middle East could seriously destabilize the region. But he's convinced that if challenged, Putin will stop at the brink rather than burn his bridges to the West.

According to Israeli intelligence, the Russian offer to supply Syria with Iskandar-

E (SS-26) surface-to-surface missiles and Strella (SA-18) anti-aircraft rockets has been on the agenda for several months. A deal may well be struck during Syrian President Bashar Assad's visit to Moscow this week.

The Iskandar, which can carry a payload of more than 1,000 pounds, is said to be far more accurate than the Scud missiles Syria now has. With a range of 170 miles, it could reach any target in Israel.

But Israeli defense experts are said to be more concerned about the Strella, which could fall into terrorist hands and could be used against civilian aircraft.

Israeli appeals to Russia to drop the possible sale seem to have had little effect. In a telephone call to Putin on Jan. 20, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon argued that not only would the Russian weapons constitute a direct military threat but — because the Syrians are deeply involved in promoting Palestinian terrorism — encouraging Syrian meddling could undermine Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' efforts to curb violence and restart peace talks. Putin did not respond, Israeli officials say.

The shift in the Russian position seems to have taken most Israeli officials by surprise. As part of its Cold War with the United States, the Soviet Union had taken an uncompromisingly anti-Israel stance, but after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 Israel's ties with the successor Russian federation advanced by leaps and bounds.

The immigration to Israel of more than 1 million Jews from the former Soviet Union helped promote trade and cultural ties. In the late 1990s, Sharon, then foreign minister, even hinted briefly at a possible pro-Russian tilt in Israeli diplomacy.

But in late 2003, hints of a change in Russia's attitude to Israel started to surface. During a visit to Moscow in November of that year, Sharon urged his "close friend" Putin not to submit the "road map" peace plan to the U.N. Security Council. Putin ignored him.

Ten months later, during a visit to Israel, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov surprised his hosts by drawing a

sharp distinction between Chechen and Palestinian terrorism and denying that Russia was cooperating with Israel against international terrorism, though the Israelis said they were.

Last December, Putin himself, in what he afterward claimed was a slip of the tongue, used the word "Zionist" in a pejorative sense, accusing Ukrainian presidential candidate Viktor Yushenko of resorting to "anti-Russian and Zionist slogans."

Then, in early January, news broke of the projected missile sale

to Syria.

A few weeks later, the Soviet Foreign Ministry made its clearest statement yet against American policy in the Middle East and Washington's definition of Syria as a state that supports terrorism.

"It's well known that slapping labels on countries and unilaterally describing certain states as part of the 'axis of evil' has not improved anyone's security," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko told the Interfax news agency. "Syria is one of the key players in the region and resumption of talks with Israel on the Syrian question is important in the context of the Middle East peace process."

The Russian shift is even more disconcerting for Israel because of its implications for Moscow's relationship with Iran. A senior Israeli official told JTA that diplomatic efforts to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons could succeed only if supported by Russia, which seemed increasingly unlikely.

Israeli analysts believe Vice President Dick Cheney's recent comments that Israel could contemplate attacking Iran's nuclear program probably were as much calculated to spur Russia and the European Union to take effective diplomatic action before it is too late as they were a warning to Israel.

For Israel the stakes are high.

To counter the new Russian diplomacy, analysts say Israel will have to find the right mix of backing from Washington, representations to Moscow, reassurances to Ankara and peace overtures to Damascus. But with Russia again in the Arab corner and on the lookout for niches of influence, it could prove increasingly difficult. ■

The shift in Russian policy stems from Putin's strategic decision to reassert Russian independence from the West.

NEWS
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MIDDLE EAST

Knowing not enough

An Israeli Arab who escaped a suicide bus bombing after being tipped off by the terrorist was cleared of complicity charges.

On Monday, Nazareth Magistrate's Court acquitted Yasra Basri of failing to prevent a crime, finding that she had no way of knowing that the August 2002 attack was going to happen.

According to Basri, a young Palestinian man wearing a backpack sat next to her on the bus in northern Israel. When he heard her speak Arabic to a friend, he urged her to get off.

Feeling personally threatened, she did so — but said she didn't realize the man was about to set off a bomb in his bag, killing nine people.

"The defendant could not have known what thoughts were going through that man's mind, nor what plots were hatching in his heart," the ruling said.

On the brink

Iran will be able to build its own nuclear bomb by the end of the year, the Mossad chief said. Despite promising the European Union it would suspend uranium enrichment, Iran was still pursuing the process so it can make nuclear weapons independently, Meir Dagan told the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Monday.

"The assessment is that by the end of 2005 the Iranians will reach the point of no return from the technological standpoint," Dagan said, adding that thereafter the Islamic republic could be nuclear-armed within two years.

Israel, which bombed the Iraqi reactor at Osirak in 1981, has hinted it could similarly attack Iran to prevent it from getting the bomb.

Demographics or economics?

The Israeli birthrate dipped for the first time in the country's history. Officials said Monday that there were 1 percent fewer births in the general population in 2004 than the year before.

According to Ha'aretz, the drop-off was far more significant among Israeli Arabs — 3.4 percent.

The newspaper quoted unnamed officials as attributing the change in growth statistics to Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to trim subsidies to large families.

The official added that this specifically targeted the Israeli Arab minority, where couples not infrequently have up to 20 children.

Rockets uncovered in Nablus

Israeli forces uncovered a terrorist rocket factory in the West Bank.

Speaking after a gag order was lifted about the weekend raid on Nablus, security sources said Monday several Hamas men had been arrested at the secret laboratory in the city, where they were preparing Kassam rockets using methods learned from terrorists in the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinians have not been able to stockpile weapons in the West Bank, thanks to Israel's military sweep of the territory in April 2002 and regular patrols since.

Settler rabbi backs resistance

A top settler rabbi backed a call to resist to the death the Israeli government's settlement withdrawal plan.

Asked whether he agreed with a recent pro-settler slogan, "Better to die than disengage," Rabbi Dov Lior, the Yesha Council's chief rabbi, told reporters on Monday, "Yes, why not? It is easy to understand these people. For them, to destroy the land and give over the Strip to the terrorists is against the Torah of Israel."

Natural-born givers

Some people may be genetically programmed to do good, Israeli researchers believe.

According to a study conducted by a team of psychologists from Herzog Memorial Hospital and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a link exists between selfless behavior and a gene variant on chromosome number 11.

The chief researcher, professor Richard Ebstein, said surveys indicate that people with this gene variant get a good feeling from doing good, according to the Web site Israel21c.org.

WORLD

'Hidden children' honor rescuers

A Czech Jewish group will unveil a plaque on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

The Czech Hidden Child Organization, whose members were protected as children from the Holocaust by non-Jews, will unveil a plaque Thursday in memory of those who helped them and who received the designation of Righteous Gentiles.

Designed by sculptor Jaroslav Rona, the plaque contains the names of 167 people and will be placed on the wall of the Pinkas Synagogue.

Soviet army to get Jewish award

Vladimir Putin will receive an award acknowledging the role of the Soviet Army in liberating Nazi death camps.

Putin will receive the Salvation Medal from Israeli President Moshe Katsav and one of Russia's chief rabbis, Berel Lazar, when the Russian president participates in commemorative events this week in Poland marking the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Lazar told a news conference Monday in Moscow.

Lazar said Putin will be the first recipient of the honor, which later will be awarded to some Righteous Gentiles and army veterans who participated in the liberation of Nazi concentration camps.

Hate crimes not a crime in Slovakia?

Slovakia's Jewish community is protesting against a government plan to decriminalize Holocaust denial.

The Federation of Jewish Communities in Slovakia has filed a formal protest with the government against a Justice Ministry plan on the issue.

As in many European countries, publicly denying the existence of the Holocaust is a criminal act in Slovakia.

However, in a general overhaul of the penal code, the Justice Ministry will submit a bill to the Parliament in February that would eliminate any sanction for promoting the view that Jews were not systematically targeted for elimination under Hitler.

NORTH AMERICA

Poll: Some Canadians question Holocaust numbers

One in six Canadians believe fewer than 1 million Jews perished in the Holocaust, according to a new survey.

The survey was conducted in December 2004 by Environics Canada at the request of the Montreal-based Association of Canadian Studies.

The association will hold a symposium and memorial service on Thursday, in conjunction with the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.