

IN THE NEWS

Israel attacks Al-Aksa Brigade offices

Israeli aircraft struck Al-Aksa Brigade offices in the Gaza Strip. No one was hurt in Tuesday's strikes on buildings used by the Palestinian terrorist group.

Military officials said rocket salvos against Israel were planned to be launched from there.

The increasing reach of rockets fired from Gaza has prompted speculation that Israel could mount a ground counteroffensive, but Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz played this down.

Addressing troops on the border with Lebanon, he said, "The current fighting front is here, and not in the Gaza Strip. It is from here that terrorists set off to attack the Israeli home front."

Palestinian sources said some residents of northern Gaza, fearing Israeli retaliation, had appealed to terrorist groups to stop firing rockets from their land.

Iranian atomic arsenal draws Mossad warning

The head of the Mossad said Iran is trying to develop more than one nuclear weapon.

"The concern is that if they manage to acquire the bomb, they will not make do with the fissile materials required for one, but will go on producing larger amounts," Meir Dagan told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in his annual briefing Tuesday.

Group wants boycott of Iranian president

The umbrella organization for North American Jewish groups called for a boycott of Iran's president.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations said it has written to leaders around the world, asking them to refrain from contact with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad until he renounces his recent Holocaust denial and his calls to destroy Israel.



WORLD REPORT

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Back from stroke, Sharon's health has become an issue in elections

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Only two things seem capable of stopping Ariel Sharon's new Kadima party from winning March elections by a landslide: a hail of Palestinian rockets from the Gaza Strip or a turn for the worse in Sharon's health.

Ever since the prime minister suffered a minor stroke last week — he's scheduled for a heart catheterization procedure in January — speculation has been rife as to what might happen if Sharon were seriously incapacitated.

Some pundits say it would open the center of the Israeli political spectrum — space occupied today largely by Kadima — to fierce competition from other parties.

Some doubt whether anyone but Sharon would have the clout to carry through further withdrawals from the West Bank. And some predict that without Sharon, Kadima would simply implode.

What's clear is that Sharon's brief hospitalization has put the health issue and the question of who would succeed him as prime minister near the top of the election agenda.

Another potential embarrassment for Kadima could be ongoing Palestinian rocket fire on Israeli civilians. The fact that just months after Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, a move touted as Sharon's greatest foreign policy success, Palestinian rockets are falling almost daily on Israeli civilians and even reaching the port city of Ashkelon could have a major impact on the March ballot.

Traditionally, Israeli elections have been won or lost in the battle between Labor and

Likud over the middle ground between them. The difference in this election is that Kadima already has captured most of that political space.

If Sharon is taken out of the equation, however, both Labor and Likud would hope to make inroads into the centrist vote.

Regardless of whether or not Sharon is there, both Labor and Likud are positioning themselves for an assault on the centrist fringes. Labor leader Amir Peretz is deliberately distancing himself from the dovish left: "We are not Geneva," he says, referring to the left's "Geneva accord" peace initiative, which offers the Palestinians additional concessions beyond the peace plan that was on the table before the intifada began.

Peretz adds that Labor would be even tougher on terrorism than Kadima or the right, because "no one could accuse us of trying to scuttle peace prospects."

Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu also is trying to boost his centrist credentials. His representatives describe the Likud as "a liberal centrist movement," and Netanyahu is moving to marginalize the disproportionate influence within the party of a far-right grouping led by Moshe Feiglin.

Other smaller parties contesting the centrist space are Yosef "Tommy" Lapid's secular Shinui Party and Tafnit, a small party formed by a former Israel Defense Forces' deputy chief of staff, Uzi Dayan, which is running on an anti-corruption platform. These parties also would benefit from Sharon's absence.

Some pundits suggest that Kadima could

Continued on page 2

NEWS ANALYSIS

■ *If Sharon is incapacitated will his party go down as well?*

Continued from page 1

disintegrate without Sharon. Leading Kadima politicians, such as Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, respond that Kadima reflects a deep need in Israeli society that goes far beyond Sharon the man: A desire to create a Jewish and democratic Israel, free from terrorism, living within borders recognized by most of the international community.

Livni says Kadima stems from an awakening of right-wing Israelis from the dream of Greater Israel and a recognition among left-wingers that there can be no instant peace with the Palestinians. Without Sharon, the party might do less well at the polls, but still well enough to go on pressing for what it believes, Livni told Israel TV.

■
In Sharon's absence, Livni and Finance Minister Ehud Olmert probably would vie for the leadership. Olmert is far more experienced, is very close to Sharon and was the first Cabinet minister to back the Gaza withdrawal plan.

Livni, another Sharon favorite, formulated compromises with Sharon's Likud opponents in government and is drafting Kadima's election platform. Her big advantage is that she is more popular than Olmert: Polls show Kadima under Livni winning 30 seats to just 26 under Olmert. Under Sharon, however, the party is projected to get around 40 seats.

In the wake of Sharon's stroke, some pundits are advocating that leaders of each party name a No. 2, who would take over if the leader is unable to perform his

duties. In Sharon's case, the deputy would be Olmert, insiders say.

However, there's a more fundamental question: Could any other leader, in Kadima or in the rival parties, continue Sharon's policy of partitioning the Land of Israel?

Ha'aretz commentator Yoel Marcus thinks not. Sharon, he writes, is "one of those legendary leaders whose abilities and personal character bisected history at precisely that moment when their strength and leadership qualities were needed."

In Marcus' view, only Sharon can dismantle settlements, end the occupation and make an agreement with the Palestinians.

"At this point in time, Sharon has become the kind of leader who is irreplaceable," he concludes.

■
So how ill or frail is the 77-year-old Sharon? According to doctors who gave details of his condition on Monday, the minor stroke he suffered has not impaired his mental or physical faculties in any way. But, they say, he will have to undergo cardiac catheterization next month to seal a tiny perforation between the walls of his heart, which they describe as a minor physical defect he was born with. The procedure is relatively

simple and not expected to cause any problems.

Sharon's medical record shows that he was wounded in the thigh during the 1948 War of Independence and has a slight limp; he has had gall and kidney stones removed; has suffered from gout; and, at 5 feet 7 inches tall, is obese at 250 pounds.

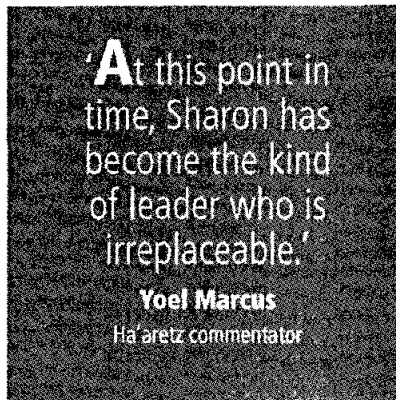
Still, his doctors insist, an exhaustive bat-

ttery of tests shows that Sharon is strong and healthy, does not suffer from high blood pressure and does not have signs of arteriosclerosis.

The most serious threat to Sharon's reelection could come from Gaza. The prime minister has ordered the IDF to do whatever it takes to put an end to Palestinian rocket fire.

One possibility is the establishment of an Israeli-held security zone in northern Gaza to force the rocket launchers back and put Israeli towns and cities out of range, but the Palestinians say they already have longer-range rockets which they will not hesitate to use.

If the security situation deteriorates drastically and the Likud is able to blame it on the withdrawal from Gaza, Sharon and Kadima could be in trouble. ■



Munich mastermind has no regrets

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Palestinian mastermind of the attack on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics said he had no regrets.

"We did not target Israeli civilians," Mohammed Daoud, former head of the PLO faction Black September, told Reuters on Tuesday.

"Whether a pianist or an athlete, any Israeli is a soldier." Daoud was speaking from his home in Syria after the U.S. release of Steven Spielberg's new thriller "Munich," which dramatizes the slaying of Israel's 11 athletes and the reprisal assassinations that followed.

Spielberg has voiced hope that his film

will help peace efforts, but Daoud accused the director of ignoring the Palestinian version of events.

"If he really wanted to make it a prayer for peace he should have listened to both sides of the story and reflected reality, rather than serving the Zionist side alone," Daoud said.

According to Spielberg's producer, Kathleen Kennedy, the film did draw on the advice of a Palestinian consultant and was previewed by distributors from the Arab world.

Some Jewish viewers have complained that the film places too much emphasis on the Palestinian perspective. ■

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Donation would boost Jewish Agency

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — A Russian Jewish financier is poised to give a \$50 million donation that may prove critical to the Jewish Agency for Israel's activities in the former Soviet Union.

The gift from Arcadi Gaydamak should help the agency, whose budget in the region has decreased over the last few years, to fund "Zionist education" projects in the region.

According to the agreement, Gaydamak will receive a seat in the Jewish Agency assembly, a 500-member representative body of Jewish leaders, and will have broad powers in the Jewish Agency's activities in the former Soviet Union.

The 53-year-old billionaire, who divides his time between Moscow and Israel, told JTA that the agreement was almost finalized.

"The issue has already been decided and we are expecting some legal matters to be concluded," Gaydamak said Monday.

The Jewish Agency was more cautious in evaluating the prospects for an agreement.

The agency is "actively seeking partners" to help fund Zionist education projects in the former Soviet Union, Michael Jankelowitz, a Jerusalem-based spokesman for the Jewish Agency, told JTA.

Jankelowitz confirmed that Gaydamak was one of those prospective partners, but

added that "these discussions are continuing and are yet to be finalized."

The issue first came up in meetings between Gaydamak and the chairman of the Jewish Agency, Zeev Bielski, in October in Moscow. It was discussed again earlier this month in Jerusalem.

The issue should be finalized by February, when the agency's board of governors is expected to adopt its final 2006 budget.

The agency's budget has fallen over the past three years from \$350 million to \$290 million.

Immigration to Israel from the former Soviet Union has decreased greatly in recent years, but still accounts for 40 percent of all immigration to Israel.

With North American federations, a source of at least half of the agency's budget, cutting their overall funding for overseas needs, the agency has been looking for funds.

Programs in the former Soviet Union not geared directly toward aliyah — including Jewish day schools and Sunday schools, camps and youth clubs — were among the programs hardest hit by the budget cuts.

If the agency is unable to find additional sources, much of its operation in the former Soviet Union would be closed down, an agency source told JTA.

The agency would have to kill many of its Jewish education and Jewish identity programs in smaller provincial communities, shifting the remaining budget to larger centers such as Moscow, St. Petersburg or Ekaterinburg, said the source, who spoke to JTA on condition of anonymity.

Gaydamak burst onto the Russian Jewish and Israeli scene several months ago with several high-profile sponsorship projects and purchases of sports teams. His eccentric philanthropy is generating nearly daily reports in the Israeli media.

A decade ago, Gaydamak was accused of unscrupulous business operations, most notably over his role in the sale of Russian arms to Angola in the 1990s. That scandal threatened the highest reaches of France's political establishment, including the son of then-President Francois Mitterrand.

Gaydamak denies wrongdoing and says he is a "victim of political persecution," but reportedly is wanted in France on charges of fraud and tax evasion.

A \$50 million donation would bolster the Jewish Agency's activities in the former Soviet Union.

ACROSS THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Village hopes emergency plan will avert future disasters

By PETER EPHROSS

CHENNAI, India (JTA) — Some 50 South Indian villagers are spread out along the sandy beach. The women are in brightly colored saris, many wearing gold-colored jewelry. Some men sit and repair fishing nets, while teenage boys playfully tackle each other.

Then the residents of Vellakoil get some news from a small group of fellow residents huddled a few yards away: Dangerous weather is on the way.

The men, women and children fan out across the beach, and some run into the Indian Ocean to save those out at sea. Using stretchers made of blankets and local bamboo, others carry the ill to a makeshift first-aid station.

Welcome to an emergency planning exercise that Indian non-profits, with support from the American Jewish World Service, are attempting to spread from village to village.

The exercise was launched about a decade ago in another part of India with the help of a group known as Sanghamitra.

Funds contributed after last December's devastating tsunami — and the chaos that it created for tens of thousands of villagers

along the southern Indian coast — are helping to pay for the training and travel to make the program work.

Now that it's reached Vellakoil, a village of approximately 475 people, the idea is to have residents bring the concept to other parts of India's southern coast.

The idea of villagers teaching other villagers is central to the ideology of groups the AJWS supports, and to the AJWS itself.

Villagers are not "super-excited about a bunch of experts coming in and telling them how to run their lives," says Kate Kroeger, the senior program officer responsible for the AJWS' work in India.

Vellakoil residents are serious about the exercise, which is not surprising in a village that lost 19 people in the tsunami.

It's impossible to say how much the exercise could help to offset the effects of another tsunami, but residents say the system helped lessen the effects of floods that recently swept across southern India. Even psychological benefits are no small thing among villagers still working to overcome the traumatic memories of the disaster.

"Now we have confidence," says Kuppamanikkam, a village woman who lost two of her grandchildren in the tsunami. "Now we don't have any fear."

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

New outposts erected

Israeli settlers said they had set up 13 new illegal outposts in the West Bank.

The Land of Israel Faithful said Tuesday its members had cobbled together the makeshift outposts near established communities as part of efforts to stop any further Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank.

The army said that if the outposts weren't evacuated voluntarily, it would dismantle them. Under the U.S.-led "road map" peace plan with the Palestinians, Israel is obligated to raze dozens of West Bank outposts.

Implementation has been sketchy, but the government vowed to crack down after it completed its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

Israel lobbies for U.S. convicts

Israel reportedly wants to extradite two of its citizens jailed in the United States.

Ma'ariv reported Tuesday that Justice Ministry officials are in contact with their U.S. counterparts in hope of having the two Israelis, who are serving life sentences in New York's Sing Sing Prison for a 1977 murder, transferred to correctional facilities in the Jewish state.

According to the report, Israeli officials would release them eventually since the convicts already have spent 27 years behind bars.

The Justice Ministry had no immediate comment.

Tragedy to joy for tsunami couple

An Israeli couple joined by the Asian tsunami decided to marry.

Ron Bombiger, an Israeli living in Los Angeles, proposed Tuesday to Dorit Nitzan, a doctor from Tel Aviv whom he met when she joined relief efforts on the Thai island of Phuket following last year's tragedy.

Nitzan, 45, tended to Bombiger as he recovered from leg injuries, and they became romantically involved.

"We call it the 'wave of love,'" said Bombiger, 49. They plan to marry in the coming months and honeymoon in Thailand.

Woman to head Israeli university

A woman will become president of an Israeli university for what is believed to be the first time.

Dr. Rivka Carmi, a pediatrician and geneticist, was named president of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Carmi replaces Avishai Braverman, who left his post to enter the political realm.

NORTH AMERICA

O.U. backs Alito's record

The Orthodox Union expressed support for U.S. Supreme Court nominee Judge Samuel Alito's record on church-state relations.

In a letter to Senate Judiciary Committee leaders, the Orthodox group came out against liberal organizations, who suggest Alito's rulings would hurt protections of religious liberty.

The letter, signed by Mark Bane, chairman of the O.U.'s Institute for Public Affairs, and Nathan Diament, the institute's director, said it's impossible to view Alito's positions on the separation of church and state as out of the mainstream.

"Only those who would advocate the most extreme views of religion-state relations in America — either total separation or total integration — could assert as much," the letter said.

The Orthodox Union did not specifically endorse Alito.

Another Orthodox group, Agudath Israel of America, announced its support for Alito last month; the Union for Reform Judaism announced its opposition to him last month.

Menorah lighting planned at Iranian office

Jewish leaders in Washington plan to light Chanukah candles in front of an Iranian office.

The Jewish Community Relations Council in Washington will light a menorah Tuesday evening in front of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Interests Section as a response to recent calls for Israel's destruction from Iran's president.

"The Jewish festival of Chanukah commemorates the victory of the Jewish people over a tyrannical regime," said the JCRC's executive director, Ron Halber. "We will light candles to symbolize the ongoing struggle against terror and tyranny."

Dating site extends its purview

The Frumster.com dating Web site says it is now open to all "marriage-minded Jewish singles."

Frumster, which says it has married off 250 Jewish couples, had been open only to Orthodox Jewish singles.

Officials with the site say it has 20,000 active members worldwide.

WORLD

Fire damages Moscow Jewish school

An electrical short circuit is believed to have caused a fire that seriously damaged the building of a Moscow Jewish boarding school.

No one was injured in the fire that started early Tuesday in the Mesivta Chabad school for boys.

All children were evacuated from the building and were given temporary shelter at a Chabad camp near Moscow.

The fire damaged some 4,000 square feet of the building's two floors and destroyed the roof. School officials said there was no reason to suspect arson.

French comic condemned

A French watchdog group condemned a French comedian for anti-Semitic behavior.

The National Office of Vigilance Against Anti-Semitism called for the state prosecutor to take action against Dieudonne.

The comedian, who has been tried for anti-Semitism numerous times, gave a Dec. 15 performance in Paris in which he listed the names of Jewish artists and philosophers, encouraging the audience to boo.

He then announced his support for the satellite television station Al-Manar, run by Hezbollah, which was banned in France last year for its anti-Semitic programming.

In the same performance, Dieudonne announced his intention to run for president of France in 2007.

Ukrainian Jews get Chanukah greetings

The Ukrainian Jewish community took to the airwaves to congratulate Jews over Chanukah.

The recorded Chanukah greetings from Azriel Haikin, one of Ukraine's chief rabbis, are being broadcast during evening prime time on the airwaves of Ukraine's two largest FM networks, which have listeners in some 50 cities across the country.

The Ukrainian-language greetings will be broadcast daily during the festival and will remind listeners of the number of candles to light each night.

Britain gets a Jewish lottery

A Jewish lottery was launched Sunday in Britain.

The lottery aims to raise money for charities in Britain, with some of the money earmarked for Jewish schools.

The lottery has a jackpot equivalent to \$17,000.