

IN THE NEWS
Jordan to return its envoy to Israel

Jordan plans to send a new ambassador to Israel after a yearlong hiatus. Jordanian government officials said the appointment was expected to be approved this week.

The previous envoy in Tel Aviv, Mahruf al-Bahit, was withdrawn last year in a move widely perceived as a reaction to Israel's actions against the Palestinians. Media reports named Bahit's likely replacement as Ali al-Eid, a veteran diplomat.

Israelis to sue Iranian leader

Israeli officials are preparing to sue Iran's president at the International Court of Justice.

The lawsuit would accuse Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of conspiring to commit crimes against humanity because of his repeated threats to destroy Israel.

Hillel pledges to double numbers

Hillel pledged to double its numbers over the next five years.

In its five-year strategic plan released this week, the largest campus Jewish organization in the United States pledged to double the number of students involved in Jewish life; double its annual campaign; double its funding to local Hillels; and launch an aggressive recruitment and retention program for campus professionals.

To help fund the effort, the Charles and Lynn Schusterman International Center will increase its endowment from \$10 million to \$100 million.

Hillel also pledged to strengthen its relationship with university administrations, Jewish Studies departments and Jewish communities near campuses where it works. A first step in that direction is taking place this week in Washington, where Hillel is sponsoring a conference of university presidents and Jewish communal leaders.

WORLD REPORT

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After Gaza pullout, border zone is on the front line more than ever

By URIEL HEILMAN

ASHKELON, Israel (JTA) — The boom of artillery fire along Israel's southern coast provides an incongruous backdrop to the bikini-clad girls, scruffy fishermen and ice cream stands just upwind of these sandy Mediterranean beaches, in the city of Ashkelon.

But with a Hamas-run quasi-state next door in Gaza, constant rocket fire in the direction of Israeli communities and daily attempts by Palestinians to infiltrate into Israel, this new frontier — occasioned by Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip last summer — has become the site of a massive Israeli military buildup.

The Israel Defense Forces are beefing up positions atop sand dunes all along the coast here, fortifying lookouts, increasing patrols and, lately, firing almost non-stop artillery barrages into the Gaza Strip.

"This border is not cooling off," says Eli Toledano, deputy platoon commander at an IDF base just east of Gaza. "I would not call it a stable situation."

Hardly a night passes where the IDF does not catch Palestinians trying to infiltrate Israel through the Gaza border fence, hit IDF patrols with gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades or bomb IDF patrols.

But the most irksome — and deadly — Palestinian action so far has been the firing of rockets at Israeli towns near Gaza.

More than a dozen civilians, including several Palestinians, have been killed in the past two years from rocket fire. Militants have stepped up their attacks since Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip last summer.

Most of the rocket fire nowadays is aimed at Ashkelon, the closest Israeli city to Gaza,

about eight miles away. No rockets have reached Ashkelon — yet — but some have fallen in the industrial zone just south of the city, where a major power station, desalination plant, oil refinery and more than 60 other factories are located.

Anat Wienstein-Berkovits, a spokeswoman for Ashkelon's mayor, says the rockets are terrorizing the 5,000-plus people who work in the industrial zone.

"It's not the damage that a Kassam causes," she says. "If a Kassam falls onto a sand dune or a road and doesn't cause any damage, the workers there still live in fear that one day they will fall in a place where it will cause damage."

"It's really terror," Wienstein-Berkovits says. "It's just like the threat of a suicide bomber."

This week Palestinians fired a Katyusha rocket toward Ashkelon. It was the second time in recent months that a Katyusha, which has a range of up to 15 miles, has been fired from Gaza. It landed in a chicken coop in the Israeli town of Netiv Ha'asara, killing some 30 chickens.

The Israeli army responds to the rocket fire with heavy artillery barrages, which the IDF says helps deter Palestinians from firing more rockets.

"Terrorist organizations need to understand that Kassam fire is not worthwhile," says Tal Lev-Ram, spokesman for the IDF's Southern Command. "But they are still not convinced and they continue to fire. And our response will continue to be harsh and to exact a heavy price."

Most days, the IDF fires hundreds of shells into Gaza. They come from artillery batteries

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■ Following Gaza withdrawal, border areas more vulnerable than ever

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to Gaza's east and north, from navy vessels patrolling the Mediterranean west of Gaza and sometimes from Israeli helicopters crisscrossing the sky above.

The IDF says the idea is not so much to hit the terrorists firing rockets — artillery fire is not accurate enough for that — but to make it difficult for terrorists to safely launch their rockets, and to deter rocket fire through the unpleasantness of the constant shelling.

The IDF says the strategy has reduced the frequency of rocket attacks and ultimately will help bring quiet, without the need for an incursion into Gaza.

"If there won't be quiet on our side, there won't be quiet on their side," Lev-Ram vows.

Two weeks ago, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh reportedly warned senior Islamic Jihad officials that their rocket fire was harming Palestinian interests by provoking the Israeli artillery barrages. Some of those barrages have killed Palestinian civilians.

But Israelis who live in the region say the near-constant refrain of artillery is more troublesome than the Kassams themselves. On one recent day, Israel fired more than 1,200 shells into Gaza.

The artillery fire "has become very troublesome," Ashkelon's mayor, Roni Mehatzri, tells JTA. "We demanded that the IDF do everything possible to halt the fire. The noise of the firing of the artillery is simply terrible. It really is harm-

ful. Citizens are afraid of it."

"We can't live like this," he adds.

The IDF says its goal is to protect the residents of southern Israel while disrupting life as little as possible. That means that IDF jeep patrols share the road with tractors and farm vehicles; weekend cyclists may find their picnics interrupted by the roar of an armored personnel carrier nearby; and residents have had to adjust to the artillery refrain.

Residents say they've learned to distinguish between the whoosh-whistle of the Kassam rockets, which leave a trail of

white-gray smoke, and the booming of the artillery, which is more steady, shakes the windows of houses and frightens dogs.

Roni Nir, who works in the Kukla restaurant in Mefallesim, just east of Gaza, says she doesn't pay attention to the artillery anymore.

"It's a little background noise. It's part of the routine here. I don't think about it," she says. "Those who live here aren't afraid. People who come from away and hear the noise, they get scared."

Mehatzri says he has conveyed his concerns to the new defense minister, Amir Peretz. Peretz may prove particularly receptive to the complaints because he happens to be a resident of Sderot, a Negev town where countless Kassams have fallen.

Peretz suggested last week that he plans to review the military's policy on the artillery. He toured the Gaza border this week for the first time since becoming defense minister.

The threat to Israel from a hostile border zone is nothing new. In the 1970s, the problems came from terrorists by way of Jordan. In the 1980s Israel suffered attacks along its border with Lebanon. Both those situations led to major military offensives.

In some ways, the situation at the Gaza border is similar to the current situation along the Lebanon border. In both places there is an omnipresent threat to Israelis living nearby — but whereas the threat in the north is mostly theoretical, near Gaza the threat is actualized

'If there won't be quiet on our side, there won't be quiet on their side.'

Tal Lev-Ram

Spokesman, IDF Southern Command

every day.

The IDF chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, said two weeks ago that he strongly opposes calls in the defense establishment for a major ground assault on Gaza, which could bear a heavy economic, diplomatic and human toll for Israel.

Touring some of the new Israeli army positions along the Gaza Strip's eastern boundary, Capt. Elitsur Trabelsi says the army has a lot of work to do to bring stability to the border. Nevertheless, he says, it's better than being in Gaza.

"When we were in Gaza, the threats came from 360 degrees," Trabelsi says, halting his jeep to watch an artillery battery discharge its shell. He went on after the boom subsided and the smoke had cleared.

"The threat was always here," Trabelsi says. "But once it was turned inward. Now it's all outward, and this is what we're trying to deal with. If the price is that a soldier dies and not civilians of the State of Israel, so be it. This is our mission."

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Yad Vashem: Let Darfur refugees stay

New York (JTA) — Yad Vashem's chairman reportedly called on the Israeli prime minister to let refugees from Darfur remain in Israel. Avner Shalev wrote to Ehud Olmert on Sunday that "as members of the Jewish people, for whom the memory of the Holocaust burns, we cannot stand by as the refugees from the genocide in Darfur hammer on our doors," Ha'aretz reported.

There are fewer than 100 refugees in Israel who fled Darfur, where hundreds of

thousands of people have been killed by government-sponsored militias.

Most of the refugees are being held in prisons or on army bases because Sudan is considered an enemy country.

Shalev, however, said security reasons cannot be used as an excuse, noting that countries such as Australia, Canada and Britain cited security concerns when they sent Jewish refugees to detention camps during the Holocaust.

Olmert sees convergence plan as 'Zionism's lifeline'

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Ehud Olmert remains firmly committed to his “convergence plan,” the evacuation of tens of thousands of Jewish settlers from the West Bank and the establishment of new borders between Israel and the Palestinians by 2010.

But even after Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank last summer, the Bush administration and its partners in the “Quartet” working for Israeli-Palestinian peace — the European Union, United Nations and Russia — would prefer to see Israel and the Palestinians negotiate under the terms of the “road map” peace plan, which provides a framework for step-by-step peacemaking.

Olmert says he is ready to try negotiations, but if it becomes clear that there is no serious Palestinian partner, he intends to go ahead with his plan unilaterally.

What is the convergence plan?

The idea is to relocate far-flung, isolated West Bank settlements in existing large settlement blocs closer to the pre-1967 border between Israel and the West Bank. This will mean a “convergence,” or in-gathering, of settlements behind the security barrier Israel is building in the West Bank. Of the 250,000 settlers in the West Bank, an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 will be affected.

The idea behind the “convergence” is to create a clear separation between Israelis and Palestinians, with Israelis to the west of the barrier, Palestinians to the east. The concentration of settlements in a much smaller area will make it easier for the Israel Defense Forces to defend them.

The move could also trigger a two-state dynamic: Israel on one side of the fence, which would become a temporary or perhaps permanent border, and Palestine on the other. If the convergence is achieved through Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the borders would presumably be permanent and approved by the international community. If, however, Israel moves unilaterally, it could leave the door open to future final border negotiations with the Palestinians, or seek international approval for the new lines it sets on its own.

How does Olmert's “convergence” differ from Sharon's “disengagement” from Gaza and the northern West Bank last summer?

BACKGROUNDER

First, the scale is much larger. Last summer's evacuation affected about 9,000 settlers; the convergence plan could touch 10 times that number. Second, Olmert will have to decide which of the two disengagement models to adopt: Full withdrawal, as was the case with Gaza, or continued presence as in the northern West Bank? The advantage of a total pullback is that it would herald the end of the occupation and win international kudos for Israel; a continued military presence in the evacuated areas, however, could make it easier to fight terror and in particular, to minimize the firing of rockets across the border.

Why is Olmert so intent on going through with the “convergence” plan?

He calls it “Zionism's lifeline.” That is because he believes Israel cannot allow itself to be sucked into an endless occupation that might lead to international pressure for a one-state solution, in which Palestinians would be the majority. In Olmert's view, Israel cannot allow a rejectionist Palestinian government, like Hamas, or a weak Palestinian leader, like Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, to enforce a status quo, which has the seeds of a one-state dynamic that could spell the end of Israel as a Jewish state. The “convergence” plan is to a large measure designed to pre-empt that scenario, by creating a clear-cut Jewish majority in a smaller Israel. If it works, the plan will defuse the “demographic time bomb” and regain for Israel, no longer an occupier, the moral high ground in any ongoing conflict with the Palestinians.

But why can't Israel just wait for a strong, pragmatic Palestinian partner to emerge?

Because the demographics would be shifting in the Palestinians' favor, and the continued occupation could lead to an erosion in Israel's international position. Therefore, Olmert speaks of Israel “taking its fate into its own hands.”

Where will a unilateral “convergence” by Israel leave final-status issues, like refugees, Jerusalem and permanent borders?

Olmert hopes it will create the contours of a permanent peace agreement that can be hammered out in the future with a pragmatic Palestinian leadership. It leaves open the possibility of border rectifications and arrangements in Jerusalem. As for refugees, although it does preclude an agreement, Israel will insist that the issue be solved within the confines of the Palestinian state, with no right of refugee return to Israel.

If no Palestinian partner emerges, will Israel be able to persuade the international community to recognize the new lines as permanent borders?

Olmert would like to get an American commitment on this, which would help him gain stronger domestic support for the plan. This, however, does not seem likely

now. But a few years down the road, especially if Hamas is still in power, things could change.

What about the Jordan Valley, part of the West Bank that Israel considers strategically crucial?

This could be a source of future friction between Israel and the United States. Olmert wants to maintain some sort of military presence there. The Americans might argue that such an Israeli presence impinges on their view of a viable Palestinian state.

How do the Palestinians and Arab states view the convergence plan?

They are all strongly opposed. The Palestinians fear they could be marginalized and left facing a fait accompli which serves Israeli rather than their interests. Jordan and Egypt fear it could radicalize frustrated Palestinians even further, with a potential for violent spillover into their territories. Jordan's King Abdullah has complained that the convergence plan could sound the death knell for the Hashemite Kingdom.

How much settler opposition is there likely to be?

Settlers are threatening much stronger resistance than there was in the Gaza/northern West Bank evacuation. But their leaders promise to bar physical violence against the evacuating forces.

How much is it likely to cost?

Initial estimates suggest it could go as high as \$18 billion, based on the \$1.8 billion cost of the disengagement plan.

How does Olmert's convergence differ from Sharon's disengagement last summer?

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Alleged predator rabbi indicted

A Maryland rabbi was indicted on charges relating to sexual overtures toward a minor.

Rabbi David Kaye, 56, is scheduled to be arraigned June 9 by a U.S. district court on charges of "coercion and enticement" and "travel with intent to engage in illicit sexual contact with a minor."

The charges stem from a "Dateline NBC" investigation last fall of alleged Internet predators. Kaye resigned his position as vice president of programs for the Rockville, Md.-based Panim: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values days before the "Dateline" episode aired.

According to a spokesperson for the U.S. Attorney, the rabbi is in federal custody pending trial, the Washington Jewish Week reported.

Congressman says AIPAC volunteer out of line

A leading Jewish congressman came to the defense of a colleague who is in a dispute with AIPAC.

Rep. Betty McCollum has banned officials of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee from lobbying her until the organization apologizes for a volunteer who allegedly said McCollum supports terrorists.

Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), the ranking Democrat on the U.S. House of Representatives' International Relations Committee, said the alleged attack by the AIPAC supporter "is an approach reminiscent of the Taliban" and violates the spirit of free debate. Ackerman is one of AIPAC's strongest supporters in the House.

The volunteer, Amy Rotenberg, flatly denies the allegation arising out of a conversation with McCollum's chief of staff, Bill Harper.

Howard Kohr, AIPAC's executive director, has asked for a meeting with McCollum.

Harper told JTA on Monday that there would be no meeting until there was an apology.

McCollum opposes a bill favored by AIPAC and Ackerman that would ban U.S. contact with the Palestinian Authority and severely restrict assistance to the Palestinians.

McCollum favors isolating the Hamas terrorist group governing the Palestinian Authority, but wants to give the United States some leeway in dealing with the Palestinian Authority.

College presidents debate religion

Many U.S. academics demean the role of religion in public life, the chancellor of the University of Texas system said.

In a Sunday evening discussion among college presidents at a Hillel gathering in Washington, Mark Yudof also said students had complained to him that their professors sometimes don't take religion seriously, according to the Washington Jewish Week.

The discussion included Georgetown's president, John DeGioia, and Yeshiva University's president, Richard Joel.

Sunday afternoon's opening plenary of the three-day conference, "The University and the Jewish Community," emphasized the need to be "universally human" and "distinctively Jewish."

Camp guard loses appeal

A U.S. appeals court upheld a decision stripping a former concentration camp guard of his U.S. citizenship.

On Monday, the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals denied the appeal of Iwan Mandycz, who lost his citizenship after a judge ruled last year that he concealed his wartime behavior when he applied to immigrate to the United States in 1949.

Mandycz, 83, was a guard at the Trawniki and Poniatowa concen-

tration camps during World War II.

The U.S. Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, the department's Nazi-hunting unit, led the case against Mandycz.

MIDDLE EAST

Israeli envoy: Russia, China delaying Iran resolution

Russia and China are impeding passage of a Security Council resolution addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations said.

Speaking Monday to a group of B'nai B'rith International members in New York, Dan Gillerman said he is disappointed by the two permanent members' reluctance to support, or at least not oppose, a resolution that would clear the way for sanctions against Iran.

Gillerman also blasted Qatar, another Security Council member, which he said had blocked condemnation of a recent suicide bombing in Tel Aviv.

"We hope that there will be a change in the attitude of Qatar," he said.

WORLD

Mission hopes to boost Ethiopian immigration

The United Jewish Communities is leading a mission to Ethiopia this week to highlight its campaign for immigration to Israel by the Falash Mura.

More than 80 North American Jews are going on the trip, aimed at motivating participants to help the federation umbrella group meet its fund-raising goal of \$100 million for the Falash Mura, part of UJC's Operation Promise.

The Falash Mura are Ethiopians whose ancestors converted to Christianity, but are now returning to Judaism.

Like a similar UJC mission in February, the trip will include site visits to the cities of Addis Ababa and Gondar, where up to 15,000 Falash Mura are living while waiting to immigrate to the Jewish state.

The main Jewish aid compound for the Falash Mura in Gondar closed last week after the arrest of one of its officials.

But an official at the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, which runs the compound through Ethiopian intermediaries, said the compound was expected to reopen this week following the release of the Ethiopian official.

Annan to Jews: Support human rights council

Kofi Annan urged American Jews to support the newly created U.N. Human Rights Council.

"We have an opportunity to make a fresh start in this vital area, not least because the council is required to conduct a regular review of the human rights record of all countries, beginning with its own members," the U.N. secretary-general said in a statement delivered to a group from B'nai B'rith International on Monday by Angela Kane, an assistant secretary-general.

"I urge you to use your influence to ensure that states make the council a truly effective vehicle for upholding the highest standards of human rights."

The council, which convenes for the first time June 19, was created by the U.N. General Assembly in March to replace the old Human Rights Commission, which included several nations with poor human rights records and which was considered vehemently anti-Israel.

Israel and America favored replacing the old commission, but voted against the new one because they felt it was not different enough.