

IN THE NEWS

U.N.: Israel out of five villages

Israel withdrew from five villages in southern Lebanon, the United Nations said.

A statement released by UNIFIL on Tuesday said Israeli soldiers no longer are present in the villages and that some Lebanese soldiers have moved into the area, The Associated Press reported.

Annan hopeful on ending blockade

Kofi Annan voiced hope for an imminent end to Israel's air and sea blockade on Lebanon.

"I don't want to raise any false hopes, but I hope that in the next 48 hours we will have some news on that, constructive, positive news," the U.N. secretary-general told reporters Tuesday during a visit to Cairo, where he also discussed the fate of two Israeli soldiers held hostage by Hezbollah.

Feinstein wants cluster bombs limited

U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein introduced an amendment to restrict the sale of U.S.-made cluster bombs.

The California Democrat, who is Jewish and a solid supporter of Israel, wants to guarantee that the weapons will "not be used in or near any concentrated population of civilians, whether permanent or temporary, including inhabited parts of cities or villages, camps or columns of refugees or evacuees."

The amendment to the Defense Department appropriations bill, due for consideration this month, does not mention any specific country, but suggests it was inspired by a State Department investigation into Israel's use of U.S.-made cluster bombs during the recent war with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Israel vigorously denies human rights groups' claims that it used the weapons in heavily populated areas.

WORLD REPORT

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With Olmert, Peretz on the ropes, Israel's Big Bang looks like big bust

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Six months ago, Defense Minister Amir Peretz seemed far and away the Labor Party's best ticket to power.

Now, after what's seen as the Israel Defense Force's poor performance during the war with Hezbollah, Peretz's political future is under a cloud.

Party strongmen claim that the former workers leader has lost his way and has no clear agenda, and they're clamoring to replace him as party boss.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert doesn't face quite the same pressure in his Kadima Party, but he also is in deep trouble: He faces mounting public criticism over the overall conduct of the war, and two potentially career-threatening investigations by the state comptroller — one for alleged cronyism in government and the other for suspected irregularities in the purchase of a luxury home in Jerusalem.

On Monday, State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss urged the attorney general to open criminal proceedings against Olmert.

Less than six months after they emerged as the two big winners in Israeli elections, Olmert and Peretz are fighting for their political lives.

Olmert is considering a government reshuffle to improve their images, but it might be too little too late.

Peretz had been in the defense job for a little more than two months when the war broke out.

He could not fairly be censured for the IDF's lack of preparedness, yet he did take

the blame for hesitancy in the decision-making process, not asking the military key questions and not seeming to have a clear war plan.

Even worse, Peretz stands accused of taking on a job for which he was patently unsuited in a bid to upgrade his political credentials after advisers reportedly told him that a stint in the Defense Ministry would fill a lacuna in his political CV and serve as a steppingstone to the premiership.

At the time, party rival Matan Vilnai, a former general, warned that Peretz's "tuition fees" at Defense might be paid with Israeli lives. Vilnai quickly apologized, but now says that had he known what was about to happen, he would not have recanted.

Vilnai is one of a number of Labor heavyweights openly challenging Peretz for the Labor leadership.

Others are Dani Yatom, former head of the Mossad spy agency; the former president of Ben-Gurion University, Avishai Braverman; and Ami Ayalon, who commanded the Navy and later the Shin Bet security service.

Braverman and Ayalon are working together to unseat Peretz.

Outside the Knesset faction, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak is another potential leadership challenger.

Some activists are urging Peretz to hand the defense portfolio to a more experienced candidate — such as Barak — and take a socioeconomic portfolio for himself, rebuilding his credibility in a sphere that he knows.

Party rebels portray Peretz as not just

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ANALYSIS

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an incompetent defense minister but as a traitor to the social agenda on which he ran, since he's now pushing for bigger military budgets to pay for the war and prepare for future threats.

Their criticisms, designed to advance their candidacies against Peretz, are hurting the defense minister's public stature — and the more his approval rating drops, the more emboldened his party rivals become.

They now are trying to get the Labor Party's leadership primaries, scheduled for next May, advanced by several months.

To blunt the criticism, Peretz has come out in favor of a full-fledged state commission of inquiry into the war.

The message to the public is that he has nothing to fear from a thorough examination of the way the war was handled.

Peretz says he wants the commission to go back at least six years and examine the extent to which his predecessors at defense — Barak, Labor's Binyamin Ben-Eliezer and Shaul Mofaz, first of Likud, then Kadima — were to blame for the army's lack of preparedness.

Olmert's troubles start with wide public perceptions that the war was poorly managed.

The fact that he opposes a full-fledged state commission of inquiry in favor of smaller, more limited inquiries isn't helping his cause.

More damaging for the prime minister are the comptroller's allegations that Olmert broke the law in appointing un-

qualified party activists to civil service posts when he was minister of industry and trade and in a transaction to buy a home in Jerusalem's upscale German Colony.

If either of those cases leads to criminal proceedings, Olmert's career could be ruined.

The prime minister is confident that nothing will come of the comptroller's investigations.

His confidants charge that Lindensstrauss is pursuing a personal vendetta against

the prime minister, and Olmert insists he'll see out his term.

Olmert is considering several options to shore up his political position. They include a small Cabinet reshuffle, under which Peretz moves to the Treasury and a strong Kadima candidate gets defense; or a larger Cabinet reshuffle in which Peretz gets a beefed-up socioeconomic portfolio, Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu joins the government and gets the Treasury portfolio, and Barak gets defense.

The problem with this scenario is that members of Netanyahu's Likud Party, which currently heads the opposition, show little inclination to join the coali-

tion, believing they can bring down the government and take over national leadership during this Knesset term.

All it would take, Likud leaders say, is 11 Knesset members to leave Kadima and return to the Likud.

Pundits say some already are talking about doing just that.

Another option is for Olmert to scrap his current government and form a new coalition.

In this scenario, Olmert could replace Labor's 19 Knesset members with 17 from the hawkish Yisrael Beiteinu Party and the fervently Orthodox United Torah Judaism Party, keeping Kadima intact and both Labor and Likud out of

government.

The downside for Olmert is that this would signal a strong move to the right, and would be internationally unpopular.

More and more pundits, however, are starting to talk about a scenario in which Kadima disappears altogether, with some of its members going over to Labor and others back to Likud, and with Likud and Labor re-emerging as the two main forces in Israeli politics.

If that happens, both Olmert and Peretz likely would be out of their jobs, and the so-called Big Bang of Israeli politics — sparked by Ariel Sharon's defection from the Likud last year to form Kadima — will have proved to be a big bust. ■

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Daniel J. Krifcher
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Israel said eyeing Iran, Syria war

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's air force chief has reportedly been put in charge of planning for possible war with Iran and Syria.

Britain's Sunday Times reported that Maj. Gen. Eliezer Shkedy was recently named officer in charge of the "Iranian front," a reference to expectations of a flare-up with Iran and its ally Syria in the wake of the recent Lebanon conflict.

According to the newspaper, Jerusalem believes that Tehran and Damascus

have been buoyed by the perceived success of their Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, against Israeli forces, and might therefore consider entering open conflict themselves.

Raising the stakes further is Iran's refusal to abandon uranium enrichment despite the threat of U.N. Security Council sanctions.

Israel has not ruled out military action as a last resort for denying its arch-foe the means to make nuclear weapons. Israeli officials had no immediate comment on the report. ■

Christian classes start in Russian schools

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — The introduction of obligatory public-school courses on Russian Orthodox culture is sending ripples through the Jewish community of Russia.

The curriculum change, which took effect in four regions last Friday, the first day of the school year, is bringing the religion-state issue to the surface in post-Communist Russia.

Liberals, members of some minority faiths and educators say the change, which was publicized only two days before the school year began, violates the principle of church-state separation in the Russian Constitution.

While several regions in Russia have offered a similar course as an elective for several years, the regions in question became the first of Russia's 89 provinces to make the study of Russian Orthodox culture compulsory.

Berel Lazar, one of Russia's two chief rabbis, said in an Aug. 29 interview with a Moscow radio station that the course on Orthodox culture will "divide children into different classes" and ostracize minorities.

A Jewish umbrella group called on Jewish parents to immediately report cases where Jewish children are pressured into attending the classes.

The Congress of Jewish Religious Organizations and Communities of Russia, or KEROOR, an umbrella group for non-Chasidic Orthodox congregations, said in a statement last Friday that any such cases should be reported to the Chief Rabbinate in Moscow. On Tuesday, the group said it had not received any complaints yet.

Vladimir Pliss, a KEROOR spokesman, told JTA the group was not protesting the new subject itself but was outraged that it had been made obligatory.

The course in "Foundations of Orthodox Culture" was introduced as part of the compulsory curriculum in the Orel, Belogorod, Kaluga and Ryazan regions of central Russia, which have small communities of a few thousand Jews.

Interviews with Jewish leaders and activists in some Russian regions indicated that some other regions may offer the classes as well.

Andrei Osherov, a Jewish leader in the city of Kostroma in central Russia, told JTA that a new Christian course, "The

Origins," was introduced for the first time last week and made compulsory for students in all grades there.

"I'm the father of twin sons who just entered the second grade of a secular school," Osherov said. "I myself, my wife and children are Jewish, and I cannot agree with the situation."

Aside from the statement by KEROOR — which went unreported in the national media — the organized Jewish community has remained relatively quiet on the matter.

Observers say it's because Jewish leaders don't want to irritate the Russian Orthodox Church, the nation's predominant faith, which long has pressed authorities to bring religion into the public schools.

However, the Interfax news agency ran a statement Monday by Rabbi Zinovy Kogan, KEROOR's chairman, who spoke with approval about the curriculum change.

Interfax quoted Kogan as saying that all Russians have "to be familiar with religious culture of the people of Russia and with the culture of Russian Orthodoxy."

Kogan said he was expressing his personal opinion, and wasn't speaking as a representative of his group.

Some leaders of the Muslim community and the Russian education minister,

who contended that such courses should be offered as electives only, have spoken out against the curriculum change.

A leading independent expert on Jewish-Christian relations said the move is just the latest example of the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox church,

which in the past few years has forged a close alliance with the federal and local governments.

"The trend is very troubling. Despite the resistance from the Education Ministry, the church is pressing very hard to advance its interest at schools," Yuri Tabak said. "The church wants to assume the dominant ideological role" in society.

The trend is very troubling. Despite the resistance from the Education Ministry, the church is pressing very hard to advance its interest at schools.

Yuri Tabak

Some attribute the church's growing influence to the fact that President Vladimir Putin is the first practicing Christian to become Russian leader since before the Communist takeover in 1917.

Meanwhile, the Council of Muftis of Russia said it would push the government to expand instruction of Muslim culture in regions with established Muslim communities.

But most Jewish leaders say it would be better for minority religions if schools taught no religion at all nor provided students with an optional course on religion.

"We believe that even elective courses or a choice of different religions is unacceptable at school," said Boruch Gorin, spokesman for the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the country's leading Jewish group.

Uprising leader protests Polish Radio hiring

PRAGUE (JTA) — The last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising protested a decision by Polish Radio to hire a controversial commentator. Marek Edelman is protesting the decision to hire journalist Stanislaw Michalkiewicz. Michalkiewicz made an anti-Semitic comment last spring on Radio Maryja, a Catholic radio station, but the criminal case against him on the issue was dropped.

The Eurotopics Internet news sum-

mary cites Edelman's comment Tuesday in the Polish newspaper Trybuna that Polish public radio is "showing its true colors" by hiring Michalkiewicz.

"It's a scandal that the case against him was dropped because it was considered 'not seriously harmful to society,'" Edelman said. "Unfortunately this is not the first time. Courts and public prosecutors repeatedly drop cases that involve anti-Semitic views."

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Netanyahu, Cheney meet

Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu met Vice President Dick Cheney. The leader of Israel's opposition Likud Party met with Cheney and top senators Tuesday on a visit to Washington to explain Israel's position on containing Hezbollah and Iran.

Netanyahu lined up behind the government during its July-August war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, and this visit was similarly in the spirit of national unity. Two top aides to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert are due to arrive in Washington on Wednesday.

Judea Pearl shares prize

Judea Pearl is sharing a \$100,000 prize with a Muslim man for their campaign against intolerance and terrorism. Pearl and Akbar Ahmed are among five recipients of the newly established Purpose Prize, awarded to Americans age 60 or older who are addressing long-standing social problems.

Pearl, 69, an authority on artificial intelligence at UCLA, is the father of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who was murdered by Islamic extremists in Pakistan in 2002.

In response to the tragedy, Pearl and his wife, Ruth, established a foundation in their son's name to further cross-cultural understanding. Ahmed, 63, holds an Islamic Studies chair at American University in Washington.

Over the past two years, the two scholars have appeared before Jewish, Muslim and Christian audiences in the United States and overseas in discussions on the Middle East and Jewish-Muslim relations. The Purpose Prize is given by Civic Ventures, a San Francisco-based think tank, and supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies and the John Templeton Foundation.

Newsweek recognizes Hebrew U.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem came in 82nd on Newsweek magazine's list of the world's 100 top institutes of higher learning.

Hebrew University was the only Israeli institute represented in Newsweek's ranking.

The magazine said its ranking system took into account "openness and diversity, as well as distinction in research."

Hebrew University said it placed 60th among a list of the world's 500 best institutes of higher learning put together by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China.

Israeli diplomat in sex case

A staffer at the Israeli Consulate in Atlanta was arrested for sex offenses. The 37-year-old Israeli, described by media reports as the consulate's security officer, was taken into custody Thursday on charges he tried to solicit sex from minors over the Internet.

Neither the consulate nor the Israeli Embassy in Washington had immediate comment.

MIDDLE EAST

Summit seen if hostage released

Shimon Peres said Israeli and Palestinian leaders would meet if a soldier held hostage in the Gaza Strip goes free.

Israel's vice premier said Tuesday that once Cpl. Gilad Shalit is released, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert plans to invite Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas for their first formal meeting.

Abbas "should be invited to talks, and I believe the prime minister will do so in the coming days. Negotiations must be launched on the basis of the 'road map,'" Peres told Army Radio, referring to the

U.S.-led peace plan. "This will take place when the situation of the captive soldier is resolved."

A Bahraini newspaper quoted Abbas as saying that a deal had been reached for Shalit to be transferred to Egyptian mediators, then repatriated, in exchange for Israel's release of an unspecified number of Palestinian prisoners. Israel, which has publicly refused to negotiate for Shalit, played down the report.

Israeli stabbed in Jerusalem

An Israeli was stabbed in what is believed to be a terror attack. Shimon Ran, 63, of Jerusalem, was seriously wounded Tuesday morning when he was stabbed on the outskirts of the capital.

Several suspects were apprehended and are being questioned.

Official loses job over Lebanon comments

The deputy mayor of an Israeli city stepped down after coming out against the Lebanon war. Walid Hamis, an Israeli Arab, handed his resignation to Haifa's mayor, Yona Yahav, on Monday upon learning that the municipal council planned to fire him to protest comments construed as supporting Hezbollah.

"You damaged the trust and the friendly, neighborly relations that have been at the core of this city for decades, you acted out of narrow, personal and partisan interests. You helped a murderous and criminal enemy during war," Yahav, whose city suffered hundreds of Hezbollah rocket strikes during the 34-day war, wrote in a letter to Hamis that was republished by a newspaper.

Hamis said his views were against the war rather than in favor of the Lebanese militia, and were shared by many Israeli Jews.

Israel refuses to meet Irish leader

Israeli officials will not meet with Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams because he is meeting with Hamas during his Mideast trip. Adams is on a two-day "private visit" to the region.

Israel has refused to meet with foreign visitors who also meet with Hamas, a terrorist group that heads the Palestinian Authority.

Adams, who will meet with Palestinian leaders in the West Bank on Wednesday, was invited to visit by P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas, who belongs to the Fatah Party.

WORLD

David Irving loses appeal

Austria's Supreme Court rejected an appeal by Holocaust denier David Irving.

A Vienna court sentenced Irving, a British historian, to three years in prison in February for speeches he gave in 1989 during which he argued that the Holocaust was exaggerated.

He was arrested in November when he returned to Austria to give a lecture. Since that time, he has been held in police custody. Irving pleaded guilty and said he had erred in claiming that Auschwitz had not had gas chambers.

Czech synagogue gets historical designation

The Czech Culture Ministry declared the Hartmanice Synagogue a national heritage site.

The only synagogue of several dozen in the Sumava Mountains to survive the Nazi and Communist regimes reopened in May as a cultural center and museum that testifies to Czech-Jewish-German cooperation before World War II.

Built in 1883, the rustic synagogue was restored by the efforts of a private foundation headed by entrepreneur Michal Klima.

Klima said the new cultural designation will ensure the protection of the building for generations to come.