

IN THE NEWS
Claims Conference faces a challenge

A campaign is being launched to challenge the Claims Conference to give Israel a larger share of Holocaust restitution funds and more control over distribution.

At a press conference Sunday, representatives from the Israeli government, the Jewish Agency, Holocaust survivor organizations and Yad Vashem presented a joint covenant calling on the Claims Conference to change the way it allocates its funds, asking that it transfer 60 percent of its activities to Israel and increase Israeli representation within the organization. Jewish Agency Chairman Zeev Bielski said the effort was inspired by the conference's disappointing response to emergency aid requests from the Jewish state during Israel's summer war with Hezbollah.

The Claims Conference responded in a statement: "Issues concerning governance or structure, as well as proposed changes to policy, can be brought to the board of directors of the organization, which meets in July every year."

Report: Hezbollah back to full strength

Hezbollah's rocket arsenal has reportedly been built up to around its prewar size. Citing Saudi, Israeli and Western sources, Time magazine reported that the Lebanese militia now has more than 20,000 short-range rockets, approximately the same number it had before the summer conflict with Israel.

According to the magazine, the rockets have been supplied through Syria by Iran, which has also posted members of its elite Revolutionary Guard in Damascus and Beirut to help oversee Hezbollah. Following the Aug. 14 cease-fire, Lebanon stationed troops along its border with Syria to prevent arms from reaching Hezbollah. But according to Time, smugglers have been managing to get through using mountain passes.

WORLD REPORT

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

Leaders cleave to Gaza cease-fire, despite violations by rocket crews

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The guns have gone silent, more or less. Are negotiations next?

Israel and the Palestinian Authority declared a surprise cease-fire in the Gaza Strip over the weekend, and, even more surprisingly, managed to keep it together despite violations by terrorist rocket crews.

That, twinned with the confident rhetoric from both sides, stirred speculation a peace summit could be in the works.

It began with a telephone call between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday night. Abbas offered to secure a halt to cross-border Palestinian rocket fire from the Gaza Strip. Olmert pledged in return to withdraw Israeli troops from the territory and put the military on a defensive footing only.

The deal went into effect early Sunday morning. Within two hours, at least five rockets from Gaza fell in the vicinity of Sderot, causing no casualties but raising hackles among Israelis who have learned to distrust Palestinian truces.

But the Palestinian Authority was quick to condemn the salvo as the work of renegade rocket crews and, in a more concrete show of good will, posted 13,000 policemen along the northern Gaza frontier with orders to stop the launches.

Olmert counseled his countrymen to give the calm a chance.

"We will evince the necessary restraint and patience, certainly in the coming days," he said during a trip to southern Israel.

"All of these things ultimately could lead

to one thing — the opening of serious, real, open and direct negotiations between us" and the Palestinians, Olmert said. "So that we can move forward toward a comprehensive accord."

Abbas, for his part, made much of his apparent success in getting Palestinian terrorist groups — including members of the governing Hamas, the main rival to his Fatah faction — to hold their fire.

Nabil Abu Rdainah, a senior Abbas aide, said all Palestinian factions would start a wide dialogue on "a full, mutual and permanent cease-fire between Israel and the Palestinians" within days.

One senior Israeli political commentator suggested that the truce was timed ahead of President Bush's planned trip to Jordan later this week, with a view to parlaying it into trilateral talks.

Shimon Shiffer wrote in Yediot Achronot that the agreement between Olmert and Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, showed that "when the 'responsible adult' arrives in the region, the naughty children decide to behave in a restrained manner.

"From here on out we can only hope that under the aegis of the cease-fire — if it is honored — the leaders Olmert and Abu Mazen will meet, and then a unity government will be formed in the Palestinian Authority, and Israel will respond by freeing thousands of prisoners and hundreds of millions of shekels that it has been withholding since Hamas came to power in the Palestinian Authority," Shiffer added.

Much could still go wrong. There is no undertaking by either side to scale back actions in the West Bank. The Palestinian

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■ *The cease-fire was violated in its first hours by Palestinian rocket crews*

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terrorist group Islamic Jihad made a point of saying its abidance by the truce might be conditional on the restrictions also applying in the second territory.

Then there is Israel's bedrock demand that Cpl. Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier held hostage in Gaza since June, go free before Israeli concessions begin, and the fact that the Hamas-led government

has not shown any sign of accepting the policy changes required of it by Western nations as a precondition for full diplomatic engagement.

Khaled Meshaal, the supreme leader of Hamas, was in Cairo over the weekend for talks on Shalit's fate. In a statement that appeared aimed as much at goading Israel as showing good faith, he said that Shalit "sends regards."

Meshaal also warned the West that any calming on the Israeli-Palestinian front could be temporary.

"If the international community does not work to create a Palestinian state within six months, the Palestinian Authority will collapse, we will throw away the diplomatic folderol and we will declare a third intifada," he told reporters. ■

With his term winding down, Blair seeks Mideast legacy

By JOSEPH MILLIS

LONDON (JTA) — Tony Blair has made clear that he wants to use his remaining time as Britain's prime minister to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he believes is the crux of the wider conflict between the West and the Muslim world.

"A major part of the answer to Iraq lies not in Iraq itself but outside it — in the whole of the region where the same forces are at work, where the roots of this global terrorism are to be found, where the extremism flourishes, with a propaganda that may be, indeed is, totally false; but is nonetheless attractive to much of the Arab street," Blair said recently at the annual Lord Mayor's banquet in London.

"There is a fundamental misunderstanding that this is about changing policy on Syria and Iran," said Blair, who has pledged to make way for a successor within a year. "On the contrary, we should start with Israel/Palestine. That is the core."

From there, Blair said, progress could be made on Lebanon, and relatively moderate Arab and Muslim countries could be marshaled to bring peace to Iraq.

"We should be standing up for, empowering, respecting those with a moderate and modern view of the faith of Islam everywhere," he said.

Iran and Syria, he added, had to be offered a way of helping peace efforts, not hindering them.

A senior Israeli diplomatic source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told JTA that Blair's comments were "less dramatic for Israel" than they were being portrayed.

"Do you expect" Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "to suddenly accept Israel's right to exist and stop mocking or denying the Holocaust and be helpful with Hezbollah and Shi'a insurgents in Iraq?" the Israeli asked rhetorically.

On Syria, however, the source thought progress could be made.

"After all, we have been in contact with the Syrians before and it all broke down over 15 meters of shoreline on the Sea of Galilee. It was only a matter of prestige which prevented a deal being done," the source said.

But what's driving Blair now that he's coming to the end of almost 10 years in office?

In a recent interview with the Washington Post last week, Blair made clear his concern that "there is increasing not just poverty and despair on the Palestinian side but also disintegration, and that is

very dangerous. So we either decide that we are going to take this moment and use it to drive forward, or obviously there's a danger that the whole region takes a wrong turn."

Regarded by the United Kingdom's Jewish community as a true friend of Israel, Blair also stressed that he believed "totally in supporting Israel's security. But the truth is the ultimate security lies in a viable and democratic Palestinian state and in resolving the issues with Israel's neighbors."

Blair also is a man of faith, and a close associate told the Observer newspaper that when Blair traveled to Israel as opposition leader for Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's funeral in 1995, "it was partly the idea of seeing Bill Clinton and Jordan's King Hussein and others who deeply

wanted peace in mourning for Rabin and rededicating themselves to making it work. But it was something else, too, which Blair dislikes talking about in public — his deep personal faith. This is a guy who has a Bible next to his bed, who has read Jewish sources and the Koran, and it all seemed to come together."

At the end of the day, however, sources in the Prime Minister's Office say Blair has few illusions about making dramatic breakthroughs in the Middle East. Despite sending his personal envoy, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, to Damascus late last month to sound out the Assad regime, he has only to remember the abortive Camp David and Taba talks, which marred President Clinton's last days in office. ■

We should be standing up for, empowering, respecting those with a moderate and modern view of the faith of Islam.

Tony Blair
British prime minister



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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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Chabadniks relish break from isolation

By JACOB BERKMAN

SOMERSET, N.J. (JTA) — The life of a Chabad-Lubavitch shaliach can be isolating.

Sent under the mandate of the late leader of the movement, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, to the ends of the Jewish world, these fervently Orthodox emissaries are often the only affiliated Jews for hundreds of miles.

Still, since 1950, when the rebbe sent out his first emissary to Morocco to build up Jewish education in North Africa, some 4,000 have dispersed around the world, from Beijing to Ukraine to Laos to Boise, Idaho, and virtually every spot in between where Jews might live or pass through.

Early this month, some 2,800 emissaries converged on Chabad-Lubavitch International headquarters in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn for the movement's annual International Conference of Chabad-Lubavitch Emissaries.

The annual "kinus," as it is known in Yiddish, offers a wide range of workshops, from staffing issues to meeting the needs of the Sephardi community to prison chaplaincy.

The conference banquet is seen as the highlight, and this year it drew some 4,000 people.

This year's banquet honored Chabad's

largest benefactor, Sami Rohr.

Rohr, a former Colombian Jewish real estate mogul who affiliates as modern Orthodox, and his family have given tens of millions of dollars to Chabad to establish outposts throughout the former Soviet Union, on college campuses and at remote spots around the world. Reportedly, they underwrite the salaries of some 500 emissaries, and have a foundation specifically to help Chabad rabbis on U.S. campuses construct buildings.

Though Rohr, his son George and their family have been involved with Chabad since the 1950s, this was the first time he was honored by the organization because he tends to shun publicity.

And though the thousands of men dressed in black and white hung on their benefactor's words, it was Rohr who lauded Schneerson's army of shluchim.

"There are those who speak of Jewish continuity, but you are the ones who create it," Rohr said.

After Rohr's speech, the conference chairman, Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky, called off each country and state where Chabad has placed shluchim — among them one in Vietnam, seven in China, four in Kazakhstan, 118 in Russia, one in the Virgin Islands and 23 in Texas.

But as impressive as was the list, it paled next to the sight of 4,000 Chabad emissaries and supporters breaking into a spontaneous dance that snaked wildly between the 18 rows of tables 22 rows deep.

But for the shluchim, the kinus is more about the "farbrenge" — Yiddish for a spending of time together — than it is about the workshops and the gala. It is there where the thousands of men dedicated to the teachings of the rebbe, most of whom knew each other as yeshiva students, can reconvene and spend a little time not on an island, but in a Chabad sea.

"There's nothing like the energy here, the synergy here," said Mendel Lifshitz, who runs the Chabad in Boise.

It allows rabbis such as Hershey Novack to share with his colleagues ideas such as the Kosher Cooking Club that he has

started at Washington University in St. Louis, where bi-weekly he organizes a coed class in cooking Jewish ethnic foods from challah to kubeh.

And it gives the emissaries a chance to share success stories.

For instance, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Kantor, who started Chabad in Thailand, which now sees some 110,000 visitors a year through four centers there and one in Laos, can tell

the story of the one Israeli tourist who actually became a Chabad rabbi after a chance encounter.

But, many say, it provides them with a confirmation of the reason they have committed to spending the rest of their lives in foreign lands.

Though they are pushed by the success stories and by the potential and need for more, there are challenges for these stridently religious families who isolate themselves in areas where there are few observant Jews.

When Kantor got to Thailand, finding anything kosher to eat was a challenge, as was anything cultural.

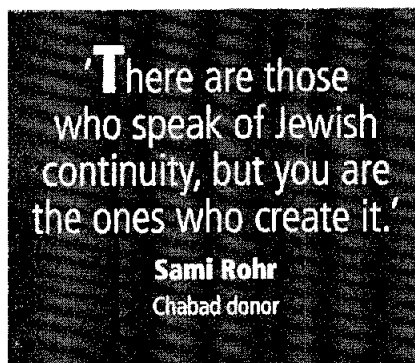
"There was no one that understood me," he said.

For some it is even harder.

"Menachem" for instance can't even be known. He asked that his name not be used, nor the country where he is stationed identified because international religious organizations are illegal there. In his adopted country, Menachem typically wears a baseball hat and cotton pants in public, instead of the typical black suit and fedora that is Chabad uniform.

Kosher food, too, is impossible to find. So he and his wife slaughter their own chickens, milks cows and make their own yogurt for themselves and the hundreds of Shabbat guests they host. "It is difficult for my wife and kids to find friends," he said.

But for the week or so he will spend in New York for the conference, he and his family are free to be more openly themselves. He wears his black suit in public, and allows his children to eat nearly all the kosher junk food they can handle. And of course he will return to his country with seven extra suitcases of food.



THIS WEEK

WEDNESDAY

■ Jewish organizations will stage a demonstration in Brussels to call for the release of three Israeli soldiers kidnapped by Palestinian terrorist groups over the summer. The protest will include family members of the soldiers. This demonstration, intended to send a message to the European Union which is headquartered in Brussels, is being organized by the European Jewish Congress; CRIF, France's Jewish umbrella group; and Siona.

THURSDAY

■ The Shalom Center presents "Beyond Oil: Can We Prevent Global Scorching? What Should the New Congress Do?" Speakers include Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; Charles Komanoff, economist and energy expert for Komanoff Energy Associates and founding trustee of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign; and Rabbi Arthur Waskow, director of The Shalom Center. The event is at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan at 7 p.m.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Russia ships Iran arms

Russia shipped air-defense missile systems to Iran.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesmen last Friday confirmed the delivery of 29 Tor-M1 systems, The Associated Press reported.

The sale went ahead despite calls by the United States to suspend arms sales to Iran as long as it does not comply with international demands to stop enriching uranium, a necessary step toward building a nuclear weapon.

Iran says its nuclear program is peaceful.

The contract for the systems, which can fire simultaneously at two targets at heights of up to 20,000 feet, is worth \$700 million.

Pullout cash went to unauthorized settlers

Unauthorized settlers were compensated after leaving the Gaza Strip. Ha'aretz reported last Friday that its review of compensation for settlers who left Gaza as part of the 2005 pullout found that it included dozens of settlers who moved into the region and set up outposts without government approval; only authorized settlers were eligible for compensation.

Ha'aretz quoted government officials as saying that the unauthorized settlers were given a one-time "act-of-grace" compensation, with some families receiving as much as \$140,000.

Report: Israel blocks army volunteers

The Israeli military is reportedly raising the bar for would-be foreign volunteers.

Ha'aretz reported Sunday that the military is making it harder for foreign Jews to join up, by imposing measures such as lower age caps on volunteers. According to the report, at least 20 foreigners who had expected to enlist in the near future were instead informed that they were not needed. Military officials declined comment.

U.N. official ends tour

The top U.N. human-rights official wrapped up a contentious visit to Israel and the Palestinian areas. Louise Arbour, a former Canadian judge who is the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, ended her five-day visit Nov. 23 with meetings with top Israeli officials.

Arbour toured the Gaza Strip, where Israel has for weeks conducted an operation aimed at wiping out rocket launchers, and areas of Israel's South targeted by the rockets.

Arbour took cover during one such attack during a visit to the Israeli town of Sderot; her party later was stoned by angry residents who accused Arbour of pro-Palestinian bias.

Settler rabbi calls for rogue militias

A settler rabbi called on Jewish youth to set up unsupervised militias to counter terrorist rocket attacks on Israel's South.

"We should have allowed the youth of Sderot, Ashkelon, the western Negev and anyone fit to bear arms," Rabbi Yisrael Rozen wrote in the bulletin of the Zomet Institute, a think tank he heads in the West Bank settlement of Alon Shvut. In the remarks, first reported by Ha'aretz, Rozen says Avigdor Lieberman, the settler recently appointed as Israel's strategic affairs minister, "will be able to argue that the State of Israel has become integrated in the Middle Eastern sphere and is incapable of controlling" its militants.

Peres plans Negev boom

Shimon Peres has drafted a multimillion-dollar development project for the Negev desert.

The Israeli vice premier's plan, which was leaked to the press Sunday and awaits Cabinet approval later this week, entails investing

more than \$80 million in various Negev ventures in 2007.

These include the creation of holiday villages and other tourist attractions, boosting the student facilities available at Ben-Gurion University, and lowering the income gaps between Jewish and Bedouin residents of the Negev.

Developing the Negev and Galilee regions are among Peres' portfolios in the Olmert government.

WORLD

Compromise reached on Jewish graves

An Israeli firm building a parking lot over a Jewish cemetery in the Czech Republic agreed to raise the structure to protect the graves. Plaza Centers, which is to build a shopping center and parking lot on the Pilsen site, made the agreement last week. Last month, archaeologists discovered several graves on the land, which a local researcher said housed a 15th century Jewish cemetery.

The museum estimates that as many as 50 graves may be located there. Plaza Centers has had several consultations with the Czech Chief Rabbi Karel Sidon and the London-based Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, which resulted in a verbal agreement to place the parking lot on cement stilts.

Paris cop kills one in soccer attack on Hapoel fan

A Paris policeman killed a man among scores of soccer fans who descended on a French Jew after a match that an Israeli team won.

About 150 Paris Saint-Germain fans attacked a supporter of Hapoel Tel Aviv Nov. 23 after Hapoel defeated PSG, 4-2. A police officer tossed a tear-gas grenade into the crowd and, when that didn't work, fired two shots; one man was killed and another injured.

The Paris mayor said the incident underscored the necessity of combating soccer hooliganism. "The seriousness of this event confirms the absolute necessity of fighting racism and anti-Semitism among PSG fans," Bertrand Delanoë said.

Pope to meet with Turkish Jews

Pope Benedict XVI will meet with Jewish leaders in Turkey.

Although the main reason for the pontiff's visit this week is reportedly to meet the Istanbul-based spiritual head of the world's Orthodox Christians, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, he also has plans to meet with Muslim and Jewish leaders in the secular but mainly Sunni country.

Latvia rejects compensation law

Latvia's Parliament rejected a proposed law on the restitution of Jewish property.

The government had proposed paying \$58.7 million to Latvia's Jewish community over 10 years to compensate for property taken by the Communist government after the Holocaust.

But the political parties that back the government, who control 67 out of 100 members of Parliament, abstained from the vote.

Leaders of the parties said the bill needed more discussion, and it will now be debated by the Cabinet and party ranks.

Japan launches Jordan Valley plans

Japan formally launched arrangements for Mideast development talks. The plans launched last Friday in Tokyo would promote agricultural and industrial development in the Jordan Valley, a region shared by Jordan, Israel and the Palestinians.

Japanese officials will discuss the plans with Jordan's King Abdullah II when he visits next month and with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni when she visits in January. Japan hopes the development will nurture peace in the region.