

IN THE NEWS

Olmert offers prisoner exchange

Ehud Olmert offered to release Palestinian prisoners en masse in exchange for an Israeli soldier held hostage in the Gaza Strip. In a major policy speech Monday, the Israeli prime minister followed up on a truce agreed to by Palestinian terrorist groups Sunday by holding out an olive branch to the Palestinian Authority.

"With Gilad Shalit's release and his return, safe and sound, to his family, the Israeli government would be willing to release many Palestinian prisoners, even those who have been sentenced to lengthy terms," Olmert said.

E.U. leader meets with Israel, Arabs

Finland's foreign minister began two days of meetings with Israeli and Arab leaders. The Associated Press reported that Erkki Tuomioja, whose country holds the rotating E.U. presidency, led peace discussions Monday in Tampere, Finland, with foreign ministers from the European Union, Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Turkey and Tunisia.

Following the talks, Tuomioja optimistically cited the Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire in place since Sunday. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni at the same news conference called the cease-fire "a message to moderates on the Palestinian side," the AP reported.

Austrian Chabad school vandalized

A man claiming to be Adolf Hitler is suspected of vandalizing a Vienna Jewish school.

Police are holding the man, who allegedly broke into the Lauder Chabad school Sunday morning and smashed windows and glass throughout the three-story building.

Austrian radio reports indicated that the suspect is a 30-year-old Croat national.

WORLD REPORT

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Despite misgivings, Olmert hopes cease-fire is first step toward peace

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Disappointed by cease-fires so often in the past, but casting an eye to a better future, Israelis greeted this week's cease-fire announcement in the Gaza Strip with a mixture of skepticism, fear and hope.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is determined to give the truce a chance in the hope that it will create conditions for the return of Cpl. Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier kidnapped near the Gaza border in June, and set in motion a new peace dynamic.

"The cease-fire is only a stage in a process we hope will lead to negotiations and dialogue, and perhaps bring about an agreement between us and the Palestinians," Olmert declared Sunday during a tour of the Negev.

Some analysts say Israel is walking into a trap with its eyes wide open. But the government, aware that Hamas could be preparing for a new round of fighting, is ready to take a chance that the lull might change the mood on both sides and lead to significant dialogue.

The Israel Defense Forces has serious reservations, arguing that Palestinian terrorists will abuse the cease-fire to build up their military power for new attacks on Israel.

They fear a lull will create a situation similar to that in southern Lebanon, where Hezbollah militiamen exploited six years of quiet to create a formidable military force. In the same way, the generals say, Hamas and other militia groups will use this latest cease-fire to smuggle huge quantities

of weapons into Gaza for a much bloodier conflict.

The signals on the Palestinian side have been mixed. Relative moderates from the Fatah movement emphasize the possibility of significant diplomatic progress, while spokesmen from the more radical Hamas tend to highlight what they see as the temporary nature of the lull.

Hamas' Damascus-based strongman, Khaled Meshaal, warned of a return to intifada violence unless the parties achieve comprehensive peace within six months.

The Israeli left backs the government's approach. In an article in *Yediot Achronot*, novelist Amos Oz articulated the left's yearning for change, coupled with its sense that the cease-fire is the barest of beginnings.

"The cease-fire, if it holds, is perhaps the first flicker of light at the end of the darkness," he wrote.

The Israeli right, however, sees only folly. Knesset member Zvi Hendel of the hawkish National Religious Party said he was "speechless in the face of the government's stupidity," especially in light of Israel's experience in Lebanon.

The cease-fire came about after intensive behind-the-scenes talks between top aides to Olmert and high-level officials close to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

The Israelis told their Palestinian interlocutors that if they could get their act together and stop the shooting, Israel would be ready to make far-reaching concessions in subsequent peace talks. The Palestinians

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decided to make the effort.

The cease-fire occurred just days before President Bush was due in Amman for talks with Iraqi and Jordanian leaders, and some pundits think the Israelis and Palestinians were signaling that they were now ready to do business under American auspices.

Others attribute the timing to the heavy military pressure the IDF is exerting on the Palestinians. In the past few months, hundreds of Palestinian militants have been killed in Israeli operations in Gaza.

The Palestinians also were aware that the Israeli army was pressing for a large-scale offensive in Gaza along the lines of 2002's Operation Defensive Shield, which gave Israel the upper hand in the fight against terror in the West Bank. The cease-fire pre-empted any such military plan.

By the same token, the Israeli government was under intense pressure to do something to stop Palestinian rocket fire on the Negev town of Sderot.

But the key question is whether the cease-fire can spark a wider diplomatic process. Olmert and Abbas both seem to believe there is a good chance that it will.

Yediot Achronot's political analyst, Nahum Barnea, maintains that Abbas and other Palestinian moderates see the cease-fire as the beginning of a process that will lead to an Israeli withdrawal from most of the West Bank.

According to Barnea, Fatah leaders

believe that "if the move succeeds, it will open a crack to a long-term interim agreement with Israel — which will be similar in substance to Olmert's convergence plan — in other words: Israeli withdrawal to the separation barrier (close to the 1967 border)," he writes.

Ma'ariv political analyst Ben Caspit asserts that Olmert has much the same idea in mind.

"The prime minister hopes for a resounding strategic move that starts with the cease-fire in Gaza, spreads to a cease-fire in the West Bank, develops into a big move for a prisoner exchange ... and from there grows into an international conference and the establishment of an axis of moderate states in the Middle East, with the aim of renewing the diplomatic process between Israel and the Palestinians," Caspit maintains.

Speaking Monday at a memorial for Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, Olmert made a statement designed to trigger the next phase of the wider plan: a large-scale prisoner exchange.

"With Gilad Shalit's release and his return safe and sound to his family, the

Israeli government will be willing to release many Palestinian prisoners, even those who have been sentenced to heavy terms," he declared.

Olmert and the Palestinian moderates seem to be more or less on the same page, envisioning a string of careful steps leading to full-fledged peace talks: a cease-fire in Gaza followed by a cease-fire in the West Bank, a prisoner exchange, American and Arab players coming in as mediators and negotiations starting on a long-term interim agreement,

based on Israeli withdrawal from most of the West Bank and the establishment of an interim Palestinian state with provisional borders.

Despite the leaders' optimism, however, many fundamental questions remain unanswered: Will the radicals on the Palestinian side allow such a process to get off the ground? Will the cease-fire hold? And if it does, will it prove a historic turning point on the road to a better future, or just a brief interlude as both sides prepare for new and worse fighting? ■

Israelis and Palestinians were seen signaling a readiness to do business under American auspices.

U.S. theaters pull Turkish film

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — A Turkish film featuring a venal, bloodstained Jewish doctor has been mysteriously withdrawn from screening in the United States. In "Valley of the Wolves: Iraq," American actor Gary Busey portrays a Jewish U.S. Army doctor who cuts out the organs of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison and sells them to wealthy clients in New York, London and Tel Aviv.

A blockbuster hit in its native country, the film had been scheduled to open last Friday at two theaters in Los Angeles and one in San Francisco. However, in early November, "Valley of the Wolves" was quietly dropped from the theaters' advance schedules.

Gregory Gardner of Luminous Velocity Releasing, a company involved in distributing the film in the United States, said the Turkish producer, Pana Films, had withdrawn the movie without explanation.

Attempts to obtain further information from American or Turkish sources were unsuccessful, but a protest filed by the Anti-Defamation League may have played a role in the cancellation.

In an Oct. 19 letter to Turkish Ambassador Nabi Sensoy in Washington, ADL leaders expressed concern at "the incendiary anti-Jewish and anti-American themes and characters in the film" and pointed to previous inquiries about the wide availability of anti-Semitic publications in Turkey.

The letter was signed by ADL National Chairwoman Barbara Balsler and National Director Abraham Foxman, who did not receive a reply from the ambassador.

The Busey character, listed only as "The Doctor" but clearly identified as Jewish, isn't even the chief villain. Another American actor, Billy Zane, plays a rogue American officer and self-professed "peacekeeper sent by God." ■



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Israelis prod Claims Conference

By URIEL HEILMAN

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli coalition including the Jewish Agency for Israel, Israeli Holocaust survivor organizations and the Knesset's pensioner affairs minister is calling on the Claims Conference to give Israel a larger share of Holocaust restitution funds and more control over distribution decisions.

Leaders of the coalition announced Sunday that they were launching a unified effort to get the Claims Conference to recognize the centrality of Israel in its distribution of hundreds of millions of dollars in unclaimed Holocaust-era assets. The new public relations campaign was prompted by the Claims Conference's "paltry" response to emergency aid requests from Israel during its summertime war in Lebanon, Jewish Agency Chairman Zeev Bielski said.

"Only one agency did not respond when I asked for one-time emergency disbursements during the war in Lebanon this summer: the Claims Conference," Bielski charged. The conference's response arrived only after the war, he said, and it was "too little and too late."

The Claims Conference denied aid requests from the Jewish Agency for hospitals and protected rooms in northern Israel, agency spokesman Yarden Vitikay said, committing only \$100,000 after the war to a program for terror victims — this, from what is perhaps the richest Jewish organization in the world. By comparison, the United Jewish Communities umbrella group raised \$348 million for northern Israel from its member federations.

Members of the Israeli coalition, including Yad Vashem Chairman Avner Shalev, now are demanding that the Claims Conference boost Israeli representation on its board, transfer most of its operations to Israel and increase the speed and quantity of disbursements to Israeli Holocaust survivors.

This Israeli campaign represents the latest in a long string of efforts to break the Claims Conference's virtual monopoly of control over hundreds of millions of dollars in Holocaust restitution disbursements. In recent years, various survivor groups, advocates, community leaders and Israeli officials have tried to wrest some control over the restitution process from the conference's board, with only limited success.

In response to Sunday's announcement, Claims Conference communications director Hillary Kessler-Godin issued a statement saying, "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."

Kessler-Godin said the conference "has been outstandingly successful in negotiating for Holocaust-era compensation on behalf of Holocaust survivors worldwide in recovering property, in assisting Nazi victims and in educating future generations about the lessons of the Shoah."

The Claims Conference has allocated emergency payments of \$3.2 million to 13,000 needy Nazi victims in northern Israel, Kessler-Godin said. These are direct payments to assist victims of Nazism affected by the war. The group also recently held information sessions for Nazi victims in Israel's North concerning their eligibility for payments and assistance from various sources of Holocaust compensation and restitution.

In addition, the Claims Conference has just allocated \$1.7 million to build protected rooms in sheltered housing complexes primarily housing victims of Nazism. The Claims Conference is also preparing future projects to assist hospitals in border areas, Kessler-Godin said.

Under agreements dating back to its formation in 1951, the New York-based Claims Conference — formally, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany — is the lead organization charged with recovering Jewish war-era assets from Germany, and its successor organization has become the legal heir of unclaimed Jewish properties from East Germany.

The value of the assets recovered so far from the former East Germany numbers in the billions of dollars. Every year, the Claims Conference distributes approximately \$90 million of that money to organizations of its choice according to a formula whereby 80 percent goes to groups that provide services to survivors and 20 percent goes to Holocaust education and documentation projects.

Projects range from soup kitchens in Russia run by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to a Tel Aviv-based Yiddish theater troupe that performs for survivors.

In the past, critics such as the National Association of Jewish Child Holocaust Survivors' Leo Rechter and the World Jewish Congress' former executive vice president, Elan Steinberg, questioned why grants were going to birthright Israel, Yiddish theater and the installation of sprinkler systems in Israeli nursing homes rather than to needy survivors.

This time, the Israeli critics — including groups that are on the Claims Conference's board — are focusing not on the types of programs that receive funding, but on the geographic distribution of funds and the composition and location of the body that makes funding decisions.

The Israelis say that they, rather than a multinational board dominated by American Jews, should decide how their share of the money is spent.

"We are a nation of victims of the Holocaust," said Noah Flug, chairman of the Center of Survivor Organizations in Israel. "Today we have no say. We don't even have autonomy in deciding how the money is distributed.

Israeli Minister for Pensioner Affairs Rafi Eitan — the erstwhile Mossad field officer who captured Nazi fugitive Adolf Eichmann — said the Claims Conference has failed survivors.

Eitan visited particularly harsh criticism on the pace of disbursements, saying money is being hoarded by the Claims Conference rather than being released to survivors while they're still alive.

"In another 15 years, there won't be Holocaust survivors around anymore," Eitan said.

The Claims Conference's spokeswoman declined to respond to specific charges.

Eitan said the fulcrum of the problem lies in the composition of the Claims Conference's board, which has not changed to keep up with the changing Jewish world. Eitan's critiques echoed those described by critics in a special JTA investigative series in 2004.



NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Troops kill 2 in Jenin

Israeli soldiers killed two Palestinians in the West Bank.

Troops patrolling the outskirts of Jenin on Monday came under fire and shot back, killing a local commander of the Popular Resistance Committees terrorist group.

A Palestinian woman also was shot dead after coming to his aid, witnesses said.

According to military officials, troops fired at a figure who grabbed the dead gunman's weapon. Also Monday, Palestinian terrorists fired rockets into southern Israel from the Gaza Strip.

No one was hurt.

Katsav ready to step down?

Israel's president plans to step down if he is indicted in a sex scandal.

Moshe Katsav's lawyer revealed in a High Court of Justice discussion Monday that his client had decided to suspend himself from duties if prosecutors pressed charges connected with allegations that he harassed and raped several female employees.

Katsav, whose term is due to end next year, has denied wrongdoing in the case.

An indictment is expected in the coming weeks.

Israel reopens shooting probe

The Israeli military is reopening an investigation into the shooting of a pro-Palestinian activist.

The Military Police announced Sunday that it would see whether there is enough evidence to press criminal charges against Israeli soldiers alleged to have wounded Brian Avery, an American, in the West Bank city of Jenin in April 2003.

The army initially had dismissed Avery's charges that he was deliberately targeted by troops, but was prompted to review its position after he turned to Israel's High Court of Justice.

Doll bombs found

A Palestinian plot to smuggle bombs into Israel in children's dolls was uncovered. Israeli troops operating in the West Bank city of Nablus over the weekend uncovered a bomb lab where teddy bears had been stuffed with explosives and wired with detonators.

Military officials said the dolls were probably meant to be smuggled through Israeli checkpoints by children. The lab was demolished.

O.U. agrees to oppose Israeli policy

The Orthodox Union adopted a resolution empowering its leadership to publicly oppose Israeli government policies.

The measure was approved by delegates at the group's biennial convention in Jerusalem on Saturday night. It was part of a broader resolution on Israel's security challenges.

The resolution noted the continued launching of rockets from Gaza more than a year after Israel's withdrawal from the coastal strip and expressed skepticism about any policy that relinquishes territory without obtaining security and peace in return.

Palestinians start English paper

A privately owned English-language newspaper was launched in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Associated Press reported that The Palestine Times began circulation Monday with 5,000 subscriptions.

The new daily says it is not affiliated with any political party; its first edition included Op-Eds from a Hamas spokesman, a Fatah spokesman and an independent analyst, the AP reported.

Circulation in Israel and an Internet edition are planned.

NORTH AMERICA

U.N. rights council keeps Israel focus

The U.N. Human Rights Council passed two resolutions against Israel.

The council voted 32-1 Monday to declare Israel's presence in the Golan Heights illegal, and 45-1 to condemn Israel's settlement construction.

Canada was the nay vote in both resolutions. The 47-member council has singled out no other country but Israel for human rights abuses since the council was established six months ago.

Holocaust hero Werber dies at 92

Jack Werber, who helped rescue some 700 Jewish boys at a Nazi camp, died at age 92. Werber suffered a fatal heart attack Nov. 18 in his hometown of Great Plains, N.Y. Born in Poland to a furrier, Werber was separated from his wife and daughter in 1939 and taken to Buchenwald. In 1944, a transport of 2,000 prisoners came to the camp, including some 700 boys.

Werber, the barracks clerk, worked with fellow inmates to hide the youngest throughout the barracks and find easier jobs for the older ones. He obtained the complicity of some Nazi guards who were beginning to fear war-crimes charges. After the war Werber moved to the United States, where his older brother, Max, his only surviving immediate relative, had settled. Werber remarried and started a business in the 1950s, selling coonskin-style caps made popular by Disney's "Davy Crockett" television show.

WORLD

British immunity for Nazi-looted art?

Jewish groups expressed concern that a British bill could provide immunity for art looted by the Nazis to be displayed in Britain. The Constitutional Affairs, Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Bill is to be read before the House of Lords this week.

The bill is being proposed ostensibly to combat a perceived trend of institutions and individuals refusing to loan art to British museums, but Jonathan Benjamin, the chief executive of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, said the bill could turn Britain into "a circus freak show" of art looted by the Nazis.

JAFI job forum a success in Paris

Some 1,000 people showed up at a forum in Paris organized by the Jewish Agency for Israel offering work opportunities in Israel. More than 800 jobs were available, ranging from manual labor and jewelry sales to marketing, financial analysis and high-tech.

"Finding a job in Israel and learning the language are the two greatest worries for aliyah candidates," said David Roche, head of JAFI's Paris office.

"At these forums we have learned to target candidates and positions better than in previous years."

Australia sees increased anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitic incidents have increased in Australia, a Jewish group there said.

The Australian Jewish News reported Monday on a study by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry that cited 442 anti-Semitic incidents from October 2005 to September 2006, an increase of 110 incidents over the same period a year earlier.

Jeremy Jones, author of the study, said incidents spiked in July, after Israel's war with Hezbollah began, though he noted that the number already had been above average in preceding months, the AJN reported.