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NATO invites Israel to joint exercises

Alliance may send troops to Gaza Strip if Israel, Palestinians negotiate pullout

By Aluf Benn
Haaretz Correspondent

BRUSSELS - The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has suggested that the Israel Defense Forces, for the first time, take part in multinational military exercises and participate in anti-terror activities such as patrols in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

NATO is also considering sending forces to the Gaza Strip after Israel implements the disengagement plan, if Israel and the Palestinian Authority reach an agreement on the withdrawal and ask for NATO help.

A military summit will be held in Brussels today, with the participation of the chiefs of staff of 26 NATO members and countries that have ties with the organization. For the first time, Israel will send a senior IDF representative to the summit: operations directorate chief Major General Yisrael Ziv, who was sent at the last minute in place of Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Moshe Ya'alon.

NATO plans to upgrade what it calls the "Mediterranean dialogue" it is conducting with Israel and six Muslim nations: Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania. This means that policy discussions will be conducted by leaders of a higher rank, and that the level of joint military operations will be raised through coordinated military exercises, the war on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, and joint planning for civilian disaster readiness.

The IDF's first-ever role in NATO military exercises is part of the organization's decision to invite the armies of the "Mediterranean dialogue" countries to take part in the exercises.

Seven exercises were proposed to the IDF, including training that will take place in Ukraine in June. NATO sources said experience has taught that it is worthwhile to start with sending officers from countries new to alliance activities to view multinational operations as a way of learning the methods.

Diplomatic, not just military, dialogue is also on the agenda. Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom was invited to participate with his colleagues from the other "dialogue" nations, in a meeting with the NATO foreign ministers council which will meet in Brussels next month.

In the last few weeks, the suggestion has been made in the United States and other Western nations that NATO should send its forces to the Gaza Strip after Israel pulls out. NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer told the Financial Times, in an interview published yesterday, that the ambassadors of the member nations would discuss the possibility of operating in Gaza, if Israel and the Palestinians reach an agreement and ask for NATO help.

De Hoop Scheffer wants the organization to play a diplomatic role, especially regarding strengthening the trans-Atlantic understanding that was somewhat disrupted by the war in Iraq. Last week he visited the U.S. and met with President Bush.

NATO, an alliance of 26 countries from North America and Europe, was founded in 1949 during the Cold War to oppose the Soviet Union and its European allies. In the last few years, the organization has been searching for new assignments, and today tries to help fight terror, even though

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Interim Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, right, and Hamas representatives pause during a meeting in Abbas' office in Gaza City yesterday. Hamas dismissed a call from Abbas for a halt to attacks against Israelis in the run-up to elections, slated for January, to replace Yasser Arafat. See story, Page 2.

Israel keeps its cool over Katyushas

By Amos Harel
Haaretz Correspondent

Israel restrained itself yesterday from responding to Monday night's Katyusha rocket attack from Lebanon, and as of press time has not retaliated for the attack. One of the rockets was found yesterday in the Shlomi region in the north, and a second one apparently landed in the sea near Nahariya. There were no reports of damage or casualties.

A little-known group calling itself Martyr Ghaleb Alawi Group claimed responsibility yesterday for the attack. It is named for a senior Hezbollah security official who was killed in a Beirut bomb attack in July; Hezbollah blamed Israel for the attack, but security sources said the group is not linked to Hezbollah.

The assessment of the security establishment is that the attack was carried out by a Palestinian group. Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah said after Alawi's death that he had been involved in coordinating terror activities with Palestinian organizations in the territories - Hezbollah's first public admission of its role in recent Palestinian terror.

In response to Katyusha attack, the United Nations called on Lebanon "to double its efforts in order to ensure an immediate halt to serious violations of this nature" and called on all sides to maintain calm.

Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon told television's Channel 2 that Israel should not ignore the rocket fire, and official declarations made in the course of the day left open the possibility that Israel would react immediately to

the shooting. "There is someone here who's responsible, and that is primarily the Lebanese government," said Ya'alon. "If they don't stop this on their own, they'll pay the price. I'm not interested in whether or not it's Hezbollah. Even if it's an ephemeral Palestinian organization that's carrying out the shooting, Lebanon is responsible."

But yesterday afternoon an IDF officer indicated that no reaction was imminent, telling reporters on the northern border that allowing violence in the region to escalate would serve only the attackers.

"Bringing the region to escalation will not serve our interests," said Colonel Hen Livni, who commands a Western Galilee brigade. "A reaction at the present time would play into the hands of those responsible for the shooting."

He added that the IDF would react another time. "Our objective is to provide maximum security and quiet to the residents of the north," said Livni.

The IDF sees the attack as an indication that Hezbollah is trying to redefine the northern border and get Israel used to the occasional renewal of Katyusha fire, which has been fairly rare in the last four-and-a-half years since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. Israel is essentially waiting to see how Hezbollah will behave. If it fires Katyushas or enables other organizations to do so under its patronage, and if there are casualties, Israel will apparently see itself as obligated to respond fairly aggressively. But if there are no injuries, Israel will suffice with a relatively minor reaction so as not to open a new front in the north.

Israel might work with PA on disengagement

PM: If Palestinian leaders fight terror, negotiations possible



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Jerusalem Post sold to TA media company, CanWest

By Anat Balint
Haaretz Correspondent and AP

Hollinger International Inc. sold The Jerusalem Post yesterday to Tel Aviv-based media company Mirkaei Tikshoret Group Ltd. and CanWest Global Communications Group for \$13.2 million.

CanWest, the largest newspaper publisher in Canada, will take a 50-percent interest together with Mirkaei Tikshoret, owned by Israeli businessman Eli Azur, in a soon to be created holding company that will control The Jerusalem Post, the Jerusalem Report and subsidiary holdings.

Mirkaei Tikshoret has holdings that include TV and radio stations, as well as daily newspapers in Russian and weekly and monthly magazines in Hebrew and Russian.

Along with The Jerusalem Post, Hollinger also sold its land and printing press, located in the Romema neighborhood of Jerusalem.

The newspaper's sale came one day after the Securities and Exchange Commission filed a civil fraud lawsuit against Black and his former top deputy, David Radler, accusing them of misleading their board and misappropriating company funds. They have denied any wrongdoing.

It remains to be seen how involved the Post's new owners will be with determining its editorial policy, and whether there will be any staff changes. Sources close to Azur say he plans to give the newspaper professional freedom regarding its editorial policies, as he has done with other media outlets he controls, because he believes that is the key to success.

But the sources also expect the Asper family to be involved with the paper's editorial policy due to their familiarity with world Jewry, and that the buyers see the newspaper as a professional media outlet

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Gov't won't recognize non-Orthodox converts

By Relly Sa'ar

The State of Israel will not recognize non-Orthodox conversions for the purpose of granting Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.

However, Interior Minister Avraham Poraz objects to the government's position and believes the state should recognize reform and conservative conversions. In Poraz's view, the more lenient conversion procedures of the reform and conservative movements could solve the problem of hundreds of thousands of Israeli residents who are eligible under the Law of Return but whose conversion is effectively prevented by stringent Orthodox requirements.

Poraz's position is supported by Population Registry data, which shows there are 258,000 immigrants living in Israel who are not registered as Jews but are eligible for civic status under the Law of Return.

The government's position,

which is careful not to alter the status quo on conversion and preserves the Orthodox monopoly, was formulated Monday in a legal opinion by Yochi Genesin, the Justice Ministry official in charge of High Court of Justice petitions.

The government's position will be presented to the High Court, which is expected to rule in coming weeks on whether it recognizes the non-Orthodox conversion of 17 foreign workers and tourists who have lived in Israel for years.

A High Court panel of 11 justices ruled several months ago that the Law of Return should also apply to people converted in Israel (overseas conversions had long been recognized). The state requested a continuance of several months to present its position on recognizing reform or conservative conversions, so the High Court left that matter outstanding.

The state's submission to the court reflects the position of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

NII to crack down on fraud among housekeepers

By Ruth Sinai
Haaretz Correspondent

The National Insurance Institute (NII) is considering imposing sanctions on people who don't reveal the names of their housekeepers to the agency.

The move is meant to minimize fraud among housekeepers who tell the NII they have no income in order to receive welfare or disability benefits.

Some 90,000 employers make insurance payments on behalf of their housekeepers. About 20,000 of them don't reveal the housekeeper's name, according to the NII.

The NII has previously tried

and failed - to obligate employers to reveal their housekeepers' names, said Nira Golan, an attorney with expertise in claims against the NII.

"It won't work today, either," she said. "It's not easy to find a good housekeeper, especially after the deportation of the foreign workers. There are quite a few Israeli women who don't want their names revealed. What are employers going to do? Fire them? Not employ them? It doesn't make sense to punish employers who are making insurance payments."

Employers of housekeepers have recently received letters asking them to com-

plete missing information on their workers. "Failing to fill out these reports fully and accurately puts your employees under the burden of proving the claims they file with the National Insurance Institute and is occasionally likely to bring about loss of benefits," the letter states.

Employers are legally obligated to report the details of employees for whom they are making insurance payments. But the law is not generally enforced and NII officials have explicitly told employers, many of whom were illegally employing foreign workers, that they can pay out for insurance without sub-

mitting worker details. But the NII's collection department has recently been discussing the possibility of authorizing some kind of sanction for failure to submit employees' names. In the next phase, the suggestion will be discussed by NII administrators.

As NII regulations stand now, housekeepers are insured against work accidents as soon as their employers make insurance payments, even if the workers' names are not provided. If a housekeeper files a claim, an investigator is sent to the employer to make sure the housekeeper is actually the employee cov-

ered by insurance, and the money is paid out.

The only danger is if the employer is unable to prove who was supposed to be the beneficiary of the insurance payments. In that case, the NII could legally demand that the employer fund any disability payments the institute is obligated to pay the worker.

Golan said such a sanction is brought only against large employers - especially those that generally don't provide their employees with insurance coverage. She said she doesn't know of a case in which the employer of a housekeeper was made to pay the benefits.

Black humor and faith help Zaka volunteers overcome terror trauma

By Jonathan Lis

Volunteers of the Israeli emergency response organization Zaka, who take upon themselves the removal of bodies and body parts from the scenes of terror attacks, have developed a mental toughness greater than that of the general public, and that is usually greater than that of rescue workers in comparable organizations in Israel and abroad, according to a study conducted by Dr. Howard Fine for a doctoral dissertation at Surrey University in Britain.

Fine found that only 2.1 percent of Zaka volunteers suffer severe post-traumatic symptoms, compared to 9.4 percent of the general Israeli population. The main explanation for these data is the social climate in which the volunteers live, the supportive community, and the religious sense of mission that motivates their work. Fine visited Israel this week and presented his findings to Zaka administrators.

A year ago, Zaka director Yehuda Meshi Zahav, who had grasped the significance of the study, sent the questionnaire drawn up by Fine to

Zaka's 829 volunteers, along with a letter urging them to fill it out. They were asked to respond anonymously to 116 questions, and 37.6 percent of them did so and submitted the forms.

The data collected showed that 71.2 percent of volunteers are at low risk for developing post-traumatic symptoms. Only 2.1 percent of respondents indicated severe symptoms, and 26.7 percent were found to have average symptoms. "The number of post-traumatic sufferers in the organization is particularly low, even compared to other organizations in the world," Fine said.

"By comparison, a comparable study of the forensic team of the police revealed that among policemen who had been exposed to the same sights as Zaka members, the percentage of those with certain post-traumatic symptoms was higher than in the general population, or more than 9.4 percent. In the Oklahoma City bombing, 13 percent of firefighters developed post-traumatic symptoms, and 23 percent of the entire population exposed to the scene."

Fine's study presents three central reasons for the mental toughness

of members of this ultra-Orthodox rescue service: the sense of mission prompted by the volunteers' religious faith; the support and assistance stemming from the fact that most volunteers have steady jobs and lead active family and communal lives within the Haredi community; and the fact that most Zaka members are educated. "The combination of these three characteristics, not each on its own, is what creates the mental toughness of its members," Fine said.

Furthermore, Zaka administers rigorous entrance exams which include various psychological evaluation tests. Only 30 percent of applicants complete Zaka's arduous course, which includes hands-on work with cadavers. Another 10 percent drop out at the end of their first year on the job.

Contrary to the popular image of Zaka members, Fine's study revealed that 71.8 percent of respondents served in the army, and 92 percent held down a job alongside their volunteer work. These experiences, Fine believes, helped to develop their ability to deal with the scenes of horror they encounter.

Fine classified the post-traumatic symptoms he examined into three categories: situations of hyperalertness and hypersensitivity to surroundings; ignoring and avoiding taking part in a situation reminiscent of the traumatic event; and nightmares and hallucinations that trigger memories of the incident.

Among other things, Fine's study warns against cases of post-traumatic symptoms among relatives of Zaka volunteers.

"Just like the children of Holocaust survivors, the wives of Zaka workers and their children can suffer post-traumatic symptoms. I found that many wives did not want their husbands to work for Zaka, but were pleased the moment they began working," Fine added.

The heads of Zaka are well aware of the emotional ramifications of their daily labor. "At first we asked volunteers to go see a psychologist and Zaka would finance the expense," said Zaka spokesman Zeev Feiner. "When we saw that nobody was seeking psychological help, we decided to hold joint workshops, led by professionals, where volunteers

get everything out of their systems. The organization of Zaka wives provides spouses with parallel tools for dealing. We decided that volunteers and their families would meet for days of bonding and fun, to get to know each other and enjoy each other's company, so that their encounters would not be based solely on the experiences built up at rescue sites."

Another element that volunteers find to be helpful is a macabre sense of humor. "Everybody makes use of black humor and jokes related to the various incidents," Feiner noted. "It helps them to unwind. But in the case of Zaka, the humor comes only after the job is done, because while activity is ongoing at the incident scene, you need respect for the dead."

Fine says his study can provide an important tool for other groups forced to deal with trauma situations on a regular basis.

"My research joins previous studies regarding the Vietnam War or the Holocaust, and which proved that religious people succeeded in surviving traumatic events with a much lower rate of emotional injury," he said.



Lior Mizrahi / BanBau
A Zaka volunteer at an attack scene.