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## Large cities won't join strike for now

**Forum of 15 pledges solidarity with strikers**

By Relly Sa'ar  
Haaretz Correspondent and Haaretz Staff

Delegates of the country's 15 largest cities decided late last night not to join the Union of Local Authorities (ULA) strike at this stage. The strike enters its fourth day today.

After a meeting of representatives of the Forum of 15, whose members include Tel Aviv, Holon, Ramat Gan and Givatayim, the group said it is "a full partner in the struggle waged by the local councils against budget reductions. However, the forum will wait for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to act on his promise to resolve the crisis faced by the local councils at Sunday's government meeting. Should government decisions not be carried out to the satisfaction of the ULA, a committee will be formed to wage an uncompromising strike."

Until now, the 15 cities, which do not depend on Interior Ministry supplements to boost their budgets, have not shown solidarity with the local

councils, whose "balance payment" subsidies from the government have been cut by 43 percent. In the big cities, whose residents constitute half of the country's population, education institutions have remained open, while the mayors have not ordered the cessation of municipality services such as trash collection.

The local authorities strike, which was launched over the nonpayment of salaries and the budget crisis faced by the municipalities, continues this morning after another day of failed negotiations. Striking local authorities workers threatened yesterday to step up sanctions today; they said thousands of workers would block 82 major junctions around the country during rush hour this morning.

Some 15,000 employees in 79 local authorities have not received their wages in months, with the localities owing their staff about NIS 200 million.

Sanctions that will contin-

ue today include no garbage collection, no office hours for municipality offices, and no kindergarten teacher assistants.

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## Police, prosecution brief AG Mazuz on PM probe

By Baruch Kra  
Haaretz Correspondent

Attorney General Menachem "Meny" Mazuz held a meeting yesterday morning with the prosecution and police teams working on the "Greek island case." They briefed him on the status of the investigation and he asked them to refrain from public comment on the case until a decision is made on it.

The interrogation of the prime minister tomorrow will bring the end near to the evidence collection stage and next week the phase of summarizing it will begin. Mazuz will later get the summary and the case files before considering whether to prosecute Sharon or his sons,

or all of them. A final decision will take weeks, possibly months.

State Attorney Edna Arbel, Central District Attorney Rachel Sheaber, Tel Aviv District Attorney for Taxes and Economics Ela Rubnick, Prosecutor Ita Nahman, Criminal Investigations Department commander Moshe Mizrahi and the head of the International Investigations Department, deputy commander Yohanan Danino all attended yesterday's meeting.

Mazuz read the team's interim report and asked for clarifications from the police and prosecutors. At first the prosecutors believed the focus should be on completing the probe into Sharon's alleged use of influence to have the Ginat

farmlands rezoned for residential and commercial use before David Appel bought them, thereby enriching the Likud backroom kingmaker.

Instead, the investigators have decided they have all the evidence they need in the case so the rest of the inquiry will focus on how much Sharon knew about the sums of money his son Gilad was receiving from Appel around the same time he is suspected of helping Appel, and what his attitude was to this money.

Questioning will be done mostly by the International Investigations Department, but a representative from the Fraud Squad, Eran Kamin, will attend as an expert on the Ginat lands case.

The Greek island probe is almost over, but the police have yet to get tape recordings of Appel made by Sharon's son Gilad. Police are assuming the court won't help them on this matter as it did in the Cyril Kern affair.

The Kern affair papers, however, can easily be produced by Gilad even if they are not physically in his immediate reach. Therefore, Mazuz will have to soon deal with the other grave suspicions regarding the PM, in which foreign businessman Kern is suspected of transferring millions of dollars into Sharon family bank accounts, ostensibly to repay illegal campaign donations from 1999.



Labor Party leader Shimon Peres at yesterday's convention in Tel Aviv, where his tenure as chairman was extended for two years.

## Labor Party votes to extend Peres' term as chairman

By Mazal Mualem  
Haaretz Correspondent

The Labor Party voted yesterday to extend Shimon Peres' term as party chairman until December 2005, by a majority of 61 percent.

A proposal from MKs Matan Vilnai and Ephraim Sneh to hold party leadership primaries in June 2004, and not to extend Peres' term, won 39 percent of the votes.

The Labor Party convention got off to a spirited start yesterday when MK Eitan Cabel called on the elder statesman to step down. Peres took over as interim chairman as a result of prime ministerial candidate Amram Mitzna's poor showing in elections a year ago.

"Make way for the young, let us lead the party," Cabel

urged Peres. "It is intolerable that Ophir Pines-Paz, Eitan Cabel and Isaac Herzog cannot grow in this party when in any other country at this age they would be elected prime minister and in the Likud would be veteran ministers. It is pathetic."

Cabel was called to order. David Libai, the head of the party's constitution committee, said Cabel had taken over the agenda and he demanded that Cabel clear the podium. Cabel refused, and continued to call on Peres to quit. MK Avraham Shochat's attempts to intervene also failed. Cabel only stepped off the podium when Libai threatened to call in the ushers to force him from the stage.

The MK urged the convention to vote in favor of holding primaries this year, and not extending Peres' leadership. "What will happen in another year?" he said. "Matan Vilnai won't start talking clearly and Fuad [Benjamin Ben-Eliezer] won't lose weight. Nothing will happen. We are not raising leaders. In 2005, we will be in the same situation and will be asked once again to extend his term of office."

Peres opened the convention by asking that his term be extended by two years, or until the end of December 2005.

Ben-Eliezer had hinted at a compromise proposal that would have kept Peres in his post for a year, or perhaps for 18 months.

"I am trying to find a compromise proposal that will enable the discussion to proceed in a good atmosphere, and that will ensure that the Labor Party begin to gear up in the coming months for our central task, and not waste time on struggles between personalities," Ben-Eliezer said.

## Kishon River ban sinks dreams of young boaters

By David Ratner

On December 26, the Haifa Boat Club held a national competition for youths. Twenty-two young competitors, most of them in small Optimist-class sailboats, took part. Boat club members were impressed by Haifa Mayor Yona Yahav's strong statements about the importance of promoting water sports in the city. After the competition, the club members prepared DVDs and a fancy brochure, hoping to attract youths to water-related activities. The DVD referred to Israeli youths who finished in top spots two years ago in European championship events.

A month after the Haifa Boat Club competition, and just a few days before the DVDs and brochures were to be distributed, everything came to a halt. Three weeks ago, the Health Ministry "discovered" that the area used for boat club activities is part of the Kishon River region that has been banned for water sports. The Education Ministry, which supports the boat club, then announced that the club's activities would be suspended.

Haifa Municipality officials now want to transfer all youth boating activity to the Hashekot beach area, near Rambam Medical Center, where natural barriers ease waves. However, the beach has been operated for decades by one concession owner; legal action has been taken to alter control of the beach, but it is unlikely the boat club will be able to set up shop at Hashekot anytime in the next few years. It appears as though water sports in Haifa will not stay afloat.

Boat club members wag fingers of blame at government ministries, and also at Yuval Tamir, a former Israel Defense Forces navy diver who developed cancer and launched a public crusade that culminated in the establishment of the Shamgar Committee inquiry into diving and water quality in the Kishon River. They charge that Tamir stirred unnecessary panic, and caused government ministries to "cover their asses," as the parent of one child

who trains at the club put it.

The Haifa Boat Club was established by the Histadrut in the 1950s. In the 1990s, it started to collapse; it was revived through the efforts of a Haifa sailing association, formed in the 1990s. The association's goal was to train a new generation of sailing enthusiasts.

The first part of the Shamgar Committee report was submitted in July 2001. The report stated: "Diving of IDF soldiers is not to be allowed in the Kishon; no training activities involving entry in the water are to be carried out until water in the harbor and the river is purified... We recommend that this ban apply, as well, to sport activity - to swimming, diving, and water activities of sport and youth movements that are conducted in the Kishon's water." In February 2002, the government adopted the committee's recommendations.

Officials in Haifa studied the Shamgar Committee report, and searched for ways to continue boating activity. Then Haifa mayor Amram Mitzna set up a special committee, which issued recommendations concerning measures that could be taken to allow boating activity. For almost another two years, boating activity continued, utilizing an arrangement whereby whoever brought the sailboats would pull them from the harbor to open water in a way that minimized the youngsters' contact with water from the Kishon.

Arrangements worked out between the boat club, the Haifa Municipality and government ministries capsize due to Tamir's activity. "I'm ready to play the role of the bad guy," he says. "I'd rather have a kid angry with me for ending his sailing activity than having him experience in another few years the suffering I endure."

Tamir watched the boat club competition in December, and then issued a complaint to MK Leah Ness (Likud), who heads the Knesset's Environmental Affairs Committee. Soon after Tamir testified at one of these panel's sessions, the education and health ministries issued the immediate ban.

## Eiland to present disengagement plan next week

**Palestinian Authority calls Gaza plan 'good news'; Peres says Labor would give PM safety net**

Haaretz Staff

National Security Council Chairman Giora Eiland is supposed to hand in the first detailed draft of the disengagement plan to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon next week, according to a senior government source in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia yesterday called Sharon's plan to evacuate Gaza Strip settlements "good news."

"Of course it is good news for us," Qureia told the Voice of Palestine radio station in his first public remarks one day after Sharon announced the plan. "We hope that Israel will withdraw from all Palestinian areas," Qureia said. He called, however, for "deeds, not words," and added that any Gaza pullout should be fol-

lowed by a similar withdrawal from the West Bank. "Then, there will be a real peace. Otherwise, the situation will remain as is," he said.

An Islamic Jihad spokesman hailed Sharon's declaration as one that "no doubt resulted from the greatness of resistance and steadfastness of the Palestinian people." But Hamas militant Sayed Seyam said that Sharon's plan "will not end the occupation," and warned that, "as long as occupation continues, resistance will go on."

Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres expressed full support for Sharon's plan, but downplayed the likelihood of his party's joining the coalition government. Speaking at the Labor Party convention, Peres congratulated Sharon for "adopting the policy of the La-

bor Party." He said that if he were a Likud leader arriving at the conclusion that Israel should withdraw from the Gaza Strip, the first thing he would do "is go to Mt. Herzl to Yitzhak Rabin's grave and say one word: 'Sorry'."

"If Sharon carries out his proposal, I promise him our support in the Knesset for as long as he travels on that path," the interim Labor leader said.

Sharon yesterday expressed the pain he feels in having made the decision. "Other than the settlers, this matter hurts me personally more than anyone," he said during a visit to an Ashkelon desalination water plant.

"Despite the difficulty and the pain, I have reached the conclusion that as the person who shoulders the responsibility to allow the development of

Israel under maximum security, there is a need to do this... that is my responsibility. Not day-to-day comfort, but Israel's development, security and economy in the years to come. This truly pains me greatly, but this is my responsibility, and therefore I said what I said, and what I intend to carry out."

Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said the disengagement plan could go into effect in as little as four to five months, while Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin hinted that right-wing ministers should consider resigning. "Today we are at the moment of truth," he said. "This decision prevented me from joining the government. I knew what was ahead for the government, and I knew what the government could expect," Rivlin said.

Some preparatory meetings are scheduled prior to Sharon's upcoming trip to Washington, which has yet to be set, where he will present his disengagement plan to the administration.

Eiland and Sharon bureau chief Dov Weisglass are supposed to go to Washington to present the plan to seek U.S. approval, and U.S. National Security Council staffers Steve Hadley and Elliot Abrams are expected to visit Israel soon to scout the plan before it is presented to U.S. President George W. Bush.

Meanwhile, Weisglass is set to meet with Qureia's bureau chief, Nassan Abu Libda, to prepare an often postponed meeting next week between the two prime ministers - their first since Qureia took office.

## Senior Justice Ministry official accused of sexual harassment

By Ruth Sinai  
Haaretz Correspondent

The Civil Service Commission is looking into an allegation that a senior official in the Justice Ministry sexually harassed a female worker and that pressure was put on her to deny the charge.

Uri Suissa, the internal comptroller of the ministry, allegedly sexually harassed a secretary in the state prosecution. Three weeks ago, as the investigation against him was underway, Suissa won the tender for supervisor of advanced training courses for lawyers and interns in the civil service. All four members of the committee that chose him were aware of the disciplinary investigation being carried out against him.

Suissa's appointment led to a storm among ministry officials, who said the tender should have been postponed until the investigation was completed, or the appointment should have been delayed. Ministry sources, however, said the investigation had been going on for

months and it was not clear when it would conclude. So far, despite the fact that most of the investigation is over, no decision has been made by the commission on whether to charge Suissa with a disciplinary infringement.

The story broke about half a year ago, when an anonymous letter was received by advocate Rivka Shaked, who is in charge of women's advancement in the civil service. The letter alleged that Suissa had abused the secretary. Even though the secretary denied this, the commission decided an investigation should be carried out. The woman subsequently gave evidence several times and reportedly described the alleged attacks by Suissa.

Sources close to Suissa said the woman had written a letter recanting her testimony but investigators believe she may have done this under duress, including pressure from a senior official. It is not clear whether such a letter actually reached the commission.

The lawyers representing

Suissa, Ro'i and David Politi, denied all the allegations against their client and said he had been suffering for half a year. "His personal, family and professional life has come to a standstill. We have evidence acquitting [Suissa] and pointing to an attempt to incriminate him," the lawyers said, adding the evidence was being turned over to the police. They said they believed the affair would end with someone else facing charges.

Suissa is the second senior Justice Ministry official to be investigated on charges of harassment over the past year. Three months ago, Amnon Aviad, director of the property register in Jerusalem (Tabu), was charged with harassing 12 female workers. According to the charge sheet presented to the civil service disciplinary tribunal, Aviad said to workers in his office, in previous sexual harassment cases: "It is a shame that he merely harassed the plaintiff... If he had raped her, he would at least have enjoyed himself."

## Geneva Accord architects look for Arab League blessing

By Aluf Benn  
Haaretz Correspondent

The Geneva Accord architects are trying to get their plan adopted by the upcoming summit of the Arab League, which is scheduled to take place in Tunisia next month.

The group is proposing that summit participants announce acceptance of the accord as the basis for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and the relevant UN documents as the basis for a peace agreement between Israel and Syria and Lebanon.

The accord's architects therefore hope to convince the Israeli public that the entire Arab world, and not only the Palestinian Authority, is a partner for dialogue and a peace agreement.

Their message to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is that he should reach an agreement with the Palestinians rather than undertake a unilateral move, and thereby achieve peace with the entire Arab world.

Yossi Beilin and Yasser Abed Rabbo, the Geneva ar-

chitects, held meetings this week with key European leaders asking them to press Arab leaders to accept the initiative. The two met in Brussels with EU officials Javier Solana and Chris Patten and EC leader Romano Prodi and in London with UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and his foreign minister, Jack Straw. Last month the two traveled to Berlin and Paris to deliver similar messages. They are asking the Europeans to adopt the Geneva plan as the third, final stage of the road map.

According to an Israeli source, Blair told them that he will not get into the details of the Geneva Accord, but added that the document is very important, and he believes it can be integrated into the road map.

In early March, the Israeli and Palestinian organizers of the accord will be invited to a conference in Cairo to discuss adapting the initiative for the Arab League summit. They are expected to meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the time.

The Arab world is divided

over whether to accept the Geneva Accord. Some Arab states reject the proposed solution to the refugee problem calling it insufficient. The Israeli organizers expect their Palestinian partners to persuade the recalcitrant Arab states and regard Saudi Arabia as a key state in that regard.

Meanwhile, Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher is trying to encourage Saudi Arabia to revive a new version of its 2002 peace initiative. According to reports that reached Jerusalem, the Saudis are not yet convinced.

Beilin yesterday attacked Sharon's unilateral withdrawal plan, saying "unilateral solutions should be a final resort only when we realize there is no chance for an agreement, and not a first step that will prevent solutions to problems like refugees and Jerusalem."

A government source in Jerusalem said the Europeans had told Israel about their plans to meet with Beilin and Abed Rabbo, and reported details of the meeting to government officials.