

Libya preparing for future existence with Israel

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi could forge ties with Israel, an Israeli opposition member of parliament says. Ephraim Sneh, who met the Libyan leader's son last August, said "Gaddafi has made a strategic decision, and he is not a man of small steps".

His remarks come amid media reports that Israeli and Libyan officials met last month to discuss the issue.

But Libya, which has never recognised Israel and called for its destruction, has denied any meetings took place.

Libya announced dramatically last month it would give up banned weapons.

Gaddafi's son - Seif al-Islam - is considered a likely successor to the Libyan leader.

Only two Arab nations, Egypt and Jordan, have full diplomatic relations with Israel.

Mauritania, a member of the Arab League, has recognised Israel since 1999.

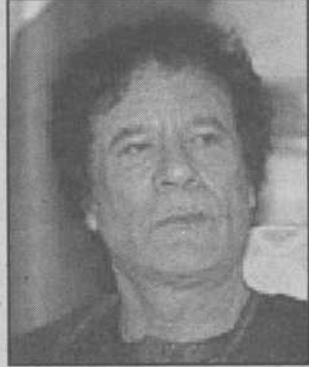
'Intrigue'

Sneh confirmed on Wednesday that he and another Israeli legislator had met the Libyan leader's son on the sidelines of an academic conference.

"He [Colonel Gaddafi] will not stop half-way. He could go as far as relations with Israel, and beyond," Sneh told Israel Radio.

Sneh spoke as both the Israeli and Arabic media reported that Libya and Israel had been exploring the possibility of establishing relations.

A senior Israeli foreign



Is Libya's leader Muammar Gaddafi ready to have a relationship with Israel?

—File photo Muammar Gaddafi

ministry official, Ron Prosor, met an Arab official in Paris in late December, to test the waters, Israeli reports said.

Israeli Government sources have refused to confirm the report officially.

But the daily Haaretz said Prosor had briefed Prime Minister Ariel Sharon about the initiative.

Unnamed officials in Mr

Sharon's office said the chance of relations with Libya did not "appear serious".

And the foreign ministry issued a statement saying: "It's still a very long way down the road before Israel and Libya can establish diplomatic relations."

"The Libyan leader has to demonstrate in action that he is headed toward real nego-

tiation."

A Libyan foreign ministry spokesman said no meeting had taken place at all.

"We would like to assert that officials in Libya have investigated this issue and have not found any evidence of it," Hassouna al-Shawish said, according to official Libyan news agency JANA.

"Whoever is circulating these reports should provide proof by stating the date and place of these meetings, as well as the people involved."

"International relations are not built on rumours and intrigues," he said.

Contacts reported

A Kuwaiti newspaper sparked the speculation about possible Libya-Israel relations on Tuesday by reporting that an Israeli delegation was due to visit Tripoli later

this month for talks.

Al-Siyasa newspaper said officials from Israel's foreign and defence ministries and Mossad intelligence service would hold talks in Libya on ending hostilities between the two countries - which date from Israel's founding in 1948.

It quoted European diplomatic sources as saying that high-ranking Libyan and Israeli officials met an American diplomat in Vienna last Friday.

The newspaper said the Libyan leader's son, Seif al-Islam, and the head of Libyan intelligence, also met Israeli officials several times in Geneva and London last year.

Israeli diplomatic sources called the report "exaggerated and far-fetched", the Jerusalem Post reported

Officials: Unguarded ports aid al-Qaida efforts in Kenya

MOMBASA, Kenya (AP) - Wooden dhows sail into Mombasa's centuries old port every day, unloading everything from smuggled baby formula to illegal weapons - all under the eyes of police and customs officers bribed not to notice, Kenyan and U.S. officials told The Associated Press.

Nearly all the contraband comes from neighboring Somalia, a lawless country where al-Qaida operatives procured missiles and explosives that were smuggled by sea into Mombasa and used in twin attacks on Israeli targets a year ago Friday, according to a recent U.N. report.

In the year since, little has been done to staunch smuggling in eastern Africa, making it easy for terrorists to slip weapons through Kenya's corrupt ports and largely unpatrolled coves that dot its Indian Ocean coast, said a U.S. official, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

A deeply rooted culture of smuggling is a problem throughout eastern Africa. Al-Qaida has twice struck Kenya and there are indications the Islamic terror network is plotting a third attack; Kenyan police uncovered a plot to destroy the new U.S. Embassy this past June.

That makes smuggling

along the predominantly Muslim coast of the East African country - where al-Qaida is also known to be recruiting - a serious concern in the war against terrorism.

There are senior Kenyan officials working to clean up the ports, but they are fighting a well entrenched bureaucracy - a battle that could take years to win, said the U.S. official, speaking from Washington.

"We cannot say there is no longer corruption at the ports," said Mombasa's district commissioner, John Egesa. "We know there are weapons coming in, we find them each day in the hands of criminals."

He insisted Kenya's new government, elected last year on promises to stamp out corruption, is cracking down at the city's old port and its modern container facility, though he refused to elaborate.

But a police officer who works at the ports and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said no action has been taken and smuggling flourishes.

According to the officer, a 10-year veteran, boat owners pay shipping agents in Mombasa to make sure goods are cleared through the port without paying taxes or import duties, which can run as high as 50 percent.

The shipping agents - the officer named a number of them - then pay off police and customs officers to look the other way.

Most of the smuggled goods are harmless - clothes, electronics and spices - and require only small bribes. But for illegal weapons - usually guns, but occasionally explosives - more money is paid to higher-ranking officials, the officer said.

Similar arrangements are in place at smaller ports to the north, like Malindi and Lamu, the officer said.

In August 2002, the officer, who is paid \$80 a month, said he and other officers were bribed \$13 each to let a dhow unload weapons at Mombasa's old port. A senior police official arranged the payments, the officer said.

The officer said he could not see the weapons, which were concealed in boxes and covered with blankets.

That same month, the United Nations said in a recent report, al-Qaida smuggled into Kenya shoulder-fired missiles that were used in a failed attempt to shoot down an Israeli airliner taking off from Mombasa's airport in November 2002.

The missiles, purchased in Somalia, "were smuggled into Kenya by sea," the re-

port said. "The launchers had been painted blue and white, presumably to camouflage their real purpose and to minimize risk of discovery during onward transport to Mombasa."

Around the same time the missiles were fired, suicide bombers detonated a car bomb outside the Paradise Hotel north of Mombasa, killing 15 people, including three Israeli tourists and at least two bombers.

"Some of the components of the bomb, including the detonator, may have been obtained from Somalia," the U.N. report said.

It's not clear if the weapons came through Mombasa's old port or one of the coves outside the city, said one of the U.N. investigators, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The coves are rarely, if ever, patrolled by the police or the Kenyan navy, said the police officer.

Throughout eastern Africa, security needs to improve at ports - both land and sea - said U.S. Marine Brig. Gen. Mastin Robeson, the commander of an American-led anti-terrorism task force based in nearby Djibouti.

"Customs is an awful lot of what needs to happen here," said Robeson.



NUCLEAR TRUCE?

The international community has hailed a breakthrough between nuclear powers India and Pakistan after their decision to reopen dialogue, two years after coming to the brink of their fourth war. The following members attended the 12th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation summit: (Left to Right) Maldivian Foreign Minister Fathulla Jameel, Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigmi Thinley, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Nepalese Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa (AFP/PIID).

Sudan

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tains. "The international community needs to maintain its high level of involvement until a comprehensive peace deal is signed," he urged.

In 2002, the Khartoum government and the SPLA agreed that the south would enjoy a six-year interim period of autonomy before holding a referendum on its future. During this period, a separate national administration would also be set up in partnership with the SPLA.

Details of this partnership and the power-sharing arrangements are still under discussion.

The bulk of the wealth-sharing deal was settled late last month, when it was agreed that the SPLA and the government would receive equal shares of oil revenue, after two percent was deducted to go to the state where the oil was produced.

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