

Bomb kills 16 in Haifa

By Eitan Hess-Ashkenaz
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HAIFA, Israel — A bomber blew himself up aboard a bus filled with students in Haifa, located in northern Israel Wednesday, killing at least 16 people and injuring 55. The blast spread blood-splattered debris throughout a prosperous hilltop neighborhood, ending a two-month lull in suicide bombings.

Floodlights cast an eerie glow on the scene, illuminating the charred bus skeleton. The explosion blew off the bus roof, shattered all its windows and toppled nearby palm trees.

The attack came days after the establishment of a new hard-line government in Israel and a government pledge to step up military strikes against militant strongholds in the Gaza Strip. Dozens of Palestinians have been killed in more than two weeks of raids, including at least 10 civilians.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called an emergency meeting of senior Cabinet ministers late Wednesday to discuss the Haifa bombing.

Bus No. 37 was packed with students from Haifa University when it stopped in the hilltop neighborhood of Carmelia at 2:17 p.m. to let off passengers.

"I suddenly heard an explosion," said bus driver Marwan Damouni, who was treated at a hospital. "I tried to move, to see if there were

wounded. I couldn't hear anything because of the force."

The bomb was laden with metal shrapnel for greater deadliness, according to Police Commissioner Shlomo Aharonishki.

Crime lab technicians were investigating, but early reports said the blast was caused by 130 pounds of explosives, which would make it one of the most powerful attacks.

Rescue workers and police said they believed one of the 16 dead was the bomber. Dozens were seriously injured, including among them innocent passers-by.

Ovadia Saar, who was driving a bus just behind the one that was attacked, said he saw "the back of the bus fly into the air, and the windows blew out and a great cloud of dust covered the bus."

"I got out and ran toward the bus. It was a horrible sight. There were a few bodies in the street," he said. "Those we saw breathing, we evacuated."

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, just as Israel's new hard-line government is stepping up its offensive against Hamas militants in Gaza and as the Palestinian Authority considers far-reaching reforms.

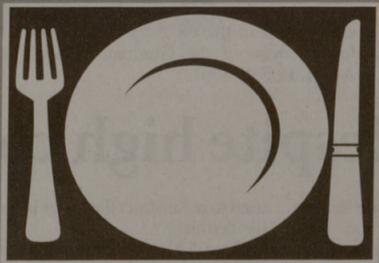
Abdel Aziz Rantisi, a spokesman for Hamas, praised the bombing but did not claim responsibility for the act.

Getting the boot



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Israel investigates authenticity of box inscribed by Jesus

By Laurie Copans
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM — Israel Antiquities Authority began studying an ancient stonebox on Wednesday to determine whether it was used to bury a man who some Christians believe was Jesus' brother. If authenticated, the box could be the oldest archaeological link to the biblical figures.

The box arrived in Israel on Wednesday from Toronto, Canada, where it had previously been on display at the Royal Ontario Museum.

The Antiquities Authority set up two commissions of archaeologists, geologists and language experts to study the box, which bears the inscription, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus," and which Israeli and French scholars believe dates to somewhere between A.D. 50-70.

The New Testament identifies James as Jesus' "brother" and the leader of Jerusalem's early Christians, although different faiths vary on how closely the two were related.

It was unclear where the box was found. Its Israeli owner, Oded Golan, has said he doesn't remember the name of the antiquities dealer he bought it from for \$200 in the 1970s in Jerusalem's

Old City. Golan showed the ossuary to a French scholar, Andre Lemaire, who revealed his intriguing finding in November in the Biblical Archaeological Review magazine.

Since then, experts have raised the possibility the inscription did not refer to Jesus of Nazareth or that the phrase about Jesus might have been forged. Israel's Geological Survey found that the patina on the stone indicates the letters were engraved in ancient times and were not tampered with.

The mention of a brother's ossuaries was very rare and could indicate this particular find was very important, Lemaire believes.

Protestants traditionally read the New Testament as meaning Mary gave birth to Jesus as a virgin and then had James, three other sons and at least two daughters with Joseph.

In accord with church fathers' writings after the New Testament era, the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics teach of Mary's "perpetual virginity," which means she and Joseph never had marital relations.

The Orthodox think Joseph had James by his first wife, and after she died he married Mary — whose only child was the virgin-born Jesus. Thus, they believe, James was Jesus' half brother.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Brothers orphaned in plane crash seek home

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Hundreds of people have offered to take in three orphaned brothers who survived a plane crash on a frigid mountainside and the boys' condition was upgraded Wednesday from critical to serious.

Offers to provide a home for the Ferris boys — Ryan, 2, Jordan, 5, and Tyler, 10 — were pouring in, but Smith said they will live with relatives in upstate New York once they're well enough to leave the hospital.

The family of seven was returning home to Swanzey, N.H., from a Florida vacation Sunday when their single-engine Piper Cherokee slammed into a snow-covered mountain in southwestern Massachusetts. Tayne Ferris and sons Shawn, 12, and Kyle, 9, died at the scene; the boys' father, Ronald Ferris, died later from his injuries. The boys' grandparents, aunt and uncle have stayed with them since they arrived at the hospital, Smith said.

That made "a huge difference in their anxiety levels," said Dr. Thomas Cohen, a pediatric trauma surgeon at Albany Medical Center Hospital. He said the boys are talking and have "captured everybody's hearts" among the 60 to 75 medical staff involved in their care.

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