

Reprinted from Jerusalem Post, May 21

U.S. Media Exaggerate Coverage Of West Bank, Ignore Other Mideast News

WASHINGTON — American media coverage of the Middle East lately has caused concern among Israel officials here and their American supporters. Especially disconcerting to them is the reporting from Israel.

The impressions being given in the U.S. is that most of the foreign press corps in Israel have abandoned Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in favour of the Arab towns on the West Bank, which have been the scene of rioting. Other important developments in Israel, which would normally be covered, seem to be neglected these days.

Thus, as of Wednesday, there was not a word in any major American daily newspaper about the current dispute between Prime Minister Rabin and Defense Minister Peres. Yet there have been lengthy dispatches describing in considerable detail the West Bank rioting.

What appears to have irritated supporters of Israel here even more is the fact that American newspapers have given front-page prominence to reports of West Bank developments, often accompanied with four and five-column pictures.

A photo late last month in the "Washington Post," for example, showing an Israel soldier pulling the hair of a young Arab woman, was splashed across the top of page one — for five columns. "If the Arabs had paid the 'Washington Post' for an advertisement, they could not have won better propaganda points," an American official recently said. That same picture was featured in several other American dailies.

While the press has highlighted the West Bank demonstrations, the escalating fighting in Lebanon where hundreds of men, women and children have been killed during the past two weeks, has received secondary coverage.

There are some explanations:

One of the problems, ironically, for Israel is that foreign reporters have easier access to the West Bank than their colleagues have to stories in Lebanon. There is certainly no comparison covering the two stories.

As a result, some Israel officials here have approved of proposals to make it more difficult to gain access to the West Bank, despite the damage these restrictions have done to Israel's freedom-of-the-press reputation.

Israel is also paying the price of having a sophisticated communications system which has facilitated television and radio coverage of rioting. "It's easier to get a story out of Israel," one veteran journalist here commented.

A good example was a nationally-televised news programme last Sunday evening. The anchorman merely

read news brief items about the fighting in Lebanon — where 150 had been killed that day — and the terrorist explosions in Northern Ireland — where eight were killed — but there was an actual film of the West Bank demonstrations.

An American editor justified the coverage saying that it was in fact more "news" because of the many years of relative quiet that prevailed on the West Bank. "Fighting in Lebanon is more common," he said.

"The New York Times," the most important American newspaper, is causing the Israel diplomatic community in Washington and New York the most aggravation. On Monday, the newspaper gave top-of-page-one coverage to the death of the Arab girl — the killings in Lebanon were placed at the bottom of the page.

It has traditionally been a truism of American journalism that the American media usually follow the lead of the "Times."

"Times" Jerusalem bureau chief Terence Smith, generally respected by Israel supporters here for many years because of what they considered his fair reporting, is now coming under increasing criticism. "He's not writing about anything other than the developments on the West Bank," an Israel official said. Arab delegates at the UN are using the Smith reports on a regular basis in their propaganda battle against Israel.

But the foreign press corps in Israel is not the only group of reporters coming under criticism by Israel's friends here. Israel officials reacted with disbelief the other day to the coverage of and interpretation given to President Ford's address before the American Jewish Committee — an address they considered to have been his most pro-Israel statement since entering the White House.

Yet the wire service reporters initially tended to give it a "negative" tone, stressing Ford's brief reference to the fact that "Israel is asked to relinquish territory — a concrete and essentially irreversible step — in return for basically intangible political measures."

And as is so typical of the White House press corps, "pack journalism" ensured — that is to say, the rest of the reporters, for the most part, followed the leads of the wire services. This is usually a "safe bet" because White House correspondents are generally not well versed in the nuances of foreign affairs.

Later, Israel officials here, concerned that the President was not getting the "positive" press he had expected, tried to reverse the interpretation of the speech. But the initial damage had already been done.