



GAZA: Actor Mahmoud Karira, who plays Gilad Shalit, has makeup applied by an assistant during the shooting of a 90-minute film entitled "Fleeting Illusion" in Gaza City. — AFP

HAMAS MAKING FEATURE FILM ON ISRAELI SOLDIER'S CAPTIVITY

GAZA: A young Israeli soldier captured by Gaza militants and held for five years before being traded for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners is the subject of an ambitious low-budget film being made by his captors. The fate of Gilad Shalit, a corporal captured in a deadly cross-border raid when he was just 19, transfixed Israel for years as his captivity in an unknown location challenged what most Israelis see as the state's sacred duty to bring its soldiers home.

But for the Islamist Hamas movement ruling Gaza, his capture and eventual exchange for more than 1,000 prisoners was a triumph for the "resistance," an epic worthy of a blockbuster feature—even if produced on a shoestring budget. A shortage of funds has drastically slowed the production, and even its director said it may not live up to the high-quality epic envisioned. Entitled "Fleeting Illusion," the 90-minute film promises revelations about Shalit's cap-

ture and top-secret captivity "about which neither Shalit nor the resistance have spoken before," director and screenwriter Majed Jundiye told AFP.

Jundiye, who says he is not a member of Hamas, made the 2009 biopic "Emad Akel" about a commander of Hamas's military wing who headed Israel's hit list until he was killed in 1993. Filming on his latest work began in December, and the first of the film's two parts was to have been ready for the eighth anniversary of Shalit's June 2006 capture by Hamas and two other militant groups, whose fighters tunneled into Israel and attacked a border post. Shalit was eventually released in October 2011 in exchange for 1,027 Palestinians. Gilad's father Noam Shalit, who was long the public face of the campaign for his release, declined to speak about the film, saying he did not want to "engage in a dialogue with Hamas." "The story is behind us," he said. —AFP

ISRAEL LOBBY SEEKS TO REGAIN FOOTING

AIPAC REMAINS A POTENT POLITICAL FORCE

WASHINGTON: For years, Israeli leaders visiting Washington have been boosted by America's main pro-Israel lobby, its influence on US Middle East policy long accepted as a matter of conventional wisdom. But when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses an annual convention of Israel's US supporters next week, he will find the group trying to show it has not lost its touch after the White House blocked its push for Congress to impose new Iran sanctions. While no one doubts the American Israel Public Affairs Committee remains a potent political force, AIPAC - and the Israeli government it seeks to bolster in Washington - can ill afford any perceptions of weakness in advancing its agenda at such a critical juncture in US-Israeli relations. The largest pro-Israel lobbying group will gather at a time when its conservative leadership - not unlike the right-wing Israeli premier - are at odds with President Barack Obama over his diplomatic strategy for resolving the West's nuclear standoff with Iran, Israel's arch-foe. AIPAC also faces questions about how it can move past its biggest legislative setback in years. The stakes are especially high on the Iran issue, the top security priority for both Netanyahu's government and America's pro-Israel community. Scoffing at the notion that the group is on the ropes, an AIPAC source insisted its critics have "lost all perspective" and that differences with the administration are being managed. AIPAC, which amassed about 100,000 members in its 60-year history, is widely credited with helping to ensure Israel remains a top recipient of US foreign aid, this year exceeding \$3 billion, mostly military-related.

Mocked on cable TV

After AIPAC lobbyists helped enlist 59 US senators from both major parties to co-sponsor legislation that would impose new sanctions on Iran if negotiations failed, the bill - which had Netanyahu's blessing - stalled earlier this month. "They came up against realities on Capitol Hill," a former administration official said, suggesting that going toe-to-toe on Iran with a Democratic president in a Democratic-led Senate was always a losing proposition. "The question now is whether this will affect AIPAC's ability to get things done that relate specifically to Israel."

AIPAC typically works behind the scenes and picks its battles well. Most measures it favors pass Congress with little opposition. But this time it found itself mocked on cable tele-

vision by popular talk-show comedian Jon Stewart, who accused US lawmakers of behaving like senators "from the great state of Israel." The White House cast the sanctions effort as a "march toward war" and Obama threatened a veto, spurring some fellow Democrats behind the bill to peel off. AIPAC still believes if it bides its time, it will have a chance to revive the sanctions drive, a senior AIPAC official said. It was the second blow to AIPAC in recent months. In September, when Obama sought congressional authorization to strike Syria over chemical weapons use, the group lobbied lawmakers at the White House's behest. But then Obama backedtracked from military action.

While AIPAC's legislative stumbles have been rare, it has tripped up before. It failed to block President Ronald Reagan's sale of planes with advanced radar to Saudi Arabia in 1981, and, a decade later, President George HW Bush delayed \$10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel in a dispute over settlement-building in occupied territories. AIPAC is predicting a record turnout of 14,000 members and attendance by "more than two-thirds of Congress" at its three-day annual bash. Even at a time of friction with AIPAC, the White House is dispatching Secretary of State John Kerry, who is trying to craft a framework deal to keep Israeli-Palestinian peace talks going, and Treasury Secretary Jack Lew to address the group.

"We have an open line of communication with the administration," the AIPAC source said. The Obama administration has made clear it hopes Netanyahu as well as his AIPAC allies will tone down their opposition while negotiations proceed with Tehran. But the administration is resigned to taking some flak from Netanyahu. "We don't dictate his talking points," said a senior US official, who also insisted that differences with Netanyahu are about tactics, not the shared goal of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Wendy Sherman, a senior State Department official who heads the US negotiating team in talks between Iran and world powers, left little doubt that the administration is keeping AIPAC on its radar screen. "I've spoken quite directly to AIPAC. I've met with AIPAC," Sherman told a roundtable of Israeli journalists in Jerusalem last weekend when asked about the group's role. "We need to create the space for this diplomacy. And I would urge AIPAC to create this space." Despite such appeals, AIPAC appears intent on keeping the heat on the administration over Iran. —Reuters

MOSCOW, WEST FACE OFF AS UKRAINE BOILS

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Moscow has promised to defend the interests of its citizens in Ukraine. While it has said it will not intervene by force, its rhetoric since the removal of Yanukovich a week ago has echoed the run-up to its invasion of Georgia in 2008. Any armed confrontation in Crimea would have major global repercussions, with tensions already heightened between Russia and the West over the change of power in Ukraine and supporting opposite sides in Syria's civil war. They have, however, pledged to cooperate to prop up Ukraine's faltering economy.

Ukraine's top security official, Andriy Paruby, said the armed men were taking their orders from the top in Russia. "These are separate groups ... commanded by the Kremlin," Paruby, secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, told a televised briefing in Kiev. One of the options being considered was declaring a state of emergency in Crimea, he added. The foreign ministers of France, Germany and Poland, who negotiated a peace deal to end violence in Kiev earlier this month, urged all parties to refrain from any action endangering Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Asset freeze

Russia announced war games on Wednesday near the Ukrainian border, putting 150,000 troops on high alert, although US Secretary of State John Kerry said his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, had told him the exercises were pre-planned. Yanukovich - who is wanted by the new government for mass murder after the deaths of protesters in Kiev last week - resurfaced in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don yesterday. He said he had not seen Russian President Vladimir Putin but had spoken to him on the telephone and was surprised the Russian leader was not more vocal over Ukraine. "Russia cannot be indifferent,

cannot be a bystander watching the fate of as close a partner as Ukraine," Yanukovich told a news conference. "Russia must use all means at its disposal to end the chaos and terror gripping Ukraine."

He denied he had run away, saying he had been forced to leave Kiev due to threats and denounced "lawlessness, terror, anarchy and chaos" in the country. Switzerland, Austria and Liechtenstein moved yesterday to freeze assets and bank accounts of up to 20 Ukrainians including Yanukovich and his son. Yanukovich said talk of foreign bank accounts was "empty chatter". Ukraine's new rulers have said loans worth \$37 billion went missing from state accounts during Yanukovich's three years in power - a jaw-dropping sum even for a population now used to tales of a lavish lifestyle and opulent residence outside Kiev.

The new Ukrainian leadership has said the country needs almost as much as that - \$35 billion - over the next two years to stave off bankruptcy. It said yesterday it hoped to get financial aid soon and was prepared to fulfil the reform criteria of the International Monetary Fund to get it. IMF chief Christine Lagarde said she did not see anything on the economic front worthy of panic and urged the leadership to refrain from throwing numbers about she said were meaningless until properly assessed.

Armed invasion

Interior Minister Arsen Avakov accused Russian naval forces of taking over a military airport near the port of Sevastopol, where the Black Sea fleet has a base, and other Russian forces of seizing Simferopol's civilian international airport. "I consider what has happened to be an armed invasion and occupation in violation of all international agreements and norms," Avakov said on his Facebook page, describing it as a "provocation" and calling for talks.

This met with a Russian naval denial of involvement in the military

airport action. "No Black Sea Fleet units have moved toward (the airport), let alone taking any part in blockading it," Interfax quoted a spokesman for the fleet as saying. Near the military airport, half a dozen men in camouflage uniforms with automatic rifles were blocking the road using a truck with no license plates. Reporters were kept from approaching them by volunteer militia, who formed a second road block about 150 meters away.

"Of course they are Russian," said Maxim Lovinetsky, 23, one of the volunteers who manned the post. "They came last night." Firebrand Russian nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy appeared in Sevastopol where a crowd outside the city administration gave him a hero's welcome, shouting "Russia, thank you". "If the people have a right to rise up in a revolt and overthrow the authorities, why doesn't Sevastopol have a right to do that?" he told them. Although nominally part of the Russian opposition, he is widely seen as a servant of Kremlin policy, used to float radical opinions to test public reaction.

Avoiding provocations

The United States has told Russia to show in the next few days that it is sincere about a promise not to intervene in Ukraine, saying using force would be a grave mistake. The Kremlin said Putin had ordered his government to continue talks with Ukraine on economic and trade relations and to consult foreign partners including the International Monetary Fund on financial aid. Yanukovich provoked protests in Ukraine in November by backing out of plans to sign landmark deals with the European Union and instead saying Kiev would seek closer economic and trade ties with its former Soviet master Russia. In December, Putin promised Yanukovich a \$15 billion bailout, but Russia has put the deal on hold after releasing an initial installment, saying it wants more clarity about the new government and its policies.—Reuters