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FILE ONLY

# Israel grants amnesty to its top spy-catcher

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JERUSALEM — Seeking to head off a potentially damaging investigation of its top-secret General Security Services, Shin Bet, the Israeli government granted immunity from prosecution to its chief spy-catcher yesterday — without waiting for any charges to be filed.

After a month of public wrangling, President Chaim Herzog granted the blanket amnesty to Shin Bet chief Avraham Shalom and three of his operatives, for whatever they did, or did not do, in connection with the deaths of two captured bus hijackers two years ago.

The hijackers were captured alive but died a short time later. Two committees subsequently investigated the affair, and the brigadier who commanded the storming of the bus was put on trial and acquitted.

President Herzog's action appeared to make any investigation into the affair pointless. Israeli Attorney General Yosef Harish, who had earlier said there was no way out of a police probe, commented that there was no sense in one now.

Immediately after the president's

move, Mr. Shalom informed Prime Minister Shimon Peres that he wished to be relieved of his post, as the exposure of his identity and the wide publicity surrounding the incident would not enable him to continue functioning effectively.

Mr. Peres accepted the resignation, with regret, and announced that he would set up a special committee to set future norms and procedures for Shin Bet.

The legal maneuvers came after more than 10 hours of consultations between Mr. Peres, his top ministers and the attorney general. While this may eventually end the affair, in the short run it has set off a political storm.

Four small left-wing parties submitted motions of no-confidence in the government and there were rebellious rumblings within Mr. Peres' own Labor Party. Many Laborites had hoped an investigation would harm Deputy Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir of the right-wing Likud Party.

Mr. Shamir was prime minister when the bus was hijacked — and is due to take over again in October under the "rotation agreement" of the National Unity Government.

So vocal was the political criticism that President Herzog — himself a Labor Party member — went on Israeli television to explain the motives for his action.

"The welfare of the public and the welfare of the state required me to protect our security and to save the [Shin Bet] from the damage that would be involved in the continuation of the affair," Mr. Herzog said.

He said the security service had saved many Israeli lives and disclosed that, over the past year alone, it had uncovered some 320 terrorist cells.

Mr. Herzog, a former chief of Israeli military intelligence, said that an investigation would have left Shin Bet officials with no way to defend themselves "except by disclosing security secrets of the most sensitive kind."

"Under the circumstances," he said, "I acted for the good of the public and the security of the state."

The incident that sparked the controversy occurred in April 1984, when an Israeli bus was hijacked outside Ashkelon by four Palestinian terrorists who held it and its passengers held in Israeli prisons.

The Israeli army and Shin Bet rushed to the scene and a military unit stormed the bus and freed the civilian passengers. Two of the four hijackers were killed in the storming of the bus, and two others were captured alive. They died shortly afterward, allegedly after being pistol-whipped while in custody.