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SWITZERLAND DECIDES NOT TO JUDGE PLO'S REQUEST ON GENEVA CONVENTIONS

By Tamar Levy

GENEVA, Sept. 14 (JTA) -- The Swiss government adroitly sidestepped a major international controversy Wednesday by declining to act on an application by the Palestine Liberation Organization to sign the 1949 Geneva Conventions as a "Palestinian state."

Instead, the decision was left to the 165 signatory states, which were informed of the Swiss decision Wednesday night.

Switzerland, historically a neutral nation, is the international guardian and administrator of the conventions, which are a series of agreements governing the conduct of war, the treatment of prisoners of war and civilians in wartime and in occupied areas.

Israel and the United States expressed great satisfaction with the government's announcement in Bern that "it was not its role to decide on the Palestinian request."

Blaise Godet, deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's legal division on international rights, noted that only sovereign states can be signatories to the conventions.

Godet explained that in view of "the lack of international consensus as to the existence or not of the Palestine state, the Swiss cannot make the decision."

"Switzerland does not recognize as such the Palestinian state, and in this case, as it acts as guardian (of the conventions), it considers that as long as the question of the Palestinian state is not resolved in an appropriate frame, it cannot make a decision," Godet said.

The Foreign Ministry official pointed out that the conventions do not provide a special procedure for the acceptance of new adherents.

Issue Is moot

Switzerland is required by the rules to advise all signatory states in writing of new applications. After that, acceptance is automatic.

Since the PLO controls neither population nor territory, two prerequisite qualifications of statehood, it will be up to the other signatories to decide, and until they do, the issue will be moot.

According to the World Jewish Congress, the Swiss Federal Council was responding to a WJC legal brief arguing against making the PLO a party to the Geneva Conventions.

It was conveyed to the council by Michael Kohn, president of the Swiss Jewish community, the WJC said.

For Israel, the Swiss decision was very good news, Yehuda Horam, Israel's ambassador to Switzerland, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

Israel had been exerting considerable diplomatic pressure on the Swiss. But until the last minute, it did not know how they would act, Horam said, especially since the influential Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross supported the PLO's bid.

Morris Abram, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, told JTA, "We feel the Swiss government acted properly as a neutral state."

Ambassador Avraham Milo, deputy chief of

the Israeli mission to the United Nations here, said, "We consider the Swiss position positive as we believe that a terror organization such as the PLO has no place amongst countries that adhere to the Geneva Conventions."

ICRC spokesman Carlos Bauverd said the ICRC does not comment on government decisions.

But television commentator Jurg Bissegger observed that if the Swiss decision had been different, Israel would have announced that the Geneva Conventions no longer apply in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, making it impossible for the ICRC to continue to function there.

PLO adherence to the Geneva Conventions would have no practical consequences, apart from being a political victory for the PLO, which Israel is determined to prevent.

Israel, with powerful assistance from the United States, has succeeded so far in blocking the PLO's admission to U.N. agencies in Geneva and Paris.

RIVAL PALESTINIAN GROUPS SPLIT ON EGYPT'S 10-POINT PROPOSAL

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, Sept. 14 (JTA) -- Strong opposition has developed in rival Palestinian factions to the 10-point Egyptian paper aimed at advancing the Israeli peace initiative.

Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat reportedly assented in principle to the Egyptian proposals when he met with President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo this week.

But reports from Tunis indicate the plan has run into stiff opposition within the PLO's Executive Committee.

It has also been denounced by Hamas, the Islamic fundamentalist resistance movement which is vying with the PLO for leadership of the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Hamas accused some Arab states of "working on American orders to tame the Palestinian people."

In leaflet No. 47 circulated in the territories, Hamas intifada activists urged the PLO to end its dialogue with the United States because "Washington believes armed struggle leads nowhere."

The leaflet maintained that the United States is a party to the Arab-Israeli struggle and not a mediator, and called for a general strike to protest PLO contacts with the Americans.

The leaflet was headlined, "Massacres Will Not Wipe Us Out."

The reference apparently was to "Black September" in 1970, when the Jordanian army decimated the PLO's fighting force, Al Fatah, then encamped in Jordan, and to the massacre of Palestinians by Lebanese Christian Phalangists at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in 1982.

Meanwhile, two Palestinians were wounded in a clash with the Israel Defense Force in Nabulus on Thursday, shortly after a curfew on the city was lifted after 12 days.

One youth was shot when he allegedly tried to snatch a soldier's rifle, and another was hit in a stone-throwing incident. Elementary and high schools remained closed in Nabulus.

REICH NAMED AS NEW HEAD OF IJCIC, SAYS HE'LL TRY TO REUNIFY GROUP

By Allison Kaplan

NEW YORK, Sept. 14 (JTA) -- Adding a third title to his list of leadership positions in the worldwide Jewish community, Seymour Reich has been named the chairman of the Jewish group designated to carry on dialogue with the Vatican.

Reich is also currently the president of B'nai B'rith International as well as the chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

In his newest role as leader of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, Reich said his first priority is to convince the Jewish agencies who have formed an IJCIC alternative to "come back" to the group.

The American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Congress announced on Wednesday that they were forming their own "cooperative effort to further understanding and communication between the Jewish community and international Christian bodies," including the Vatican.

AJCommittee pulled out of IJCIC just last week.

Reich said AJCommittee "erred in leaving, and I hope to bring them back under the IJCIC umbrella."

"It doesn't serve the Jewish world to give the perception of disunity," he said.

But Ira Silverman, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, said that at least in the near future, he could not envision "any possibility" of AJCommittee returning to IJCIC.

However, he said that if eventually "there were changes made in IJCIC under which we could all come together, I would be interested in any possibility."

An IJCIC delegation had been scheduled to travel to the Vatican this month to discuss the Auschwitz convent controversy.

Reich said the group would now "proceed slowly" in coordinating such a visit, and that he would "be in touch with the Vatican" to discuss the plans for the trip.

The former chairman of IJCIC, Rabbi A. James Rudin, who is now leading the alternative group, is scheduled to go to Rome on Sunday for talks with the Vatican.

Reich said that the Vatican is aware that Rudin is going on this visit "wearing a different hat."

UNESCO CONFIRMS AUSCHWITZ CONVENT IS ON SITE PROTECTED BY TREATY

NEW YORK, Sept. 14 (JTA) -- A United Nations agency has confirmed that the building now used as a convent on the grounds of the former Auschwitz death camp is one that Poland pledged to maintain unaltered when it applied for the inclusion of Auschwitz on the World Heritage List.

The World Jewish Congress reported Thursday that it has received documentary proof, accompanied by photographs and a schematic map of the site, from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

In releasing the documents, WJC Vice President Kalman Sultanik said they made clear that the building taken over for use as a convent was "unequivocally part of the protected site of the Auschwitz complex, and its alteration is a flagrant

violation of the UNESCO convention."

UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972 to preserve international sites "of outstanding interest." Sites to be protected are included on the World Heritage List.

Poland ratified the convention in 1976 and applied to UNESCO three years later to add Auschwitz to the list.

In the 26-page application, which was provided to the WJC, Poland pledged "maintenance of the condition and original character of the entire complex."

The accompanying map removes any doubt that the building used as a convent is part of the Auschwitz complex. Photographs show it prior to takeover by Carmelite nuns. A caption identifies the building as the place were "the personal effects" of inmates taken to the gas chambers were stored.

At a meeting in Paris last week, WJC officials succeeded in convincing the director general of UNESCO, Federico Mayor Zaragoza, that the convent is a violation of the convention.

A TRUSTED ARAB MILITARY EMPLOYEE TURNS OUT TO BE INTIFADA ACTIVIST

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, Sept. 14 (JTA) -- A trusted Arab employee at a military garage in the Gaza Strip was exposed as an intifada activist and arrested last week, Ma'ariv reported Wednesday.

The newspaper identified the man as Naji Mohammad al-Rajab, who for many years was foreman of the garage where Israel Defense Force vehicles are repaired in Rafah.

Soldiers felt secure talking to him, Ma'ariv said. It quoted one as saying "We used to say such things as, 'Naji, why don't you repair this command car first, we need it for an operation in a refugee camp.'"

But Naji, who had security clearances from IDF top brass, turned out to be a senior member of a "popular committee," the cells that direct and supervise the Palestinian uprising, Ma'ariv said.

His case highlights the risks Israel takes employing Arab workers, Ma'ariv observed. IDF employs dozens of Arabs at its Gaza Strip installations, all of whom passed security checks.

In another development Wednesday, the IDF announced that from now on, soldiers will be allowed to fire live ammunition at masked men who lead disturbances or attack Arabs suspected of collaborating with Israel.

The live ammo can be fired even if the masked persons are unarmed or are carrying "cold weapons" such as stones, knives or axes, the IDF said.

Until now, soldiers had standing orders to fire only plastic bullets in such circumstances.

PALESTINIAN PLEADS GUILTY TO CHARGES HE CAUSED JULY 6 EGGED BUS DISASTER

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, Sept. 14 (JTA) -- A Palestinian who caused the death of 16 bus passengers two months ago pleaded guilty to the act in Jerusalem district court Thursday but denied it was premeditated.

The defendant, Abdul Mahdi Ghanem, a West Bank resident, has been charged with 16 counts of murder and 24 counts of attempted murder.

DOMESTIC ISSUES HIGH ON THE AGENDA OF NJCRAC POLICY BLUEPRINT FOR YEAR

By J.J. Goldberg

The New York Jewish Week

NEW YORK, Sept. 14 (JTA) -- Jewish community agencies nationwide will be asked to put a high priority in the coming year on Catholic-Jewish relations, Arab-American propaganda and congressional passage of a child-care bill for working mothers.

Those issues are among some 35 areas of concern covered in the 1989-90 Joint Program Plan for Jewish Community Relations, issued this week by the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

Other issues in the plan include Soviet Jewish resettlement, South African apartheid, church-state separation and homelessness.

The plan, issued every fall since 1955, is considered an overall policy blueprint for Jewish organizations under the council's umbrella, expressing a broad American Jewish consensus on the main issues of the day.

"These are the gut issues that will energize the community relations field in the year ahead," Albert Chernin, executive vice chairman of the advisory council, said at a news conference where this year's plan was released.

The council, commonly known by the acronym NJCRAC, coordinates the policies and activities of 11 national organizations and 117 local councils involved in intergroup relations.

Liberal Agenda Included

NJCRAC officials said the Joint Program Plan is distilled out of positions adopted at the council's national plenary meeting in February.

The final 80-page document released here was the result of discussions and refinements adopted over the intervening months by affiliates around the country, they said.

The end product is a document that combines a detailed agenda on specifically Jewish interests with an updated but strikingly clear restatement of the Jewish community's traditional liberalism on domestic U.S. issues.

The plan includes detailed strategies for community action in such areas as the Middle East peace process, U.S.-Soviet relations and Soviet Jewish rights, arms control, housing and homelessness, anti-Semitism, black-Jewish relations and raising the national minimum wage.

New to the plan this year are a call for the Jewish community to begin working toward universal health care in the United States and unusually blunt calls to defend abortion rights here and religious pluralism in Israel.

In the area of Soviet Jewry, the plan's lengthy analyses and detailed recommendations reflect what Chernin called "an entirely new ball game" in the field of advocacy for Jews in the Soviet Union.

The plan notes the dramatic improvements in the life of Jews in the Soviet Union, the marked increase in emigration and the problems of absorbing the emigres here and in Israel.

Most significantly, the plan says the "Jewish community relations field should urge the president to carry out his expressed intention to invoke the waiver provision of Jackson-Vanik, based upon the assurances given the secretary of state by the Soviet Union."

The provision entitles the Soviet Union to U.S. trade privileges for a limited period, in

recognition of substantial improvements in its emigration policy.

The Joint Program Plan is structured into 36 separate topic areas, each of which carries a series of individual, concrete recommendations or "strategic goals" -- a total of 180 goals in all.

Emphasis On Child Care

Among the plan's specific recommendations to its members are to:

- * "Oppose any efforts by the administration or Congress to weaken any standing civil rights protections."

- * Support public "programs that will result in adequate supplies of low-income housing."

- * Press for "legislation that would raise the minimum wage" and "oppose any attempts to include a subminimum wage."

- * "Continue to interpret to the general community the complex challenges faced by Israel in its ongoing efforts to restore order in the West Bank and Gaza Strip."

- * "Convey to the Israeli leadership a concern" over "the consequences of the status quo in the territories."

- * "Design and implement programs with the black community on our international agenda, such as the security of Israel, freedom for Soviet Jewry, ending apartheid in South Africa, Ethiopian Jewry and famine in Africa."

Of all the items on the plan, Chernin said, perhaps the highest priority should be assigned to the congressional Act for Better Child Care, to which a full page is devoted in the document.

A recent study conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations found that "the most sought-after service in the Jewish community is child care," Chernin said, noting that the increase in working mothers and the rising cost of day care were turning the issue into a crisis for Jewish families nationwide.

Dissent On Apartheid Statement

The most divisive issue confronting the drafters of the program plan was the South African system of racial separation known as apartheid.

The program plan contains a seven-page statement on apartheid as part of its 80-page roundup of major issues facing Jewish community relations agencies for the coming year.

Arden Shenker, NJCRAC's national chairman, called it "the most fully fleshed position on apartheid" to be issued by a broadly representative body of the U.S. Jewish community.

Five member groups dissented from the statement, which included a call to "support divestment by corporations currently doing business in South Africa."

Four groups, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, Hadassah and Women's American ORT, declined to back the blanket call for divestment.

A fifth member, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, backed divestment, but called for closer coordination between the U.S. and South African Jewish communities in anti-apartheid action.

This year's Joint Program Plan was the first ever launched with the fanfare of a public news conference.

NJCRAC officials said it marked a tentative turning away from the council's tradition of keeping a low profile and leaving the spotlight to its constituent agencies.

AMID MUCH POMP AND CELEBRATION, SYNAGOGUE OF SZEGED IS RESTORED

By Ruth E. Gruber

SZEGED, Hungary, Sept. 14 (JTA) -- Fifty years after the outbreak of the war that brought the Holocaust, the splendid Great Synagogue of Szeged has once again come to life.

In a moving and spiritually uplifting ceremony Sunday, the domed and turreted turn-of-the-century synagogue was dedicated after an extensive restoration job financed by a former Szeged Jew who is now an American citizen.

The donor, who insists on strict anonymity, was presented a medal by the city for his efforts -- but in a private ceremony totally barred to outsiders.

"This is a very important day for us," said a woman who traveled the 110 miles from Budapest for the ceremony, and whose young daughter formed part of the 40-member children's choir which sang for the occasion. "My daughter has never seen such a beautiful synagogue in Hungary," she said.

Seven busloads of people came from Budapest for the celebration, which was advertised in wall posters in Szeged itself.

Well over 1,000 people in all attended, including the town's deputy mayor, government representatives from Budapest, Hungarian Jewish community leaders, officials from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Israeli representative in Hungary, Shlomo Merom.

The Joint Distribution Committee administered the anonymous donor's contribution -- estimated by sources at about \$300,000 -- and helped arrange restoration.

"This will be a most memorable day for me and for everyone who was here," said Ralph Goldman, JDC honorary executive vice president.

"We all take back with us the beauty and the dignity of the service for the dedication of the synagogue," he said. "Beyond these memories, it is a historic day -- for the Jews of Szeged, for the Jews of Hungary and for world Jewry as a whole."

Maintained By Government

He stressed that the Szeged synagogue would be the first in the world which will remain as a synagogue but be maintained in perpetuity by the Hungarian government and the local city authorities.

Under an agreement reached with the government, the temple will also be used for secular concerts and cultural events.

"The fact that the synagogue has not only been restored but also will be maintained is of critical importance," commented Samuel Gruler, director of the New York-based Jewish Heritage Council.

"We hope that this will provide a model for the subsequent restorations of synagogues in Europe."

Before the war, 5,000 Jews lived in Szeged, which is in southern Hungary on the Yugoslav border.

Most of them were deported to Auschwitz, under the direction of Adolf Eichmann, and today only 300 Jews live here.

About half of those deported died in the Holocaust: Their names are inscribed on the walls of the entry area of the synagogue.

In all, 600,000 Hungarian Jews were killed by the Nazis. Today, there are at least 80,000 Jews

in the country -- the third largest community in Europe outside the Soviet Union.

The Szeged synagogue was built at the turn of the century by architect Lipot Baumhorn, under the inspiration of the city's chief rabbi, Immanuel Loew.

Loew, an enthusiastic botanist, collaborated closely with Baumhorn and had the architect incorporate innumerable intricate floral and plant designs into the detail of the extraordinarily ornate decoration of the shul.

Baumhorn was the most successful synagogue designer of his time, designing 24 synagogues during his career -- Szeged being his masterpiece.

The temple is breathtaking. From the outside, it shoots up pale brick domes and tin-roofed turreted towers in a heavenward construction.

Inside, marble and glass shimmers, highlighted by gold fillings, together with beautiful chandeliers and brilliant stained glass windows.

An enormous dome, in an intricate design of blue glass and gold stars representing heaven, soars up above the center of the hall, supported above the ceiling by 24 columns.

Restorations on the dome, the stained glass windows and the tin-work cupolas outside were among the major works carried out, along with clearing out what was once a weed-choked, overgrown yard.

The main seating area is flanked by two side aisles below the women's galleries. Facing the hall, behind the candelabra-flanked bimah, is an ornate interior facade framing the Ark and allowing the pipes of a magnificent organ to peep through.

The dedication ceremony, parts of which were broadcast nationally on state-run television, began with a solemn procession, with men carrying Torah scrolls to the sounds of the powerful organ.

It then featured songs from children's, teenagers' and adults' choir from the Budapest Jewish community, such as "Shalom Aleichem" and "Hatikvah."

There was an emotional performance by Cantor Joseph Malovany of New York's Fifth Avenue Synagogue, who sang a selection of liturgical and secular Jewish music.

"Can you imagine," a member of the congregation was heard to marvel, "how long it has been since a cantor has been heard singing like this in this shul?"

EIGHT PLEAD NOT GUILTY TO CONTACT WITH TERRORISTS By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, Sept. 14 (JTA) -- Eight left-wing activists pleaded not guilty Thursday to violating an Israeli law that forbids Israelis from having contact with members of a terrorist organization.

The eight are accused of having met with PLO activists in Budapest two years ago. Their trial will open next March.

Its outcome is expected to be affected by how the High Court of Justice rules on the appeal of another group of Israelis, who were convicted of meeting PLO representatives in Romania.

Meanwhile, seven of the defendants pleaded not guilty on all counts.

The eighth, David Ish-Shalom, pleaded guilty to meeting with PLO people but not guilty of illegal activity on grounds that the PLO is not a terrorist organization.