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PROTESTS LODGED OVER CARDINAL'S SHARP REMARKS ON CHRISTIAN QUARTER

By Allison Kaplan

NEW YORK, May 13 (JTA) -- Israeli officials and American Jewish leaders registered protests at the Catholic Archdiocese here after Cardinal John O'Connor called the move of 150 Jews into Jerusalem's Christian Quarter "obscene" and raised the question of whether a "conspiracy" exists to drive Christians out of Israel.

In his column Friday in the weekly newspaper Catholic New York, O'Connor said there were "perceptions on the part of some that the move of the settlers is only a signal of a conspiracy to grab land all over Israel currently occupied by Christians."

The archbishop opened the column by stating that "what has happened in Jerusalem is obscene" and that "the Israeli government has acted reprehensibly."

The Jewish community here is particularly unhappy that such harsh words came from O'Connor, who is considered a longtime friend of both Israel and American Jews.

Seymour Reich, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said the column "repeats a vicious conspiracy theory" reminiscent of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the classic anti-Semitic forgery.

Israel's consul general in New York, Uri Savir, said he had contacted O'Connor's office to express his disappointment.

"While I understand the cardinal's sensitivities, I have to distance myself from the sharp language used and the assumptions made in his article," Savir said.

"Israel's record in safeguarding freedom and the interest of all religions in Jerusalem is well known and should not be questioned," he said.

In Israel, Religious Affairs Minister Ze'evulun Hammer warned the cardinal's words could encourage anti-Semitic excesses.

AJCommittee Award Stands

But while criticizing the column, Jewish organizational leaders also stressed O'Connor's outstanding record on defending Israel within the Catholic Church.

The archbishop will be honored for his interfaith work here Thursday, when he is to receive the American Jewish Committee's Isaiah Interreligious Award. He is scheduled to address the group on "The Next 25 Years in Catholic-Jewish Relations."

Rabbi A. James Rudin, AJCommittee's director of interreligious affairs, said O'Connor's column would have no effect on the award ceremony and "doesn't reflect on his long record of understanding, commitment to and affection for Israel."

O'Connor has worked diligently over the years on behalf of Israel, Soviet Jewry and to defuse the controversy over the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz, Rudin said.

"We believed eight months ago when this was first planned, and we believe today that he is deserving of our interreligious award," Rudin said.

He said AJCommittee would not release a public statement criticizing the column, as the

Conference of Presidents did, but would contact the cardinal privately instead.

He added that Israel has "the obligation to make it very clear that there is no conspiracy, there is no campaign" against Christians living in Israel.

Reich, who also serves as chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, called O'Connor "a warm and sincere friend of Israel."

In the column, O'Connor recognized that many American Jewish groups have condemned the move into the Christian Quarter complex, known as St. John's Hospice.

Reich himself, in his capacity as president of B'nai B'rith International, was sharply critical of the April 11 move into the building complex.

Israel's High Court of Justice has ordered all but 20 of the 150 Orthodox Jews out of the occupied building complex, pending an appeal on the legality of the lease used to rent it.

(JTA correspondent Hugh Orgel in Tel Aviv contributed to this report.)

PROTEST MARCHES THROUGHOUT FRANCE VOICE DISGUST AT CEMETERY VANDALISM

PARIS, May 13 (JTA) -- From the Elysee Palace to the Cannes Film Festival, France recoiled with anger and disgust over the weekend against the brutal desecration of the ancient Jewish cemetery at Carpentras, a town of 26,000 in southern France.

Protest marches were staged in Carpentras and throughout the country Friday, a day after unknown vandals overturned 34 headstones, and exhumed and mutilated a recently buried corpse.

Special services were held in the Carpentras synagogue Saturday, an edifice that dates from 1367. All traffic in the city came to a halt for 15 minutes beginning at 11:30 a.m. local time, when the services began.

President Francois Mitterrand was personally represented at the services, presided over by the chief rabbi of France, Joseph Sitruk. Mitterrand had paid a call on Sitruk on Thursday, as though he were visiting someone in mourning, the president had told the rabbi.

Four government ministers attended. Jean Kahn, president of CRIF, the umbrella group of French Jewish organizations, represented the organized Jewish community in France.

Regional police in nearby Avignon have focused suspicion on three young Skinheads known to be active in neo-Nazi groups in the Carpentras area. Two other shaven-headed youths were arrested but later released.

Neo-Nazi groups in the region have long been considered by the authorities and the public to be relics of a dead past. But lately they have become a vehicle for extreme right-wing, racist Skinheads to indulge in provocative acts.

The authorities took more serious notice of them last year, when members of the neo-Nazi French and European Nationalist Party were arrested for bombing a hostel for immigrants on the French Riviera.

About 1,000 people marched through Carpentras on Friday, behind leaders of local anti-racist organizations.

The only incident occurred when a member of Jean-Marie Le Pen's extreme right-wing National Front tried to join the demonstration. The fact that the Le Pen supporter was a Jew did not prevent him from being forcibly ejected from the ranks of marchers.

Le Pen, who despite his disclaimers is widely regarded as an anti-Semite, is suspected by many to be behind the cemetery desecration, or at least to have created the climate for it.

Le Pen, for his part, charged that the act was the work of "professional provocateurs" out to discredit the National Front.

In Cannes, where the international film festival is under way, the minister of culture, Jack Lang, and Danielle Mitterrand, wife of the president, stood next to a leading French actress, Fanny Ardant, as she declared, "After the desecration, the film festival cannot go on as if nothing happened."

She added, "We, the craftsmen of dreams, must do whatever we can to prevent Europe from reverting to the sicknesses of the past."

A mass protest is scheduled in Paris for Monday, with leaders of the government and the opposition expected to attend.

If the Carpentras perpetrators are caught, they will be charged with desecrating a grave and racial abuse. Police believe there were four persons responsible, because of footprints found on the graves.

The two offenses combined amount to a misdemeanor, with penalties ranging from three months to one year in jail.

DESECRATION OF CEMETERIES IN HAIFA MAY BE WORK OF DERANGED JEWISH MAN By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, May 13 (JTA) -- Police investigating the desecration of two Jewish cemeteries in Haifa on Saturday night are considering the possibility that it may have been the work of a deranged Jewish man.

Police on Sunday evening detained a 41-year-old Jewish resident of the Haifa Bay area, who was said to have visited the cemeteries recently, behaving in a suspicious manner.

Earlier reports said police believed either Arab nationalists or Jewish provocateurs could be responsible. There was also speculation that the large-scale vandalism might have been copied from the desecration perpetrated last week in the ancient Jewish cemetery in Carpentras, France.

The vandalism here took place at the Kfar Samir and Hof Carmel cemeteries, where some 250 headstones were daubed with black spray-painted slogans. Written in perfect Hebrew, they urged Arab villagers and Arab leaders, including President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, to "burn, kill and exterminate the Jews" and establish a Palestinian state.

Special guards have been posted at Jewish and Moslem cemeteries all over Israel.

Mayor Aryeh Gurel of Haifa called on the populace to remain calm. He appealed to residents to refrain from retaliation and to encourage good neighborly relations. Haifa, Israel's third largest city and major seaport, is populated by Jews and Arabs.

Gurel attributed the desecration to "extremists trying to sow discord between different religious and ethnic sections of Israel's population."

Dr. Noam Gavrieli, a member of the Haifa

City Council, said the vandalism could have been the work of an insane person or a group of Jewish agitators.

After inspecting the cemeteries, he said the slogans that defaced the tombstones were carefully painted in flawless Hebrew, and that they included phrases not used in the intifada or in the context of Arab nationalism.

Gavrieli tended to suspect Jewish provocateurs because one slogan referred to the Mosque of Omar, an Islamic shrine on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem which, unlike the adjacent Al-Aksa Mosque, is never mentioned by intifada activists.

It is, in fact, known to Moslems as the Dome of the Rock.

The operation had to have taken eight to 10 hours by one or more persons going systematically from gravestone to gravestone, Gavrieli said.

None of the stones was overturned.

WEST GERMAN FIRMS HALTED FROM AIDING CONSTRUCTION OF NEW POISON GAS PLANT By David Kantor

BONN, May 13 (JTA) -- The Federal Republic claimed credit over the weekend for halting the participation of West German companies in the construction of a second poison gas factory in Libya.

The prevention of "a second Rabta" was hailed by an Economics Ministry spokesman Saturday.

Rabta, about 40 miles south of Tripoli, the Libyan capital, is the site of a chemical weapons factory built with illicitly exported West German technology.

The United States reportedly advised Bonn two weeks ago that another plant was being built with German technology at a second Libyan site.

The spokesman said Bonn foiled a plot to ship equipment for a poison gas facility at Sabha, a remote military installation more than 370 miles from Tripoli.

The government promised to take immediate action against the firms involved in the new attempt.

In early April, customs officials searched the offices of Abacus, located in Ulm, and Rose, in Stuttgart. It is believed that Abacus acted as an agent for companies in Panama and Holland.

Officials had acted on a tip by Siemens, the giant electronics firm, that Abacus and Rose had ordered its computer system Teleperm-M, used in the manufacture of poison gas.

Siemens was told originally that it was intended for Saudi Arabia. The system was supposed to be shipped via a Dutch firm.

A Siemens spokesman said last month that the company became suspicious because the same system was known to be installed at the Rabta plant. Because the destination was also the Middle East, Siemens asked who the end user of the product would be. It received no answer and then notified customs agents.

The investigation established it was ordered for Libya.

The man behind the plot was identified as Uthai Thiemboonkit, owner of Supachok, a firm in Bangkok, Thailand. He is suspected of having ordered a similar device for Rabta.

Government quarters expressed concern, meanwhile, over indisputable reports that Libya is continuing to produce chemical weapons at the Rabta plant, which the Libyan government claimed was destroyed by fire on March 14.

**BESET BY DEMANDS FROM SMALL PARTIES,
SHAMIR MAY REQUEST MANDATE EXTENSION**
By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, May 13 (JTA) -- Acting Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir is expected to ask President Chaim Herzog for an extension when his mandate to form a Likud-led government expires this Thursday.

He is allowed by law up to 21 more days for the task. Although Shamir is said now to have the support of at least 61 Knesset members, the requisite minimum, there is strong speculation here that he prefers not to present his government to the Knesset for approval this week.

For one thing, he would like a wider margin of support. To achieve it, he has to persuade the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael party to break the alliance it entered with Labor when Shimon Peres was trying to form a coalition last month.

Shamir is also trying to solidify the support of the National Religious Party and Shas, both of which have been striving for a new Likud-Labor unity coalition in preference to a narrow regime.

They have made little headway so far, because Labor insists on parity between the two major parties in the Cabinet, as it existed in the previous unity government. Shamir has intimated he would accept Labor only as a junior partner.

NRP continues to demand that a new government state in its guidelines that it hopes to revive a unity regime.

Senior Likud officials said Sunday that if Shamir failed to overcome those problems, he would ask the president for an extension Thursday, if only to signal his potential coalition partners not to put too many political difficulties in his path.

Competition For Portfolios

Shas, for example, says it would support Shamir but not join his government for two months in order to test its peace policies. Shas subscribes to the land-for-peace formula, which is close to Labor's position but rejected by Likud and the right-wing factions.

The guidelines of a new Likud-led government state that "the pursuit of peace will continue in light of the Camp David accords and the peace initiative of the outgoing government."

That, in theory, leaves the door ajar for a future unity government.

Meanwhile, Shamir is said to be facing the dilemma of too few Cabinet offices to distribute among the aspirants within his Likud bloc plus those in the religious and right-wing parties who would be his coalition partners.

There are four candidates for the portfolio of foreign minister: David Levy, Ariel Sharon, Moshe Nissim and Moshe Arens, the incumbent.

Arens and Sharon are possible competitors for defense minister, an office both have held.

Yitzhak Moda'i has been offered the post of finance minister.

Sharon, Arens and Levy also may be in line for the Ministry of Construction and Housing, presently held by Levy. Nissim, Sharon or Moshe Katsav could wind up as minister of industry and trade, the portfolio resigned by Sharon in March.

Sharon or incumbent Yitzhak Peretz could be the next minister of immigration and absorption.

Rehavim Ze'evi of the Moledet party, which advocates the expulsion of all Arabs from Israel and the administered territories, is one of two candidates for minister of police.

**U.S. MAY ALLOW IN MORE IMMIGRANTS
IF ISRAEL DOESN'T IMPROVE ABSORPTION**
By David Landau

JERUSALEM, May 13 (JTA) -- If Israel does not immediately make immigrant absorption a top priority, the U.S. Congress will come under pressure to raise the ceilings on Soviet Jewish immigration to the United States, a prominent American Jewish leader has warned.

Seymour Reich told the Israeli newspaper Davar that there was a sense in the organized American Jewish community that the Israeli government was not focusing on managing the Soviet aliyah and that conflicts between various ministries had thwarted efforts to draw up a coordinated policy for housing and employment.

Reich, who is chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, was quoted as saying that unless Israel makes absorption a top priority, there will likely be "an explosion." He apparently was referring to a public demonstration of frustration by Soviet olim in Israel.

If Israel appears publicly to be incapable of handling the inflow, pressure will increase in the United States to let more of the emigrants in, Reich told the paper.

Currently, the U.S. ceiling on refugees from the Soviet Union is 50,000, about 40,000 of whom are Jews.

**IDF COLONEL BLAMED FOR BONE-BREAKING
SAYS HE ACTED ON RABIN'S INSTRUCTION**
By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, May 13 (JTA) -- The attorney for an Israel Defense Force colonel, on trial for ordering his troops to break the bones of Palestinians, claimed Friday that the accused acted on the explicit instructions of then Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Rabin informed field officers that bone-breaking was permissible in certain situations, said Amnon Goldenberg, counsel for Col. Yehuda Meir. Goldenberg said Rabin counseled officers not to worry about media reaction, because he would deal with the problem.

But Goldenberg's allegation was disputed in testimony given by a top-ranking IDF officer, Maj. Gen. Amram Mitzna, former commander of the central sector, which includes the West Bank.

Meir, the highest-ranking IDF officer to be prosecuted since the Palestinian uprising started in December 1987, pleaded not guilty on March 29 to charges that he ordered brutal treatment of Palestinians in two West Bank villages in January 1988, shortly after the intifada began.

The trial is being held at a special military court at IDF General Headquarters in Tel Aviv.

The prosecution charges that Meir, who was commander of the Nablus region, issued orders on two separate occasions in January 1988 to remove Arabs from their homes in Beita and Huwara villages near Nablus, chain their hands, gag them, beat them up and break their arms and legs.

Goldenberg said he would prove that the colonel acted under orders, not on his initiative.

The indictment says that in Huwara, Meir ordered a platoon to arrest 12 Palestinians and break their bones.

The court must determine if such orders were indeed given; if so, by whom; and if they were to apply to persons caught throwing stones, or were used for the interrogation of suspects.

COURT'S DECISION IN PEYOTE CASE COULD MAKE JEWISH RITUALS ILLEGAL

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, May 13 (JTA) -- The Supreme Court decision allowing American Indians to be prosecuted for the use of illegal drugs in religious rituals could result in making illegal such Jewish ritual practices as drinking wine for Kiddush, the slaughter of kosher meat and circumcision, a Jewish leader has warned.

Henry Siegman, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, issued the warning last Thursday at a news conference after his group and 15 other religious and civil liberties organizations filed a petition with the Supreme Court asking for a rehearing of the case, popularly known as the "Peyote case."

The court ruled 6-3 on April 17 that two members of an American Indian church could not be exempted from an Oregon law that makes it a crime to possess or use peyote, even though they used it only for sacramental purposes.

Justice Antonin Scalia, who wrote the majority opinion, rejected the Oregon Supreme Court's ruling that the First Amendment free exercise of religion clause required that the two men, Alfred Smith and Galen Black, be exempted from the Oregon law.

"For all practical purposes, a majority of the Supreme Court has eliminated the free exercise clause of the First Amendment from our Bill of Rights," Siegman said.

He explained that in the case, known as the Employment Division vs. Smith, "the court decided that when a generally applicable law conflicts with a religious practice, the state need not exempt individual religious adherents from the court's reach."

The Rev. Dean Kelley, director for religious liberty of the National Council of Churches, said the court's decision "gutted" the free exercise clause.

'Disastrous' For Religious Liberty

He compared the Scalia ruling with the 1857 Dred Scott decision, which said that a black slave was property and not a U.S. citizen. "In Smith, Justice Scalia said in effect that religious minorities have no rights to religious practices that majorities are bound to respect," Kelley said.

He charged the decision "not only devastated the Native American Church but struck a serious blow at all religious groups in this country."

This is why the petition for a rehearing was signed by such a diverse group of organizations, ranging from the American Civil Liberties Union to the National Association of Evangelicals.

Jewish groups joining the petition were the American Jewish Committee, AJCongress and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

"I doubt that these groups have ever been in the same room together, much less in a joint project of this magnitude," said Oliver Thomas, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

"These individuals and organizations agree on very little," Thomas said. "They all agree, however, that the Smith decision is disastrous for the free exercise of religion."

Marc Stern, Amy Adelson and Lois Waldman of the AJCongress legal staff argued in the rehearing petition that "every religious group in

the country will be profoundly disadvantaged" by the court's decision.

They were joined by the Craig Dorsay, lawyer for the Native American Program's Oregon Legal Services, the counsel of record for the Indians. In addition, 55 of the nation's leading constitutional law professors signed the petition.

On specific Jewish ritual practices, the petition noted that under the ruling, the "government could, for example, without constitutional impediment, bar all 'non-humane' slaughter, and thus effectively outlaw Jewish and Moslem ritual slaughter; (and) outlaw as medically unnecessary all circumcision, including that practiced for religious reasons by Jews, Moslems and Coptic Christians."

Siegman noted that during Prohibition, if the law "had not exempted sacramental wine use in Communion by Christians and Sabbath Kiddush by Jews, according to this court such religious rituals would have landed their practitioners in jail.

"Under the court's new dispensation, which overturns 30 years of free exercise jurisprudence, laws that have the effect of outlawing shechitah (ritual slaughter), or circumcision would no longer be violative of the free exercise clause," he added.

The petition also noted that Jewish students could be expelled from public schools for wearing kippot and could be refused time off for religious holidays. Siegman said the protection that now exists for Shabbat observers not to work on the Shabbat could be lost.

Thomas said that the organizations that asked for the rehearing recognized it was "a long shot," since only six such petitions were granted between 1976 to 1982. "Nevertheless, it is our only shot, so we are taking it," he said.

BONFIRES LIGHT UP ISRAEL FOR LAG B'OMER

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, May 13 (JTA) -- The sweet smell of smoke from bonfires pervaded much of Israel on Saturday night, as Jews ushered in Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer, which begins on Passover and ends on Shavuot.

It is a holiday of religious, particularly mystic significance, but observed by secular Jews as well because of the festive atmosphere and the opportunity for cookouts.

It is also known as the "scholars' festival," commemorating as it does the end of a plague that had killed many Talmudic students of the sainted Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.

The annual observance centers on the hilltop township of Meron in Galilee, the traditional site of the rabbi's tomb.

While Orthodox males sing and dance around the shrine, pious women who are childless offer prayers to become fertile.

Another ritual is the slaughter of lambs, which this year brought scores of shoachim (ritual slaughterers) to Meron from nearby Safed.

Barbers came too, since young males from Orthodox families who reach age 3 get their first haircuts on Lag B'Omer.

The holiday is a busy time for firefighters and rabbis. Fire departments call up extra help to put out the many bonfires that get out of hand.

The rabbis perform marathon wedding ceremonies on Lag B'Omer, the one day Orthodox Jewish weddings are performed between Pesach and Shavuot.