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ARAFAT BLASTS ISRAEL FOR ABUSES AT VIENNA HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE

By Marta S. Halpert

VIENNA, June 16 (JTA) -- Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, addressing the World Conference on Human Rights here, accused the world of double standards, saying that Israel's behavior in the territories proved that some governments could get away with abusing human rights.

"I will not stop fighting till the flag of the Palestinians will fly over Jerusalem," exclaimed Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, speaking Wednesday to over 1,000 delegates at the U.N.-sponsored conference.

Arafat, disregarding a conference rule that prohibited delegates from mentioning specific rights violations in any country, asserted that "Israel is committing war crimes against unarmed civilians."

The PLO chief said that the "grave violations of Palestinian human rights over decades provides us with the most striking example of double standards in the implementation of human rights."

He faulted the United States for its strong support of Israel, saying such assistance only encouraged Israel to persist in its human rights violations.

Arafat claimed that 140,000 Palestinians were under Israeli arrest and that some 800 Palestinian women had been forced to abort their children.

Despite Arafat's breach of the conference rules, Israel did not interrupt or intervene in the PLO leader's speech, though Israeli officials in general deny human rights abuses occur in the territories.

Peres Upbeat On Peace Process

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres addressed the conference a day earlier, saying he was very optimistic regarding the peace process. Peres said he was convinced the peace talks could be concluded quickly and successfully.

Less optimistic about the talks was Jordanian Crown Prince Hassan, who claimed the key issue -- namely autonomy for the Palestinians -- had not even been put on the agenda of the Middle East talks.

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, speaking to the conference Tuesday, made an emotional call for the establishment of a U.N. high commissioner for human rights, who could act quickly and effectively in cases of immediate human rights violations.

This human rights ombudsman could then bring criminals before a human rights tribunal. He told the conference participants not to give up hope despite the many cases of human rights violations.

Carter's appearance at the conference was not without controversy. He was loudly attacked by people opposing U.S. policies worldwide.

Outside the conference hall, Robert Kunst, chair of the Miami-based Shalom International, demonstrated against Germany and a wave of anti-foreigner and neo-Nazi sentiment in that country.

Holding a huge banner reading "No more Nazism -- boycott Germany," Kunst said that

Israel's Peres, who was speaking inside, "takes (money) from Kohl, while today another three Turks were attacked in Germany."

Harris Schoenberg, B'nai B'rith's director of U.N. affairs, tried to organize a visit to the former Mauthausen Nazi death camp for all the delegates from non-government organizations in Vienna.

"It should become a pilgrimage for all," Schoenberg said. Because of the tight schedule of the conference and a lack of coordination, he was unable, as of Wednesday, to arrange the visit.

KNESSET LEFT PROPOSES OUTLAWING TORTURE OF PALESTINIAN PRISONERS

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, June 16 (JTA) -- Left-wing lawmakers in the Knesset have proposed a bill that would outlaw torture of Palestinian prisoners, a practice human rights groups routinely charge Israel with committing.

According to the private member's bill, anyone found guilty of torture would be sentenced to a jail term ranging from one to seven years.

Those found guilty of torture resulting in grave bodily harm could face up to 20 years in jail, while torture resulting in death would be punished with a life sentence.

Furthermore, evidence obtained by interrogators through torture would not be accepted as legal and acceptable in court.

A vote on the bill, introduced by a group of Knesset members led by Tamar Gojansky of Hadash, the largely Arab Communist party, was postponed until a government-appointed committee concluded its own work on the same subject.

The committee of experts was appointed this week following a memorandum by the Association of Civil Rights in Israel that several countries--including the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Holland -- had enacted laws which formally incorporated the international anti-torture convention into their legal code.

Israel signed the international convention against torture in 1984, but has refused to incorporate the convention within its legal system, arguing that this would be tantamount to admitting that its present laws are insufficient to prevent torture.

Both the government move to re-evaluate its position on the torture convention and the Knesset bill proposal come in the wake of strong criticism leveled against Israel.

The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, during a recent visit here, slammed Israel for human rights violations in the administered territories.

There have also been reports that the United States may exert more pressure on Israel to improve its record on civil rights.

Several years ago, another government-appointed committee charged with examining the practices of Israel's domestic security agency, the Shin Bet, sparked controversy with its findings.

The committee, headed by Justice Moshe Landau, justified in its final report the use of "moderate physical pressure" during interrogation.

This phrase was widely criticized by Israeli liberals, who said the report legitimized the use

of a certain measure of terror in interrogation.

In fact, one of the major objections of the Justice Ministry to the Knesset bill currently under debate was a clause which defined torture as any "physical or mental pressure."

Justice Minister David Libai said this week that the language was too broad and that under this definition one would be able to press charges of torture against any interrogator.

JEWISH GROUPS SPLIT OVER EXEMPTING FORMER SOVIET STATES FROM TRADE BILL By Deborah Kalb and Lisa Mann

WASHINGTON, June 16 (JTA) -- A split in the Jewish community over how best to encourage completely free emigration from the former Soviet Union was evident at hearings this week on Capitol Hill.

The issue under discussion at a House Ways and Means trade subcommittee hearing Tuesday was whether or not to exempt Russia permanently from the Jackson-Vanik amendment.

The amendment, a Cold War-era statute, links the granting of most-favored-nation trading status to Russia and other countries to their emigration policies.

Some advocates for Soviet Jewry believe that current conditions in Russia indicate that this is not the time to exempt the country from provisions of the 1974 amendment.

On the other hand, some in the Jewish community believe that democratic forces in Russia would benefit from an exemption, which would in turn help the Jewish community there.

The congressional hearing took place as the Clinton administration reviews the Jackson-Vanik amendment.

Currently, U.S. policy is to grant the Russians one-year waivers of the Jackson-Vanik restrictions, in recognition of the progress Russia has made in its emigration policies.

This policy meets with the approval of most Jewish organizations.

But at the summit meeting between President Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin in April, Yeltsin urged Clinton to remove Jackson-Vanik restrictions against his country permanently.

In 1974, just over 20,000 Jews were allowed to leave the Soviet Union. In recent years, however, emigration has skyrocketed, with nearly 600,000 Jews emigrating from the former Soviet Union since 1989, according to figures from the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

The National Conference, a coalition representing the Jewish organizational establishment, was one of the groups testifying at Tuesday's hearing that while one-year waivers were acceptable, Russia should not be permanently exempted from the Jackson-Vanik amendment.

Both the National Conference and the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, another group championing the rights of Jews in the former Soviet Union, argued at the hearing that as long as there are still Jews in Russia not allowed to emigrate, the amendment should not be permanently repealed.

In addition, many in the Jewish community are concerned about the continuing economic and political instability in Russia. They point out that Yeltsin's standing is threatened by a coalition of nationalists and former Communists, many of whom are anti-Semitic.

Harold Luks, a member of the National

Conference's executive committee who chairs the group's Jackson-Vanik committee, told the subcommittee that his organization opposed "any legislative measure to repeal the amendment, to suspend the waiver requirement or to remove any (former Soviet) state from its scope" at this time.

Luks said there are currently "more than 200 refuseniks, most of whom are in Russia," who are "still denied the right to emigrate due to 'state secrecy' policies."

Gideon Aronoff, assistant director for government relations of the Union of Councils, testified that Russia should not be exempted from all further compliance with Jackson-Vanik.

He cited the facts that there are still refuseniks in Russia, the institution and apparatus for refusal remain in place and none of the former Soviet republics has enacted a freedom of emigration law complying with international standards.

The Union of Councils provided the members of Congress with a list of current refuseniks.

On the other hand, the American Jewish Congress, also testifying at the hearing, believes that "the merits of repealing Jackson-Vanik outweigh the limited benefits of leaving the statute on the books," according to Julian Spier, chair of the governing council of the American Jewish Congress.

Spier testified that the current number of Jews leaving Russia showed that the amendment had reached its goal. Russia would benefit from unrestricted trade, he said, adding that minorities traditionally do better when the economy is stronger.

Also on Capitol Hill on Tuesday, B'nai B'rith was circulating a letter from Sidney Clearfield, the group's executive vice president, to members of Congress, urging a continuation of the Jackson-Vanik one-year waiver process for Russia.

JEWISH LEADERS WARN CONGRESS OF RISE IN ANTI-SEMITISM THROUGHOUT EUROPE By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, June 16 (JTA) -- In post-Cold War Europe, with the upheavals caused by the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of national borders, anti-Semitism and xenophobia have become a resurgent phenomenon, Jewish leaders told members of Congress this week.

At a hearing Tuesday before the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on international security, Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said that "fear of the foreigner" was the "most widely observed phenomenon in a Europe of mass migrations and newly opened borders."

He argued that world leaders should not only issue verbal condemnations of racist and anti-Semitic actions, but should also undertake concrete measures to prevent such incidents.

Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean of the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center, warned that Germany, in particular, was facing an era of turmoil.

"Not since the days of the Third Reich has Germany been witness to the wave of violence currently eating away at her social fabric," Hier told the subcommittee.

He said the Wiesenthal Center would urge German officials to institute various programs, including a joint federal-state task force to combat the extreme right, and mandatory Holocaust education programs.

FINANCE MINISTRY CALLS CONFERENCE AFFIRMING ISRAEL'S NEED FOR LOANS

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, June 16 (JTA) -- Israel's Finance Ministry called a special news conference for the foreign press this week at which officials emphatically declared that Israel continues to need the \$10 billion in U.S. loan guarantees.

The conference was apparently called to contain political damage from recent reports, in the Washington Post and elsewhere, that some Israeli political and economic figures believe the loans may not be needed for the intended purpose of absorbing immigrants.

"We can say without any hesitation," said Finance Minister Avraham Shohat at the conference Wednesday, "we need it all if we want to carry out our plans" to absorb both immigrants who already have come to Israel and those yet to make aliyah.

The money is needed "to increase the infrastructure and to invest more money to create more jobs," he said.

The Finance Ministry's director-general, Aharon Fogel, was reported to have suggested the loan guarantees might be used to repay the country's foreign debt rather than finance investment that would help stimulate the economy and absorb newcomers.

His spokesman subsequently denied the comments, and at Wednesday's news conference, Fogel repeatedly stated that the loans are "very important to us."

"They give us a much higher (credit) rating than any other growing country in the world," Fogel maintained.

He said the resulting increased investment will be invaluable in aiding new immigrants, primarily by providing jobs.

"The main precondition for the absorption of immigrants is employment, and the main precondition for this is investment," he said.

He stressed the loans would not be allocated by the government to specific investors or projects, but that their use would be determined by the private sector.

Alluding to his reported controversial remarks, Fogel attempted to explain that foreign debt would be restructured as a consequence of the loan guarantees.

The remark prompted Shohat to interject, "I want to emphasize there is no intention that this money will (be used) to change the debt structure."

Rabin: Loans Needed For Immigrants

Earlier in the week, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin also issued a statement clarifying the government's intended use of the guarantees.

"The government requires them for immigrant absorption," said Rabin's statement. "All (contrary) statements are counter to the needs of the state as the government views them and serve to cause damage to Israel, its relations with the United States and the issue of foreign assistance."

Of the \$2 billion in guarantees Israel is scheduled to receive this year, \$600 million will be used to finance infrastructure investments by the government, said Bank of Israel Governor Jacob Frenkel in a recent interview.

The rest will be allocated to "activities which encourage the private sector in its investment-related operations," Frenkel said.

ELTON JOHN FLEES ISRAEL TO ESCAPE FANS, BUT THEN DECIDES TO RETURN

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, June 16 (JTA) -- British pop star Elton John, who arrived in Israel on Tuesday, left the country two hours later when airport officials snubbed him and fans started a near riot in his hotel.

But Israeli tenacity then paid off.

After receiving hundreds of phone calls, telegrams and fax messages, John, who escaped to London to get some rest, announced that he would return to Israel to perform Thursday night.

The concert at Tel Aviv's Hayarkon Park was originally scheduled for Wednesday.

The British ambassador and Israeli officials also joined admirers in coaxing John back to Israel.

But some fans were disappointed that John became exasperated with them so easily. One radio disc jockey promised he would never play the musician's songs again.

The episode began when the 45-year-old singer, said to be one of the richest men in Britain, arrived in Israel aboard his private executive jet. Tired out after a 30-hour trip from Singapore, he was accompanied by an entourage of bodyguards, aides and backup performers.

John wanted immigration officials to come to his jet, but the most the Israeli officials would do was let him wait in the airport's VIP lounge -- for 40 minutes -- while his aides took care of the formalities.

As John's patience wore thin, airport officials checked the group's passports and customs inspectors looked over the tons of equipment he brought with him aboard the plane and had shipped in separately.

As John left the lounge to board a waiting limousine, the first scuffles broke out, with his bodyguards fending off fans and press photographers.

Fans And Photographers Injured

When he arrived at Tel Aviv's Hilton Hotel, he was again mobbed by fans and photographers. But this time, the clashes grew violent, with four photographers and two fans getting injured. One fan was taken to the hospital.

John managed to push his way through the lobby to the elevators, climbing over chairs and sofas.

When he got to the elevators, however, he turned around and headed for the door again, calling out that he wanted his plane readied for immediate departure.

He left Israel shortly afterward, despite pleas from concert promoters and one government official.

His only scheduled concert, at Hayarkon Park on Wednesday, was called off, creating a problem of nearly \$1 million in ticket money.

Four ticket holders had already appealed to the Tel Aviv Magistrate's Court for \$20,000 in compensation for their wasted tickets and for the "mental anguish" they had suffered.

But John's local impresario, Australian-born Ze'ev Isaac, said Wednesday the star had decided to return and the tickets were made valid for the Thursday show.

Isaac was accused by the media for failing to make the necessary arrangements ahead of time with the police, airport officials and the Hilton Hotel.

ETHIOPIAN JEWRY GROUP CLOSES SHOP, SAYING ITS WORK IS DONE

By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, June 16 (JTA) -- Two years after some 14,000 Jews were airlifted from Ethiopia in Operation Solomon, the American Association for Ethiopian Jews has decided its work is done.

The 24-year-old organization's board voted last month to close up shop by the end of the year.

"We met our mandates and goals of rescue and relief for Ethiopian Jews," explained William Recant, the association's executive director.

"It is our belief that all of the Jews are out of Ethiopia, that any stragglers are free to come and go as they please. Rather than metamorphose into something else, we decided to stick to our original guns."

For the past two years, since the massive airlift on May 24-25, 1991, and the subsequent reunification of those left behind in that operation, the AAEJ has been working together with the Israeli government and other Jewish organizations to aid the absorption of Ethiopian Jews.

That process of absorption, said Recant, is now well underway.

"The world is filled with Jewish organizations that can serve (the Ethiopian Jews), so why should we duplicate them?" said Nathan Shapiro, AAEJ's president since 1982.

The Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, which had been closely aligned with the AAEJ, last year decided to go a similar route and closed its doors.

Despite these considerations, however, another organization devoted to Ethiopian Jews has no plans to close up shop.

"Our scope was broader," explained Barbara Ribakove Gordon, executive director of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry. "Caring for the Jews in Ethiopia, rescuing them, helping their absorption and preserving their culture are all part of our mission."

At the same time, NACOEJ is working with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa to assist roughly 4,000 Falash Mora gathered there.

The Falash Mora, Ethiopian Jews whose ancestors converted to Christianity in the past century or so, seek to emigrate to Israel, where some have relatives who entered as part of Operation Solomon or an earlier airlift of Ethiopian Jews, Operation Moses in 1984.

2 Groups Disagree Over Falash Mora

NACOEJ has supported the Falash Mora in their effort to emigrate, while the AAEJ has gone along with the policy of the Israeli government that, in general, the Falash Mora are not to be treated as Jews.

"We were the ones there when people came from Gondar to Addis Ababa," explained Recant. "A lot of people got off the bus, who now say they are Falash Mora. They said, 'we're Christians and we want to go to Israel.'"

The postures of the two activist groups toward Israeli policies on this issue represent a marked turnabout from the early 1980s.

Then, the AAEJ was so loud and unabashedly critical of the Israeli government, for its perceived inaction regarding the plight of the Ethiopian Jews, that the NACOEJ was formed as a more moderate, establishment body.

The suspicions of the AAEJ regarding the Israeli government's intentions were based on long experience.

The organization was founded in 1969 by Graenum Berger, a professional with the New York federation, after 15 years in which his interest in the Jews of Ethiopia found no response from the American Jewish community or the Israeli government.

At the time, the Israeli rabbinate had yet to decide that the Falashas, as the Jews of Ethiopia were known, were in fact Jewish.

"Our work was advocacy, to provoke Israel primarily, but also American and world Jewry to take on this responsibility of rescuing and bringing them to Israel," said Berger.

In this cause, Berger repeatedly lobbied Israeli officials. Even after the chief rabbinate declared the Falashas to be Jewish, Israel made little effort to bring them in.

In America, AAEJ tried to get the issue on the communal agenda, organizing unofficial lunches at communal events when they were denied space on the formal agenda. The group also raised the issue's profile in Washington, a move that paid off handsomely during the Reagan years.

Worked Secretly To Bring Jews Out

And in Ethiopia itself, AAEJ began working clandestinely to bring out Jews to Israel.

In all of this, the AAEJ was more concerned with rescuing Ethiopian Jews than with making friends in the Jewish communal establishment.

"They were necessary nudniks," said Michael Schneider, executive vice president of the JDC.

The AAEJ's Shapiro recalls the period between 1977, when the Israeli government first accepted the right of the Ethiopian Jews to immigrate, and 1984, when Operation Moses took place, as "frenzied, controversial, unpleasant and argumentative, and much more difficult than we ever believed it could be."

The controversy has not gone away. There is no consensus even today on the value of AAEJ's actions at the time.

Did the group's clandestine rescue efforts of several hundred Ethiopians show the way for the Israelis? Or did it interfere with the equally secret Israeli efforts, which brought out between 4,000 and 6,000 Jews by 1984?

The AAEJ again took matters, controversially, into its own hands in 1989. And the country's civil war was raging in Gondar province, where most of the 20,000 remaining Jews lived.

"It was a completely lawless and chaotic time," said Susan Pollack, an AAEJ activist in Ethiopia then.

So, against the urging of the JDC and the Jewish Agency, "We decided that if it was no longer possible to get to Gondar and help Ethiopian Jews survive there, we would get them out of Gondar, get them to Addis Ababa, and bring them to the doorstep of the world, and the Israeli government in particular.

"We thought it was the community's only chance of survival, and history has proved us right."

Soon after the AAEJ began bringing the Jews down to its compound in Addis Ababa, Israel and Ethiopia re-established diplomatic ties.

A moderately paced immigration was begun. Eventually, American pressure enabled Israel to carry out Operation Solomon, bringing the Jews out on the eve of the capital's fall to rebel troops.