



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **House Speaker Newt Gingrich said he would support the transfer of the American Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem when and if the issue comes to the floor of the House of Representatives.** In an interview with Ha'aretz, Gingrich also said he favored a peacekeeping role for American troops on the Golan to enforce an Israeli-Syrian peace. But he said he wanted a careful examination and debate of all the possible scenarios, including the worst-case scenario of a war breaking out between Israel and Syria. [Page 3]

■ **The Israeli Foreign Ministry expressed "deep concern" about the crisis in the breakaway republic of Chechnya and said it is ready to extend humanitarian aid to Chechnya in coordination with Russian authorities.** The statement came as the Jewish Agency for Israel was arranging for the arrival of a second group of Jewish refugees from Grozny. [Page 2]

■ **Israel and Jordan agreed in principle to build two new rail lines linking the two countries.** The agreement was reached at talks in the northeastern Israeli city of Beit She'an, where representatives from both sides discussed efforts to speed up implementation of the economic portions of the Oct. 26 Israeli-Jordanian peace accord. A spokesman of Israel's Transportation Ministry said the two rail lines — one running from Haifa to the Jordanian city of Irbid, the other from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea — would primarily be used to transport cargo.

■ **An Israeli guard at a boarding school in Jerusalem shot and wounded two Arabs as they were unloading merchandise from a truck.** The wounded men were taken to Hadassah Hospital, where one later died of his injuries. The other was lightly hurt, Israel Television reported. The security guard was detained by police, who were attempting to determine why he had opened fire.

■ **Egypt has again blocked Israeli participation in an international book fair in Cairo.** While Israeli publishers participated in the fair during the early 1980s, their presence has been banned for the past eight years, with Egyptians citing security concerns.

Fifty years after liberation, controversy swirls around Auschwitz

By Ruth Gruber

ROME, Jan. 16 (JTA) — Fifty years ago this month, on Jan. 27, 1945, Soviet troops of the 60th Army of the First Ukrainian Front entered the Auschwitz concentration camp.

There, amid an icy wasteland of incredible horror, they found 7,000 skeletal survivors.

Nine days earlier, as the Red Army approached, the Nazis had blown up crematoriums and gas chambers, set fire to documents and other buildings and forced 60,000 Auschwitz prisoners on a death march westward into the heart of the German Reich.

Wanting no living witnesses to testify to the Nazi atrocities, the Germans left behind only the sick, the weak, the dead and the dying.

In the half century since the Red Army liberated what was Nazi Germany's biggest and most notorious concentration camp complex, Auschwitz has become one of the world's most potent symbols of man's inhumanity against man.

Because of the potency of its symbolism and the enormity of what it represents, Auschwitz has long been the object of controversy.

Thus it is not surprising that it has also become the object of controversy as Poland prepares to host ceremonies on Jan. 26 and Jan. 27 to mark the 50th anniversary of its liberation.

Believing that Polish officials were focusing too much on a universal message of suffering rather than the specific sufferings of Jews, some Jewish organizations have decided to sponsor their own, specifically Jewish, commemoration on Jan. 26.

Some Jewish leaders have also charged that the preparations for the ceremonies have been marked by delays and needless inefficiencies on the part of "bungling" Polish bureaucrats.

Since the Polish government has still not announced the official commemoration program, some said, it is still uncertain which Jewish leaders will participate. Even Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, is among those currently assessing their exact role at the Polish commemorations.

The ultimate in cynical depravity

Auschwitz' very name has become a synonym for the Holocaust, as well as for evil. The exhortation "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("Work Makes You Free") arching in iron letters over the camp's main gate stands out as the ultimate in cynical depravity.

"The meaning of Auschwitz is powerful," Stanislaw Krajewski, a Polish Jewish intellectual and activist, said in an interview. "People want to relate to it."

As a symbol, "it can be used and misused," he said.

In addition to its universal symbolism as the ultimate in inhumanity, Auschwitz represents different things to different people.

It is as if at times the word means different things in different languages.

"An interesting thing that emerges from our research in various countries is that there is no one meaning," said David Singer, director of research and publications of the American Jewish Committee.

"Different people, different historical experiences, different memories end up filtering the memory of Auschwitz itself," he said.

Between 1.1 million and 1.5 million people were murdered at Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945.

Ninety percent of the victims, or at least one million, were Jews from all over Europe. Most of them were killed during the last two-and-a-half years of the camp's operation, at the Auschwitz II camp at Birkenau, two miles from the main camp.

For Jews, and for most of the world, Auschwitz has come to represent the ultimate symbol of the Nazi genocide against the Jews.

Auschwitz also symbolizes the genocide against the Gypsies, some 21,000 of whom were killed there.

Yet Auschwitz was set up in 1940 primarily as a concentration camp

for Polish political prisoners. For the first two years of its operation, its main purpose was the torture and murder of the Polish elite, including priests. In all, at least 75,000 ethnic Poles were killed there.

For Poles, Auschwitz represents the chief symbol of the Nazi oppression of Poland — and indeed, under the Communists, this was what was taught in Polish schools.

The museum and monument set up at the former camp in 1947 were called a "Monument of the Martyrdom of the Polish Nation and of Other Nations." Until the changes that came with the fall of communism in 1989, museum exhibits minimized or ignored the fact that 90 percent of Auschwitz victims were Jews.

"It was as if Auschwitz had abandoned the memory of the Jews," wrote Jewish scholar Jonathan Webber. "It stood for other memories, other meanings."

Since 1989, this has changed dramatically. Museum captions, exhibits and inscriptions were changed to reflect the reality of the overwhelming Jewish presence at Auschwitz without belittling Polish suffering there.

Official Polish ceremonies marking the 50th anniversary of the liberation — the first major commemorations linked to the end of World War II — were intended to stress the universal meaning of Auschwitz.

But this universalist approach to honoring the memory of the dead came under fire from the beginning.

'We have the right to weep alone'

Polish President Lech Walesa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983 for leading the Solidarity labor movement in Poland, had intended to invite all living fellow Nobel Peace Prize winners to attend the ceremonies and launch an appeal for peace and tolerance to the world.

This triggered an avalanche of protest from Jews, however, since it would have included Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat, who jointly won the 1994 prize along with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

Jews protested the inclusion of Arafat, who for decades was the symbol of Arab terrorism against Jews.

The protest forced Walesa to change the invitation to include Nobel Peace Prize recipients only through 1993.

In addition to the Arafat debacle, some Jewish organizations have protested that Jewish participation in the commemorations should be given more prominence and criticized what they saw as attempts to "Polonize" the ceremonies. Two weeks before the ceremonies, Jewish groups in Warsaw announced that a separate Jewish ceremony would be added to the program.

"We have the right to weep alone," said Arnold Mostowicz, an Auschwitz survivor and head of a Polish organization of Jewish ex-combatants and survivors.

He said that Jewish groups would participate in the official events, but would also gather on Jan. 26 for a Jewish commemoration service at Birkenau, while the official dignitaries are at lunch.

According to Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress, which is involved in the Jan. 26 Jewish commemoration, said it is "not meant as a substitute" for the formal Polish ceremonies, but "to ensure that the Jewish content of the commemoration will be preserved."

Steinberg expressed dissatisfaction with the way some Polish officials have handled preparations for the commemoration and said that WJC only received a program for the ceremonies last Friday.

Steinberg described the Polish preparations as the result of "bungling bureaucratic disorganization instead of ideological insensitivity."

While more recent contacts with Polish officials have been "enormously helpful," Steinberg said that

because of the confusion surrounding the events, his organization has still not decided whether to send its president, Edgar Bronfman, and other top officials.

Meanwhile, Elie Wiesel's participation is also currently in doubt.

The Nobel laureate and survivor was expected to play a prominent role in the ceremonies, but was dismayed that Polish officials contacted him only recently to invite his participation.

"To my regret, you gave me too short notice," Wiesel wrote to Walesa in a letter dated Jan. 6 that was obtained by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

"I am not even sure I will be able to take part in the 50th anniversary ceremonies of the liberation of Auschwitz."

Responding to an additional request by the Polish government that he script a message on behalf of all the Nobel laureates, Wiesel wrote: "I am afraid that in this case also, it came too late.

"How can I write a text of such importance, share it with our colleagues who will surely comment on its content and formulation, get their remarks and then work on them — all that in 2-3 weeks? Granted, I am a writer — but I write slowly, carefully."

In addition to protests from Jewish groups, non-Jewish Poles who were former Auschwitz prisoners have complained that they, too, had not been represented adequately in the program.

"There are thousands of Polish Christians who are former Auschwitz inmates," Krajewski said.

"Auschwitz has a very strong and personal meaning for them, which is different from the outside image of Auschwitz as the place where Jews were brought to the gas chambers in trains from all over Europe," he said. □

(JTA staff writer Mitchell Danow in New York contributed to this report.)

Israel offers humanitarian aid to civilian population of Chechnya

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Jan. 16 (JTA) — As fierce fighting continues to rage between Russian troops and rebels from the breakaway republic of Chechnya, the Israeli government has offered to send humanitarian aid to the besieged civilian population in the Chechen capital of Grozny.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry published an official statement on Monday expressing Israel's "deep concern" about the crisis and said it is ready to extend humanitarian aid to Chechnya in coordination with Russian authorities.

The statement said that Israel views the Chechen crisis as an internal matter of the Russian Federation. But it also called on Moscow to make every effort to settle the conflict peacefully.

Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin said the aid effort would not affect Israeli relations with Russia.

Foreign Ministry officials said contacts are underway to explore the possibility of sending medical supplies and other humanitarian aid to the war-ravaged area.

Russia's ambassador to Israel, Alexander Bovin, has welcomed the Israeli gesture.

In the past few weeks, dozens of Jews fleeing Chechnya have been airlifted to Israel in an effort organized by the Jewish Agency. A group of 16 people, including seven who escaped from Grozny under fire, were scheduled to arrive in Israel on Tuesday.

Chaim Chesler, the Jewish Agency representative in Russia, recently visited the Chechen border to observe agency efforts to help the Jewish refugees reach Nalchik, a city some 100 miles east of Grozny. □

Gingrich on embassy, troops and aid: Yes on three counts

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Jan. 16 (JTA) — House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) would strongly support the transfer of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem if and when the issue comes to the floor of the House of Representatives.

In an interview with the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, Gingrich said it was Israel's right to determine where its capital should be and it was America's duty, as Israel's ally, to accept that determination and act accordingly.

He noted that this had been his position for more than a decade, implying that there was no question of his having recently adopted the stance on Jerusalem in order to curry favor with Jewish voters at home.

In his interview over the weekend with Ha'aretz reporter Akiva Eldar, Gingrich displayed detailed knowledge of Middle East issues. A portion of the interview aired Sunday night on Israeli television.

On the subject of deploying American peacekeeping troops to the Golan Heights as part of an eventual Israeli-Syrian peace treaty, Gingrich said he tended to support the idea. But he said his support would come only after a careful examination and debate of all the possible scenarios, including the worst-case scenario of a war breaking out between Israel and Syria.

Gingrich cited the successful experience of American personnel who have been stationed in the Sinai to enforce the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

But in considering the Golan, Gingrich said, Americans would be asking two tough questions: the threat of terror attacks, particularly in light of the September 1983 suicide car bombing of a U.S. marine base near Beirut that killed 241 American soldiers; and the way events might unfold in case of a military escalation in the region.

'Assad is a dictator'

Gingrich also stressed the dangers posed by fundamentalist Iran — both as a source and supporter of international terror and as a country bent on attaining nuclear weapons.

Indeed, the speaker said that peace with Syria was important in order for the world to focus on the dangers emanating from Teheran.

"I would put that at the head of the list of problems that the U.S. needs to resolve," Gingrich said, referring to the Iranian threat.

On the issue of foreign aid, Gingrich said it was hard for him to see why the United States would wish to help Syria.

Syrian President Hafez "Assad is a dictator, and it's hard to point to any real change in Syria," he noted.

Gingrich said that while Syria would likely be the last Arab state to make peace with Israel, Egypt had been the first — and therefore merited continued U.S. aid.

He said that Jordan was also likely to continue receiving U.S. aid because, despite supporting Iraq in the 1992 Persian Gulf War, the Hashemite Kingdom was a longtime American friend in the region.

Regarding aid to the Palestinians, Gingrich said that Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had persuaded him that this was essential — and that he tended to go along with that.

Aid to Israel was also likely to continue, despite the new efforts to balance the budget, Gingrich said.

But at the same time, he urged Israel to press ahead with privatization and greater competitiveness in its economy. □

Jewish Republicans seek liaison role with Congress

By David Twersky

MetroWest Jewish News

WHIPPANY, N.J. (JTA) — The top Republican leaders of the new Congress met with the heads of a Jewish political group last week to discuss relations between the Grand Old Party and the American Jewish community.

Following the meetings, leaders of the GOP-linked National Jewish Coalition spoke with reporters.

Short on detail, the meetings were rich in nuance. That the Republican leadership chose to meet with Jewish allies within days of taking over the Congress was hailed by NJC director Matthew Brooks as "a signal that Republicans have not written off the Jewish community."

In last November's midterm congressional elections, American Jews were among the few groups to buck the Republican tide, giving an estimated 80 percent of their votes to Democratic candidates.

NJC leaders met separately on Monday, Jan. 9, with House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.) and Senate Majority Whip Trent Lott (R-Miss.).

The meetings were held just hours before Gingrich fired Christina Jeffrey, the academic he had appointed as House historian, after learning she had opposed federal funding of a Holocaust course because it omitted Nazi and Ku Klux Klan views.

Participants in the Jan. 9 meetings included NJC national chair Cheryl Halpern of Livingston, N.J.; NJC honorary chair Richard Fox of Philadelphia; Joseph Gildenhorn of Washington, D.C.; and George Klein of New York.

Israel remains a 'strategic ally'

The NJC leaders said Gingrich, Dole and Lott had reassured them about their support for continued aid to Israel, reaffirming their view of the Jewish state as a "strategic ally."

But they avoided going into operational details, including the controversy over whether the United States should commit troops to a peacekeeping mission on the Golan Heights.

According to Gildenhorn, "Dole said that he would like to see results of [negotiations with Syria] before making any decisions" on the Golan issue.

The NJC leaders also stayed away from school prayer during their meetings with Gingrich, Dole and Lott.

According to Brooks, the school prayer amendment is on "the back burner" and will not surface during the first 100 days. While NJC has no position on school prayer, Gildenhorn said, "I think we all feel a moment of silence would be satisfactory."

The meetings with Republican leaders mark a turning point for NJC, which hopes to position itself as the key "interface" between the Republican-controlled Congress and the Jewish community, Gildenhorn said.

"Our organization is looking forward to playing a key role in maximizing the communication between the new Republican leadership of the Congress and the American Jewish community," said Halpern.

Fox disputed the notion that, for Republicans, Jews are a lost cause.

"There is no monolithic Jewish community," he said. "Under age 30, Jews are much more conservative in their voting."

Jews, Fox and Gildenhorn said, would be increasingly attracted by the GOP's fiscal conservatism. "We have now a unique revolution that goes beyond anything we've seen before." □

Rabin promises development of municipal Jerusalem only

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Jan. 16 (JTA) — Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin declared last week that his government would move to strengthen the unification of Jerusalem through development within the municipal borders of the city.

But he hinted that such expansion could mean slower development of outlying communities east of the capital, including Ma'ale Adumim and the Gush Etzion settlement bloc in the West Bank.

His remarks came in the wake of the recent controversy over the expansion plans of Efrat, a Gush Etzion settlement. The government decided to halt Efrat's plans to build at a designated site after Palestinians threatened that the move could halt the peace process.

Instead, the government worked out a compromise with the community to build on another site.

Speaking on Jan. 10 during a tour of the capital, Rabin said that Jerusalem must be given priority in housing and other public services. By speaking of development only within the municipal borders of the city, he in effect excluded the outlying areas.

"The other areas on the periphery are a different issue," he said.

For Rabin, who oversaw the capture of the eastern half of the city in 1967 as the Israel Defense Force chief of staff, the visit to the Old City was his first during his current term as prime minister.

He was accompanied by Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert and by Housing Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer, who described plans to build 30,000 apartments in the city over the next five to six years.

Michal Cohen, a spokeswoman for the Israel Lands Authority, recently said that the decision to build apartments in Jerusalem was made in an effort to ease housing shortages that have led Israelis to leave the city.

According to government figures, approximately 6,000 Israelis have left Jerusalem annually since 1992.

Jerusalem is currently home to some 405,000 Jews and about 160,000 Palestinians.

Hosting Rabin during his tour, Olmert welcomed the prime minister's pledge to develop the capital, but hoped that a similar effort would also be made east of the city.

"We need a security belt in the future, east of Jerusalem," Olmert said. "We see Jerusalem's natural development [as being] toward the east. I think you could do both." □

Israel said to be considering a harder stand toward Egypt

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Jan. 16 (JTA) — Officials in the Israeli Foreign Ministry have reportedly recommended that Israel take a harsher stand toward Egypt in an effort to change what is described as Cairo's negative attitude toward Jerusalem.

Israeli concerns that Egypt has been acting to slow the peace process and Israel's normalization of ties with other Arab states were factors in the Foreign Ministry's making the recommendation, the Hebrew daily Ha'aretz reported.

According to Ha'aretz, a position paper was submitted to Foreign Minister Shimon Peres calling for talks aimed at overcoming differences between the two sides.

If the dialogue fails to produce results, the position

paper said, a number of measures should be taken to pressure Cairo into changing its attitude toward Israel.

These steps include moving the Israel-Palestinian autonomy negotiations out of Cairo; ending Israeli briefings to Egyptian leaders on developments in the peace process; requesting that the Nile be included in multilateral talks on water — which would reverse Israel's earlier consent to an Egyptian demand that it not be included; and lobbying Washington against aid to Egypt, citing human rights violations and Cairo's relations with Libya.

Egyptian government officials have recently called on Arab states not to establish ties with Israel until it withdraws from all occupied territories and signs the nuclear non-proliferation pact.

Peres said remarks made by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Foreign Minister Amre Moussa reflect less substance than an effort to present a hard-line stance in advance of an April meeting to renew the non-proliferation treaty.

Speaking in Caracas, Venezuela, last week, Peres dismissed the Ha'aretz report, saying Israel has not changed its policy toward Egypt. □

Prime minister blames Syria for ongoing clashes in Lebanon

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Jan. 16 (JTA) — Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin last week visited the security zone in southern Lebanon, where the Israel Defense Force and the allied South Lebanon Army have been engaged in ongoing clashes with the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement.

Rabin said at a news conference that Syria is using Hezbollah to put pressure on the IDF and SLA.

Israeli officials have frequently said that Syria could restrain the Iranian-backed group's activities if it wanted to, but that Damascus was trying to use the clashes in southern Lebanon as a playing card in negotiations with Israel.

There were clashes in the security zone almost every day this last week.

On Jan. 11, an Israeli soldier was lightly wounded and four Hezbollah gunmen were killed during fighting in the western sector of the zone.

The day before, Israeli planes bombed Hezbollah targets in the security zone after Hezbollah gunmen fired on positions held by Israel and the SLA in the eastern sector of the zone.

During his visit to southern Lebanon on Jan. 12, Rabin said that Israel and Syria had made some progress in their recent talks in Washington, but that the fighting in Lebanon had not come up in their discussions.

But the same day in Damascus, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa said that last month's high-level talks involving Israeli and Syrian diplomatic and military officials in Washington had produced no results. He added that he did not expect the talks to resume soon.

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, meanwhile, refused to comment on rumors that he met secretly with a Syrian official while he was in Paris last week.

Media reports speculated that the official could have been Syrian Defense Minister Gen. Mustafa Tallas.

Peres, arriving in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas on Jan. 12, declined to comment. But the foreign minister blamed Syria for the ongoing stalemate in the Washington talks.

He said the Syrian demand that Israel make a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights and dismantle all its settlements there before starting negotiations was unacceptable. □