

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ A second group of Jews fleeing the ongoing fighting in the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya arrived in Israel on a flight organized by the Jewish Agency. Seven of the 16 new refugees had fled Grozny while it was under fire from Russian forces, including a 16-year-old girl who lost her mother during the fighting. The refugees had fled to Nalchik, where they stayed with relatives or in hotels while agency emissaries helped them sort out the necessary exit papers.

■ An Israeli pilot, Capt. Danny Overest, 22, of Ashdod, was killed and another slightly injured when two fighter planes collided over the Mediterranean during a training exercise. The air force ordered an official inquiry into the accident, which was the second to take place in as many months.

■ Thousands of Israelis planted trees to mark the Tu B'Shevat holiday, but at least one ceremony took on political dimensions this year. Economics Minister Shimon Shetreet attended a tree-planting ceremony with residents of the West Bank settlement of Efrat at the site of a recent confrontation between settlers and Palestinians over a planned expansion of the settlement. [Page 3]

■ The Israeli Cabinet erupted in intense bickering over economic issues. The debate came in the wake of a scathing memo in which Police Minister Moshe Shahal sharply criticized Finance Minister Avraham Shohat's performance. The infighting overshadowed the Cabinet's decision to approve a \$239 million cut in government spending. It also came with more gloomy economic news: an overall inflation rate of 14.5 percent. [Page 4]

■ Great Britain reportedly has barred Israeli students from advanced studies in science and technology at its universities. Also on the blacklist are Iran, Iraq, Cuba and Egypt, according to Ma'ariv. In response to Israeli protests, the British Foreign Ministry said the list includes only those states at immediate risk of developing weapons of mass destruction. The Foreign Ministry said that Israel would be removed from the list if and when it signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Just off the plane, Chechen Jews adjust to a different life in Israel**

By Uriel Masad

JERUSALEM, Jan. 16 (JTA) — In the center of the room stands a makeshift table, a large wooden plank perched on sawhorses and covered with coarse papers.

Four heavysset, elderly women sit on plastic stools around the table, silently busy as they prepare the contents of an array of bowls and buckets. One woman chops large onions, one dices cooked beets, another cuts homemade pickled green peppers and cucumbers into strips, and the fourth, her head covered in a traditional kerchief, meticulously peels cashews, then cuts them into tiny pieces.

Chaim Shalmayiev is getting married this night, and his mother and her friends are preparing for the celebration.

In one corner of the room, detached from his surroundings, sits Chaim's friend, Ilya Nissimov, the latest addition to the Chechen community in Israel.

Barely one week has passed since the Nissimov family of six landed at Ben-Gurion Airport in the dead of night, without a notion of what awaited them or who would welcome them.

The family was among the first group of 32 Chechen Jews to arrive in Israel on Dec. 27 on a special flight arranged by the Jewish Agency for Israel.

They came from Grozny, the capital, where Russia has been waging an all-out war against the breakaway republic.

Having fled the war, the Nissimovs arrived empty-handed, with only suitcases containing clothes and a few personal belongings. They left behind their car, their clothing shop and the house that was in their family's possession for generations.

A second party of 16 refugees arrived in Israel on Tuesday.

According to Jewish Agency reports, most of the dozens of remaining Grozny Jews have reached safety out of Chechnya.

But there are still some people unaccounted for and communication with them has broken down.

Ilya has an uncle back in Grozny, and they all worry about him.

'The Muslims have driven us out'

"We have lived there for 2,000 years," says Ilya in a low voice, his eyes downcast.

"Now the Muslims have driven us out. When it became bad, I sent Marina and the children to Nalchik," he says, referring to a neighboring area where many refugees fled.

"Then the Russian army came and the Muslims, with whom I used to eat and drink, came in armed with rifles and knives and told me that if I want to stay alive, I better leave everything behind and go."

Burlant, Ilya's mother, who looks older than her 54 years and suffers from a heart condition and swollen legs, nods sadly, adding: "They were always after us, the Muslims."

She says that since the Chechen leader, Dzhokhar Dudayev, came to power in 1991, the Muslims "started to harass us openly."

"Go to Israel where you belong," they told us. All our men have scars from fights with the Muslims.

"It came to the point that we could not even send the boys to the corner shop to buy bread for fear they would be robbed, or worse," she recalls.

"They came inside our homes and beat us. Evedi, my grandson, was once clubbed over his head with a rifle butt and has never been the same again," she says.

"Even in Israel, when he hears the siren of an ambulance or police car, he takes cover. He is so afraid of everything."

Grozny once had 5,000 to 6,000 Jews, most of them north Caucasian mountain Jews who had lived there for generations and knew each other well. They were cobblers, barbers and small shop owners.

Since Russia began its assault on the city last month, the Jewish

quarter has been partially destroyed, including its ancient synagogue, which the Communists had turned into a music school.

While many of the Jews had left for Israel in recent years, the beginning of the war sent most of the rest of the community fleeing.

"Yes, I wanted to come to Israel," says Ilya. "Israel has a flag and a strong army. We are welcome here and safe, but I feel bad.

"I live with friends, my kids sleep somewhere different every night, we eat other people's food. I am ashamed to take from others. I never had to before."

Chaim, Ilya's friend, pats his back, explaining that this was how he felt when he came here three years ago, with only his guitar and suitcase.

Since then he has brought over his parents and younger brothers and sister, and has even bought a two-room apartment in Oshiot, a quiet neighborhood in Rehovot.

When Chaim heard on the news last month about the arrival of a plane carrying Chechen refugees, he immediately rushed to the airport to find out who was arriving. When he saw his friend Ilya and his family, he insisted they stay with him.

Ilya says he doesn't want much right now — just a roof over their heads and some furniture, so they can start to build their lives anew.

Where does one begin?

He wants to feel settled and see his three children in school. But how does one do that, he wonders aloud. How and where does one begin?

Ilya, like other indigenous Chechen Jews, is thinly built, small in stature and dark-skinned.

His looks are deceiving, however, for Ilya was once Chechnya's lightweight boxing champion.

"We all did sports; we had to, in order to fight back against the Muslims," Chaim says, showing off his younger brother's certificate as Israel's champion in classic wrestling.

"All the men got into fights with them, and have scars and knife wounds to show for it." He lifts his shirt and urges Ilya to do likewise.

Farther north, just east of Netanya in the pastoral village of Kefar Yona, the three members of the Ismailov family are also adjusting to their new homeland.

They don't look Chechen, and Vladlin, a 48-year-old graphic designer, explains that their grandparents fled Russia and moved to Grozny during World War II.

Their account of life in Chechnya differs from the Nissimovs.

They say their relationships with the Muslims were good, better than with the Russians. And they are vehemently opposed to the Russian invasion.

But they agree that life became more difficult when Dudayev came to power.

Vladlin's wife, Svetlana, a 35-year-old doctor who worked with emergency and rescue vehicles, says, "When Dudayev took over and unilaterally declared independence, he first set free all the prisoners, and that is when the troubles started.

"He then opened the arsenals the Soviet Army had left behind, and armed all the Chechens," all except the Jews, she says. "We had Yibrey (Jew) written in our documents."

Dudayev then abolished pensions for all Chechens, declaring that the sick and elderly should be cared for by their families. Next he froze salaries, and neither of us got paid for months," she says.

"First they took our home," adds Vladlin. "A group of armed and masked men came and drove me to a

forest, where they made me sign papers stating that I had sold the apartment and got paid for it.

"I signed; what else was I to do? People were already disappearing by then. We had two days to leave our home and went to stay with Chechen friends. I started to move what was left to Nalchik, but thieves there robbed us of that too," he recalls.

"The Jewish Agency there took care of us, and I started to work with them, going back and forth to help Jews escape from Grozny. When the Russian Army that surrounded Chechnya started to bombard Grozny, we left," Vladlin says.

Recounting the arduous journey with their 2-year-old daughter, Alberta, Vladlin says: "In subzero temperature, we made the 120-mile journey to Nalchik — on foot, by hitchhiking and by bus. The Russians let us through only after ascertaining that we were not Chechens.

"The roads were filled with refugees. But we were lucky; the real killing started after we left."

"The bastards," Svetlana interrupts. "They're killing everyone. The Chechens are good people. It's only Dudayev and his mafia. The Chechens would have gotten rid of them somehow.

"But once the Russians came, the whole Chechen people joined Dudayev and his bandits to defend their country. Dudayev's criminals took mostly property, and here and there someone disappeared. But the Russians, they kill everyone indiscriminately. They are murderers!"

"But now we are safe here," Vladlin says, calming down his wife.

No regrets about coming to Israel

The couple say that they had in fact been planning to come to Israel but were waiting to save some money.

But now, everything they owned is lost. All they want now, they say, is to master the language as soon as possible and start working, preferably in their professions.

They say they knew it would be hard here and they are not afraid to face the difficulties; they have no regrets about coming to Israel.

The Ismailovs and the Nissimovs are on the "direct absorption" track in Israel, meaning they receive financial and other assistance from the state and are free to choose what to do with it.

Their "absorption basket," some \$10,000 for a family of five over the first six months, is designed for Jews who come from distressed areas. The grant provides free transportation to Israel, and then to their place of choice, plus additional assistance for rent or mortgage payments, free health care, Ulpan, children's education and more.

It is a generous package. However, with Israel's high cost of living, it does not guarantee an easy start.

The Ismailovs say they are grateful for the help they have received, both from the Jewish Agency along the way, and from the State of Israel. They are convinced that they can make it, and are eager to begin their new life.

Ilya Nissimov, in contrast, is not so confident. He says he won't be going back to boxing for a while, but might look for some promising boys to train.

All he cares about is getting a place to live, seeing his children settled and in school and finding work — any work. Like the rest of his family, he is still bewildered. He is happy to be here, he says, but he worries, especially about his sick mother, his fearful wife and son Evedi.

His friend Chaim tells him not to worry. In Israel, there's always someone who will help, he says. No one goes hungry, and everything will be fine in the end.

Ilya does not look convinced, but agrees to put aside his worries and get dressed, for tonight the Chechen community is celebrating Chaim's wedding. □

Intense congressional scrutiny expected on future aid for PLO

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, Jan. 17 (JTA) — Senior Israeli and Palestine Liberation Organization officials traveled to Capitol Hill together last week to press for continued financial support for the peace process.

What they encountered, however, was an unexpected grilling from two U.S. senators who were sharply critical of the PLO for failing to comply with its peace agreements.

Uri Savir, director-general of Israel's Foreign Ministry, and Ahmed Korei, an economic specialist with the Palestinian Authority, met with Sens. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Connie Mack (R-Fla.) on Jan. 11.

According to Capitol Hill sources, the senators told Korei, also known as Abu Alla, that PLO violations of its peace accords with Israel is jeopardizing millions of dollars in promised U.S. aid.

"The PLO needs to fulfil its commitments. The way it is right now, it's going to be very difficult getting a majority vote" to support aid to the PLO, the senators told the visitors, according to a Capitol Hill aide.

When Israel and the PLO signed the Declaration of Principles in September 1993, the Clinton administration pledged \$500 million over five years to the PLO.

So far the PLO has received \$70 million in direct assistance, according to State Department officials.

Lieberman and Mack co-sponsored legislation in the last Congress that cleared the way for the United States to give aid to the PLO.

That legislation, which requires the State Department to review PLO compliance every six months in order to assure continued aid, is due to expire June 30.

Since the legislation passed soon after the historic Israeli-PLO accord agreement, all three State Department reports have drawn fire from some members of Congress and the Jewish community for being too lenient.

Over the next six months, lawmakers are expected to take a closer look at whether the PLO has complied with its agreements with Israel.

Congress generally skeptical of aid programs

The increasing scrutiny comes at a time when congressional leaders have expressed skepticism in general about aid programs.

With these concerns in mind, staffers on both sides of the aisle have begun to draft new legislation that would require the PLO to amend its covenant calling for the destruction of Israel and do more to prevent and renounce terrorism.

Current legislation cites an expectation of compliance but does not give Congress the ability to withhold funds. The law says that the White House has final say on whether the PLO receives aid.

Many members of Congress want to see stricter compliance, but at the same time, there is a widespread belief that peace with the Palestinians rests on a strong PLO that requires aid dollars.

"There will be no PLO if there is no aid. But on the other hand, there will be no peace if there's no compliance," a congressional aide said of the dilemma lawmakers face.

While no formal action on aid — either through existing or new legislation — is expected until the spring, aides say lawmakers will watch PLO actions closely over the next few months to determine the course of future legislation.

As they consider aid to the PLO, some members of Congress will look to the Israeli government for guidance.

"If the Israelis say the PLO is doing a good enough job, who are we to argue otherwise?" one aide asked.

The Israeli government has continued to support aid to the Palestinians for the sake of the peace process.

But others take a harder line.

"This is American taxpayer money going to an organization that has not proven it has shed its terrorist past. The time has come to demand compliance," another aide said.

According to Capitol Hill insiders, the new law will most likely raise the stakes and mandate PLO compliance with its peace accords in order to receive aid.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which had supported aid to the Palestinians in the aftermath of the Israeli-PLO peace accord, has begun to question whether the current law holds the PLO to its commitments.

"We will seek through the congressional process to increase PLO compliance with its commitments," an AIPAC official said, cautioning that it is too early in the process to forecast specific ways.

The Zionist Organization of America, which, under its president, Morton Klein, has pushed for stronger PLO compliance, has already begun lobbying lawmakers in anticipation of the forthcoming debate this spring.

"Clearly we need legislation with greater teeth that would cut off all U.S. aid to the PLO if they continue to violate every aspect of the accords," said Klein.

"In light of the fact that the PLO has had one and a half years to comply, they deserve no more than two or three months before all U.S. aid is cutoff," Klein said.

One of the primary avenues that future legislation could use to ensure compliance is a direct link between aid and all incidents of violations, according to congressional staffers.

Originally floated by Klein, the linkage idea is receiving great attention on Capitol Hill.

Some lawmakers support the idea. Others, however, say the link will result in micromanagement and have suggested instead the imposition of a strict deadline for the PLO to amend the covenant and prevent terrorism. □

Tu B'Shevat turns political with one tree-planting event

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Jan. 17 (JTA) — As thousands of Israelis planted trees on Monday to mark the Tu B'Shevat holiday, at least one ceremony took on political dimensions this year.

The main ceremony for the holiday, which is the traditional new year for trees, took place at Givat Massua in Jerusalem in the presence of President Ezer Weizman.

The theme of this year's Jewish National Fund tree-planting activities was "Planting for Peace," which has the goal of planting an estimated 300,000 trees.

At the West Bank settlement of Efrat, Economics Minister Shimon Shetreet attended a tree-planting ceremony at the site of a recent confrontation between settlers and Palestinians over planned expansion of the settlement.

Shetreet planted a sapling on Givat Hazayit, where the Israeli government worked out a compromise to allow settlers to begin building apartments. The compromise came after local Palestinians protested construction plans at another nearby hilltop, Givat Hatamar, that the protesters claimed was on land belonging to their village.

Shetreet, a hawkish Labor minister who opposed the government compromise, said the settlements near Jerusalem should continue to be developed and remain under Israeli sovereignty. □

Cabinet approves budget cuts as it erupts in intense bickering

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, Jan. 17 (JTA) — A divided Israeli Cabinet this week approved a \$239 million cut in government spending aimed at covering planned tax reforms.

But the Cabinet's decision was overshadowed by intense bickering among government ministers before the cut was approved.

The infighting led Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to warn that he would invoke his "full authority" against ministers who did not act in a civil fashion toward one another.

Rabin's remarks came in the wake of a scathing memo he received from Police Minister Moshe Shahal, in which Shahal sharply criticized Finance Minister Avraham Shohat's performance.

Reports about the memo, which was leaked to the media over the weekend, were given prominent play in the Israeli press on Sunday.

In the memo, Shahal was quoted as saying the country was "hurtling full speed toward an economic disaster."

Sunday's Cabinet session was designed to ease friction among the ministers, who have been sparring publicly since the budget cut was proposed last week.

But the session became overheated, with Shohat calling Shahal a "liar," and a "saboteur of the government."

Shohat also accused Shahal of writing the memo to serve his own aspirations of becoming finance minister.

Shahal in turn denied the allegations, saying he had no interest in obtaining Shohat's portfolio.

He also said he had "no regrets" about the memo, which he said included nothing he had not already stated openly in the Cabinet.

The Cabinet ultimately passed the spending-cut plan, with 10 ministers voting in favor and seven against.

The budget reduction will enable the government to reduce the employers' health tax by nearly two percentage points. It also provides working women with an additional tax credit to offset higher health taxes.

The budget reforms, approved only two weeks after the Knesset passed its \$49 billion annual budget for 1995, amount to less than one-half percent of the total budget.

Bank of Israel Governor Jacob Frenkel welcomed the Cabinet decision, but said it was not enough.

"I think the changes are in the right direction," he told Israel Television. "I would like to see them in a larger magnitude — about three times as much as what was adopted. I think our tax burden has gone up significantly in the past few years, and it's essential to see its reversal."

The government, which has seen its popularity fall as inflation rates rose, could take little comfort from the latest inflation figures, which were released by the Central Bureau of Statistics on Sunday.

According to the bureau's figures, inflation in 1994 stood at 14.5 percent — nearly double the government's projections for the year. □

Yemenite Jews in U.S. echo call for inquiry into missing children

By Marsha Fischer

MIAMI, Jan. 17 (JTA) — A leader of the Yemenite Jewish community in America has echoed calls already sounded in Israel for an investigation into the disappearance of hundreds of Yemenite children soon after they were brought to Israel in the late 1940s.

The story of the rescue of the Yemenite Jews is

one of the most romantic in early Israeli history, but the Yemenite Jews in the United States and Israel say there is a hidden dark side to the story.

Hundreds of Yemenite children mysteriously disappeared from absorption centers and development towns during the late 1940s and early 1950s, these advocates charge.

Sampson Giat, president of the Yemenite Jewish Federation of America, recently returned from a trip to Israel, where he had the opportunity to talk to parents who were told their young children had died.

Years later, these parents received notices claiming their children had not reported for army duty, indicating they were still alive.

Giat shared the story with his fellow Sephardi Jews at the annual gathering of the American Sephardi Federation, held here last week.

"During Operation Magic Carpet [which brought the Yemenite Jews to Israel], many immigrant families suffered a loss of one or more children under suspicious circumstances," Giat said.

"These families relate similar stories: a child was brought to the children's house at an absorption center or hospital, and after a period of time the family was informed that the child had died. The family was never given a death certificate, nor was the family shown a body or a grave.

"When I was in Israel I talked to several families and their stories were all eerily the same," he added.

Giat's visit to Israel came during a time of renewed interest there in the fate of the missing Yemenite children.

A government commission appointed six years ago to look into the matter issued its findings several weeks ago. The commission, headed by retired Judge Moshe Shalgi, found no evidence supporting allegations by some leaders in the Yemenite community that the children were sold for adoption in Israel and abroad.

The committee examined 505 cases, and determined that in all but 65, the children died of various illnesses.

Armed confrontation in Israel

In March of last year, about 10 heavily armed members of a Yemenite sect led by Rabbi Uzi Meshulam holed themselves up in a fortified house near Tel Aviv, protesting what they described as the "disappearance and sale of thousands of Yemenite children."

They were eventually dispersed following a massive police operation, and several sect members were arrested in May.

Giat expressed dissatisfaction with the Shalgi investigation and with an earlier one conducted years ago by the Israeli government.

Giat stressed that the Yemenite Jewish Federation of America is a sincere friend of Israel. "But Israel must have an open investigation into the fate of these children.

"If the investigation implicates the government, then the government should make amends to the families that have suffered. If the government is exonerated, then an open investigation will put to rest the damaging rumors of a cover-up," said the American-born Giat.

Since Giat's visit to Israel, the Israeli Cabinet has agreed to appoint a state commission of inquiry to investigate the matter.

"We must continue to press for an open investigation and an investigation that has teeth in it, so the fate of these children can be learned," said Giat.

"The members of the Yemenite community are a humble people and devoted citizens who have contributed a great deal to the State of Israel. They deserve to know the truth." □