



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Jewish defense organizations pointed to links between the militia movement and neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups as the investigation into the Oklahoma City car-bomb attack intensified. [Page 1]

■ French Jewish leaders reacted with dismay to the strong showing of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the extreme-right National Front, in France's national elections. Le Pen received 15 percent of the vote. [Page 3]

■ A French court ruling that, in effect, enables Jewish students to miss Saturday classes in the country's secular schools elicited mixed reaction among French Jews. [Page 4]

■ Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Jordan's Crown Prince Hassan called on the United States to help set up a joint authority to oversee development of the Jordan Rift Valley. They issued the call at a three-day conference in Amman that was attended by officials from Israel, Jordan and the United States.

■ An Israeli soldier was wounded when a roadside charge went off near his patrol in the eastern sector of the southern Lebanon security zone. Immediately after the explosion, Israeli gunners opened fire on positions held by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah group, which claimed responsibility for setting off the charge.

■ About 14,000 Palestinian workers returned to their jobs in Israel as a closure imposed on the territories for the Passover holiday was lifted. But Palestinian leaders criticized Israel, saying the restrictions are behind the self-rule government's cash-flow problem.

■ Israel's Bezek phone company threatened to cut off international phone service to the Palestinian self-rule areas if a \$4.6 million debt is not paid within two weeks. If the services are slashed, 125,000 people would be affected in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank Jericho enclave. Bezek has provided international service to the autonomous zones since the Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement went into effect a year ago.

With finger pointed at militias, links to neo-Nazi ideology unfold

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, April 24 (JTA) — The paramilitary movement, whose loyalists are prime suspects in last week's Oklahoma City bombing, is widely believed to have links to neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups.

With more than 10,000 members believed to be active in 13 to 20 states, many of these militias borrow their anti-government ideology from anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

"Their view of government is really a rewrite of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion," said Kenneth Stern, referring to the notorious anti-Semitic tract.

"Anti-Semitism is recast as anti-governmentalism," said Stern, an American Jewish Committee program specialist who recently wrote a report on the militia movement.

The assessment of the militia movement comes in the wake of the April 19 car bombing in front of the Alfred Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, the worst terrorist attack against U.S. citizens on American soil.

The attack renewed calls for swift legislation to combat both international and domestic terrorism.

As the death toll mounted daily, rescuers combed through the wreckage and a rapidly developing investigation shifted its focus from suspicions of a Muslim fundamentalist attack to domestic terrorism.

Officials have charged at least one suspect, Timothy McVeigh, with the bombing. Terry and James Nichols, who are brothers and friends of McVeigh's, were also being questioned in connection with the attack.

All three men have been linked to paramilitary groups.

'A real pedigree of racism and hate'

The loosely connected militia movement breeds heavily armed foot soldiers prepared to fight against the federal government, according to those who have studied the phenomenon.

The groups believe that the government has violated their liberties through laws on taxation, gun control and home schooling. They also think that U.S. cooperation with international bodies such as the United Nations threatens American sovereignty.

"The aims of these militias, often bellicosely stated, involve laying the groundwork for massive resistance to the federal government and its law enforcement agencies as well as opposition to gun control laws," according to a report issued last year by the Anti-Defamation League.

Although the groups' stated target is the U.S. government, many of the leaders have allied themselves with neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups, including the Aryan Nation and the Ku Klux Klan, according to both ADL and AJCommittee.

"The movers and shakers and people doing the organizing have a real pedigree of racism and hate," Stern said. "But they are not organizing to go out and do what the skinheads do," specifically targeting blacks, Jews and foreigners.

In their literature, the militias talk about an international conspiracy to take over America using code words such as "international bankers," which is still used in anti-Semitic quarters to describe a plot by Jews to take over the world. Jews are seen by many of the leaders of this movement "as the evil force behind government," Stern wrote in the AJCommittee report, issued just nine days before the Oklahoma attack.

"It is not unreasonable to surmise that this blend of anti-Semitic and anti-government paranoia and guns will result in tragedy," Stern wrote with a certain prescience.

On the day of the attack, even before any arrests, Stern noted the April 19 anniversary of the Branch Davidian conflagration in Waco, Texas, and said in a statement, "Although it is too early to tell, this bombing may be connected to the growing militia movement around the country."

Thomas Halpern of the ADL called the militias a "new generation of extremism."

Nonetheless, Halpern, the co-author of the ADL report, "Armed and Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government," said it is hostility

to the government that drives the movement, not anti-Semitism. But there are links, he said, citing as an example an Aryan Nation gathering in the early 1990s at which the founder of the Militia of Montana, John Trochmann, spoke.

At the same time, however, some militias have gone out of their way to distance themselves from anti-Semitism and racism, Halpern said, "partly because they regard anti-Semitism and racism as a loser."

Meanwhile, the Oklahoma attack has prompted renewed calls from both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue to pass the administration's Omnibus Counter-Terrorism Act.

Although initially aimed at combatting Middle Eastern terrorism, the proposed legislation could now take on additional components targeted at domestic terrorism.

In the wake of Oklahoma bombing, President Clinton and members of Congress have pledged to give law enforcement agencies more power to monitor militia groups operating in the United States.

In the past, many law enforcement agencies took a "hands-off approach" to the militias, ADL's Halpern said, predicting closer scrutiny of these groups in the future. The bombing has highlighted concerns that law enforcement agencies at times have to wait too long to investigate groups suspected of terrorist activity.

As part of his new campaign, Clinton will ask Congress to pass legislation that would establish a Domestic Counterterrorism Center to be headed by the FBI and also to create a fund to infiltrate suspected terrorist groups.

The proposal would also increase FBI access to hotel and motel registers, phone logs and credit card records.

Congress began considering the administration's anti-terrorism legislation three weeks ago. The bill, in its original form, would ban fund raising by terrorist organizations, declare terrorist acts a federal offense and allow for expedited deportations of suspected terrorists.

In the wake of the Oklahoma bombing, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) said he would try to strengthen the bill when the House returns from its recess May 1.

In the Senate, which reconvened this week, Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, planned to shift the focus of his hearings on the legislation Thursday from international to domestic terrorism, Capitol Hill staffers said.

The legislation, even before Oklahoma, has been a centerpiece of the organized Jewish community's legislative agenda. Last week's attack has only reinforced the resolve among Jewish groups to press for passage of the bill.

Arab Americans, however, have cautioned against using the bombing in Oklahoma to rush any legislation through Congress.

Even prior to the Oklahoma bombing, some Arab Americans and other had expressed concern that such legislation would violate civil liberties.

In any case, Congress has now put counterterrorism on the fast track. Activists on both sides of the issue expect committee votes to begin in the coming weeks. □

Scud attack may have been deadlier than first thought

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, April 24 (JTA) — A new study suggests that stress played a major role in the deaths of Israelis during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when Israel was under attack by Scud missiles fired by Iraq.

The report, published last week in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, found that the death rate was higher than first thought as a result of stress inflicted from the Scuds.

The team of three researchers from Hadassah Medical School involved in the study found that the actual death toll on Jan. 18, 1991 — the day of the first Iraqi attack — was 147. That figure represents an incidence of death 58 percent higher than the same day the previous year, even though no one was directly hit by a missile.

The researchers stressed that they had no definitive answers regarding the causes of death, but added that it was likely that tensions connected to the war could have been a factor.

"There are a number of possibilities," one of the researchers, Dr. Leon Epstein, told Israel Radio. "This was a very stressful period. People were worried about an unknown possibility."

"It is known that stress can provoke heart attacks," he added. "Also, there could have been breathing problems connected to using the [gas] masks in sealed rooms."

During the Persian Gulf War, Israelis took refuge in sealed rooms, fearing that the Scud missiles launched by Iraq against the Jewish state may have contained poison gas.

Altogether, Iraq fired 39 missiles at Israel on 17 separate days between Jan. 18 and Feb. 25, 1991. The attacks caused extensive property damage and more than 1,000 injuries, but only two deaths as a result of direct hits, the study said. □

Qatar cancels Peres visit but proceeds with gas deal

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, April 24 (JTA) — The Persian Gulf nation of Qatar has canceled a planned visit of Foreign Minister Shimon Peres after Israeli news organizations reported the impending trip.

Peres' visit was scheduled to take place after the Passover holiday. But in a statement released last week, Qatar said the visit was canceled because of the media leak.

Qatar hosted an Israeli delegation last year at multilateral talks on arms control. Yossi Beilin, deputy foreign minister, stopped in the Qatari airport at the end of last year, on the way to Oman.

The Qatari foreign minister has also met openly a few times with Peres. More recently, however, the country has cooled its move toward normalization of ties, adopting the stance by other Gulf states that progress first be made on the peace tracks between Israel, Syria and Lebanon.

Despite the cooling of political ties, a deal to ship natural gas from Qatar to Israel will be completed "within a matter of weeks," Qatari officials told a visiting American Jewish Committee delegation last week.

The deal with Mobil and Enron would ship gas to Israel, Jordan and Palestinian-controlled areas.

The AJCommittee delegation, the first Jewish group to visit Qatar, also reported that Qatar has closed its Arab boycott office. The four-person delegation, led by AJCommittee President Robert Rifkind, also traveled to Bahrain and Oman last week.

Qatari officials "signaled to us that they have every intention of opening the door even further to economic relations with Israel," said Jason Isaacson, director of AJCommittee's Washington office.

Businessmen have begun to travel between Israel and Qatar through third countries, Isaacson said.

In terms of increasing political ties with Israel, the message conveyed to the delegation was: "The peace process must proceed first," Isaacson said. □

(JTA correspondent Matthew Dorf in Washington contributed to this report.)

Le Pen's strong showing worries French Jewish leaders

By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, April 24 (JTA) — Leaders of French Jewry were dismayed by the strong showing of the extremist right-wing National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in Sunday's French elections.

Le Pen, who has been known to make anti-Semitic statements and campaigned on an anti-immigrant platform, received 15 percent of the vote. Le Pen's high scoring was one of a pair of surprises from the first round of national elections in France.

To everyone's surprise, including his own, Lionel Jospin, the Socialist candidate for the French presidency, won Sunday's elections with 23.3 percent of the vote.

As a result of his victory, Jospin will face Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac in the May 7 runoff to replace outgoing Socialist President Francois Mitterrand.

Chirac, the conservative Gaullist Party candidate who was favored to win the first round, came in second, with 20.7 percent of the vote. His fellow conservative, Prime Minister Edouard Balladur, was ousted from the race after finishing third, with 18 percent of the vote.

Another right-wing nationalist, Philippe de Villiers of the Movement for France, won 5 percent of the vote.

Le Pen charged Sunday that French radio stations had attempted to undermine him on election day by "repeating every five minutes that the culprits in the Oklahoma City bombing were from the extreme right."

But after the results came in, Le Pen called his tally "a very great political success."

Although Le Pen has claimed that he is not anti-Semitic, he has made frequent statements in the past denying that the Holocaust took place.

In 1991, an appeals court in Versailles ordered him to pay some \$18,000 for slurring Holocaust victims. As far back as 1968, a Paris court found Le Pen guilty of issuing a recording of Nazi war songs and marches. The record also contained a commentary by Le Pen, who voiced his approval for Nazis accused of committing war crimes.

Although he expressed dismay at Le Pen's strong showing, Jean Kahn, president of CRIF, the umbrella body representing France's secular Jewish organizations, said he did not believe that all those who voted for Le Pen were racists and anti-Semites.

"It was a vote of protest and of despair, protest against the bad economic situation, against the financial scandals in which many political leaders are involved," Kahn said, adding, "After having protested, most of Le Pen's voters will go back to more traditional parties."

The French should not "fool themselves," he said.

"There is a rise of racist feelings here, or rather of xenophobia against immigrants," most of which is directed at Muslims from North Africa, he said.

Kahn noted with some concern that if Le Pen had not had de Villiers as a challenger, he might have emerged second in the first round of elections. "This must give us all a lot of food for thought," Kahn said. □

German foreign minister defends country's ties with Iran in ADL talk

By Steven M. Zeitchik

NEW YORK, April 24 (JTA) — Diverging from current American and Israeli policy, German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel last week defended his country's controversial relationship with Iran.

"We, along with our [European Union] partners, hold the view that isolating important countries in the region does not promote the peace process," said Kinkel

at an Anti-Defamation League luncheon held in his honor. "For this reason, we are continuing to maintain a critical dialogue with Iran, despite all difficulties," he said.

Germany's policy has alarmed Jewish groups, who are concerned by the recent spread of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and suspect that Iran plays a key role in funding these activities.

Kinkel, who received the ADL's Distinguished Statesman Award at the April 19 luncheon, also reaffirmed his country's monetary and political support of the fragile Middle East peace process. "We hope that the peace process, despite all difficulties, will continue to move forward," he said. "From the start, we have supported the process both economically and politically."

He advocated the notion that Germany and the European Union become more intimately involved in the peace efforts, especially in light of allegations that Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat is increasingly losing control over the Palestinian population.

"Arafat thinks everything is in his control," said Kinkel, but "I propose we [Germany and the European Union] send more direct specialists to the region."

Kinkel also addressed the upcoming 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. He acknowledged the "collective shame" many Germans now feel.

Germany must be more vigilant than ever in its attempts to prevent citizens from becoming victims of racial and ethnic bias, he said. "United Germany is aware of the obligations that stem from the past," he said. "Only respect for human dignity, democracy and the rule of law, both internally and externally, can guarantee the peaceful coexistence of people and nations."

ADL National Director Abraham Foxman, in introducing Kinkel, spoke of how the Holocaust has complicated his feelings toward present-day Germany.

"I am in a tug of emotion and reason," said Foxman. "I am a survivor; it is difficult to reconcile that which memory demands and that which fairness dictates," he said, holding back tears.

Kinkel stressed the importance of fostering strong connections between Germany and various Jewish groups.

"It is so important for people who have been shaped by their difficult history," to share their experiences, he said. He cited a German-Israeli student exchange program that attracts thousands of students.

The Distinguished Statesman Award is given by the ADL once every several years at no prescribed time.

Past recipients include Kinkel's predecessor Hans-Deitrich Genscher and former Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

Kinkel was given the award, said the ADL in a press release, because of his "fight against the rise of extremism in Germany." □

Jewish leaders ask Menem for apology

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, April 24 (JTA) — The Simon Wiesenthal Center has written to Argentine President Carlos Menem, asking him to repudiate the age-old Christian claim that the Jews killed Jesus.

The center learned that the Argentine president had read a liturgical text Easter Sunday containing that canard.

In an April 20 letter to Menem, the Wiesenthal Center dean, Rabbi Marvin Hier, and associate dean, Rabbi Abraham Cooper, urged him "to repudiate the charge of deicide, to sanction the staff member who prepared the material." The rabbis wrote that the deicide charge is "baseless" and "has led to the death, suffering and persecution of Jews the world over and continues to serve as a primary source of anti-Semitism till this day." □

French ruling on classes evokes mixed Jewish reaction

By Michel Di Paz

PARIS, April 24 (JTA) — Jewish leaders reacted with mixed views to a recent French court decision that, in effect, enables Jewish pupils to miss Saturday classes in the country's secular schools.

In ruling that school headmasters should have the final say over whether to impose compulsory attendance on Saturdays, the court decision recognized the long-established practice of turning a blind eye to the Saturday absences of religious Jewish pupils.

Some Jewish leaders praised what they perceived as a wise decision, but others said they feared that the case would only serve to create a perception that Jews were different from other French citizens, a perception they said the community had fought long and hard to counter.

The ruling by the Conseil d'Etat came in the wake of a 1991 suit that challenged a decree issued that year which required all French pupils to attend regularly scheduled classes in the country's secular schools.

The suit was brought by the Consistoire Central, the body in charge of protecting the religious needs of the 700,000-member French Jewish community. The case emerged in response to two cases involving Jewish pupils who had sought to avoid attending Saturday classes.

The Consistoire and two religious Jewish organizations felt that the decree infringed on the freedom of religion guaranteed by the French Constitution.

In its ruling, the Conseil d'Etat, France's highest court in charge of resolving disputes between the country's citizens and the government, stated that in both cases the pupils would have to abide by the decisions of their respective schools.

Reacting to the ruling, Jewish leader Jean Kahn, who serves as president of the Consistoire, praised the court's decision.

But others disagreed. "This is really the last thing we needed right now," said an influential member of CRIF, the umbrella body representing France's secular Jewish organizations.

"It took us two centuries to be regarded as no different from any other citizen in this country," said the CRIF member, who asked not to be identified. "Did we really need now to be perceived again as wishing to be ruled by our own laws?"

A similar point was made in an editorial carried by the Jewish weekly Tribune Juive: "The way this legal suit has been handled seems to indicate a will to religiously differentiate [the Jewish community] and take it out of the common law."

Eager to distance themselves

So eager were some in the Jewish community to distance themselves from the appeal that people close to the leadership of the Consistoire were careful to point out that the appeal had not been brought by any of the organization's current leaders.

Before the court rendered its verdict, not one Jewish leader wanted to be quoted about the case — with the sole exception of France's Chief Rabbi Joseph Sitruk.

In a statement, Sitruk wrote: "We do not ask for any specific right for the Jews, but we wish that in each and every case, solutions be found enabling all practicing Jews to assume their double duty toward God and toward the Nation."

"Enabling all Frenchmen to be responsible citizens while remaining faithful to their religious beliefs is the greatness of a democracy," Sitruk wrote.

Magistrate Yann Aguila, who argued against the

appeal the Consistoire brought before the court, stated that issues of religious freedom must be tempered by other overriding imperatives such as serving the public interest and maintaining law and order.

Aguila also maintained that because Jewish pupils have the option of attending Jewish schools, they "cannot complain about the restrictive rulings existing in the state-run schools." Arguing against the imposition of any measure that would undermine the basic laws establishing the country's state-run schools, Aguila concluded his argument by quoting from the Talmud: "Dina dimalchuta, dina." ("The law of the country is your law.")

At a state-run school in Creteil, a suburb of Paris with a large Jewish population, most of the teachers were very critical of the court's decision, the French daily Le Monde reported. "If you agree on Saturdays for the Jews, why not Fridays for the Muslims and Tuesdays for who knows whom?" said a history and geography teacher. □

Israeli Arabs head to Mecca after controversy is resolved

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, April 24 (JTA) — Some 2,700 Israeli Arabs will make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca this week, after a controversy was resolved regarding their travel documents.

The ability of Israeli Arabs to make the pilgrimage, known as the hajj, had been in doubt after Saudi Arabia demanded earlier this month that Israeli Arabs travel under Palestinian travel documents. Israel objected to the Saudi demand, saying that Israeli Arabs as well as Arabs from the West Bank should travel under Jordanian documents, as in previous years.

The head of the local Arab councils in Israel, Sheik Ibrahim Nimer Hussein, said the Saudis agreed to the Israeli request after Saudi officials discussed the matter with the Palestinian leadership in the Gaza Strip.

All Muslims are obligated to make the hajj to the holy city at least once in their lifetimes. This year's hajj ceremonies will culminate during the second week in May.

One source in Israel's Religious Affairs Ministry said the Palestinian Authority was behind the Saudi request, describing it as another attempt by the self-rule government to extend its authority. "We are always living with the Palestinian tricks," the source told the Israeli daily Ha'aretz. "They are always trying to 'annex' Israel."

Earlier this week, Israel prevented nearly 100 Palestinians from Gaza from departing for Egypt to make the hajj because they had links to the Hamas and Islamic Jihad fundamentalist movements, which are militantly opposed to the peace process.

Earlier this month, Israel seized about 4,000 Palestinian passports issued by the Palestinian Authority to West Bank Palestinians. Israel said at the time that Palestinian passports could only be issued to residents of the Palestinian self-rule zones.

This week, a spokesman for the Religious Affairs Ministry said that at the last minute, Saudi Arabia also cut the combined quota of pilgrims traveling to Saudi Arabia from Israel, the West Bank and the Palestinian self-rule zones from 15,000 to 10,000 people.

He said the cut was an attempt to put Israel "in the situation where it has to prevent people who planned to go on hajj from going."

Meanwhile, the first group of Palestinians left Gaza last week for Mecca, traveling on Palestinian travel documents. Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat, who was on hand to see off the group of about 700 pilgrims, said he was pleased to see Palestinians making the hajj for the first time on Palestinian passports. □