

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israel's domestic security service admitted that it had been told in advance of a plot to carry out the Rabin assassination, but had been unable to locate the potential suspect. The head of the Shin Bet said at the weekly Cabinet meeting that the information provided in advance about the assassination was too general. [Page 1]

■ Leah Rabin addressed some 250,000 people gathered at Tel Aviv's Malchei Yisrael Square, the site of last week's assassination of her husband. During the memorial rally, which took place amid tight security, the area was officially renamed Yitzhak Rabin Square. [Page 2]

■ A Brooklyn rabbi who said Jewish law permitted the Rabin assassination was publicly isolated by his congregation for his remarks. But, contrary to previous news reports here and in Israel, Rabbi Abraham Hecht has not been fired. [Page 3]

■ Israel's Supreme Court ruled that the state must recognize Reform conversions to Judaism. The 6-1 ruling only applies to recognition by the state, and does not compel the chief rabbinate, which has exclusive control over marriages, divorces and conversions, to recognize the Reform conversions.

■ A German law firm said it would represent former SS Capt. Erich Priebke for free when he goes to trial on war crimes charges in Italy. "We are not Nazis," said one of the firm's attorney's. "We do this because this might be the last case involving Germans in relation to the war." [Page 4]

■ Congress has delayed voting on controversial legislation that would ban lobbying by not-for-profit organizations, including Jewish agencies. House Speaker Newt Gingrich pledged that he would make it a top priority in the coming weeks.

■ A stamp commemorating the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin will be issued a month after his death. Israel's Postal Authority said the stamp would bear Rabin's official photograph and will be issued in a 5-shekel denomination.

Shin Bet admits to lapses in assassination of Rabin

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Compounding the apparent security lapses that made the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin possible, the Shin Bet admitted this week that it had been told in advance of a plot to carry out the killing, but had been unable to locate the potential suspect.

The disclosure was the latest blow to Israel's domestic security service, which came under harsh criticism in the wake of an internal report targeting security lapses that made it possible for the assassin to get within point-blank shooting distance of Rabin at a Nov. 4 peace rally.

The head of the Shin Bet, identified only as "C." for security reasons, said at Sunday's weekly Cabinet meeting that the information provided in advance about the assassination was too general.

He added that Shin Bet officials had received dozens of reports about possible assassination plans.

The Shin Bet head reportedly offered to resign, but was asked to stay on by Acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who said he should remain until a state commission of inquiry issued its findings.

Peres expressed his full confidence in the Shin Bet, particularly the division charged with protecting dignitaries. However, the head of that division was one of several Shin Bet officials who resigned in the wake of the assassination.

Peres also called on the Cabinet to refrain from issuing public criticisms of the Shin Bet's operations.

The Cabinet voted last week to establish a state commission of inquiry into the assassination.

The three members of the commission — former Supreme Court President Meir Shamgar; Reserve Maj. Gen. Zvi Zamir, a former head of the Mossad; and Professor Ariel Rosen-Zvi, dean of the faculty of law at Tel Aviv University — met for the first time last Friday.

The committee agreed to meet four days a week until it issued its findings.

Advance information about the assassination was conveyed to police last June, according to Israel Radio.

The informant was identified as Shlomo Halevy, a Jerusalem resident who studied law at Bar-Ilan University with the 25-year-old confessed assassin, Yigal Amir.

Israel Television reported that Halevy learned of Amir's plans from another friend and then contacted a police officer who was his former commanding officer in the army.

Halevy gave a description of the person, but not his name. Halevy's lawyer said this week that his client did not want to name Amir, in case the information was not accurate.

The revelation took place as Israeli authorities continued rounding up suspects in connection with the assassination.

Seven suspects in custody

Although Amir said he acted alone, police are pursuing the possibility that the killing of Rabin was the work of a group of right-wing conspirators.

A soldier serving in an elite combat unit was arrested last Friday on suspicion of supplying arms to Yigal Amir and his brother Hagai, who was also arrested in connection with the murder. The soldier, identified as Arik Schwartz of the religious community Bnei Brak near Tel Aviv, was arrested after weapons were found during a search of his home.

His father was also detained for allegedly knowing of his son's activities, but was later released. Schwartz's mother was also questioned.

Schwartz was the seventh suspect taken into custody. All the suspects were religious Jews identified with extremist right-wing groups militantly opposed to Rabin's land-for-peace policy with the Palestinians.

Police Minister Moshe Shahal said in an interview on Israel Television last Friday that the ongoing investigation had two tracks: one into the specific activities of Yigal Amir, and the other into the right-wing extremist group, Ayal, to which he allegedly belonged.

Amir reportedly plotted the assassination for months with his older

brother Hagai, 27. They had planned eight previous assassination attempts, initially planning to kill Rabin outside his home in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Aviv, using a sniper's rifle, Israel Radio reported.

Hagai Amir, who was brought before a Tel Aviv court on Sunday, had his custody extended by an additional 12 days.

Among other offenses, Hagai Amir is suspected of attempted murder and illegal possession of arms.

He said in court that he had nothing to do with his brother's actions, and that his brother "was not crazy. He's mature and knew exactly what he was doing."

But Judge Dan Arbel rejected the idea that Yigal Amir acted alone, adding that evidence had been found of plans to commit other acts of violence, including car bomb attacks.

Last week, police found a cache of arms and explosives at the Amir home.

"Previous assassination attempts and car bombs planned by others lead us to believe there was a conspiracy and an organization," the judge said. "This was not done by one man."

In a related development, security officials reportedly located two rabbis who had given religious justification for killing the prime minister.

Israel Television identified them as Rabbi Nahum Rabinovich of Ma'aleh Adumim and Rabbi Dov Lior of Kiryat Arba. Both men denied the reports.

Israel's Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau said it was up to law enforcement officials to determine whether the reports were true.

But if they were true, Lau added, the rabbinate would convene a special committee to consider the spiritual and moral implications of the rabbis' actions.

After his arrest, Yigal Amir said he had acted on God's orders, because Rabin was giving away Jewish land to the Arabs. He reportedly consulted with a rabbi before carrying out the assassination. □

At site of Rabin's assassination, 250,000 memorialize slain leader

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Amid tight security measures, an estimated 250,000 Israelis attended a memorial ceremony Sunday at the Tel Aviv square where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated a week earlier.

At the ceremony, held after the completion of the seven-day mourning period for Rabin, the city of Tel Aviv renamed the site "Yitzhak Rabin Square."

Rabin's widow, Leah, was the only speaker at the event.

Acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who attended the ceremony despite warnings from security officials to stay away, sat far back on the stage, away from the crowd.

In her remarks, Leah Rabin thanked the nation, in particular its youth, for the outpouring of support voiced in the wake of the Nov. 4 assassination.

Addressing the gathering from the same spot from which her husband addressed a peace rally the week before, Leah Rabin said the utmost tribute to him would be the continuation of the peace process.

She called on Peres to continue the work of her late husband.

"I appeal to you, Shimon Peres, to continue to guide the Israeli nation to peace in the path and spirit of Yitzhak," she said.

Rabin, who in the days after the assassination said supporters of her husband's peace policies had not been vocal enough in rejecting the often harsh rhetoric of his critics, returned to the same theme at Sunday's rally.

The late prime minister's supporters, she said, had left him "alone in the turret" even in the face of "the writing on the wall, insults and terrible hatred" directed at his peace policies by members of the extreme right.

But, she added, "now the silent majority will be silent no longer."

Support for the peace process grew dramatically in the wake of the assassination.

According to a poll published last Friday by the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot, 74 percent of Israelis favored a continuation of the peace process with the Palestinians, while 23 percent opposed it.

A similar poll published Sept. 28 indicated that the two camps were in a statistical dead heat.

Aerial television pictures of Sunday's rally showed a mass of people crowded into the square.

A sign saying "Shalom, Chaver," or "Goodbye, Friend" — words used by President Clinton in the aftermath of the assassination — stood atop a large picture of the slain Israeli leader.

The picture, bordered by Israeli flags, hung near the spot at which the late prime minister had addressed 100,000 peace supporters a week before.

Strict measures were taken to secure Sunday's event. Some 2,000 police and other security personnel were on hand; roads were closed off to traffic in the surrounding area.

Israel Television carried pictures of police detaining a bearded man wearing a baseball cap who was walking around behind the stage without the required permits to be there. The man was carrying a briefcase, which he told police contained pens.

Earlier in the day, a brief, private ceremony was held at the late leader's graveside at Mount Herzl Cemetery in Jerusalem.

The memorial was attended by members of the Rabin family, close friends, members of the Cabinet and army, and other public officials.

After the brief service, during which Kaddish was read, the family members filed past the grave, which was covered by mounds of flowers left by those who visited during the week.

Hundreds of memorial candles at the grave flickered in the cold Jerusalem air.

Among other items left at the grave by mourning Israelis were an olive tree sapling as well as a tennis racket and two canisters of balls — a tribute to the late prime minister's love of the sport. □

Germany, Israel to research cells

By Miriam Widman

BERLIN (JTA) — Germany's largest bank has agreed to provide \$1.8 million for a joint medical research project between the Hadassah Medical Organization in Jerusalem and the Georg-Speyer-Haus in Frankfurt.

The German-Israeli undertaking, funded by Deutsche Bank, will focus on the investigation of specific leukemia and virus-infected cells.

The goal is to develop new medications and methods to inject them into infected cells.

In a statement, German bank officials said, "The possibility to promote a closer relationship between Germany and Israel via a scientific cooperation made this project for the Deutsche Bank particularly attractive."

The Hadassah Medical Organization is one of the leading medical institutes in Israel.

The Georg-Speyer-Haus became internationally known because of Paul Ehrlich, a bacteriologist and the center's first director. Ehrlich, a Jew, developed the first effective medicine against syphilis. □

Congregation moves to isolate rabbi who called for Rabin's death

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Brooklyn rabbi who said Jewish law permitted the assassination of the Israeli prime minister for giving up land for peace has been publicly isolated by his congregation for his remarks.

But, contrary to previous press reports here and in Israel, Rabbi Abraham Hecht has not been fired from Congregation Shaare Zion.

However, there are conflicting reports over whether the congregation is looking for a way to force Hecht to retire.

The controversy surrounding Hecht continued as reports surfaced in Israel that rabbis there had issued similar edicts against Rabin.

Late last week, congregation leaders presented a letter to the Israeli Consulate in New York, saying that the statements uttered by Hecht were "his own personal views and not those of Congregation Shaare Zion."

"We reject all messages of hate and condemn all acts of violence," said the letter, which was addressed to Acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres and signed by Morris Franco, the congregation's president.

But Franco, in an interview, dismissed as baseless the widespread reports that Hecht had been ousted.

"I deny everything regarding Rabbi Hecht's dismissal from the synagogue at the present time," said Franco.

At the same time he refused to discuss what course the synagogue might next pursue with Hecht.

With regard to "what happens in the future," he said, "I have no idea."

One source close to the community who declined to be identified said the congregation was looking for a way to force Hecht to retire.

'My father is not a Khomeini'

Rabbi Hecht, who is in Florida, could not be reached for comment. But his son, Rabbi Yehoshua Hecht, said his father's character was being assassinated and he had become an easy target for all the "anger, chagrin and pain" of the Rabin assassination.

"My father is not a Khomeini," he said, referring to one of the epithets that have been directed at the senior Hecht.

"He is a prince of a man. He has always had the interest of the Jewish people and the state of Israel foremost in his mind."

Hecht's son said congregation members remained loyal to his father. He said their written repudiation of his remarks was a function of their coming under widespread attack with "their beloved rabbi out of town on vacation."

"They are truly like a ship without a rudder," he said.

Going to the consulate was "a knee-jerk impulse" to show that "they don't condone violence," he said.

Hecht made headlines in June when he said at a news conference that by conceding land for peace, Israeli leaders fall into the category of "moser," or people who betray Jews to gentiles.

According to Maimonides, Hecht said, such people not only deserve the death penalty, but should be killed before they can perform the deed.

In late October, Hecht, the president of the Rabbinical Alliance of America, penned a letter to Rabin expressing regret for his earlier statements. The alliance is a group of a few hundred fervently Orthodox rabbis.

Jews "must speak and act toward each other as we would toward God," he wrote. "For my part, I wish to

repudiate any words and actions of anger and which have caused hurt."

According to an open letter from Hecht to his congregation after the assassination, Rabin had read the letter and "expressed his satisfaction and acceptance and my apology to those present."

In the letter to Shaare Zion, Hecht went on to say, "my remarks have been twisted and misconstrued and I have been quoted totally out of context."

Nonetheless, he said, "I wish to publicly apologize to my community for causing any unintentional aggravation and pain that I may have caused them."

Ambassador Colette Avital, Israeli consul general in New York, said she welcomed the apology at the time that it was issued. In the wake of the assassination, however, she has singled out Hecht and others who used violent rhetoric for creating a climate of intolerance and hatred that made the killing possible.

The New York Board of Rabbis, with 800 mostly non-Orthodox members, issued a similar condemnation of the harsh rhetoric.

"We believe that the recent level of vilification and demonization of Israel's leaders by some Israelis and American Jews helped prepare the atmosphere for Israel's tragic loss. The vituperative rhetoric has been outrageous and unacceptable and violation of Jewish norms."

In a statement issued by the RAA, Hecht was quoted as saying, "I quoted Jewish law as codified in Maimonides that conveys the seriousness of taking action that endangers human life. I never said nor meant that [the] Maimonides ruling was to be applied, heaven forbid, against Rabin or any other person." □

More Chernobyl children arrive

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A group of 21 Jewish children from areas contaminated by the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident have arrived in Israel.

The recent flight was the 20th to land in Israel as part of the Children of Chernobyl Project, a humanitarian effort organized by the Chabad-Lubavitch Chasidic movement.

Since the project's inception in August 1990, 1,250 children have been brought to Israel from cities in the former Soviet Union where the highest rates of cancer have been documented in connection with radiation exposure.

The children live and go to school in a Chabad village south of Tel Aviv, where they receive intensive medical evaluation and treatment. They are reunited with their families within two to three years. □

IDF to have burgers their way

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli soldiers will soon be able to snack on Whoppers at a number of kosher restaurants Burger King plans to open at army bases, the fast-food chain said.

Burger King said it reached an agreement with Shekem, the state-owned retailer that has a monopoly on army canteens.

The first restaurant is scheduled to open Dec. 17 at a base in Ramat Gan, near Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, McDonald's, which recently opened a kosher branch here, has agreed to remove its trademark golden arches from outside one of its restaurants.

Some Israelis had complained that the arches and the restaurant, located next to a memorial for soldiers, was symbolic of rampant Americanization. Others had said the restaurant location diminished the memorial. □

German law firm to represent former SS officer at trial in Italy*By Sergio Kiernan*

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — A German law firm has decided to represent former SS Capt. Erich Priebke for free when he goes to trial on war crimes charges in Italy.

Heinrich Wirtz, a partner in the Berlin firm of Anwaltsburo Andreas Schultz, arrived last week in the Andean resort town of San Carlos di Bariloche, where Priebke awaits extradition to Italy.

"We think Mr. Priebke is innocent," said Wirtz, who added, "We shall help him free of charge as a matter of humanity."

"We are not Nazis," Wirtz said. "We do this because this might be the last case involving Germans in relation to the war." Wirtz added that Priebke had contacted the Berlin law firm on the "recommendation of his many friends in Berlin."

Sergio Widder, representative of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Argentina, said he was surprised by these developments. "We don't know who these people are," he said, adding that he could not say "who is behind this unexpected help to a Nazi war criminal."

Priebke could be flown to Rome from Argentina before the end of the month to face what is expected to be an emotional and painful trial before a military tribunal.

Tullia Zevi, president of the Union of Italian Jewish communities, said the extradition would be "positive for the image of both Italy, which seeks justice for its victims, and for Argentina, which in the past showed too much tolerance in accepting and supporting tens, if not hundreds, of Nazis and escaping fascists."

Argentina's Supreme Court ruled Nov. 2 that Priebke be extradited to Italy to stand trial for his involvement in the 1944 massacre of 335 Romans — 75 of them Jewish — at the Ardeatine Caves south of Rome.

The massacre, which was ordered in reprisal for the killing by partisans of 33 German soldiers, is regarded as the worst war crime committed on Italian soil.

The Argentine Supreme Court decision overturned an appeals court ruling three months ago refusing extradition.

'State of depression'

Legal disputes delayed the formal ruling to extradite Priebke for more than a year.

Priebke was unmasked in May 1994 by an ABC-TV news team in Bariloche. He has lived openly in the town under his own name since 1948.

Priebke, who has been under house arrest in Argentina since May 9, is awaiting the arrival of an Italian police unit that will accompany him to Italy.

According to local reports, Priebke's health is deteriorating. His doctor maintained that he fell into a state of depression in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling, adding that Priebke has high blood pressure and is suffering from senility.

But Argentine Justice Minister Rodolfo Barra, who was in Italy last week to meet with Italian officials about Priebke's case, dismissed reports that Priebke was too ill to be extradited. Barra said in Rome on Nov. 6 that Priebke's extradition would take place "within two weeks."

Barra added that it would be "very difficult" for Priebke's lawyers to block the extradition.

Italian officials welcomed the Argentine court's ruling to extradite Priebke. Argentina has "recognized Italy's right to have the chance to put on trial a person who took part in one of the worst human tragedies," former Justice Minister Giovanni Conso told Italian radio.

Conso signed an international arrest warrant for

Priebke 17 months ago. He said the trial — expected to be one of Italy's most emotional — "will be a day of light for justice, a day of sunlight."

Priebke has admitted taking part in the massacre, but said he was just following orders and would have been killed himself if he had refused to participate. □

(JTA correspondent Ruth E. Gruber in Rome contributed to this report.)

Jewish groups press Congress to enact laws curtailing militias*By Daniel Kurtzman*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish groups have called on Congress to enact legislation that would criminalize paramilitary training by anti-government militia groups and give law enforcement authorities more tools to confront domestic terrorism.

"Congress must take steps to ensure that the American criminal justice system is better equipped to counter a new level of sophistication and danger posed by terrorist groups," Michael Lieberman, Washington counsel for the Anti-Defamation League, testified before a recent hearing of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime.

Also testifying on the dangers posed by groups that espouse anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories and an overthrow of the federal government were representatives of the the American Jewish Committee and the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Jewish groups have expressed support for legislation sponsored by Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) that would make it a crime not only to conduct but to participate in paramilitary training; make it easier for federal authorities to go after private armies by making criminal civil rights violations a federal offense; and extend protections under civil disorder statutes to all public officers and employees, not just law enforcement officials.

The measure is based on model legislation developed by the ADL, which is now law in 24 states.

"This legislation addresses a real problem in a reasonable and effective way," Nadler said. "It targets overt, violent activity, not ideas, speech, assembly or the right to petition the government for redress."

Militias are believed to operate in more than 30 states. Many harbor anti-Semitic and racist views.

A number of those in Congress oppose such legislation, saying that it would grant the federal government too much authority and curtail individual freedoms.

After listening to Jewish representatives and others testify, Rep. Bob Barr (R-Ga.) said he was "flabbergasted" to hear them "dealing so cavalierly" with civil liberties. He said it was "strange" that so many people are in "such a pell-mell rush to outlaw more activity, to cut off people from doing things" that are disagreeable, "given the fact that we already have very, very extensive criminal laws in this country that do protect us against acts of violence or conspiracy to commit acts of violence."

Kenneth Stern, the AJCommittee's program specialist on anti-Semitism and extremism, said Jewish groups retain "very strong respect for civil liberties and the First Amendment" when opinions are expressed through acceptable channels — but not through the formation of armed units that endanger lives. The real threat to free speech, Stern told the committee, is the atmosphere of fear that armed "thugs" create, which "makes people afraid to speak their minds" and confront them.

In a related move, Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) has launched a campaign to force the House of Representatives to vote on anti-terrorism legislation with a back-door procedural move that requires the support of 218 lawmakers. □