



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The Jewish Agency's effort to rescue Jews from the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya is in its "last stage," with the remaining Jews expected to leave for Israel shortly. Meanwhile, the Agency's next mission in the former Soviet Union is to rescue the Jews of Abkhazia in Georgia. [Page 4]

■ Israel's High Court of Justice ordered the religious councils of three cities to include non-Orthodox members. The ruling reaffirmed the court's 1994 decision that local religious councils cannot bar candidates from non-Orthodox denominations solely on the basis of their religious affiliation. [Page 4]

■ Palestinian security officials arrested a Palestinian human rights activist who criticized Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat. The detained man, who holds Israeli citizenship, is a researcher for the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem. [Page 2]

■ Women's groups have joined with rabbis to oppose a proposed law to legalize surrogate motherhood in Israel. Hundreds of infertile Israeli couples see surrogacy as the only hope of having a child. [Page 3]

■ U.S. embassies and consulates worldwide will run out of money Thursday to pay non-American employees unless a budget agreement is reached in Washington. Under Israeli law, the U.S. government will have to pay upward of a 10 percent penalty — one of the highest levied under foreign law — for not paying its hundreds of Israeli employees in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem on time.

■ Palestinians protested in Ramallah against the low number of women running for the 88-member Palestinian Council. One of the demonstrators was human rights activist Hanan Ashrawi, who said a dozen women were among the some 700 Palestinians registered as candidates.

■ The German government reportedly declared Jan. 27 a national day of remembrance for the victims of Nazi terror. The day was chosen to mark the Jan. 27, 1945, liberation of Auschwitz.

NEWS ANALYSIS

First Palestinian elections test Arafat's promise of democracy

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It is going to be the best show of democracy the Arab world has ever known.

But in the best tradition of the Arab Middle East, there will be few surprises in the voting: The results are more or less already known.

On Jan. 20, as many as 1.2 million Palestinians will elect leaders for the first time in their troubled history.

Although the official campaigning began only this week, the political competition has been in the air for the past few weeks.

Contrary to earlier fears, the campaigning has so far proceeded without bloodshed or bitter clashes, as if democracy has always been the name of the Palestinian political game.

In recent weeks, candidates for the Palestinian Council have filled the newspapers with their photos, seeking the support of the voters.

Suddenly, faces from the intifada — the bitter 1987-1993 uprising against Israeli administration of the territories — have surfaced from deep underground to announce that they are part of the legitimate Palestinian political scene.

Some 3,000 international supervisors, led by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, are likely to encounter an election in which the rules of the game are generally played fairly — right down to the computerized ballots that were provided with the compliments of the government of Japan.

But "generally" is a key qualifier, given the fact that the international observers have already criticized Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat for making moves aimed at stacking the voting in his favor.

Palestinian voters will make two choices on election day.

They will elect candidates to serve on the 88-member Palestinian Council, the legislative body that will represent 16 electoral districts in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

They will also elect the president of the Palestinian Authority, who, along with being the 89th member of the council, will have executive authority over the body.

The only challenger to Arafat for the presidency is Samiha Khalil, 72, a social activist from Ramallah who is expected to receive at best several thousand votes in her West Bank hometown.

Fatah circulating list of recommendations

Unlike elections in the West, the candidates for the Palestinian Council will only nominally run on their own personal merits.

Instead, support for their candidacies will be based largely on backing by Arafat's mainstream Al Fatah establishment or on the support of the large clans — known as "hamulas" — in each of the 16 districts.

While the candidates for the council will appear on the ballot as individuals, with no party affiliation, Fatah is circulating its own list of recommendations of who should be elected. The list was created as a result of primaries already held.

But Arafat is maintaining strict control over Fatah's lists down to the last candidate.

And in some cases, he has intervened to remove some candidates from the recommended list.

Some candidates who were out of favor declared last week that they would run independently.

But Fatah immediately countered that anyone who did so would no longer be allowed to return to the Fatah ranks.

Meanwhile, Fatah's main opponent, the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas movement, has decided to stay out of the elections, though it announced that it would not boycott them.

Fatah and Hamas representatives met last week in Cairo in an attempt to reach an agreement on the elections.

Although no agreement was reached at the time, the very fact that Hamas said it would not boycott the elections was regarded as yet another

victory for Arafat, because it reflected a recognition by his strongest opposition that the elections were legitimate.

In addition, several Hamas members announced in the past few days that they would run as independents.

Those announcements prompted some Hamas leaders to brand them as traitors to the cause.

In an apparent bow to those pressures, three of the candidates withdrew their names during the course of the week.

Other Palestinian groups opposed to the peace process have also opted out of the elections, leaving a situation in which the only competition to Fatah will come from Communists and eight other insignificant splinter groups — none of whom are expected to gather a significant portion of the vote.

Arafat's critics say that he and the Fatah leadership are using strong-arm tactics to rule the streets and the polls.

"In Tulkarm, there is no political competition," said candidate Dr. Thabet Thabet.

"There are 40 candidates — all Fatah candidates," he added.

One of the more striking phenomena in Fatah's pre-election strategy is the absence of the young leaders of the intifada from the candidate lists.

The youths who had carried the uprising on their shoulders, organizing mass demonstrations and waging stone-throwing wars against the Israelis — and serving prison sentences for their efforts — have suddenly found themselves displaced by older Fatah activists known for their close ties with members of Arafat's governing establishment.

These frustrated activists will remain in the autonomous areas after the elections — and they may pose a threat to the new Palestinian leaders.

Some intifada leaders, such as Hatem Id of the Shuafat refugee camp in Jerusalem, have decided to run as independents.

Id, who served long prison sentences for his involvement in the intifada, won most of the votes in one of the Fatah primaries in eastern Jerusalem.

But Arafat removed him from the Fatah list, forcing him to run independently.

Najib Abu-Rakia, an Israeli Arab who is an activist with the Meretz Party, was sharply critical of the treatment received by the former leaders of the intifada.

"What's happening now in the West Bank is a disgrace," he said. "What kind of a parliament are they electing?"

Israel is well aware that if the Palestinian Council does not give the people a sense of true representation, it will ultimately work against the very interests of the Palestinian autonomy — and of Israel as well.

But Israel has no choice.

It must be a bystander as the Palestinian elections proceed.

The show must go on, and Arafat is running it. And the Israelis know that there is no one who can do it better. □

Palestinian security seizes Israeli Arab critical of Arafat

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Palestinian human rights activist who had claimed that Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat committed human rights violations was seized this week by Palestinian security officials.

Both Israelis and Palestinians criticized the arrest and called for the immediate release of Bassam Eid, a researcher for the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem.

Human rights activists said Eid, a resident of eastern Jerusalem with Israeli citizenship, was taken late Tuesday from his home.

The security officials were reported to be holding Eid in the West Bank town of Ramallah, which Israel transferred to Palestinian rule Dec. 27 under the terms of an accord for expanding West Bank autonomy.

Eid was reportedly being held by members of Force 17, one of several security bodies operating under the Palestinian Authority.

Citing Eid's Israeli citizenship, members of the Labor Party appealed to Prime Minister Shimon Peres to demand that Arafat order his immediate release.

The Israeli peace group Peace Now also denounced the detention.

"The arrest of a human rights worker who has earned the respect of people who support peace and oppose the occupation harms the peace process and the trust between the two nations," Peace Now said Wednesday in a statement.

Faisal Hussein, the top Palestinian official in eastern Jerusalem, and Palestinian human rights activist Hanan Ashrawi also denounced the arrest.

"I don't know why they arrested Bassam Eid, but if it is illegal then we oppose it," Hussein told Israel Radio.

Izhar Be'er, the director of B'Tselem, spoke to Eid by telephone the morning after his arrest.

"He said a Palestinian police officer came to his home at 11 p.m. in East Jerusalem and asked him to accompany him for questioning.

"His wife called me this morning and said he was under arrest," Be'er said.

He added that because Eid was an Israeli citizen, the arrest was illegal under the terms of the accords reached between Israel and the PLO.

The agreements bar the Palestinian Authority from making arrests in eastern Jerusalem and other areas not under Palestinian autonomy.

Eid recently spoke out against the arrest of Palestinian newspaper editor Maher Al-Alami, who had refused to publish a story about Arafat on the front page. Alami was released after six days.

In August, Palestinian security officials threatened Eid after he helped write a report citing instances of torture by Palestinian troops.

There was no official comment from the Palestinian Authority about Eid's arrest. □

Israel to seek drug dealers in India

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has disclosed that a unit of undercover Israeli police will head to India to search for Israeli drug dealers.

The announcement came last week amid widespread Israeli media reports about mass drug use and sales by Israelis in India, the destination of thousands of young Israelis each year.

During the winter, thousands flock to the beaches of Goa, in southern India, for massive parties where drugs, some bought from Israelis, are heavily used, according to the reports.

The largest of these parties apparently is the one held New Year's Eve.

In addition, because of a lack of interest, a flight was canceled that would have taken concerned parents to India to search for their traveling children, it was reported.

The Foreign Ministry said that since the media reports, there has not been a dramatic increase in the number of inquiries from concerned parents. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Women's groups join rabbis to oppose legalizing surrogacy

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A proposed law to legalize surrogate motherhood in Israel is at the center of a debate between those who want to satisfy the desires of infertile couples and those, such as women's groups and some rabbis, who oppose the very notion of surrogacy.

For the hundreds of infertile Israeli couples that see surrogacy as the only hope for having a child, the issue is clear: The proposed law, which just passed the first of three required readings in the Knesset and is now being debated, must not place "unreasonable" limitations on the couple or the surrogate mother.

For others, including women's rights activists and the rabbinical establishment, the issue is equally clear-cut.

Women's groups charge that surrogacy violates the surrogate mother's civil rights by turning her into a "womb for hire."

Rabbis, including Yehuda Amital, whom Prime Minister Shimon Peres recently appointed to the Cabinet as a minister without portfolio, believe that the bill, as drafted, violates Jewish law.

If the surrogacy bill becomes law, Israel will become the second country to legalize surrogacy, following in the footsteps of England.

Some U.S. states have also passed surrogacy legislation.

While the debate rages inside and outside the Knesset, no one can deny that Israel is already at the forefront of fertility technology.

However, even though tens of thousands of infertile Israeli couples benefit from in vitro fertilization and other standard fertility techniques, thousands more never conceive.

Some, mostly well-to-do and younger than 40, are able to adopt either in Israel or overseas.

Until now, many had no other options.

'Our flesh and blood'

About 50 infertile couples petitioned the High Court of Justice more than a year ago, arguing that the regulations banning surrogacy were illegal because they violated their civil rights.

Fearful of media attention, only one of the petitioners agreed to be interviewed, provided that her name was not published.

"We have been married for almost eight years, and we can't have children," said the 39-year-old woman. "My husband is 44 and we're considered too old to adopt a child."

"We've heard of cases where a couple adopts a child and then, without warning, the adoption is canceled," she said. "We want a child to be a part of us, at least partly our flesh and blood. There are many people like us. We just want to be parents."

The High Court agreed with the petitioners, ruling that the regulations would be abolished Dec. 31, 1995.

The court ordered the Knesset to come up with a law that would regulate every aspect of surrogacy, from the issue of payment to the mother to the identity of sperm donors.

Although the new law was to go into effect Monday, to coincide with the abolishment of the anti-surrogacy legislation, it is still tied up in the Knesset.

To prevent the unregulated practice of surrogacy until the bill is approved, the High Court has given the Knesset until March 7 to finalize a new law.

Should the Knesset pass the surrogacy bill in its

current form — a virtual impossibility, given the opposition — surrogacy would be a relatively simple procedure.

Even so, there would be several preconditions.

The couple must first be approved by a special committee composed of three physicians, a lawyer, a clinical psychologist, a social worker and a member of the clergy.

Although the bill stipulates that only one of the "commissioning" parents donate sperm or ova (eggs), it forbids the surrogate mother from donating ova. It also stipulates that the surrogate be an Israeli resident, single and unrelated to the couple.

The proposal would also regulate monthly payments to the surrogate mother in order to cover her expenses and compensate her for loss of time and income. Those attempting to circumvent the system could face a year in prison.

While acknowledging the anguish felt by infertile couples, women's groups are solidly opposed to the surrogacy bill.

"We think that a surrogacy contract constitutes a womb-for-hire agreement," said Orit Sulitzeanu, spokeswoman for the Israel Women's Network. "In some ways it is similar to prostitution, even to slavery. In a modern, enlightened society, a woman should not be paid to carry someone else's baby."

In the network's view, surrogacy robs the surrogate of basic rights. "During pregnancy, a surrogate mother is not totally autonomous," Sulitzeanu said. "She doesn't have the right to make decisions about her own life and her own body. She must obey other people's demands because she has signed a contract."

The Network, Na'amat and other women's groups also argue that in England and those American states that permit surrogacy, women who become surrogate mothers often do so out of desperation. "This kind of contract attracts the poorest women, just like prostitution. Surrogate motherhood turns the status of women back 100 years," Sulitzeanu said.

"A much better solution," she added, "would be to create a better, more efficient system of adoption."

Although their reasons for opposing the bill differ from those of women's groups, rabbinical authorities would also like to block, or at least amend, the bill.

Sperm donations from strangers

"In the bill's original version, either the eggs or sperm may be donated by a stranger," said Avraham Avishai, spokesman for Rabbi Yehuda Amital.

Avishai added: "We have proposed a second version requiring the sperm to be donated from the commissioning father."

Permitting sperm donations from strangers — for example, through a sperm bank — "could lead to problems of incest as well as to genetic and health problems," Avishai said. "At the very least, there needs to be a system of checks and balances, a way to prevent a brother from marrying a sister while at the same time ensuring privacy for everyone involved."

But Erica Hirschmann, a lawyer representing several infertile couples, believes that a law requiring the commissioning man to provide his own sperm "will rule out surrogacy for couples where the male is infertile."

Should Amital's version pass, she said, "it could erode the religious status quo since sperm bank donations are already acceptable in cases of in vitro fertilization."

Hirschmann charges that the new law, even in its original draft form, "is too restrictive."

"My clients don't think an official law is necessary," she said. "As it is, the law limits those who can be surrogate mothers, and the price will be too high." □

Court orders religious councils in 3 cities to admit non-Orthodox

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's High Court of Justice this week reaffirmed an earlier ruling that local religious councils cannot bar candidates from non-Orthodox denominations solely on the basis of their religious affiliation.

The court ordered Monday that a Reform and a Conservative Jew must be two of the Haifa City Council's candidates for the city's religious council.

The court also ruled that the city councils of Jerusalem and of the northern community of Kiryat Tivon must reconsider their lists of religious council candidates because of their refusal to approve Reform and Conservative candidates.

Rabbi Uri Regev, the director of the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center, who represented the petitioners before the court, said the decision was "another significant defeat" to the "Orthodox monopoly" over religious life in Israel.

In January 1994, the court ruled that candidates for religious councils may not be barred on the basis of their affiliation with non-Orthodox Jewish movements.

The local religious councils, supervised by the Religious Affairs Ministry, have exclusive jurisdiction over marriage, kashrut, burial and other religious matters for all Jews living in Israel.

The services provided by the councils are rendered according to Orthodox practice regardless of the affiliation or religious customs of the individual receiving the service.

Forty-five percent of each religious council is appointed by the local municipal council, with another 45 percent appointed by the religious affairs minister and 10 percent by the local rabbinate.

The religious councils of Haifa, Kiryat Tivon and Jerusalem had rejected the Reform and Conservative candidates proposed by the Meretz Party, prompting the left-wing, secularist movement to petition the court.

Meretz charged that its candidates had been disqualified solely because of their religious affiliation.

In the case of Haifa, the justices said that because all the council members had praised the Meretz candidates on a personal level, they had no choice but to conclude that the candidates were disqualified because of their religious affiliation.

The court ordered that the two candidates be appointed to the council.

In the cases involving Jerusalem and Kiryat Tivon, the court ordered the city councils to discuss the qualifications of the Meretz candidates and to vote again on the candidates within two months. □

Jewish Agency concluding rescue mission in Chechnya

By Alissa Kaplan

NEW YORK (JTA) — The effort to rescue Jews from the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya is in its "last stage," said Chaim Chesler, head of the Jewish Agency for Israel's office in the former Soviet Union.

About 40 Chechen Jews remain in the Jewish Agency's refugee camp in P'atigorsk in the region, Chesler said in a telephone interview Tuesday from Moscow.

Another 100 Chechen Jews are with family members in other former Soviet republics, he said.

"I believe that in the next couple of weeks all of them will leave for Israel," he said of those who fled because of the ongoing war between Russia and Chechnya that began in late 1994.

In 1995, some 200 Chechen Jews went to Israel under the auspices of the Jewish Agency, many of them settling in Ashdod and Ashkelon, Chesler said.

Among the recent Chechen immigrants was the oldest immigrant in Israel's history — a 110-year-old Chechen woman.

Tzipora Mataiyeva, who was born in April 1885 in Chechnya, reportedly arrived last month in Israel with her 74-year-old son.

As the violence in the region continues, Chesler said, he expects the approximately 20 Jewish families remaining in Chechnya to leave soon as well.

Chechnya has some of the harshest living conditions of the former Soviet Union, with no running water, gas or electricity, Chesler said.

The Agency's next mission in the area is to "rescue the Jews" of Abkhazia, which declared independence from the Soviet republic of Georgia after a 1993 civil war, he said.

Between 800 and 1,000 Jews live there, Chesler said.

Living conditions are as bad as in Chechnya and the political situation "can explode any minute," he also said. □

Rabin assassin's lawyers protest prison conditions

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The lawyers representing Yigal Amir, the confessed assassin of Yitzhak Rabin, have appealed to have their client moved to another prison or to have his living conditions improved at the jail where he is now being held.

In the appeal brought before the Beersheba District Court, the lawyers said Amir had complained that he was cold and wanted a heater in his room.

The lawyers also asked for approval of Amir's requests to receive religious books and to meet with the prison rabbi.

Court papers also reportedly included a complaint by Amir that the food he was being served in prison violated Jewish dietary laws.

Amir is being held in solitary confinement in a prison in southern Israel.

His trial for shooting Rabin at a Nov. 4 peace rally in Tel Aviv began last month with a reading of the charges against him.

After Amir's lawyers requested time to review evidence, Judge Edmond Levy set Jan. 23 as the date for the resumption of the trial in Tel Aviv District Court.

No cameras will be allowed in the courtroom when the trial resumes, Israel Radio reported.

Justice Minister David Libai was quoted as saying that even though he recognized the high level of interest in the trial, the absence of cameras in the courtroom was the only way to ensure that the proceedings would proceed normally. □

Palestinians prevent terrorism

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Palestinian security forces thwarted 80 planned terrorist attacks against Israel in 1995, according to the head of Israel's domestic security service.

In a semiannual appearance before the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the head of the Shin Bet said there had been a sharp drop in the number of terrorist attacks after the May 1994 signing of the agreement for establishing Palestinian autonomy in the Gaza Strip and West Bank Jericho enclave. □