



## NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ After three days of meetings in El Arish, Egypt, the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee reached agreement to draft a new Palestine National Covenant, not to amend the existing one. Palestinian officials said this would prevent a confrontation between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and those members of the Palestine National Council who are opposed to the PLO's peace accords with Israel. [Page 3]

■ U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher urged Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to ensure that the Palestine National Council removes the clauses from its 1964 covenant that call for the destruction of Israel. Christopher met with Arafat in the Gaza Strip.

■ Israeli and Syrian delegations are scheduled to resume negotiations at the Wye Plantation in Maryland on Feb. 26. During talks in Damascus with President Hafez Assad, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher convinced the Syrian leader to continue the negotiations, despite reports Damascus was thinking of suspending the talks because of Israeli plans to hold early national elections. [Page 3]

■ Iran lashed out at Argentina for what it said was a failure to fulfill a contract providing nuclear technology to Teheran. An Iranian nuclear official vowed that his government would sue Argentina to seek compensation. [Page 2]

■ Labor Party officials expected Prime Minister Shimon Peres to announce as early as the end of this week that he was moving forward Israel's national elections from October to May. Peres held consultations this week with senior Labor officials who have been examining the legal and technical issues linked to holding early elections and who have been coordinating with other political party factions on the matter. [Page 4]

■ U.S.-educated diplomat Omar Abdul-Monem Rifai was nominated to become Jordan's ambassador to Israel. Rifai would replace Marwan Muashar, who was appointed minister of information when a new Jordanian government was named earlier this week. [Page 3]

## JEWISH PROPERTY CLAIMS [PART 2] Nations of Eastern Europe slowly begin making restitution

By Mitchell Danow

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Almost a half century elapsed from the end of World War II before Jewish leaders were able to begin pressing their demands for the return of Jewish property seized from its rightful owners during the war years.

"I see a historic opportunity for a united effort to right, in some small but still significant way, a piece of the wrongs done to Jews and others in Central Europe during World War II," Stuart Eizenstat, the U.S. Department of State's special envoy for property claims in Central and Eastern Europe, told delegates at the recently held 10th Global Assembly of the World Jewish Congress.

The opportunity of which Eizenstat spoke came as a direct result of the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Throughout the region, democratic forms of government were established, legislation envisioning the restoration of private property was discussed in some countries, and there was even some public discussion about each state's responsibility for the wartime plight of its Jewish citizens.

Created in 1992 by the World Jewish Congress and other leading Jewish organizations, the World Jewish Restitution Organization set out to secure the return of Jewish property seized during the war years in 13 eastern and central European countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

The property sought falls into three broad categories: communal properties, including synagogues, schools, cemeteries, hospitals and old age homes; individual properties whose owners or heirs are still alive; and heirless individual properties.

The WJRO has signed agreements with the local Jewish communities in 10 of those eastern European countries — excluding Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Estonia — to work together for the restitution of communal property and to establish foundations to jointly manage returned properties.

Eizenstat, whose status as State Department envoy reflects the U.S. government's firm backing of the WJRO's efforts, provided the delegates at the Jan. 22-24 WJC assembly in Jerusalem with an overview of Jewish restitution efforts in Eastern and Central Europe.

After visiting most of those countries last year as part of a fact-finding mission he carried out in his role with the State Department, he found that in each country there had been some progress in restoring Jewish property to its rightful owners.

But just the same, he added, much remained to be done.

### 'Best laws on property return in the region'

The most progress, he said, has been in the return of communal property; private property restitution was a more difficult issue — particularly heirless individual property.

"We hope that success with communal property can be used to build momentum for dealing with private property," he said.

Throughout the region, private property restitution has been hampered by restrictive citizenship and/or residency requirements — which create huge hurdles for Jewish claimants, many of whom had no choice but to emigrate during the war and are now being penalized for what was in effect a decision that had been forced on them.

Eizenstat spoke of a number of successful restitution efforts: in Bulgaria, which, he said, was lauded by the local Jewish community "as having some of the best laws on property return in the region"; in Latvia, where about a dozen communal properties have been returned to the local Jewish community; and in Estonia, where Jewish communal buildings have been returned and other claims are being processed.

In Slovakia, too, restitution efforts have proven successful — with important results for the local Jewish community.

Fero Alexander, executive chairman of the Union of Jewish Religious

Communities in Slovakia, spoke in an interview about the status of restitution efforts in his country.

"It's not easy to get things back," he said. "But profitable communal properties have been returned — and as a result, the community will be able to be independent and survive."

Across Europe, however, those seeking restitution are encountering a number of difficulties.

In several countries, significant government initiatives have not been implemented or have been blocked at the local level, Eizenstat said.

In the Czech Republic, for instance, the government has committed itself to return Jewish communal property controlled by the state — and indeed in some cases has already done so.

But at the same time, local municipalities have refused to return some important income-producing communal properties under their control — and the central Czech government has not enacted legislation that would force the municipalities to do so.

Similarly, in Belarus and Ukraine, the disposal of Jewish communal assets has been left to municipal authorities — resulting in only a minimal transfer of properties to the local Jewish community.

In Hungary, the government has committed itself to the prompt resolution of both communal and individual property claims.

But, as Eizenstat said, "restitution of communal properties has yet to start."

Poland, which had a prewar population of some 3.5 million Jews, has made little headway on individual property restitution, which could present substantial problems for the government, given the sheer magnitude of the property at issue.

But, in a more hopeful sign, Eizenstat noted that the Polish government has prepared a bill on the restitution of Jewish communal properties and that Warsaw hopes the Polish Parliament will pass the bill in the spring.

In Romania, too, a bill for Jewish communal property restitution faces a parliamentary approval process.

In many of these countries, restitution of Jewish property will prove central to the ability of the local Jewish community to care for some of its elderly members, particularly Holocaust survivors.

#### Addressing survivors' needs

Eizenstat put a human face on some of the potential beneficiaries of the restitution efforts of the WJRO and local Jewish communities.

"I have been struck during my mission with the desperate condition of the Holocaust survivors in these countries," he said. "They are, by definition, old, and most are destitute and living out what has already been a tragic life in very difficult circumstances.

"They demand first priority in terms of attention."

Benjamin Meed, president of the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors, also spoke before the WJC assembly to address the needs of some of the 100,000 survivors his group represents.

In a moving, heartfelt speech, he spoke of how Germany, which has paid millions of marks in compensation to survivors since World War II, has given no compensation to those survivors living in countries formerly under Soviet domination.

Moreover, Meed said, under the terms of the so-called Article 2 Fund established after German reunification, significant restrictions were imposed on compensation to survivors.

In order to receive compensation, he said, survivors had to have spent at least six months in a concentration camp or 18 months in a ghetto.

Moreover, survivors have to pass a needs test, with those earning more than \$14,000 per year exempt from compensation — a situation, Meed said, that "turns the payments into welfare."

"We must demolish all these restrictions," said Meed, who called on the worldwide Jewish community to press Germany "to meet its obligations."

Noting the advanced age of survivors, whom he said had an average age exceeding 75, Meed said that Germany could well afford to play a waiting game.

"Time is Germany's ally. As nature takes its inevitable course, we daily learn of the deaths of yet more survivors," he said, urging swift pressure on the German government.

Eizenstat, also alluding to the survivors' advanced age, suggested that the international Jewish community take immediate action on their behalf while restitution and compensation efforts continue.

Noting that successful restitution claims will enable local Jewish communities to care for survivors, Eizenstat said that "this may take time — time that the survivors do not have.

"In the interim, I would encourage international Jewish organizations to take a moral decision to use their own financial resources — at least until there are sufficient revenues generated from returned communal property — to ensure that survivors can live out the balance of their lives in dignity.

"Other issues or disputes should be subordinated to this consideration." □

#### **Iran charges Argentina failed to fulfill nuclear reactor deal**

*By Sergio Kiernan*

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Iran has lashed out at Argentina for what it said was a failure to fulfill a contract providing nuclear technology to Teheran.

In early February 1992, the Argentine government stopped the shipment of a small nuclear reactor to Teheran under pressure from the United States and Israel.

The \$18 million contract for the provision of the reactor had been signed between Argentina's INVAP, a state-owned atomic materials manufacturing company, and Iran's Nuclear Energy Organization.

The contract was for the construction in Iran of a reactor with uranium-refining capabilities.

Iran reacted strongly to what it said was a breach of contract.

Reza Amrollah, head of the Iranian nuclear organization, said the reactor was needed "to train engineers and manufacture medical equipment, not to wage war."

He made clear that his government would sue Argentina, seeking compensation.

Argentina and Iran clashed last year when Argentine President Carlos Menem accused Teheran of being involved in the July 18, 1994, bombing of the Jewish communal headquarters building that left 86 dead and at least 300 wounded.

As a result of that accusation, Iran removed its ambassador from Buenos Aires.

Since that time, relations between the two countries have remained at the level of charge d'affaires.

Sources in the Argentine foreign ministry said that negotiations between Iran and Argentina over the nuclear contract will continue, with meetings in Buenos Aires slated for early March.

Argentina continued to refuse to deliver the nuclear reactor, but it has offered financial compensation to Iran in order to resolve the matter. □

**U.S. urges Arafat to fulfill pledge to amend PLO covenant**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Having secured a Syrian commitment to continue peace negotiations with Israel, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher turned his attention this week to the Palestinian track, urging Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to revoke the clauses in the Palestine National Covenant that call for the destruction of Israel.

Christopher's meeting with Arafat in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday took place as the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee ended several days of talks in the Egyptian town of El-Arish about how to deal with the covenant.

Arafat has in the past repeatedly vowed to amend the covenant, but the matter does not rest solely in his hands.

A two-thirds vote of the 540-member Palestine National Council, the so-called Palestinian parliament-in-exile, is required to amend the covenant.

Moreover, the PNC can only be convened by a majority of the PLO's Executive Committee.

In a sign of the potential difficulties facing Arafat, he was unable to obtain a quorum from the Executive Committee after seven members of the 18-member committee boycotted this week's meeting in El-Arish to demonstrate their opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace accords and to changing the Palestinian covenant.

The 11 members of the Executive Committee who did attend the El-Arish meeting reportedly reached a preliminary agreement to draft a new Palestine National Covenant, not to amend the existing one.

Palestinian officials were quoted as saying that this approach would prevent a confrontation between Arafat and those members of the PNC who oppose the PLO's peace accords with Israel.

The Executive Committee set no date for convening the PNC, with officials saying only that the committee would meet again later this month, after the end of the fast of Ramadan, to discuss convening the PNC.

Committee officials reportedly attached conditions to calling for a meeting of the PNC: the release of all Palestinian prisoners still in Israeli jails, a halt to Jewish settlement activities and the redeployment of Israeli soldiers in the West Bank town of Hebron.

Earlier this week, Israeli officials said that the redeployment in Hebron would not take place until after the PNC met and amended the Palestinian covenant.

**Arafat reminded of obligation**

During his meeting with Arafat, Christopher reminded him of his obligation, under the terms of the agreements with Israel, to amend the covenant.

"As the chairman and I discussed, it's also essential for the members of the [Palestine National] council to fulfill their commitment to amend the covenant and also to take all possible steps to prevent terror," Christopher said.

Arafat said he planned to put the issue before the 88-member Palestinian Council, which was elected last month, and before the Palestine National Council.

Responding to Arafat's comments, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres told reporters at a dedication ceremony of a border police training base that Israel expects the covenant to be amended two months after the elected Palestinian Council meets, as called for under the terms of the accord signed with the Palestinians last September in Washington.

From Gaza, Christopher traveled to Tel Aviv to brief Peres on his talks Tuesday in Damascus.

During his trip to Syria, Christopher persuaded Syrian President Hafez Assad to send a delegation to resume negotiations with Israel in eastern Maryland on Feb. 26. A State Department spokesman said in Washington that the talks were expected to last two weeks.

Assad agreed to continue the negotiations, despite reports that Damascus was seriously thinking of suspending the talks because of Israeli plans to hold early national elections.

The talks, which were expected to include generals as well as diplomats from both sides, were scheduled to focus on security, normalization of ties and economic issues.

Speaking at a joint news conference with Peres, Christopher said that in agreeing to continue their negotiations, both sides showed their commitment to reaching a peace agreement in the current year.

Peres, who is expected to announce soon his decision to move forward Israel's national elections from October to May, said the talks with Syria would continue, regardless of when elections are held.

He also said he was pleased that negotiations were continuing.

"It is easy to stop talks," he said, "and less so to resume them." □

**Amir's attorneys ponder shift in defense strategy**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Attorneys representing Yitzhak Rabin's confessed assassin are reportedly planning to adopt a new strategy and argue that their client suffered from emotional disorders.

If this line of defense were employed, Yigal Amir could get a lighter sentence if convicted of assassinating Rabin.

Under the Israeli criminal code, a defendant convicted of murder can get less than a life sentence if it is proven that he or she suffered from emotional problems at the time of committing the crime.

But one of Amir's attorneys, Jonathan Goldberg, said Wednesday he knew nothing of a new defense strategy.

Amir has told the court that he wanted to wound Rabin seriously, and thereby force him out of politics, but not to kill him.

In the latest court deliberations on Feb. 1, presiding Judge Edmond Levy ordered that Amir undergo psychiatric evaluations.

Those evaluations were being conducted this week.

In Jerusalem on Wednesday, about a dozen members of the Amir family and supporters held a demonstration to demand better prison conditions for Amir — as well as for his brother Hagai and for a friend, Dror Adani, both of whom have been separately charged with conspiracy in the Rabin assassination. □

**Jordan names new envoy to Israel**

*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — U.S.-educated diplomat Omar Abdul-Monem Rifai has been nominated to become Jordan's second ambassador to Israel.

Rifai, 39, a Jordanian Foreign Ministry official and peace negotiator, would replace Marwan Muashar, who was appointed minister of information when a new Jordanian government was named earlier this week.

Rifai worked closely with Israeli officials during the negotiations that resulted in the historic October 1994 Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty. □

## Scholars say Jews in Russia need educational programs

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Development of Jewish studies in the former Soviet Union is seen by many Jewish scholars here as a major tool to help bring Russian Jews closer to their historical roots.

“The future Russian Jewish leadership will emerge through strengthening and support of Jewish studies programs in the country,” said Nehemia Levzion, director of the Jerusalem-based International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization.

Levzion was among a group of scholars and governmental leaders who addressed the conference this week of the Moscow Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization, also known as Sefer.

Yevgeny Velikhov, vice president of the Russian Academy of Science, which hosted the conference, emphasized that the scholarly activities of Jewish intellectuals in Russia serves as a great contribution to Russian culture in general.

More than 100 researchers and university teachers of Jewish history, philosophy, linguistics and literature from the republics of the former Soviet Union, the Baltic countries, as well as from the United States, Israel, Canada and Great Britain attended the event, which began Monday.

The conference focused attention on the increasing interest in Jewish studies among students in Russia as well as in other former Soviet republics.

According to Sefer, 48 universities throughout the former Soviet Union now offer courses in Jewish studies and Jewish-related topics. Among these schools are five Jewish universities operating in Moscow, St. Petersburg and in Kiev, Ukraine.

Russian Jewish religious leaders see these Jewish academic programs as one of the ways to help Russian Jews rediscover their nearly forgotten Jewish roots.

“Jewish studies is one of the tools to make sure that Jews who stay here will remain Jews,” said Chaim Chesler, referring to the high rate of assimilation among Russian Jews.

### ‘Conference of surviving Jewish people’

Chesler, the head of the Jewish Agency for Israel’s delegation to the former Soviet Union, said the rate of assimilation in Russia ran as high as 70 percent, compared with about 50 percent in the United States and only 10 percent in South Africa.

Termining the event “the conference of surviving Jewish people in Russia,” Chesler said that students are “the most important part of Jewish continuity” in every community throughout the world.

The chief rabbi of Moscow, Pinchas Goldschmidt, used his address to the conference to point to the necessity of creating a national association of Russian Jewish students.

He noted that membership in Russian Hillel organizations has not yet gained wide popularity among Jewish students here.

In a greeting to the conference sent by Ralph Goldman, the honorary executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, he described Judaica scholars in the former Soviet Union as helping to restore a sense of pride among Russian Jews.

To the surprise of those who attended the conference, the Israeli ambassador to Russia, Aliza Shenhar, gave a lecture on Jewish folklore.

Before her diplomatic career began more than a year ago, Shenhar was a philology professor at the University of Haifa. □

## Peres expected to announce early elections for end of May

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Labor Party officials are expecting that Prime Minister Shimon Peres will announce as early as the end of this week that he was moving forward Israel’s national elections from October to a date in May.

Peres held consultations this week with senior Labor officials who have been examining the legal and technical issues linked to holding early elections and who have been coordinating with other political parties on the matter.

Israel Radio reported that Peres was likely to announce before the end of the week that he was calling early elections, most likely for May 28.

“That looks like the date,” Interior Minister Haim Ramon, who had been involved in the consultations, told reporters.

It was widely expected that Peres would make such an announcement after U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher ended this week’s round of shuttle diplomacy between Jerusalem and Damascus.

Peres has been leading Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu in the polls.

For the first time, Israelis will directly elect the prime minister.

In addition, there will be a separate vote for the members of the Knesset, who will be chosen from party lists.

Netanyahu announced Wednesday that he and Rafael Eitan, the leader of the right-wing Tsomet Party, had finalized their agreement to form a joint list in the upcoming elections. □

## Study of Diaspora gets more time

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In addition to math, biology, history and grammar, Israeli high school students can now expect to spend more time studying Diaspora Jewry.

While the topic is already included in the high school history curriculum, the Education Ministry said this week that teachers tend to devote scant attention to the topic.

In an effort to encourage teachers to address the subject in greater detail, the Education Ministry has published a workbook, “Diaspora Jewry in the 20th Century.”

The workbook has lesson plans calling for approximately 25-30 hours of class time. □

## Master plan for tourism unveiled

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel’s tourism and interior ministers this week unveiled a 10-year plan aimed at developing the country’s tourism facilities in order to be able to accommodate an anticipated 5 million tourists annually.

The plan includes projects to build tourism facilities in 14 areas, including the Golan Heights, whose future status is currently under discussion in Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

At a news conference held this week, Tourism Minister Uzi Baram and Interior Minister Haim Ramon said the development plan calls for building basic infrastructure, such as roads, as well as for building more hotels. □