

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Forty-eight percent of Reform rabbis and 38 percent of Reconstructionist rabbis perform intermarriages, according to a study. Only 14 percent of the respondents said they would not preside over an intermarriage or refer an interfaith couple to someone who does. [Page 3]**

■ **President Clinton urged American Jews to rely on the historical triumphs of worldwide Jewry to stay the course toward peace in the Middle East. Addressing the United Jewish Appeal's Young Leadership Conference, Clinton vowed to work with Israel against terror. [Page 3]**

■ **Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat decreed that areas under his control should be referred to as "Palestine" in all legal documents. The West Bank will be called the Northern District and the Gaza Strip will become the Gaza District.**

■ **An Iranian Jew told a congressional committee harrowing details about the current conditions for Jews in Iran. The estimated 25,000 Jews who remain are desperately trying to find a way out, according to Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society officials. [Page 1]**

■ **About 24 Canadians protested the Ontario attorney general's decision to withdraw a charge of promoting hatred that was filed against Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel. Prosecutors dropped the charge, citing a lack of evidence.**

■ **Three Israeli soldiers will be court-martialed for letting a suicide bomber slip into the Jewish state from Gaza. A major who was in command of the crossing point was removed from his post.**

■ **The 331 reported incidents of anti-Semitism in 1995 in Canada set a new record, according to B'nai Brith Canada. The group pointed to the increase of racist propaganda on the Internet as a contributing factor.**

■ **Jewish groups protested the decision by black media executives to honor Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. The National Newspaper Publishers Association gave Farrakhan its "Newsmaker of the Year" award. [Page 2]**

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Iranian's testimony reveals plight of the Jews left behind***By Daniel Kurtzman*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — They questioned him for hours under blinding lights. They hit him in the face to get him to talk. They boxed him into a tiny cell where he could not stand up straight, lie down or sit. They frequently threatened to kill him.

Suspected of being a Zionist and a spy, Shahin Abkazian was held for two years in an Iranian prison until suddenly, without explanation, authorities released him.

"All this happened to me simply because I was Jewish," Abkazian, a pseudonym used to protect his identity, said in recent testimony submitted to Congress.

"I had no more contacts with Israel or the United States than any other Jew in Iran. I had no contacts with foreigners," he said in his testimony.

"There was no reason to believe that I was a spy, except for the general atmosphere of hate and suspicion generated by the government in Iran against Jews."

Although others have suffered even worse at the hands of Iranian authorities, Abkazian's story presents some of the most startling and harrowing testimony ever brought to light about current conditions for Jews in Iran.

Extreme cases of Jews being murdered in prison, suffering permanent physical damage or simply disappearing have not been widespread.

But such incidents, Abkazian said, have nonetheless occurred with regularity and have served to terrorize the estimated 18,000 to 25,000 Jews remaining in Iran.

Abkazian initially agreed to present his own testimony at a congressional hearing on the persecution of worldwide Jewry last month. Fearing reprisals against relatives still in Iran, he was to use a pseudonym.

Abkazian, who immigrated to Los Angeles this year, traveled to Washington last month to give his testimony, but backed out at the last minute when he learned it would not be a closed hearing.

"His reluctance to testify because it was in public spoke volumes about his great fears," said Norman Tilles, president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, who read Abkazian's testimony before the House International Relations Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights.

Rep. Christopher Smith (R-N.J.), who chairs the committee, convened the hearing as Congress continues to weigh sweeping reforms in the nation's immigration laws.

'Their almost total inability to get out'

The plight of Iranian Jews, while less publicized than the exigencies facing Jews in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere around the globe, remains no less acute.

Their situation is reminiscent of the Jews of Syria and Ethiopia, who also lived under the grip of repressive regimes until rescue campaigns liberated them.

Those operations freed nearly all of Syria's 4,000 Jews between 1990 and 1994, and more than 28,000 Ethiopian Jews since 1984.

"I think that most of us are not aware of the situation of Iranian Jews," Tilles said. He said most Americans are not aware of the numbers of Jews still there and "don't have any understanding of the difficulty of their life or of their almost total inability to get out."

Since the exodus of Iranian Jews began in 1983, between 70 percent and 80 percent of Iran's population of an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 Jews left the country.

When the Shah of Iran fell in 1979, the regime shifted from a pro-Western, pro-Israel government to a fiercely anti-Western, Islamic state.

Those who remain are desperately trying to find a way out, according to HIAS officials.

"The Arab-Israeli peace process is being taken out on the hides of

Iranian Jews," said Bruce Leimsidor, director of HIAS' Vienna office, which handles the flow of Iranian refugees to the United States and Canada.

"Every Jewish family in Iran has been persecuted in some way — they've lost property, spent time in prison or have been roughed up by police," Leimsidor said in a telephone interview from Vienna. Other Jewish officials disputed that degree of persecution, but said nonetheless that a majority of Jews are treated unfairly.

Since 1983, HIAS has brought more than 10,000 Iranian Jewish refugees to the United States, including 226 in 1995. The vast majority of the refugees have gone to Israel.

Leimsidor said the HIAS Vienna office facilitates the immigration of between 20 and 30 Iranian refugees to the United States and Canada each month.

Fearing for the safety of the Jews still in Iran and for the continuation of the program, HIAS would not discuss its refugee operation in any more detail.

In his testimony, Abkazian — who declined to be interviewed or to provide more specifics about his case — described the degenerating economic situation "where Jews are being blamed for the destruction of Iran" and where the "government-sponsored anti-Semitic propaganda campaign" has "intensified in the past several years."

"The anti-Semitic diatribes broadcast during the Friday sermons on television no longer just talk about the Israelis or the Zionists," Abkazian said. "They talk about the Jews in general, about the worldwide Jewish plot and how the Jews in Iran are all agents of this conspiracy."

Climate of suspicion and hatred

Moreover, he said Jews are frequently forced out of their jobs, pressed to convert to Islam and are unable to find protection in Iran's judicial system.

Abkazian blames the climate of suspicion and hatred of Jews for his imprisonment.

"I was probably denounced by a fanatic co-worker, and it was simply assumed that the accusation was valid because of this general atmosphere of hatred."

His nightmare did not end with his release from prison. Authorities warned him against any contact with the Jewish community, the synagogue or foreigners. They told him not to leave Tehran and kept him under constant surveillance, tapping his phone and opening his mail.

"I lived in constant terror," he said.

For Jews attempting to leave, the obstacles remain formidable, according to Leimsidor. While Muslims can generally obtain passports within 24 hours, Jews must go through a separate passport office, where they are met by complex forms and delaying tactics, as well as a blacklist.

"If they have even suspected contact with Israel, too much contact with the States, if they're administering property for people who have left, they're on the blacklist," Leimsidor said.

Passports are rarely issued to all members of a family, he said. Immediate relatives are frequently forced to surrender passports to assure the return of another family member.

In Abkazian's case, it took his wife nearly a decade to obtain her passport.

Moreover, the sheer cost of immigration is often prohibitive.

"It takes a large amount of money to get out," Leimsidor said. "People do try to liquidate some of their assets, but it's extremely difficult and dangerous to do so. If the government feels you're selling your property for purposes of immigration, it's immediately confiscated."

Through a combination of bribes and luck, Abkazian got himself and his family out of Iran.

Others have not been so fortunate, and it was with

them in mind that Abkazian chose to publicize both his story and the plight of Iran's Jewish community, declaring in no uncertain terms that "the Jewish community is being gradually excluded from any possibility of further existence in Iran." □

Nation of Islam leader feted by black newspaper publishers

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — When black newspaper publishers honored Louis Farrakhan as "Newsmaker of the Year" last week, Jewish groups winced.

One of the four criteria for the award from the National Newspaper Publishers Association is the display of a "higher level of moral authority."

The association, which represents some 200 black-owned newspapers, chose Farrakhan as the first recipient of the award because of the vision he displayed in leading October's Million Man March on Washington, said Dorothy Leavell, the association's president.

Jewish leaders voiced objections to the choice of honoree. "To salute this man for his 'vision beyond the ordinary' and 'higher level of moral authority' because of the Million Man March is to irresponsibly ignore the harm he is doing to race relations in America and the support he is giving to America's most implacable foes throughout the world," wrote Tommy Baer, president of B'nai B'rith, in a letter to Leavell.

"Whatever value there might have been to the stated goals of the Million Man March was more than offset by the racist hatred spewed out by Farrakhan."

Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said, "I just find it strange that this would be the first" newsmaker to be honored.

Foxman added that it would be one thing to honor Farrakhan as the most prominent black newsmaker in the way Time magazine honors its "Man of the Year."

But, he said, "to give him an award that includes moral authority I find very distasteful and ironic, because I guess that moral authority includes anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric."

At a news conference before receiving the award, Farrakhan said, "If it were not for the black press and black radio and black persons of consciousness in television, the truth of my world cause will not be known."

The Nation of Islam leader has come under fire most recently for his 18-nation world tour, which included stopovers in rogue nations such as Libya, Iran and Iraq.

Justice Department and Treasury Department officials hand-delivered two separate letters to Farrakhan last week notifying him that he must register as an agent for Libya and that U.S. law prohibits American citizens from spending U.S. currency in countries under economic sanctions.

"I am not an agent of Libya, or any foreign government, and there is no need for me ever to follow that law that I should register," Farrakhan told reporters.

"I think I can receive aid in the program of the honorable Elijah Mohammed, which is for the rise of our people, from any quarter, without strings attached."

Meanwhile, the House International Relations Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights opened up a probe this week into Farrakhan's travels and may call on him to testify at a later hearing.

"I would welcome a chance to defend myself against the false charges," Farrakhan said. "I don't think they'll bring me before Congress, because they don't want to give me that platform."

"But I would hope that the American press would not convict me on the basis of lies." □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Survey says rabbis performing intermarriages at record rates

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Nearly half of Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis now officiate at intermarriages, according to a new study.

The study was conducted by Rabbi Irwin Fishbein, a Reform rabbi who runs the Rabbinic Center for Research and Counseling in Westfield, N.J.

The center helps engaged couples find a rabbi to officiate at their wedding when one partner is Jewish and the other is not.

The study also found that, relative to five years ago, far fewer Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis require the couple to commit to having a Jewish home and raising children as Jews before agreeing to officiate.

A leader of the Reform rabbinic association disputed Fishbein's findings, while the Reconstructionist movement confirmed their accuracy.

The 47 percent of rabbinic respondents who said they perform marriages between Jews and non-Jews represents a slight increase since 1990, when Fishbein conducted his last survey. At that time, 43 percent of responding rabbis said they officiate at intermarriages.

Fishbein has conducted similar surveys of rabbis periodically since 1971.

In 1995, he sent questionnaires to the 1,651 members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform rabbinic organization, and to the 167 members of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. He received 710 responses, a return rate of 40 percent.

Among the respondents, 48 percent of the Reform rabbis and 38 percent of the Reconstructionist rabbis said they perform intermarriages.

Fishbein publishes a list of 231 rabbis willing to officiate at intermarriages, which he sells for \$20. Seventeen of those listed are Reconstructionist and the rest are Reform.

The Conservative and Orthodox rabbinical organizations prohibit their rabbis from officiating at intermarriages.

Rabbi Simeon Maslin, president of the CCAR, questioned Fishbein's findings. "By no means do 48 percent officiate" at intermarriages, he said of his Reform colleagues. Maslin estimated that between 33 percent and 40 percent of Reform rabbis would officiate at a mixed marriage.

'A very skewed sample'

"The people responding to him are a very skewed sample," Maslin said, adding that "those willing to respond to him are those who do" officiate at intermarriages.

Fishbein said that in 1971, the last time that the CCAR did its own member survey to find out how many officiate at intermarriages, it got a 41 percent response rate, which is about the same as the response rate he has been getting each time he conducts the survey.

Rabbi Michael Cohen, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, said the percentage of his colleagues in Fishbein's study who said they officiate at intermarriages — 38 percent — is an accurate reflection.

Different rabbis will perform an intermarriage under different circumstances.

Some have criteria so strict that few couples are able to meet them. Those rabbis might perform one or two intermarriages each year.

Others will marry any couple willing to pay the fee, which can run as high as \$1,500.

At the same time, there has been a significant drop in the number of Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis who will officiate at an intermarriage only if the couple commits to having a Jewish home and raising Jewish children.

In 1990, a solid majority of both Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis — 64 percent and 70 percent, respectively — required that commitment from a couple before agreeing to officiate.

Five years later, 42 percent of Reform rabbis and 63 percent of Reconstructionist rabbis said they now have that condition.

In addition, a significant minority of respondents from both movements — 27 percent of Reform rabbis and 29 percent of Reconstructionist rabbis — are willing to co-officiate at a wedding with a priest or minister.

"There's been a gradual recognition" that a commitment to having a Jewish home is "not something that rabbis can really require," Fishbein said.

"You're dealing with a future. Very often the couple themselves do not know what they are planning to do. More and more rabbis are confronted by couples who have not made a decision about how they will raise their children prior to marriage. There is more and more interest today in raising children with both religions," he added.

"This is contrary to traditional philosophy about what is good for families and children, but there are thousands and thousands of families out there doing this," he said.

In the new survey, another substantial minority of respondents — 39 percent — said they were willing to refer couples to other rabbis who officiate at intermarriages, though they themselves will not.

Only 14 percent of the respondents said they would neither preside over an intermarriage nor refer a interfaith couple to someone who does. □

Clinton urges American Jews to stay course toward peace

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Clinton is urging American Jews to rely on the historical triumphs of worldwide Jewry to stay the course toward peace in the Middle East.

"We are convinced that, ultimately, fear will overcome the adversity of terror, because overcoming that kind of adversity is the genius of the Jewish people and the history of the State of Israel," Clinton told more than 3,000 cheering participants at the United Jewish Appeal's Young Leadership Conference here.

As an overflow crowd stood on chairs chanting "four more years," Clinton took the stage Sunday night for his first public appearance since returning from last week's "Summit of the Peacemakers" in Egypt.

"The Jewish people have overcome every one of their would-be destroyers, denying them their goal, and in doing so reaffirming that what is good in human nature can prevail," Clinton said. With this in mind, Clinton pledged to work with Israel in its war against terror.

As a follow-up to the Egypt summit, Secretary of State Warren Christopher will host a meeting of foreign ministers on March 28 in Washington to plan ways to combat international terrorism.

"No one seriously believes anymore it is fair to ask Israel to give up its security until the peace is made," Clinton said.

The UJA's Young Leadership Conference, a gathering of activists younger than 40, met here this week for a three-day conference that includes lobbying visits to Capitol Hill and some fund raising by local communities represented at the gathering. □

Recapture of Klinghoffer killer becomes a high priority for U.S.

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — U.S. and Italian officials have stepped up efforts to recapture a Palestinian hijacker of the Achille Lauro cruise ship who escaped during leave from an Italian prison.

The United States offered a reward of up to \$2 million for information leading to the capture of Youssef Magied al-Molqi, who was convicted of the 1985 murder of Leon Klinghoffer, an American Jew who was shot in his wheelchair and thrown off the deck of the hijacked ship.

Molqi fled a church-run shelter in Italy on Feb. 28 while on a 12-day good-conduct leave from prison, where he was serving a 30-year sentence.

The State Department also announced that it is prepared to resettle informants and their families in the United States — signaling the high priority Washington is assigning to the case.

Italian authorities, who also offered an unspecified reward for information about Molqi, reportedly are investigating six people in connection with his escape.

Molqi was the third Achille Lauro hijacker to escape while on leave from an Italian prison. Only one of the hijackers remains in custody.

U.S. officials have criticized the Italian law that permits cooperative inmates to spend time out of jail, regardless of the crime they committed.

The U.S. reward was offered under the State Department's Heroes program, which designates payments to informants in terrorist cases.

The program has been credited with leading to the 1995 capture in Pakistan of Ramzi Ahmed Youssef, wanted in connection with the Feb. 26, 1993, World Trade Center bombing. A similar reward was offered for two Libyan suspects sought in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. □

Russian court sets precedent in sentencing neo-Nazis to jail

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — In an unprecedented action by a Russian court, members of a neo-Nazi organization have received long prison sentences.

Igor Pirozhok, 28, the leader of the neo-Nazi group known as the Werewolf Legion, was sentenced last week to five years in prison for hooliganism and inciting racial and ethnic hatred. Pirozhok was sentenced by the court in Yaroslavl, a city 130 miles north of Moscow.

Another member of the organization, Victor Baranov, 23, received a nine-year prison term for homicide and hooliganism.

The group, which was formed in the spring of 1994 in Moscow, includes about a dozen youths allegedly bent on carrying out acts of terror.

The legion was reported to have set the "final solution of the Jewish question" as one of its major goals.

Before the organization was broken up by Russian federal security forces in July 1994, Werewolf members had been preparing to carry out acts of terror.

A laboratory for the production of explosives was discovered on the premises of the organization.

Shortly after it was organized, the Werewolf Legion allegedly attempted to set fire to the Olympic sports hall in Moscow, which was serving as the site of a Messianic Jewish conference.

Prior to his arrest, Pirozhok said in interviews with several Moscow newspapers that "Democrats, Yankees and kikes should be wiped out ruthlessly." □

Jewish high school student found murdered in Mexico City

By Alissa Kaplan

NEW YORK (JTA) — A Jewish high school student killed in Mexico City fell victim due to "sheer misfortune," not because of her religion, according to a Jewish official there.

Paulina Rayek, 18, was found dead last week, several hours after she did not return home from the Naye Yiddische Schul, where she was a 12th-grader.

Her body was discovered in a ravine beside a main thoroughfare, not far from the Israeli Embassy.

"She wasn't singled out because she was Jewish," Dina Siegel, executive director of Tribuna Israelita, said in a telephone interview from Mexico City.

Tribuna Israelita is the human relations committee of the Mexican Jewish community.

Her death was the result of "living in Mexico City," Siegel added.

The case is still being investigated.

A top Mexican official recently said that crime is now Mexicans' greatest concern, eclipsing worries about the economy and growing unemployment.

Shortly before her disappearance, Rayek had taken part in a dialogue with Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Avraham Burg, who was on a tour of Latin America to meet with government officials and Jewish leaders.

According to an agency statement, Burg expressed solidarity with the local Jewish community by attending the student's funeral. He canceled a meeting with the Mexican foreign minister in order to attend.

"This is a shocking outrage for the local Jewish community, and a shared sorrow for the Jewish people," Burg said. "Our priorities are clear. Jewish partnership precedes all politics and diplomacy." □

Acquittal of neo-Nazi leader spurs call for hate-crimes laws

By Agnes Bohm

BUDAPEST (JTA) — Thousands of people gathered here recently to protest the acquittal of a Hungarian neo-Nazi leader who had been charged with inciting racial hatred.

The demonstration came after a Budapest municipal court ruled that there was insufficient evidence to convict Albert Szabo, who openly declares himself the direct ideological heir of the man who led the Hungarian Nazis during World War II.

Szabo's acquittal prompted demonstrators to call for changes in Hungary's hate-crimes statutes.

Szabo's trial began in November, after he and five of his followers were charged with wearing Nazi uniforms and with displaying Nazi flags and other symbols at public demonstrations. They were not charged with organizing anti-Semitic demonstrations, because such gatherings are not illegal under Hungarian law.

All six were cleared by the municipal court.

The state prosecutor announced that he would appeal the case to the Supreme Court.

After the trial, Szabo said in an interview on Hungarian radio, "Jews and Gypsies are over-represented in the economic and political life of Hungary."

Szabo, 40, fled Hungary in 1956 when the country was under Communist rule. When he returned here some five years ago, he founded the World National Popular Rule Party, which was patterned after the wartime Arrow Cross Party of Ferenc Szalasi.

Szalasi, a Hitler collaborator, was executed after World War II as a war criminal. □