

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **President Clinton wrote to reassure Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat that the U.S. position on Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking was unchanged since the Israeli elections. Clinton's letter was delivered to Arafat by Edward Abington, U.S. consul general in Jerusalem.**

■ **Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat said he was waiting to see how the new Israeli government would act toward implementing agreements signed by Israel and the Palestinians. Arafat made the remarks on his return to Gaza from Egypt, where he held talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on ways to boost the peace process.**

■ **Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy said he was preparing for a meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.**

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held urgent consultations with the Bank of Israel governor as share prices on the stock exchange plunged by more than 3 percent. Meanwhile, Israel's cost-of-living index rose by 0.7 percent in June, bringing inflation for the first half of the year to 7 percent. [Page 4]**

■ **Argentine Jews began a week of commemoration marking the second anniversary of the bombing of the Argentine Mutual Aid Association, the Jewish community headquarters in Buenos Aires. The July 18, 1994, attack, which remains unsolved, left 86 dead and 300 wounded.**

■ **A House International Relations subcommittee was set to convene a hearing on Palestinian human rights as well as Palestine Liberation Organization compliance with the peace accords. The hearing also will focus on Israeli violations of Palestinian rights.**

■ **The Conservative and Reform movements for the first time are jointly running a national social activist training retreat for rabbis, educators and congregational social action leaders. The three-day seminar, which has about 80 participants, is under way at Gallaudet University in Washington.**

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Disputes about Auschwitz weave complex web of competing needs**

By Ruth E. Gruber

OSWIECIM, Poland (JTA) — Auschwitz-Birkenau is, as Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel put it in an emotional speech this month, “the largest invisible Jewish cemetery in history.”

In the half-century since the Holocaust, however, the former Nazi death camp outside the town of Oswiecim in southern Poland has become more than that.

At Auschwitz, the Nazis killed at least 1.5 million people, the overwhelming majority of them Jews.

Most of those murdered were gassed at Auschwitz I and then incinerated at Birkenau, the Auschwitz II camp located two miles away.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, which the Polish government turned into a museum/memorial in 1947, is regarded around the world as the paramount symbol of the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews.

But in the postwar years, the Communists made it the paramount symbol of the Nazi subjugation of Poland — and this is how it was primarily regarded in Poland for decades.

For many worldwide, it has also more broadly become the paramount symbol of humankind's capacity for evil.

In physical terms, Auschwitz-Birkenau is a grim tourist attraction that draws more than a half million visitors a year — from Asia, Africa and Latin America as well as from Europe, North America and Israel.

The camp is also a looming presence for the city of Oswiecim's approximately 50,000 citizens, who try to go about normal lives alongside the constant reminder of past horrors.

These varied facets of Auschwitz contain the seeds of the recurring controversies that surround its present and its future.

“There are difficult practical problems,” Krzysztof Sliwinski, Poland's roving ambassador to the Jewish Diaspora, said in an interview. “The practical problems of preserving the testimony of what has happened here; the practical problems of dealing with visitors; the practical problems of the people living there in the town.”

“No doubt there is a sort of conflict of memory among Jews and Poles which makes another emotional contribution.”

Site of ongoing controversy

How the practical problems of daily life conflict with Auschwitz's role as a symbol has been at the root of an ongoing controversy about the attempted construction of a commercial center across the street from the camp's main gate.

In the 1970s, the United Nations called for the establishment of a 547-yard protective zone around the camp to preserve the area's character and mood.

But what now stands outside the camp is a grim collection of ramshackle buildings, ugly overgrown lots and unsightly corrugated iron structures containing warehouses and wholesale outlets with signs advertising meat, sausages, bananas, paints and tobacco products.

Protests from Jews, Auschwitz survivors and the Polish government forced developer Janusz Marszalek to cancel his original plans to build a mini-mall there to serve Oswiecim residents.

Marszalek agreed instead to build a visitors center for the hundreds of thousands who go to Auschwitz each year.

Such a center would have allowed for fast-food kiosks, bookstores, souvenir stands and parking facilities to be removed from the museum grounds and relocated across the street.

Local authorities, however, did not approve the new plans and threatened to use force to stop unauthorized construction.

Marszalek threatened to sue for millions of dollars in damages if he could not build.

The ongoing controversy, regardless of its outcome, drew attention to the need for a major, coordinated plan for the management of the Auschwitz zone and for dealing in a dignified way with the practical needs

of all parties involved. Last month, in response to the conflict, Poland's Cabinet approved a costly three-part plan including the removal of unsuitable buildings and enforcement of the camp's protected zone.

Leszek Miller, the Cabinet's chief of staff, said the plan "envisages that both the extermination camp and the town should undergo complex actions" in order "to keep the town's character both as a place of national remembrance and a center where normal life must go on."

A detailed plan was due to be ready by Sept. 15. Until then, the government ordered a halt to all construction in and around Auschwitz.

Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski provided a glimpse of the broad outlines of the plan at a meeting last week with Jewish leaders in New York.

Poland will attempt to resolve the situation, the president said, by dividing the area around Auschwitz into two zones: "The City of the Living," which would serve the needs of Oswiecim's residents, and "The City of the Dead," where preserving the memory of the camps and their surrounding areas would be the top concern.

Coming on the heels of the construction controversy is a second Auschwitz conflict, this one rooted in the conflict of traditions.

Wiesel, an Auschwitz survivor, made an impassioned appeal this month for the removal of crosses from Birkenau.

He was referring to seven 10-foot wooden crosses erected 12 years ago by a Krakow group of non-Jewish and Jewish youths in a remote corner of Birkenau where the ashes of victims were scattered.

Six-foot Stars of David are also scattered among the field's chest-high weeds. At least one of the stars is crumbling.

Wiesel, who spoke last week at a ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of a 1946 Polish pogrom that killed 42 Jews in the southern city of Kielce, said, "Birkenau is its own eloquent symbol.

"The chimneys, the ruins of the crematoria. Nothing else should be there.

"With all due respect to all religions and all believers, the presence of crosses on sacred soil covering multitudes of Jewish victims in Birkenau was and remains an insult.

"There can be no justification for placing crosses over their remains."

'A disaster, a blasphemy'

"Whoever did this may have been inspired by good intentions, but the result is a disaster, a blasphemy," said Wiesel.

Polish Catholics reacted immediately to his comments.

The cross, said a statement by the Polish Episcopate's Commission for Dialogue with the Jews, had served as a symbol of faith and national resistance to atheistic domination by both Nazi Germany and the Communists.

"Therefore, an act against the cross, albeit unwitting and in good faith, places the promoter of such an act on the side of those who were both against the Jews and also against Christians," the statement said.

An editorial in the liberal Roman Catholic newspaper *Tygodnik Powszechny* said the crosses were not meant to offend anyone and that it was necessary to understand the Polish Catholic way of paying respect to the victims, some of whom were Christian.

The issue was the topic of heated discussion at a two-day session last week of the International Council of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, the body charged with protecting the integrity of the former concentration camp's grounds.

In a statement, the council said it decided to authorize the council's president, former Polish Foreign Minister Wladyslaw Bartoszewski — himself an Auschwitz survivor — "to pursue initiatives aimed at finding solutions that would not hurt anybody's feelings."

The council remains divided on the monument issue, Kalman Sultanik, one of its members and the vice president of the World Jewish Congress, said Monday in a telephone interview from Italy.

Sultanik, also a Holocaust survivor, said he believed that the crosses and the Stars of David should be removed.

Auschwitz is "not a place of religious symbols," he said.

Another member of the council said some of the members were concerned that removing the crosses now could "cause unrest and potentially dangerous conflict here."

And he said that Jewish members of the council were even more critical of a monument in the field of crosses and Stars of David that Wiesel did not mention in his speech.

The monument, which resembles a tombstone, memorializes Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism who became a nun and was killed at Auschwitz.

"We feel that this is highly inappropriate," the council member said.

"She is the only person to be singled out individually with a monument there." □

(JTA staff writer Alissa Kaplan in New York contributed to this report.)

Settler leaders develop plan to establish new communities

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Anticipating a shift in government policy regarding Jewish settlements in the territories, Jewish settlement leaders have drawn up a plan for the expansion and creation of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

According to members of the Yesha Council, which represents settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, the plan includes a call for the establishment of eight new settlements in the territories.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he favors settlement expansion, but has left open whether this would include enlarging existing settlements or creating new ones.

Arab leaders have warned that virtually any plan for settlement expansion would bring the peace process to a halt.

Officials with the Yesha Council said the focus of their program was to triple the current settler population in the territories during the next four years.

About 134,000 Jews live on 144 settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics reported in March.

"I don't see why anyone should be surprised by this plan," said settler spokesman Yechiel Leiter.

"It's our job to build settlements, and this is what we are doing."

The previous Labor-led government sought to contain the creation of new Jewish settlements in the territories.

Before leaving for the United States last week, Netanyahu brought Likud hard-liner Ariel Sharon into the government as national infrastructure minister.

In the early 1990s, as housing minister, Sharon spearheaded a Jewish settlement drive in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Haunting memories motivate Jews' response to church fires

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Kenneth Sweder felt the specter of Jewish history weighing heavily over the ruins of the Johnson Grove Baptist Church in Denmark, Tenn.

“When I smelled the acrid stench from the burned churches in Tennessee, it was as if I was smelling the destruction of our own synagogues through the ages,” said Sweder, president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston.

Sweder traveled with an interfaith delegation from Boston just before the July 4 weekend to sites of burned churches in Tennessee and Mississippi.

About 40 churches, most with predominantly black congregations, have burned down during the last 18 months, with arson suspected in most cases.

The epidemic of fires carries a special resonance for Jews haunted by memories of Kristallnacht, when Nazi gangs burned synagogues and vandalized Jewish businesses in 1938 in Germany.

Underscoring the parallels to Jewish history, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said last week in his address to a joint meeting of Congress, “The recent torching of Afro-American churches in America strikes a familiar, chilling note among Jews.”

For some, the torchings also recall the height of the civil rights movement in America, when Jewish synagogues, along with black churches, were targeted in arson attacks and bombings. During the “Freedom Summer” of 1964, three students — two Jewish, one black — were killed in Mississippi as they investigated fires at black churches that had been set to dissuade blacks from voting.

‘Acts of hate’

In what has been a trying year for relations between blacks and Jews, the recent spate of church fires has created a sort of psychological kinship between the two communities as Jews have joined efforts to combat racism and rebuild the churches.

In the process, the two communities have made strides toward repairing the traditional black-Jewish alliance. “This has become an opportunity out of a crisis,” said B. Maxwell Stamper, a spokesman for the National Urban League.

Jewish organizations, from major communal groups to local synagogues, have launched fund-raising drives to help rebuild the churches and assist victims in affected communities.

The church fires have also given rise to a number of interfaith, interracial coalitions on both the local and national levels.

The Anti-Defamation League and the Urban League were to present a \$100,000 check Wednesday to the Congress of National Black Churches, which represents 65,000 churches. The check, according to the ADL, is the first distribution of funds collected in response to ads placed jointly by the ADL and Urban League in the New York Times, Washington Post and Atlanta Constitution urging people to speak out against the perpetrators of the church fires and their “acts of hate.”

Some Jews, meanwhile, have become directly involved in rebuilding efforts.

Nineteen black and Jewish teen-agers from the Washington, D.C., area, touring the South as part of a program called Operation Understanding, spent July 4 helping rebuild the Mount Zion Baptist Church in Boligee, a small town in western Alabama.

“I’m actually nailing nails. I’m actually putting

something into rebuilding this church,” Ryan Richmond, an Operation Understanding participant, told The Southern Shofar, a Jewish weekly in Alabama.

“We’ve been going through a period of black-Jewish tensions and often times the news isn’t very good, but I have a sense that Jews hunger for an earlier period when we could march together in common cause,” said Murray Friedman, Middle Atlantic States director of the American Jewish Committee and author of “What Went Wrong? The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance.”

Since the 1960s, blacks and Jews have collided about as often as they have cooperated on issues running the racial gamut, activists from both groups said. The past year has seen tensions flare between the two communities, beginning with differences over the Louis Farrakhan-led Million Man March on Washington in October.

More recently, blacks and some Jewish groups found themselves at odds over voting rights. When the black community decried the Supreme Court’s recent decisions striking down race-based congressional districts as unconstitutional, some Jewish groups cautiously welcomed the rulings.

Some of the differences between blacks and Jews have been unbridgeable.

But as Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL, said, “The differences are not of the magnitude that prevents us from standing together against the greater evil” represented by the church burnings.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and a board member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, agreed that blacks and Jews could benefit by opposing bigotry and addressing issues of tolerance and pluralism together.

The Jewish expression of solidarity with the black community, Saperstein said, “takes us a step back from some of the more controversial issues that have caused tensions, and returns our attention to the fundamental issues at stake in the great struggle for civil rights in America.”

That sentiment was echoed by Stamper of the Urban League, who said that in recent weeks “the spirit of the civil rights movement in which Jews and African Americans were both long-distance runners was brought together again.”

The Rev. Jeffrey Brown of Boston’s Union Baptist Church, who took part in the interfaith trip to Tennessee and Mississippi, said cooperation against church arson had already proved a “galvanizing event” in black-Jewish relations. Through their response, he said, Jews have communicated to the black community “that we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny, that what affects you affects us, that any violation of community will affect us all.” □

Israel: Ban ‘Palestine’ banner

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has asked the International Olympic Committee to prevent the Palestinian delegation from marching at Friday’s opening ceremonies of the Summer Games in Atlanta with a banner saying that it is from “Palestine.”

Ya’acov Levy, deputy director general of the Foreign Ministry, said Israel had asked the Olympic committee to prevent the Summer Games from being manipulated for political purposes.

Levy added, “There’s no dispute over the participation of the Palestinian athletes.”

There are three athletes from the West Bank and Gaza Strip on the Palestinian Olympic team. □

Prime minister confronts widespread market fears

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After vowing during last week's trip to the United States that he would revitalize Israel's economy, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu summoned the governor of the Bank of Israel for urgent consultations about a growing crisis in the nation's stock and capital markets.

Monday's meeting between Netanyahu and central bank Gov. Jacob Frenkel took place as share prices on the Tel Aviv Stock Market plunged by more than 3 percent for the day.

Investor fears about the future course of the peace process and regional stability have prompted the market to lose more than 10 percent of its value since Netanyahu's victory in the May 29 national elections.

In addition, a record level of Israelis cashing in their low-interest provident funds have forced banks to begin reconsidering their mortgage policies.

The provident funds were created to enable employees and employers to make long-term deposits in non-taxable savings plans.

The money is invested primarily in savings bonds that were originally assured competitive interest rates by the government.

But since the decision of the government several years ago to stop guaranteeing the interest rates, the funds have earned relatively low rates.

Israelis have instead opted to cash in the plans and invest in bonds, which are offering the highest yields in 10 years, or in short-term savings plans.

Israelis have reportedly liquidated some \$1.4 billion from the provident funds during the first six months of the year.

The liquidations have had serious repercussions on Israel's banks, which use the provident funds to capitalize mortgages they issue.

The rush to liquidate the funds has forced the banks to reduce the number of mortgages they grant and may also lead to increases in their lending rates.

Further upward pressure on interest rates came with Monday's release of the June figures for the cost-of-living index.

The index rose 0.7 percent for the month.

The main factor in the rise was a continuing increase in housing costs.

The rise was offset somewhat by a drop in fruit and vegetable prices.

The rate of inflation for the first half of the year now stands at 7 percent, and the projected rate of inflation for the year may rise into the double digits.

Rising interest rates as a result of inflationary pressures could in turn have additional adverse effects on the stock market as well as on rates for housing and other loans.

Netanyahu attempted to quell investor fears this week by saying that the markets would eventually reflect the positive effects of his plans for privatization and government spending cuts. □

ACRI study finds shortcomings in guaranteeing Israelis' rights

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel walks a complicated, often conflicted path when it comes to protecting civil rights, according to a leading civil rights group here.

In a 260-page report issued this week, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel examined to what degree the

Israeli government affords basic civil rights to the population in general and to specific groups.

The Hebrew-language report found that "Israel basically respects the human rights of its citizens" and that "infractions are sporadic rather than intentional."

But it adds that the rights of Arab residents of the West Bank and Gaza "are violated often and widely."

Unlike the vast majority of Western democracies, Israel's security needs — as well as its definition as a Jewish state with Jewish and civil laws — often lead to complications and conflicts in the struggle for human rights, the report said.

Among the report's findings:

- **Freedom of expression:** Although the government's law-enforcement policy before November's assassination of Yitzhak Rabin regarding political expression and demonstrations "was restrained and moderate," after the killing, the tendency "to investigate and prosecute extremist elements" was, "on occasion, excessively harsh and sweeping."

- **Struggle against terrorism:** In its efforts to prevent terror attacks, the government decided on severe measures that involved human rights violations, "most notably torture during interrogation and administrative steps and collective punishment which affect the families and neighbors of terrorists."

- **Status of women:** The past year has seen a number of legislative amendments that promote gender equality in Israel.

Despite such gains, violence against women continues to increase, and only rarely do Israeli courts impose the maximum penalties on rapists and offenders who assault women.

Further, the problem of "agunot," women whose husbands cannot or will not give them a divorce, remains a problem because there is no civil marriage or divorce in Israel, "which is a clear violation of human rights," the report said.

'Almost every field'

- **Status of Arab Citizens:** Last year saw the continuation of the trend initiated by the governments of Rabin and Shimon Peres to attempt to narrow the "enormous gaps between Jewish and Arab citizens."

Nonetheless, "Arab citizens face discrimination in almost every field of life."

Of particular concern was the severe housing shortage in the Arab communities, the result of a long process "of expropriating lands and reducing boundaries of Arab localities while ignoring the needs of Arab citizens in planning and building."

- **Lesbians and gays:** Although lesbians and gays still face social stigmatization, the amendment to the Equal Opportunities in Employment Law prohibited discrimination against employees on the grounds of sexual orientation.

In addition, the rights of same-sex partners to receive spousal benefits was recently recognized.

- **Religion and law:** "Israelis do not enjoy freedom of religion in the full sense of the term."

While Israelis are free to hold their own beliefs, all citizens are subject to the religious laws of their communities — regarding marriage, divorce and burial — regardless of whether they are believers.

But advances have been made, including a Supreme Court ruling that the Interior Ministry may not refuse to register as Jews people who undergo non-Orthodox conversion in Israel.

However, "a considerable gap still remains between monies allocated to Jews and non-Jews by the Religious Affairs Ministry," the report concluded. □