



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **The Council of Jewish Federations is expected to consider a resolution urging the Israeli government to preserve the current status of conversions to Judaism.** The issue was one of many on the agenda of CJF's General Assembly, which opens in Seattle on Wednesday. [Page 1]

■ **Fervently Orthodox men threw chairs and shouted curses at a group of women who tried to pray at the Western Wall to mark the beginning of the Jewish month of Kislev.** [Page 2]

■ **Political tensions dominated the opening of a regional economic conference in Cairo.** U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders there, failed to secure an agreement on Israeli withdrawal from most of the West Bank town of Hebron. [Page 4]

■ **Israel's chief Sephardi rabbi said Jewish settlers should evacuate Hebron if Israel could not guarantee their security.** [Page 4]

■ **International Jewish leaders joined representatives of the German Jewish community in criticizing the Berlin government for suspending funding for a new museum about Nazi terror.**

■ **The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and Agudath Israel of America filed friend-of-the-court briefs at the U.S. Supreme Court to support laws banning physician-assisted suicide.** The court is scheduled to hear cases on the matter early next year.

■ **The Clinton administration announced an advisory committee on worldwide religious freedom.** The committee, which includes veteran Jewish leader Rabbi Irving Greenberg, comes after prodding by evangelical leaders.

■ **Hezbollah called on the Lebanese government to ban the showing of the blockbuster film "Independence Day" because the character who saves the world is Jewish.** The movie is "propaganda for the so-called genius of the Jews and their concern for humanity," Hezbollah said in a statement.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Jewish leaders in Seattle take up conversion gauntlet

By Cynthia Mann

SEATTLE (JTA) — The Jewish federation world may be taking up the cudgel for the legitimacy of non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel — at least in the arena of conversions.

The Council of Jewish Federations was expected to pass a resolution this week at its annual General Assembly here calling on the Israeli government to protect and preserve the current status of conversions to Judaism.

That action comes in spite of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's efforts to assuage concerns in advance of the meeting by declaring that Israel's recognition of non-Orthodox conversions performed in the Diaspora is not at risk.

He did so in the face of new conversion legislation expected to be submitted shortly to the Knesset. That legislation is expected to delegitimize non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel. Its impact on conversions outside of Israel is unclear.

Tensions were simmering around this issue as CJF opened its annual assembly here. Martin Kraar, executive vice president of CJF, called the prime minister's clarification "a step in the right direction," saying it prompted "a lot of relief."

However, it clearly wasn't enough to buy harmony. Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary and an ardent defender of religious pluralism, said this week that he welcomed the prime minister's reassurances, which came in a letter to Jewish leaders in America. But he cautioned it was "not decisive."

"The decisive text is the proposed legislation, and it makes it pretty clear that the ultimate decision on the kashrut of conversions will be in the hands of the Chief Rabbinate" of Israel, he said.

Risk of repeating 1988 debacle

The bill aims to plug a hole in Israel's Orthodox monopoly over religious affairs. The hole was opened a year ago, when the Supreme Court said there was no legal reason why non-Orthodox conversions should not be recognized in Israel.

However, the court did not explicitly recognize such conversions, saying that it would be up to the Knesset to pass the appropriate legislation.

The pending measure was initiated by the Orthodox parties in Israel's governing coalition. Those parties gained significant strength in May's election and made support for such legislation a condition for joining the coalition.

The latest initiative, seen as a blow to those fighting for equal status for Reform and Conservative rabbis, immediately put those in the Diaspora on notice that there was a risk of repeating the "Who is a Jew" debacle of 1988. At that time there was an Israeli initiative to recognize as legitimate only Orthodox conversions in the Diaspora for purposes of determining which Jewish immigrants to Israel were eligible for automatic Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.

In issuing his letter to American Jewish leaders last Friday, Netanyahu was signaling that he anticipated no repetition of the political conflagration that erupted in 1988, when hordes of Diaspora delegations descended upon the Jewish state in protest.

Netanyahu pledged in his letter to "oppose any legislation which will change the status quo regarding conversions outside of Israel."

That CJF decided to go forward with its resolution this week was certain to be viewed as a rebuke to the diplomatic gesture by Netanyahu, who was scheduled to appear in Seattle on Thursday night.

The resolution called on the government of Israel not to change or pass legislation that would "change the current situation."

But if the risk to the status of Diaspora conversions is ruled out, federations will face the dilemma of whether to get involved in fighting for the legal status of non-Orthodox conversions in Israel.

Federations have traditionally been reluctant to intervene in internal

Israeli affairs. The issue at stake is "how much CJF wants to involve itself in a resolution that concerns conversions within the State of Israel," said Dr. Conrad Giles, the new president of CJF.

He said he believed that a "substantial" number of people would be "unhappy if, at the very least, we don't engage in the discussion."

CJF clearly has calculated that it cannot afford to risk alienating the leadership of the Reform and Conservative movements here and their millions of constituents.

Eighty percent of the donors to the annual campaigns run jointly by the federations and the United Jewish Appeal identify themselves as Reform or Conservative. For their part, UJA officers were expected to pass the resolution on Tuesday.

At the same time, however, federation leaders are concerned about their Orthodox constituents, most of whom have expressed support for legislation invalidating non-Orthodox conversions.

The questions are how hard the fund-raising leadership will be willing to fight and whether the Israelis will risk a rift with the Diaspora.

The decision by CJF to take action, meanwhile, was applauded by non-Orthodox leaders. "We're appreciative that CJF recognizes the issue and sees right through the desperate attempts at confusing the matters," said Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

Warnings of a "deepening divide"

Hirsch said the prime minister's letter reinforces the split between the Orthodox monopoly of Jewish life in Israel and Jewish pluralism in the Diaspora.

"If the prime minister wanted to be helpful, he'd come to the G.A. and declare in no uncertain terms he'll oppose any legislation which disallows Reform and Conservative conversions inside Israel," Hirsch said.

For Schorsch, protecting the legality of non-Orthodox conversions in the Diaspora "averts a rupture between Israel and the Diaspora." But if those in Israel continue to be invalidated, he said, there will be "a deepening divide between the religious and non-religious in Israel, between Judaism and Zionism."

At the same time, he seemed philosophical about the Orthodox monopoly in Israel. "It is not healthy, but it is not a situation I can alter from abroad."

For his part, Hirsch said he would hold CJF to its pledge to fight the fight and not let its resolution recede as a formality. "We have enough respect for CJF to think if it passes a resolution, it does so with serious purpose and intent."

CJF's Giles explained why CJF is prompted to act now.

"There has been a window" for Reform and Conservative conversions in Israel, he said, referring to last year's Supreme Court decision that paved the way for the legitimacy of such conversions.

"We took great comfort that these gains, albeit incremental, would never be taken away,"

David Minkin, head of a CJF committee formed to address the issue, said this "affects the credibility and legitimacy of religious movements in the Diaspora."

Said Richard Wexler, national chairman of the UJA, "I don't see the resolution as representing any opposition" to Netanyahu.

"The issue here is a threat to Jewish unity. And as federation and UJA leaders know, Jewish community strength is dependent on its unity.

"We ought to be out front on issues of critical importance to our constituency," he said. "The time has come to cease political timidity." □

Israeli court postpones ruling on status of adopted children

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Supreme Court has postponed a decision on the religious standing of several adopted children who underwent Conservative conversions in Israel.

The postponement prompted charges that the court was sidestepping a highly charged issue.

Israel's Masorti, or Conservative, movement appealed to the high court last year in a bid to have the adopted children recognized as legally Jewish.

In a sign of the highly charged emotions generated here over the conversion issue, the Masorti movement has received almost a dozen death threats from an extremist Orthodox organization known as Brit Ka'anim, a movement spokeswoman said.

The threats came after the movement placed newspaper ads urging public support for non-Orthodox conversions in Israel.

Israel's Interior Ministry now recognizes non-Orthodox conversions when they are performed outside the Jewish state, but does not grant them recognition if they are performed in Israel.

The Masorti movement's appeal before the high court argued that if conversions performed outside Israel by the Conservative movement's rabbis are recognized within Israel, the identical conversion procedure performed in Israel should also be recognized.

A new court date was set for Feb. 1. □

Women of the Wall attacked as the legal battle intensifies

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Fervently Orthodox men in Israel threw chairs and shouted curses at a group of women who were trying to pray at the Western Wall to mark the beginning of the Jewish month of Kislev.

Tuesday's attack was prompted when the men took offense that some of the women in the group wore religious skullcaps and prayer shawls.

The incident came as the High Court of Justice is considering a petition from the group, Women of the Wall, to pray at the Kotel.

Last month, the court instructed the government to find appropriate prayer arrangements for the group, a cross-section of Orthodox and non-Orthodox women who have been mounting a legal battle over the matter for years.

In an unprecedented move, the court also instructed the Religious Affairs Ministry to pay the legal expenses of the petitioners.

Anat Hoffman, a Meretz Jerusalem council member, who was among the group of worshipers attacked this week, said boards and other objects were hurled over the partition separating the men's and women's prayer areas at the Western Wall Plaza.

Police arrived and requested that the women leave the area and conclude their service in the public parking area outside the plaza.

"We came in good faith," Hoffman told Israel Radio, "and as a result, we were the ones taken out of the Wall area."

The court, she said, referring to last month's ruling, "has had it with the government dragging its feet for 8 1/2 years and not coming up with a solution."

"The court has recognized that we have a right to pray in the Kotel area," and that a way to implement this must be found that "would least hurt the feelings of others. We agreed with that." □

Documents: Slaughter of Jews predates the Nazi death camps*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The German slaughter of Jews during World War II may have begun long before anyone previously has believed.

According to newly available documents, British intelligence intercepted hundreds of German cables detailing the 1941 slaughter of at least 500,000 Russian Jews during the German invasion of Russia. This was one year before the Nazis began the mass extermination of Jews in death camps.

The documents, which show that London knew about the mass murder of Jews as early as the summer of 1941, remain classified in Britain.

Richard Breitman, an American University history professor, filed a Freedom of Information Act request for 1.3 million pages of British intelligence information on the German cables. The cables are in the possession of the U.S. National Security Agency and can now, thanks to Breitman's request, be found at the National Archives reading room in Washington.

In addition to providing a new glimpse at the German slaughter of Russian Jews during its 1941 invasion, the information bolsters theories that ordinary German police units willingly participated in the killing of Jews alongside the elite SS troops.

"In yesterday's cleansing action in Slonim, carried out by Police regiment center," one commander wrote July 18, 1941, "1,153 Jewish plunderers were shot."

The document is one of the earliest known pieces of evidence on Germany's execution of Jews.

"This shows a much wider range of units and individual participation in mass executions in the first phase of the Holocaust," said Breitman, who plans to publish a book on his findings.

Additional information on the killings is expected to be available shortly at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Officials are sorting and cataloguing about 15,000 pages of information turned over last month by Russia that includes information on the same period.

While the British documents present only a partial history over a three-month period, during which British agents could decipher the German codes, the cables shed new light on the murder of hundreds of thousands.

British government had evidence

One document Breitman reviewed from a German commander in Russia dated Aug. 7, 1941, reported that the "total number of executions in territory under my jurisdiction has now exceeded 30,000."

Said Breitman in a telephone interview: "The British government had overwhelming evidence almost from the beginning of the Holocaust" that Jews were being killed in mass executions. "The information had to have come to the United States during the war," he said, adding that the documents he has reviewed do not give a glimpse as to when Washington received the information.

Despite media reports to the contrary, Breitman said he does not believe that the new information will lead historians to conclude that 7 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust.

"This may raise the number of victims in the first phases of the Holocaust as we find reports we did not know about," he said. But challenging the widely held view that 6 million Jews died, he said, "Conservative scholarly estimates are in the range of 5.1 to 5.2 million Jews" killed by the Nazis.

"There's probably going to be a slight increase in the number of victims," he said. □

French Jewish family regains valuable art seized by Nazis*By Lee Yanowitch*

PARIS (JTA) — France has returned a valuable pastel drawing to a Jewish family, 56 years after the Nazis plundered their art collection during the World War II occupation of France.

Foreign Minister Herve de Charette presented Antoinette Carvailho, heir to the Levi de Benzion family, with "Les Glaneuses," or "The Harvesters," a drawing by French artist Leon Augustin Lhermitte that was stolen from her father's chateau outside Paris.

Carvailho told reporters at a ceremony last week at the French Foreign Ministry that the Germans had robbed her father of some 950 works of art, only a fraction of which she has been able to recover.

The ceremony took place amid controversy over revelations that the city of Paris owned apartments that had been seized from Jews deported to death camps or who had fled the Nazi persecution in France. The Paris city council last month froze the sale of municipal apartments until a probe into their past ownership was completed.

Henri Bulawko, vice president of CRIF, France's umbrella group for secular Jewish organizations, said in an interview this week that "light is being shed" throughout Europe on Jewish property stolen by the Nazis during the war.

"The Jewish community was crushed during the war, so it took a long time to pull its forces together to carry out the proper investigations that should have been done earlier," he said.

The Lhermitte pastel, drawn in 1892, was one of 28 art works stolen from several families by a German officer stationed in France during the war. At the end of the war, he entrusted them to a soldier of the Wehrmacht to take back to Germany for safekeeping until his return.

But the officer never returned, and the soldier gave the paintings to a priest in the East German town of Magdeburg. In 1972, the priest turned them over to the Berlin State Museum.

After German reunification, France and Germany began negotiating their return.

In 1994, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl returned the works to France, where they were put on exhibit at the Musee d'Orsay to be claimed by their owners.

"I immediately recognized the drawing that had belonged to my parents," said Carvailho, who provided French officials with an inventory of her father's collection, which included three works by Lhermitte.

Seven other works stolen by the German officer were recovered by owners who preferred to remain anonymous. The remaining 20, including paintings by Claude Monet, Eugene Delacroix and Camille Pissarro, have yet to be claimed. □

Israel names Cabinet members

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Two new Israeli Cabinet appointments were made official Tuesday: Tzachi Hanegbi as justice minister, and veteran Likud Knesset member Yehoshua Matza as health minister.

Matza took over the health portfolio from Hanegbi, who was made acting justice minister by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when his original appointee, lawyer Ya'acov Ne'eman, stepped down because of a police investigation into allegations against him.

The state attorney has reportedly decided to charge Ne'eman with perjury and obstruction of justice related to his alleged intervention in the trial of Shas Knesset member Aryeh Deri. □

Growing Israeli-Arab tensions highlighted at Cairo conference

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Political sparring between Israelis and Palestinians marred the opening of the third annual Middle East-North Africa economic summit held this week in Cairo.

Some 3,000 delegates from more than 80 countries attended the conference. Among those attending was a 100-member Israeli delegation that included six government ministers. The delegation brought a collection of proposals for regional projects worth about \$13.5 billion.

But uncertainties about the peace process cast a pall over the conference's economic goals.

The 1994 conference in Casablanca, Morocco, and last year's meeting in Amman, Jordan were full of high hopes for a new regional order in which former enemies would overcome their differences and forge economic partnerships that would insure a peaceful future for the region.

Those meetings arguably produced more proposals than tangible economic achievements. But at the very least, they brought the Israeli delegation to the table as a full partner of their Arab counterparts.

This week's meeting in Cairo, by contrast, threw a harsh spotlight on a growing rift in Israeli-Arab relations.

The first tensions became evident weeks ago, when Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak threatened to cancel the meeting to protest the stalemated negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

And hours before Tuesday's opening of the conference, a dispute surfaced between the Israeli and Palestinian delegations over the wording of the meeting's closing statements.

The Palestinians demanded that it include a unilateral declaration by Israel canceling its closure of the territories, which the Palestinians said was crippling their economy. But the Israeli delegation refused, saying the closure had been imposed for security reasons.

While Palestinian officials lashed out at Israel, claiming that they could not survive the closure, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy criticized the summit during remarks to reporters.

"This is different from the previous conferences, which were done in participation with Israel," said Levy, who did not directly address the summit.

"This conference is an Egyptian economic conference to which Israel has been invited."

Backdrop for political efforts

Nonetheless, the meeting provided the backdrop for continued political efforts to seal a long-delayed agreement for implementing an Israeli redeployment in Hebron.

In Cairo for meetings with Levy and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher told the opening session that an agreement on an Israeli troop redeployment in the West Bank town was "close at hand."

But U.S. and Palestinian officials stressed that gaps in the positions were still wide.

U.S. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said Christopher's talks with Arafat had not clarified whether there had been any progress in the talks with Israel, which continued without any resolution Tuesday night in Tel Aviv.

In remarks before the full conference, Christopher, on a final trip to the region before retiring in January, said that integrating the region's economies "will make war even less likely."

Mubarak, for his part, used the podium to say that

Israel must adhere to the land-for-peace principle if regional peace is to be achieved.

Irish Foreign Minister Dick Spring drew applause when he, too, called on Israel to support the land-for-peace approach in its negotiations with its Arab neighbors.

Spring visited the region this week along with two other European foreign ministers in an effort to boost the European Union's role in the peace process.

In a related development, a senior E.U. official in charge of Mideast and Mediterranean affairs earlier this week lambasted the European body for the "second-class role" it plays in the peace process.

"To put it bluntly, the Union lacks firmness, does not react quickly and is not coherent. It cannot even fulfill what it promises," European Commissioner Manuel Marin wrote in a confidential document that was published in the Brussels-based weekly *European Voice*.

(JTA correspondent Joseph Kopel in Brussels contributed to this report.)

Chief rabbi backs removing Hebron Jews if lives at risk

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's chief Sephardi rabbi has called for the removal of Hebron's Jewish settlers if their lives are imperiled by a redeployment of Israeli forces.

"If their security can be ensured, then certainly they should stay, and I want them to," Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron said this week.

"But if it is impossible to ensure their security, and security officials say that there is a danger in leaving women and children in the heart of a hostile population, with no chance of existing, then the sanctity of life overrides all else."

The chief rabbi's remarks come as Israeli and Palestinian negotiators continue to hammer out an agreement on implementing the long-delayed redeployment.

If the security of Hebron's 450 Jews cannot be assured, said Bakshi-Doron, then they must be evacuated, even by force, as was done in the dismantling of Yamit when the Sinai was returned to Egypt.

Noam Arnon, spokesman for the Jewish community in Hebron, said removing the Jewish presence in Hebron would endanger all residents of Israel.

The prime minister's office issued a statement this week reaffirming the government's policy to ensure the growth and development of the Jewish community in Hebron.

Meanwhile, a former Likud defense minister suggested this week that the Tel Rumeida settlement on a hill overlooking Hebron be exchanged for the vegetable market situated in the downtown Avraham Avinu complex.

Moshe Arens said it was illogical for the market to be in the center of a Jewish residential area, both for security and logistical purposes. □

Israeli Arab seized in Cairo

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy has demanded the release of an Israeli Arab detained in Egypt on suspicion of spying for Israel.

Egyptian police confirmed this week that security forces had arrested Azam Azam, a 35-year-old Druse from the lower Galilee.

Family members said Azam, a mechanic at an Egyptian-Israeli textile factory, was grabbed by unidentified men last week outside his Cairo hotel. Family members denied that he was involved in anything except his job. □