



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to protect the legal status in Israel of non-Orthodox conversions performed abroad. At the same time, the Israeli leader said he would not fight legislative efforts to reinforce the Orthodox's exclusive authority over conversions done in Israel. The premier was addressing the annual General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations. [Page 3]

■ Israel's High Court of Justice again ordered the Jerusalem municipality to include Reform and Conservative rabbis on its local religious council. For seven years, the Meretz Party, which initially submitted the petition, has been trying to get non-Orthodox representatives on the council.

■ The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is sending a medical team from Ethiopia to Tanzania to assist with the huge influx of refugees from surrounding African nations as a result of the recent fighting in Zaire, a JDC official said. The JDC has had a presence in the region since the 1994 civil war in Rwanda.

■ Members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition demanded that the Knesset approve any agreement on Hebron. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators began a seventh week of talks on implementing a redeployment of Israeli forces from most of the volatile West Bank town, but there was little apparent progress. [Page 4]

■ Israel's High Court of Justice agreed to allow the domestic security service, the Shin Bet, to use physical force in the interrogation of an Islamic Jihad detainee. The Shin Bet, which said the detainee had essential information on a planned terrorist attack, had asked the High Court of Justice to lift a ban on the use of force.

■ A Hamas activist was killed during the weekend in the West Bank in an explosion apparently caused by a bomb he was preparing to use in a suicide attack. The man, who was from the Jenin area, had been in Israeli jails in the past for Hamas activities.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Israeli Bedouins struggle to improve living conditions

By Michele Chabin

RAHAT, Israel (JTA) — In a poor encampment just north of Beersheba, 1,200 Bedouin men, women and children cling to a way of life that is all but disappearing.

Members of the Tarabin al-Sana tribe, they reside in one-room shacks topped with corrugated iron or, in some cases, in large oval tents.

Drinking water comes from a single line, and there is no indoor plumbing. After sundown, they turn on a portable generator, which powers their lights — and television sets — for about six hours. One outdoor phone booth serves the entire community.

Like virtually all of Israel's 130,000 to 140,000 Bedouins, the tribe finds itself caught between tradition and modernity.

The Bedouins are Israeli citizens, and thus are required to send their children to school and have them immunized against infectious diseases.

Although exempt from military duty, several hundred Bedouin men voluntarily join army units, often as trackers.

No longer able to roam freely with herds of sheep and goats, due in large part to the government's gradual annexation of vast stretches of the Negev and Judean deserts for military and other purposes, the Bedouin of Israel have ceased their wanderings.

Half of the country's Bedouins have already settled in government-funded towns built specifically for them.

But others, like the Tarabin al-Sana tribe, have resisted all relocation efforts.

"Decades ago, the government moved us from our land" near Ofakim, northwest of Beersheba, "and promised to let us return," Sheik Mahmoud Abdullah, head of the Tarabin al-Sana tribe, recently told a small group of American and Israeli visitors.

"Now, they are forcing us from this land because Omer wants to expand," he said, referring to a Jewish community next to the Tarabin al-Sana.

Benny Shiloh, who served as head of minority affairs in the Prime Minister's Office during the previous government, believes that many of the Bedouin land claims are without merit.

"They claim land, but did not pay one penny. Where ownership has been proven, the government has paid compensation. Still, there's a lot of bluffing and lying."

"Unfortunately," Shiloh added, "a modern state cannot live with wanderers."

Israel's poorest ethnic group

Elie Rekhess, director of Tel Aviv University's Program on Arab Politics in Israel, takes a more conciliatory tone.

"There is a significant measure of truth in the Bedouin claims," Rekhess said.

"None of the government ministers would argue that what the Bedouin are saying is totally invalid. The problem is, where is the truth? I believe it passes somewhere in the middle."

Even among those Bedouin who have settled in communities that are recognized by the government, there is bitterness.

As the poorest ethnic group in Israel today, "we Bedouin lag behind even other Israeli Arabs, who themselves lag behind Jewish citizens," Mussa Abu Seheiban, mayor of the Bedouin town of Rahat, near Beersheba, told the visitors.

Meeting with representatives from the Abraham Fund, a U.S.-based organization that funds Arab-Jewish coexistence programs, Seheiban tried to explain the challenges facing his community.

"In Rahat, only 30 percent of the residents can afford to pay arnona (municipal taxes) and the vast majority live on Bituach Leumi (government stipends). Officially, our unemployment rate is 8.5 percent, but the real figure is as high as 50 percent."

Sixty-three percent of Rahat's population is younger than 18, Abu

Seheiban said. "Only 20 percent of the boys complete high school, and the number is even lower for the girls."

Noting that Rahat's sewers, roads and schools are in urgent need of upgrading, Abu Seheiban added, "We are citizens of the State of Israel, and we want to be given the same resources as Jewish" communities.

Government officials maintain that Bedouin needs are being addressed.

"The government wishes to assist in developing opportunities for the younger generation of Bedouin both in the economic and social spheres," said Moshe Fogel, a spokesman for the Netanyahu government.

"Over the years, efforts have been made to deal with the housing and social needs of the Bedouin community and without doubt, these efforts will continue and even increase."

Among the bright spots are the first-ever industrial park in the Bedouin community, now under construction on the outskirts of Rahat; a series of new vocational training centers; and a 2-year-old "incubator" that has enabled several families to successfully grow roses in the middle of the desert.

While acknowledging these advances, Rahat's mayor called on the government to do even more to help the community.

Another challenge for Rahat — and Bedouin society in general — concerns the inherent conflict between traditional and modern societies.

"Bedouin society is undergoing Westernization, and all of a sudden the traditional norms are breaking down," Abu Seheiban said.

As the contact between Bedouins and Jewish Israelis has increased over the years, they have adapted a more Western way of life.

"Our young people are attracted to all the negative aspects of Western life, from delinquency to drug abuse," the mayor said.

Modernization of Bedouin society has made a particular impact on women.

Bedouin women, many of whom rarely venture beyond their encampments for reasons of modesty, nonetheless bear their children in modern Israeli hospitals, resulting in a lower rate of infant mortality.

"Our infant mortality rate has dropped, although it is higher than that of other Israelis, and our children are healthier and better educated than they were a generation ago," said Younis Abu Rabia, a Rahat physician.

Searching for work programs

How to create livelihoods for Bedouin women that could also improve their community's economy is an ongoing challenge.

"You can't expect our women to suddenly go into Beersheba and find work. A few educated ones do, but most would never leave their towns or encampments," Abu Rabia said.

"What's needed is some sort of work program inside the community, ideally one that will utilize the women's traditional skills."

Reflecting on the myriad social and economic problems that Rahat faces, Abu Seheiban said, "Rahat is considered the jewel, the model of Bedouin integration. Imagine how the rest of the Bedouin are faring."

The Tarabin al-Sana tribe, for one, is faring worse, according to its leader.

Seated in the communal tent where the tribe's men consume their meals — the women and children eat in a separate tent — tribe leader Abdullah blasted the government.

"Look at how we live. Our children have to go far away to school. We have no hospital, no running water.

"The only time we're not frustrated is before an election, when ministers come down and make us promises. But then we don't see them again."

This summer, the tribe's members took matters into their own hands.

When bulldozers from Omer began working just outside the encampment, the tribesmen clashed not only with the construction workers, but with hundreds of policemen called in to keep order.

By the time the demonstration was over, several Bedouins and police had been injured.

Ahmed Mahmoud, the sheik's cousin, sees little room for compromise.

"We want to live peaceably with our Jewish neighbors, but not at the expense of our land," he says, angry tears coming to his eyes.

"The government moved us before. We won't allow that to happen again." □

Orthodox groups file briefs against doctor-aided suicide

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Terminally ill people do not have a constitutional right to physician-assisted suicide, Orthodox Jewish groups have argued in briefs submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, the Rabbinical Council of America and Agudath Israel of America last week filed friend-of-the-court briefs urging the justices to support laws banning physician-assisted suicide.

Earlier this year, federal appeals courts in New York and Washington struck down laws prohibiting doctors in the two states from prescribing life-ending drugs for terminally ill but mentally competent people who want to die.

The court is scheduled to hear the states' appeals early next year and will issue a ruling by July.

The issue has generated considerable debate among Jewish doctors and medical ethicists.

The Orthodox community, for its part, has come out strongly against assisted-suicide, arguing that Jewish law prohibits a doctor from hastening the death of a patient.

"This is an issue of critical constitutional and moral significance which Jewish tradition clearly speaks to," said Nathan Diamant, director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs, which filed a joint brief with the Rabbinical Council.

"We believe that the recognition of a constitutional right to die for the terminally ill is a clear statement against the recognition and sanctity of human life."

In a separate brief, Agudath Israel of America said: "We respectfully urge the court to reverse these rulings and clarify the limits of constitutional moral revolution."

Meanwhile, lawyers for the Clinton administration also filed a friend-of-the-court brief urging the Supreme Court to reinstate the New York and Washington laws banning assisted-suicide.

"A state may conclude that it has an overriding interest in maintaining a prohibition against all assisted suicides," wrote Acting Solicitor General Walter Dellinger.

The high court first acknowledged a constitutional right to die in 1990 when it ruled that terminally ill people had a right to refuse life-sustaining medical treatment.

But in the administration's brief, Dellinger said, "There is an important and common-sense distinction between withdrawing artificial supports so that a disease will progress to its inevitable end, and providing chemicals to be used to kill someone." □

Netanyahu's pluralism pledge leaves some at G.A. confused

By Cynthia Mann

SEATTLE (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reaffirmed to North American Jews that he will protect the legal status in Israel of non-Orthodox conversions performed abroad.

That pledge prompted relief among many of the nearly 3,000 people gathered here for the annual General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations. Religious pluralism in Israel appeared to be a simmering issue in the hallways as well as in some of the formal sessions on Israel-Diaspora relations.

At the same time, however, Netanyahu said he would not fight current legislative efforts to reinforce the Orthodox's exclusive authority over conversions performed in Israel.

"We have Orthodox conversions in Israel. That won't change," he said. "We will not allow anyone to change the status quo."

The premier's reference to the "status quo" confused people at the G.A., leading some to believe that he was vowing also to protect the conversion rights of the non-Orthodox in Israel.

"It was a bit distorted," said Natalie Rose, a Jewish social services professional from Seattle.

"There was a lot of relief among Conservative and Reform people, but I'm not sure they understood. He wasn't explicit."

Dr. Herzl Spiro, a federation activist from Milwaukee, said Netanyahu made clear that "the status quo decided by the Israeli Supreme Court is not acceptable to his coalition and that he is willing to pay a political price that damages the unity of the Jewish people."

"I understand why he did what he did," said Spiro. At the same time, "we're in danger of blowing apart as a people."

A year ago, Israel's 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.

Protest among Orthodox

Netanyahu's appearance via satellite came after the adoption of a resolution the day before by the CJF Board of Delegates. The measure called on the Israeli government not to pass or change any legislation that "would change the current situation regarding recognition of conversions."

The resolution pointedly did not differentiate between Reform and Conservative conversions performed inside Israel and those in the Diaspora.

It thereby signaled a new willingness by the federation world to join the struggle for the legitimacy of non-Orthodox movements in Israel, where non-Orthodox denominations have no legal recognition.

The resolution generated strong protest from some Orthodox quarters, who viewed it as inappropriate meddling in internal Israeli affairs.

The CJF action came as legislation was expected to be submitted to the Knesset that would explicitly invalidate non-Orthodox conversions in Israel.

Its impact on conversions performed abroad has been unclear.

The legislation was prompted by last year's court ruling, which the Orthodox establishment viewed as a threat to its exclusive authority. Orthodox parties now in the governing coalition made support for such legislation a condition for their joining the coalition.

Netanyahu was scheduled to appear in person in Seattle, but canceled the trip because he believed that an agreement with the Palestinians was imminent on the redeployment of Israeli troops in Hebron.

He pledged to the G.A. delegates his government's commitment to the agreements made by the previous Israeli government.

At the same time, he emphasized that such agreements have to be reciprocal and that he would hold the Palestinians to their obligations.

He also said a broad Israeli consensus had to be achieved before moving forward in the "pivotal negotiations" toward final-status agreements.

His remarks come against the backdrop of some speculation in Israel that he seeks some form of partnership with the opposition Labor Party in the interest of forging a national consensus.

Meanwhile, opposition leader and former Prime Minister Shimon Peres received a standing ovation before and after he delivered a lengthy and impassioned speech to the delegates, who interrupted him nearly a dozen times with applause.

After emotionally recounting the details of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, he seemed to address the current prime minister.

"It is not enough to say you want peace," it is a matter of making it and, in doing so, understanding the need for "compromises and concessions," he said. □

Court ruling brings Lithuanian one step closer to deportation

By Alissa Kaplan

NEW YORK (JTA) — A federal appeals court in Philadelphia has upheld a ruling that Jonas Stelmokas entered the United States illegally by concealing his involvement in a Nazi-sponsored Lithuanian battalion during World War II.

The ruling affirms the 1995 revocation of Stelmokas' U.S. citizenship and places him one step closer to deportation, said Eli Rosenbaum, director of the Office of Special Investigations, the Nazi-hunting arm of the U.S. Justice Department.

"We've gotten over another hurdle," Rosenbaum said in an interview last week.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 3rd Circuit, which is based in Philadelphia, last week upheld in a 2-1 decision a U.S. District Court ruling to strip Stelmokas of his American citizenship.

Stelmokas has two more opportunities to appeal, Rosenbaum added.

The appeals court upheld Nov. 12 that Stelmokas, 80, a retired architect in Lansdowne, Pa., hid his wartime past when he came to the United States as a refugee in 1949.

Stelmokas was made a naturalized American citizen in 1955.

According to the court, Stelmokas voluntarily joined a Nazi-sponsored battalion that assisted in rounding up and killing Jews in Lithuania.

He served as an officer in the battalion, known as the Schutzmannschaft.

The group's members swore allegiance to Adolf Hitler and were under control of German Einsatzgruppe A, a mobile killing unit.

The appeals court also upheld the finding that Stelmokas was on duty when his entire battalion took part in the so-called Grosse Aktion, or Great Action, in which Nazi documents record that more than 9,000 Jews in the Kaunas ghetto were methodically killed in a 24-hour period. □

Netanyahu coalition members demand to review Hebron pact*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Rumbblings of discontent over the planned redeployment of Israeli troops in Hebron emerged this week from within Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's own government and from the right-wing camp at large.

The criticisms, which prompted some to believe a national unity government would be required to implement the redeployment, came as Israeli and Palestinian negotiators held their seventh week of discussions aimed at concluding an agreement for the launch of self-rule in the volatile West Bank town.

Knesset member Michael Kleiner of the Geshet Party said this week that he would vote against the government in a no-confidence ballot if Netanyahu signed an agreement on Hebron without bringing it first to the Knesset for approval.

Geshet, led by Foreign Minister David Levy, had run in the country's May 29 elections on a combined list that included Netanyahu's own Likud Party.

Along with his threat of a no-confidence vote, Kleiner submitted a petition Sunday to the High Court of Justice.

The petition demanded that Netanyahu make available all understandings and commitments Israel made to Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat in connection with the Hebron agreement.

The National Religious Party, also a member of the governing coalition, has likewise demanded to see an agreement before it is signed.

Another voice in the chorus of discontent was that of the powerful chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Uzi Landau, who is a member of Likud.

"I will do everything to give full expression to my total rejection of this agreement," Landau told the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Commentators noted that Netanyahu's possible consideration of a national unity government was more likely a stern signal to dissenters within his governing coalition than an invitation to the Labor Party to help form a new government.

Tackle toughest issues

Speculation about the potential for forming a national unity government increased after Finance Minister Dan Meridor told Israel Television this week that he believed that it would be the best way to assure the success of a permanent-status agreement with the Palestinians.

In recent weeks, Labor and Likud officials have held contacts in an effort to come up with agreed-upon principles for the final-status negotiations, which will tackle the toughest issues confronting the two sides, including Jerusalem, settlements, refugees and the political status of the Palestinian entity.

In an effort to counter the speculation, sources close to Netanyahu denied this week that he was considering a national unity government.

Meanwhile, the Yesha Council, which represents Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, this week launched a protest campaign against government policy.

"The phase of dialogue is ending. The phase of going out on the street has begun," Yesha leader Pinchas Wallerstein said during a demonstration held outside last Friday's weekly Cabinet meeting.

On Sunday, settlers protested outside Netanyahu's residence in Jerusalem.

Wallerstein said the final decision to launch the

campaign was made after settlement leaders emerged dissatisfied from recent meetings they held with the prime minister.

The prime minister had failed to convince them that he would authorize renewed settlement construction activity, the settler leaders said.

The negotiations for the Hebron redeployment, a particularly sore spot for the settlers, continued this week with little apparent progress and with accusations from each negotiating team that the other side was responsible for the delay.

Nonetheless, in anticipation that an agreement will eventually be reached, Israel Defense Force troops have built observation points, fortified positions and installed close-circuit television cameras to monitor Jewish enclaves in the tense city. □

Holocaust denier loses bid for visa to enter Australia*By Jeremy Jones*

SYDNEY, Australia (JTA) — Australia's immigration minister has turned down a visa request from Holocaust denier David Irving.

Announcing his decision at a recent news conference, Philip Ruddock, immigration and multicultural affairs minister, said, "All applicants for visas to Australia must be assessed for good character."

Citing Irving's legal difficulties in Germany, Canada and Great Britain, Ruddock said, "Taken together, they reveal a consistent pattern of behavior that led me to conclude that Mr. Irving is not a person of good character."

Ruddock added that his decision "has nothing to do with notions of free speech. Mr. Irving's views and writings are well-known and remain readily available in Australia."

The Jewish community here welcomed Ruddock's decision.

Diane Shteinman, president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, expressed relief that the "elderly Holocaust survivors of our community will not be subject to further trauma and aggravation," which would be caused by Irving's presence here.

Irving announced from London that he would appeal the decision.

He said his enemies around the world had spread misinformation to keep him out of Australia.

He also claimed that only 1 million Jews were killed in World War II.

He said Holocaust survivors were all victims of faulty memory. □

Murdered Slovak Jews remembered*By Randi Druzin*

PRAGUE (JTA) — Jewish leaders unveiled a plaque last week in the Slovak town of Kolbasov in remembrance of 11 Jewish citizens who were killed there by Ukrainian nationalists in December 1945.

Speaking at the Nov. 12 unveiling, Pavol Traubner, the honorary chairman of the Central Association of Slovak Jewish Communities, said Kolbasov was only one of many European towns with Jewish martyrs.

Condemning anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, the chairman warned that other religious groups could be persecuted in the future the way Jews were in the past.

The Ukrainians who murdered the 11 Slovak Jews during World War II had been part of a nationalist unit known as the Banderites. □