

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israel observed a day of mourning for the 73 Israeli troops killed a day earlier in the mid-air collision of two military helicopters over northern Israel. In New York, a memorial service for the victims was held at the Israeli Consulate. [Page 1]

■ Three Swiss banking giants transferred \$71 million to open a humanitarian fund for Holocaust victims. Advocates of a fund called the move a positive first step. [Page 3]

■ The European Union also provided a letter of guarantees to the Palestinians to accompany the Hebron deal signed with Israel last month. The letter, disclosed by Yasser Arafat, had been kept secret at the request of Israel, he said. [Page 3]

■ The British government launched an investigation into gold and other valuables that had belonged to Jews but were looted by Nazis. About \$65 million in valuables is now stored at the Bank of England.

■ A U.S. Navy plane carrying four crew members remains missing after routine training exercises off Israel. Rescue efforts are under way in the Mediterranean Sea near Haifa.

■ Two small explosions went off in a Haifa neighborhood Wednesday night, but did not cause injuries or damage. Police were investigating the blasts and searching for suspects.

■ The United States agreed to join Israel and Turkey in joint air and sea maneuvers. Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai finalized details in talks during a visit to the American aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt, which was docked in Israel this week.

■ Jury deliberations began in the Crown Heights civil rights trial. The jury will decide the fate of two black men charged in the fatal stabbing of a Chasidic Jew during the 1991 riots in Brooklyn. During a 1992 state murder trial, one of the defendants, Lemrick Nelson Jr., was acquitted.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Gripped by grief, Israel mourns loss of 'so many boys'**

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The parents of Assaf Rothenberg long had the eerie feeling that their son would not return from Lebanon alive.

Voicing the day-in-day-out sense of foreboding felt by many parents of soldiers serving in Lebanon, the father of the 20-year-old paratrooper said, "For a few months already, whenever Assaf went into Lebanon, I felt that he might not come back."

At 9 p.m. Tuesday, when the television first reported that two army helicopters had crashed over northern Israel, he said he and his wife "knew what happened."

The Israel Defense Force "notified us later, but we already knew."

The Rothenbergs were far from alone in their grief.

Stunned by the news that 73 Israeli soldiers and air crew had perished in the mid-air collision, the whole nation plunged into mourning Wednesday.

Throughout the country, people expressed shock, and then grief, over the worst military air disaster in the country's history.

When Israel Television first interrupted its prime-time programming Tuesday night to announce the crash, thousands of families were thrown into panic.

In many cases, it took several hours for the IDF to confirm the worst or for the sons, stationed in Lebanon and elsewhere, to call home and relieve the anxiety.

Although most immediate family members knew the fate of their loved ones by dawn, others had to wait longer.

All too accustomed to rushing to the newsstand to check whether someone they knew had been injured or killed in an accident or terror attack, many were shaken to find that the newspapers contained almost no information on the victims' identities.

The reason: Many of the bodies had not yet been identified.

On Wednesday, the list of those who died grew longer as the day wore on, and several funerals took place that afternoon.

Throughout the country, restaurants and places of entertainment closed early, in accordance with the Knesset's decision to declare Wednesday and Thursday days of national mourning.

The Chief Rabbinate called for a day of fasting, to be followed by a mass prayer Thursday evening at the Western Wall.

The Education Ministry, which had recently ended a year's worth of special classes related to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, encouraged teachers to discuss the latest tragedy with their students.

Although far from the site of the crash, the streets of Jerusalem were unnaturally hushed the day after. Most cafes and restaurants had closed by noon, despite the fact that they were permitted to remain open until 3 p.m.

Several places of business did not open at all.

'How do you make sense of it?'

"I didn't want to come in at all today, but what could I do?" said Saida Shahat, the owner of a gift shop on Ben Yehuda Street. Tears streaming down her face, she said, "I couldn't sleep."

"They were all 20, 21 years old," she said. "They were like flowers, and now they're dead."

Shlomit Ashur, an 18-year-old waitress at Big Apple Pizza, said she had just closed the pizzeria a few minutes earlier.

"There were several people here, mostly tourists, but I told them we were closing early and why. Everyone seemed to understand."

About to enter the IDF herself, Ashur said she has many friends now serving in Lebanon. "This morning I received a ton of phone calls from the boys to say they were safe. I'm relieved, but this is still a terrible tragedy."

"So many boys, how do you make sense of it? It doesn't matter that I didn't know any of them. These are all my people and it hurts."

Those who knew the victims spoke of their commitment to peace and their love of life.

A physician at Rambam Medical Center who knew one of the

List of Israeli crash victims

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The following is the list of soldiers killed in Tuesday's military helicopter crash in Israel. The list includes all those names released for publication as of midday Wednesday.

Staff Sgt. Idan Alper, 20, of Bat Yam	Staff Sgt. Shilo Levy, 21, of Karnei Shomron
Sgt. Maj. Saguy Arazi, 22, of Kfar Yona	Staff Sgt. Nadav Lishchinsky, 20, of Sde Avraham
Staff Sgt. Emil Azulai, 20, of Eilat	Sgt. Maj. Gal Meiseis, 24, of Kiryat Ata
Lt. Alon Babyin, 21, of Givat Ze'ev	Capt. Vadi Melnick, 24, of Safed
Staff Sgt. Rafi Balakti, 20, of Migdal Ha'emek	Sgt. Vladislav Michaelov, 22, of Tel Aviv
Lt. Kobi Ben-Shem, 20, of Ramat Hasharon	Sgt. Idan Minaker, 20, of Kibbutz Nir Yitzhak
Master Sgt. Paul Bibas, 26, of Ashdod	Staff Sgt. Gilad Mushaker, 20, of Jerusalem
Maj. Ronan Chalfon, 35, of Tiberias	Staff Sgt. Avraham Ofner, 21, of Kiryat Tivon
Lt. Datan Cohen, 21, of Hadera	Lt. Eran Peretz, 21, of Kibbutz Deganya Alef
Maj. Yirmi Cohen, 23, of Rosh Ha'ayin	Sgt. Vitaly Pesachov, 19, of Acre
Lt. Gil Eisen, 21, of Ness Ziona	Staff Sgt. Ran Erman, 20, of Ra'anana
Staff Sgt. Ran Erman, 20, of Ra'anana	Sgt. Gideon Posner, 22, of Tel Aviv
Sgt. Menachem Feldman, 20, of Kiryat Chaim	Capt. Vitali Redinsky, 33, of Or Akiva
Sgt. Mito Gideon, 21, of Lod	Staff Sgt. Assaf Rotenberg, 20, of Tel Aviv
Sgt. Avishai Gidron, 19, of Kiryat Motzkin	Sgt. Shachar Rozenberg, 19, of Ness Ziona
Sgt. Maj. Tamir Glazer, 24, of Holon	Sgt. Moshe Saban, 19, of Hod Hasharon
Sgt. Tomer Goldberg, 29, of Moshav Dishon	Staff Sgt. Omer Shalit, 19, of Jerusalem
Sgt. Aviv Gonen, 20, of Petach Tikva	Sgt. Yiftach Shalpuversky, 20, of Hod Hasharon
Staff Sgt. Michael Katz, of Mitzpe Netafah	Staff Sgt. Gil Sharabi, 22, of Rehovot
Sgt. Fadi Kazamel, 19, of Beit Jann	Staff Sgt. Tsafir Shoval, 22, of Kibbutz Bar Am
Sgt. Tomer Kadar, 21, of Kibbutz Negba	Lt. Nir Shraibman, 20, of Kfar Sava
Staff Sgt. Shachar Kessus, 20, of Alfei Menashe	Lt. Erez Shtark, 21, of Kiryat Ata
Staff Sgt. Tom Kitain, 20, of Neve Shalom	Staff Sgt. Asaf Siboni, 20, of Kibbutz Nir Am
Lt. Dvir Lanir, 21, of Moshav Moledet	Sgt. Yaron Tsufiot, 20, of Tel Aviv
Master Sgt. Ilan Lentsitsky, 20, of Haifa	Sgt. Danny Zahavi, 19, of Haifa

France and Russia. Among the first to express their sadness over the loss of life were Jordan's King Hussein and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat.

Netanyahu canceled a scheduled visit to Amman and postponed a meeting he had set with Arafat for Thursday.

The Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah group and Iran issued statements rejoicing over the Israeli deaths. □

Ronald Lauder is nominated to take over helm of the JNF

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — Cosmetics heir and philanthropist Ronald Lauder has been nominated to be the next president of the Jewish National Fund of America.

JNF's nominating committee chose Lauder on Monday. The board is slated to weigh in with its vote on Feb. 10.

Questions have arisen, however, as to whether the process by which the board was notified of next week's meeting was in compliance with technical requirements spelled out by the organization's constitution, sources say.

Some say that following the letter of the law means that the process could be delayed by at least two weeks.

JNF officials would only say that plans are to hold the meeting as scheduled.

Lauder would take over for Milton Shapiro, who has said he would step down before his term expires at the end of the year.

Many in JNF's lay leadership see Lauder's high profile as a prescription for the organization's recovery after recent problems over its fiscal management.

For Lauder's part, he is said to be vying for the chairmanship of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which will become vacant later this year.

Being president of a member-organization is a prerequisite for the job. □

Israel selling vacant homes in 30 West Bank settlements

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In a move likely to spark Palestinian protest, Israel's Housing Ministry has published newspaper advertisements to sell 120 apartments in 30 West Bank settlements.

The action came in the wake of a government decision last year to expand existing Jewish settlements and allow the sale of 3,000 empty apartments in the West Bank.

The move came days before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat were slated to hold a summit aimed in part at airing complaints each side has against the other.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat called the planned apartment sales "worrisome and dangerous."

The Palestinians have opposed the Netanyahu government's settlement policy, saying that it is changing facts on the ground before final-status talks.

But Housing Ministry officials defended the decision, adding that the timing was purely a logistical matter.

"Everyone knows that for the past five years, some 3,000 apartments have been standing empty," Elisha Peleg, a senior adviser in the Housing Ministry, told Israel Television. "Now is a good time to let people move in."

Jewish settler leaders have been pressing the government to implement the decisions it made on settlement activities. □

victims, Vitaly Redinsky, a 33-year-old doctor who was serving in Lebanon as a reservist, recalled "a very quiet, very nice, very serious man."

"Coming from the former Soviet Union, he had to pass many exams, and he did so with honors. He worked so, so hard, and we believed that he would attain great things."

Redinsky leaves a wife and 6-year-old son.

The disaster took place at a time when a national debate had reopened on an old, sore topic: whether it was wise for Israel to remain in southern Lebanon, where it has been fighting a cat-and-mouse war with Hezbollah gunmen for years.

Israel established the 9-mile-wide security zone in 1985 to prevent cross-border terror attacks and to prevent the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement from firing Katyusha rockets at northern Israeli communities.

But a steady toll of Israeli casualties over the years has more than once led to serious doubts about Israel's strategy in Lebanon.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the crash site at Moshav Sha'ar Yishuv, a farming community located near Kiryat Shmona. No one on the ground had been hurt in the incident.

Netanyahu stressed that the tragic crash would not change Israel's policy in Lebanon.

"We are not going to be deterred, and we are not going to relent," Netanyahu told reporters. "We shall defend our country. We shall reduce the risks. Ultimately, we shall achieve peace, too."

One of the helicopters crashed into a vacant house on the moshav. The helicopters were carrying large amounts of ammunition, and the impact set off a series of fiery explosions.

Netanyahu said army investigators did not yet know the cause of the crash.

A high-level commission began investigating the collision. Although the accident occurred during bad weather, military officials ruled out weather as a factor, saying that transport helicopters often flew in heavy rains.

Condolences, meanwhile, continued to pour in from around the world, including the United States, Egypt,

NEWS ANALYSIS**Swiss banks' move on fund seen as a key turning point***By Daniel Kurtzman*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A decision by three Swiss banks to transfer \$71 million into a fund earmarked for Holocaust victims is being viewed as an important turning point in the longtime quest for financial and moral accounting.

Credit Suisse, Swiss Bank Corp. and Union Bank of Switzerland placed \$100 million Swiss francs into a special escrow account Wednesday and invited further contributions from the Swiss government, the Swiss National Bank and other institutions.

The action marks the first concrete move since Switzerland's announcement last month that it would establish a fund to begin compensating Holocaust victims and their heirs whose families transferred their assets to Swiss banks for safekeeping. The decision comes after months of international pressure on Switzerland in the face of revelations that it hoarded the wealth of Holocaust victims while helping to finance the Nazi war effort.

In a statement, the three Swiss banking giants said, "Reflecting the intensive discussions which are under way in Switzerland to create such a fund, the banks said the time has come for action, not words."

The World Jewish Congress, which spearheaded the campaign for such a fund, welcomed the move as a "positive response" to the WJC's call late last year for a "good faith financial gesture" from the Swiss.

Elan Steinberg, WJC's executive director, stressed that the banks made clear that the humanitarian fund was only preliminary and that it would not prejudice a final settlement. "I believe we finally may have at last turned a corner," Steinberg said, adding that "the road toward complete moral and material reparation is still a long one."

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), who has led the congressional quest, said the Swiss move amounted to an "acknowledgment of wrongdoing" and called it a "first step." He said, "I believe very strongly that \$71 million is nowhere near enough, but it is an acknowledgment and a start."

'Not in the cards'

The U.S. State Department also weighed in, saying that the banks' contributions marked "an important demonstration of good will." It also expressed hope that the Swiss government and central bank would contribute to the fund "expeditiously."

The move comes a week after New York politicians threatened to pull the rug out from under three Swiss banks operating in Manhattan if Switzerland did not make good on its promise to set up the fund. The New York state Assembly and City Council of New York announced separate hearings last week to examine ways to help Holocaust victims and their heirs reclaim their wealth.

The two bodies said they would review New York's relationship with Swiss banks and examine how a foreign bank's license or certification could be revoked.

In addition, N.Y. Gov. George Pataki said he would order audits to determine whether any looted assets were transferred to the New York branches of Swiss banks.

Steinberg last week welcomed the New York proposals as further help in "advancing the cause of justice and morality." But after the establishment of the Holocaust fund in Switzerland this week, he said, "I don't think a boycott is in the cards."

The state Assembly and City Council are still planning to go forward with hearings next week, but it remained unclear what, if any, action they might now take.

In another development, the United States, Britain and France have agreed to halt distribution of \$68 million in gold looted by the Nazis while officials investigate whether some of it came from Holocaust victims. The gold bars, which have been stored at the New York Federal Reserve Bank and the Bank of England, were supposed to be distributed to Europe's central banks early this year.

But D'Amato and Jewish groups, led by the WJC, intervened after documents unearthed at the National Archives revealed that some of the plundered gold had been melted down from the wedding rings, watches and even the teeth of Holocaust victims.

The Clinton administration, citing newly found evidence in support of the finding, convinced Britain and France to freeze distribution of the stockpile until the facts could be weighed.

WJC President Edgar Bronfman has asked that the money be turned over to Holocaust victims. □

European Union guarantees accompanied Hebron accord*By Tamarah Benima*

THE HAGUE (JTA) — The United States is not the only country that provided letters of guarantees for the Hebron agreement.

A letter of guarantees from the European Union also accompanied the accord, Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat has disclosed.

Arafat referred to the E.U. document during a joint news conference with Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok and Foreign Minister Hans van Mierlo after the three held a two-hour meeting to discuss the Middle East peace process. Arafat said Monday that the E.U. document, in which he said the body's 15 member-states committed themselves to ensuring the implementation of all signed Israeli-Palestinian agreements, was kept secret at Israel's request.

Until now, the only letters of guarantee known to have accompanied the Jan. 17 Hebron accord were those provided by the United States, which played a central role in bringing about the agreement on transferring most of the West Bank town to Palestinian self-rule.

Arafat also told the news conference that he expected to announce the creation of a Palestinian state "in 1999" — presumably at the conclusion of the final-status talks, which are scheduled to end in May of that year.

Israeli officials acknowledged the existence of the E.U. document. "The Europeans sent the letter unilaterally to the Palestinians," said Gideon Mark, spokesman for the Israeli Consulate in New York. The guarantees, he added, are "not binding on anyone but the Europeans." Mark had not seen the E.U. document, but said he believed that other Israeli officials had. He confirmed that the document contained a European commitment to supervise implementation of the Israeli-Palestinian accords, adding that it also pledged economic support to the Palestinian Authority.

Levy visited the Netherlands last week, but there was no mention at the time of any E.U. letter of guarantees. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to visit the Netherlands next week.

Van Mierlo, whose country holds the six-month rotating E.U. presidency until July, also confirmed the existence of the until-now undisclosed E.U. document, adding that it was requested by Arafat and ultimately agreed to by the Israeli government. Van Mierlo said Israel had requested that it be kept secret, but added, "There is nothing that eventually does not come out in the open."

Arafat is set to meet with the 15 E.U. foreign ministers Feb. 24 in Brussels, where he is expected to sign a cooperation accord between the European Union and the Palestinian Authority. □

Congressional report warns: War in Middle East is imminent

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Middle East is on the verge of a major regional war, according to a congressional report.

“The present vulnerability of Israel is so great that there is a unique opportunity to, at the very least, begin the process leading to the destruction of Israel,” according to a Dec. 10, 1996, study by the U.S. House of Representative’s Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare.

But Middle East experts — including both champions and critics of the peace process — are calling the report “garbage” and “alarmist and unreliable.”

The report’s authors, Yossef Bodansky and Vaughn Forrest, who serve as staff members for the task force, had planned to keep their document, “Approaching the New Cycle of Arab-Israeli Fighting,” secret, according to an aide to a member of Congress on the task force.

But members of Congress received the report, and it has been leaked to the media and posted on the Internet, where it has created a stir among some on the political right. It appeared in cyberspace just as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government was signing the latest agreement with the Palestinian Authority on Hebron.

Just as the majority of Israelis — indicated by public opinion surveys and the large Knesset majority affirming the accord — were letting down their guard, the report challenged the fundamental assumptions about the Arab world held by champions of the peace process.

Instead of peace, the report argues, Arab states are exploring the option of war. Driving this is the explosion of fundamentalism throughout the Islamic world, as well as distrust of Israeli intentions and a belief that Israelis, embittered by internal dissension, have lost the will to fight. The underlying message of the report is that Israel is foolish to put its trust in states whose very existences are being challenged by militant Islam.

‘Stitched-together quotes’

But Middle East experts disagree with the report’s conclusions.

“There has hardly been a frantic military buildup, certainly not in comparison to the past,” said Barry Rubin, senior resident scholar at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies of Bar-Ilan University. Rubin, who called the report “garbage,” also said that “the idea that there is some kind of Arab-Islamic conspiracy to attack Israel is totally unbased on any fact whatsoever.”

Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, the Philadelphia-based think tank that publishes the journal *Middle East Quarterly*, agreed.

The report is nothing more than “stitched-together quotes” of dubious provenance and authority. While the Middle East is “a dangerous place,” he said, for Israel, it is “the best of possible times” because “for the first time Israel is not facing any existential threat.” States that would make war against Israel are either too weak militarily or too preoccupied domestically, or both, Pipes says.

According to the report, specific military moves suggesting active preparations for a possible war in the near future began in the spring of 1996.

“These activities range from highly irregular and highly significant military exercises to political and international agreements,” according to the report.

The authors base their conclusions in part on the belief that “political-strategic dynamics in the Middle East have already reached a deadlock that makes a dramatic breakout possible only through cataclysmic violence.”

But according to some analysts, the breakout came peacefully, when Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat signed the Hebron accord last month.

Shoshana Bryen, director of special projects at the Jewish Institute of National Security Affairs, said the report was written at a low point in Israeli-Arab relations, when Hebron negotiations appeared deadlocked.

Bodansky, who is credited with writing the bulk of the report, defended his conclusions. “This is a very prudent and reasonable assessment given the overall regional dynamics over the last few months,” he wrote in the report.

Among the events chronicled in the report:

- A spring 1996 summit between Syrian President Hafez Assad and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to agree that Iranian troops could cross Iraq to join a Syrian offensive against Israel.

- A May 1996 Iranian military exercise simulating a deep offensive in an area identical to the distance between Iran and Israel.

- A mid-June 1996 agreement between Iran and Syria to codify military cooperation against Israel. In mid-August, Iraq signed on as well.

The report also states that Iran has functional nuclear weapons obtained from former Soviet Central Asia.

According to the report, Syria gave a briefing in late November to its Arab allies stating, “The Syrian leadership now believes that the military option to liberate the Golan Heights from the Israeli army is a legitimate option. It also believes that Syria has the right to resort to this option at any time.”

The report outlines a war scenario in which Syria would provoke a Lebanese attack from Israel’s security zone in southern Lebanon, which would, in turn, instigate a major Israeli response that would include the killing of Syrian troops. Syria would retaliate by launching missiles against Israel. Syria would also work with the Palestinians, and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza would launch a “wave of terrorism.”

According to Rubin, the Mideast analyst, there has been concern over the possibility of war with Syria, “but intelligence assessments argue that this will not happen.”

While Rubin said “we must be prepared” for any possible war with Syria, it is unlikely other Arab nations would become involved.

Bodansky defends the track record of the task force, as does Rep. James Saxton, (R-N.J.), who serves as its chairman. Noting that he views the situation as “quite alarming,” Saxton said, “This may be a situation which will defuse itself. On the other hand, it may be something that is more serious” that needs to be explored further. □

(*Shammai Engelmayer, news editor of the MetroWest Jewish News, contributed to this report.*)

Palestinians admit prisoner was tortured before his death

NEW YORK (JTA) — A senior Palestinian official acknowledged this week that a Palestinian detainee was tortured before he died in a Nablus hospital.

Freih Abu Medein, Palestinian justice minister, reportedly said Monday that Yusouf Ismail Al-Baba, 32, a real estate agent who had been accused of fraud, was tortured while being interrogated in the Palestinian-ruled enclave. The Palestinian Authority continues to investigate Al-Baba’s death.

In its annual report on human rights conditions around the world, the U.S. State Department noted that the Palestinian Authority used “excessive force” against detainees, resulting in four deaths in 1996. Five such deaths were reported in the previous year. □