

NEWS AT A GLANCE

- **The U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal by San Francisco aimed at letting the city keep a 103-foot-tall Christian cross in a public park. The American Jewish Congress hailed the development, saying the high court sent a clear signal "that government cannot be the endorser of religion."**

- **Israel's High Court of Justice rejected two petitions by Arabs and Israeli peace activists to temporarily halt construction of a Jewish neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem. At the disputed site, meanwhile, bulldozers continued work amid heavy security. [Page 4]**

- **Only a minority of Israelis believe that now was the right time to begin construction on Har Homa, according to a Gallup poll. The poll found that 60 percent of those questioned supported the decision to build in principle, but only 40 percent thought this was the right time.**

- **One Israeli soldier was killed and three others wounded when Hezbollah guerrillas attacked their patrol in southern Lebanon.**

- **Jordan's King Hussein chose a new prime minister with strong ties to Israel. Abdul Salam al-Majali, who brokered the 1994 peace agreement with Israel, will replace Abdul Karim al-Kabariti, whom Hussein dismissed. Hussein, meanwhile, has rescheduled a meeting with President Clinton for next week. [Page 4]**

- **Israel and the World Jewish Congress swiftly condemned Palestinian charges that Israelis injected Palestinian children with the AIDS virus during the intifada. [Page 2]**

- **An Italian military court granted house arrest to former SS Capt. Erich Priebke, who is awaiting a retrial for his role in the World War II massacre of 335 men and boys outside Rome.**

- **A trial opened for four French neo-Nazis who face charges in connection with a 1990 act that prompted nationwide outrage. The four are accused of unearthing a body in the Jewish cemetery of Carpentras and desecrating the corpse.**

NEWS ANALYSIS**Swiss officials win plaudits from watchful Jewish groups**

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — Matching deeds to their words, Swiss officials have won a vote of confidence from Jewish leaders that Switzerland is at last prepared to confront its wartime past.

The Swiss have shown a willingness to "face their past with honesty and courage so they can have an honorable future," said Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Congress, the organization that has led international calls on Switzerland to make a moral as well as financial accounting of its actions.

Bronfman was speaking last week at a joint news conference with Swiss Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti, who came to New York and Washington to convey that the Swiss are committed to understanding the truth about their country's past.

"We must try to answer the questions put to us, openly, self-critically, yet also self-confidently," Cotti said in a March 13 address to Jewish leaders gathered for a kosher-catered lunch at the posh Four Seasons restaurant.

Those questions deal with the nature of Switzerland's wartime ties to the Nazis and its handling of Holocaust victims' bank accounts.

Underlying the controversy is the issue of Switzerland's famed neutrality.

Special Ambassador Thomas Borer, Switzerland's leading troubleshooter for dealing with the accusations against his country, joined in Cotti's efforts to emphasize that the Swiss role in the war was complex.

"Under international law, neutrality refers only to military neutrality," Borer said in an interview. By this limited definition, the Swiss were clearly neutral.

But Borer went further, addressing the questions of economic and moral neutrality. "Economic neutrality was not feasible when we were surrounded on all sides by the Axis powers," he said.

"Switzerland was never morally neutral," he continued. "We were always on the side of the Allies. In fact, the Nazis accused us of being biased toward the Allies."

"Ironically, 50 years later, we're now being accused by the Allies of being biased toward the Nazis. The tables have been turned on us."

Hard-won words of support

Jewish leaders appear to be willing now to accept the complexity of Switzerland's position as they and Swiss officials have come to establish a working relationship after months of tense exchanges.

Bronfman's words of support were hard-won, coming as the Swiss engage in the wrenching process of collective self-examination.

Released documents have provided crushing evidence that Switzerland helped finance the Nazi war machine by providing Germany with Swiss francs and materiel in exchange for tons of gold bars from Hitler's Reichsbank. Switzerland's purchases of gold ingots imprinted with the Nazi insignia touched a particularly raw Jewish nerve because of growing suspicions that the gold came not only from the central banks of European countries overrun by the Nazis — so-called monetary gold.

It also may have included privately owned, or non-monetary, gold — some of which may have come from wedding bands and tooth fillings stripped from Jews on their way to the death camps.

Further tarnishing the Swiss, and exacerbating Jewish sensibilities, were charges that Swiss banks have withheld from their rightful Jewish owners the contents of bank accounts opened during the war years.

Jewish organizations have said Swiss banks hold up to \$7 billion from Jewish deposits made during that period.

At a speech last Friday at the National Press Club in Washington, Cotti referred to past Swiss actions as "immoral," "outrageous" and "inexcusable." His comments stood in marked contrast to the angry, defensive posture projected by some Swiss officials in recent months.

For half a century, Switzerland was widely perceived as the glorious

haven across the Alps where refugees could escape the devastation engulfing the rest of the European continent.

Suddenly, as the charges mounted against them, the Swiss were being perceived as a country of greedy, jack-booted bankers secretly in league with the Nazi oppressors.

Gradually, however, Swiss anger was replaced by a seeming willingness to explore the darker side of the country's wartime experience.

Cotti's U.S. visit was intended to serve as the capstone of that change in posture.

Some observers have suggested that his comments were intended purely to protect Swiss banks from growing threats of boycotts. Indeed, the general manager of Switzerland's second largest bank, Swiss Bank Corporation, said last week that the institution had lost several customers in the wake of the mounting accusations.

In addition, according to some, the timing of Cotti's visit was suspect, coming just weeks before a U.S. panel issues its findings. According to sources familiar with that inquiry, it will soon deliver a scathing verdict indicating that Swiss purchases of Nazi bullion included Jewish-owned gold.

Swiss hold no meeting with D'Amato

While in Washington, Cotti met with Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat, who is heading the investigation. He also met with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright — but not with Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), the chairman of the Senate Banking Committee and one of Switzerland's harshest critics.

Cotti's visit, the observers added, was part of a public relations onslaught aimed at softening the impact of some hard blows to come.

Such skepticism may certainly reflect more than a grain of truth. But Bronfman took a different tack.

When asked whether he trusted the Swiss, Bronfman said at the news conference with Cotti, "I will have trust in them based on what they do." Bronfman was signaling that he is watching Swiss actions closely.

Those actions include Swiss President Arnold Koller's proposal to create a so-called "Swiss Foundation for Solidarity" to help the "victims of poverty and catastrophes," including, "of course, victims of the Holocaust." To create the foundation, the Swiss National Bank would sell off some \$5 billion of its gold reserves. Interest and other investment income from the proceeds of that sale would generate some \$200 million annually to support humanitarian causes.

But Holocaust survivors should not expect support from this foundation anytime soon.

The Swiss Parliament is expected to vote next year on Koller's proposal, after which it will be subject to at least one national referendum because the proposal requires a change in the Swiss Constitution.

Cotti and other officials promised that they would actively campaign to get the proposal ratified by the Swiss public. He also told reporters last week that current indications are "promising," referring to two recent newspaper polls showing some 50 percent to 73 percent support among the Swiss for the foundation.

Yet, even after a successful referendum, documents provided by the Swiss indicate that the process of selling off the \$5 billion in gold reserves may take up to eight years. Only then would the foundation have the \$200 million in annual income to distribute.

Needy Holocaust survivors, Cotti and other officials maintain, should apply to a separate "Special Fund" that was created recently by Switzerland's three largest banks.

This fund, which has received additional contributions from Swiss industrial giants and from the country's

central bank, now contains some \$190 million, according to Cotti. The procedures for applying to the fund will soon be developed, and "the first payments should come by this summer," Borer said.

In their comments, Cotti and Borer sought to strike a balance between conceding the vast injustices that Switzerland had committed and reminding their audiences that the Swiss could still stand proud.

In his speech to Jewish leaders, for example, Cotti acknowledged that Switzerland had turned away 30,000 Jewish refugees during the war. But he added that "it was nonetheless possible for more than 25,000 Jews to cross the border and survive the war together with Switzerland's 20,000 Jewish citizens."

Similarly, at the National Press Club, Cotti said he was trying to "create a certain balance in a time where this period seems to be painted only with black colors."

Borer, for his part, readily admitted that international pressure had forced the Swiss to reassess their wartime actions. But he also called for a letup in the criticism, saying in an interview that it would have a negative impact on a Swiss public already "stung" by world opinion. Such criticism, he added, could hurt efforts to gain public support in the upcoming referendum.

Cotti made a similar observation to reporters in Washington, telling them, "The Swiss do not like to be backed into a corner or to be unfairly accused."

Bronfman and other Jewish leaders appear to be giving the Swiss leaders the benefit of the doubt — for now. But at the same time, it appears certain that they will keep a watchful eye that Swiss leaders live up to their promises. □

Israel blasts Palestinian charge that it infected children with HIV

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A senior Palestinian representative to the United Nations has drawn swift and strong condemnation from Israel for accusing the Jewish state of injecting 300 Palestinian children with the virus that causes AIDS.

Nabil Ramlawi, the Palestinian observer delegate to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, cited a litany of what he called "crimes of genocide by the Israeli occupation authorities against the Palestinian people" at the opening session of the commission's annual meeting last week.

This list included a charge that Israeli authorities "infected by injection 300 Palestinian children" with HIV "during the years of the intifada."

Ramlawi claimed that the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot confirmed the report in January.

In fact, the Egyptian newspaper al-Ahram printed a full retraction on its front page of the same charges, "admitting that the story was completely false and that nothing of the kind had appeared in Yediot Achronot," Israel's ambassador to the U.N. commission, Yosef Lamdan, wrote to the body's president.

"The Palestinian observer has never had a reputation for accuracy and integrity, but today he has surpassed himself," Lamdan said in Geneva after the charges were leveled.

"This is a blatant barefaced lie, an absolute and total libel," he said, "the product of a sick and infected mind."

The World Jewish Congress representative in Geneva, Morris Abram, called upon the president of the U.N. body, Ambassador Miraslov Somol, to "challenge the assertion of the Observer of Palestine as baseless, false and intolerable in the Commission of Human Rights." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

U.S. policy toward Har Homa draws mixed Jewish reaction

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — The international political uproar over Israeli construction of Jewish housing in eastern Jerusalem initially found American Jews circling the wagons.

Some criticized the timing of Israel's decision, saying that it would endanger the peace process. But most defended Israel's sovereign right to build anywhere in the city of Jerusalem.

What subsequently provoked a stronger and more divided reaction, however, was the Clinton administration's response to the construction at Har Homa.

"A significant part of the community is very concerned about the way Israel's been treated in recent days," said Kenneth Jacobson, director of international affairs at the Anti-Defamation League.

"The decisions by the Israeli government were not illegal and did not violate the Oslo accords," he said, referring to the Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements.

World reactions were "way out of proportion" and "we would have hoped our own government would have understood and tried to temper them." Jacobson, like many others, lauded the recent veto by the United States of a U.N. Security Council resolution that denounced the construction as illegal. But he said there were a series of other steps "that were disappointing, and not necessary."

He was referring, among other things, to President Clinton's statement that he wished that the Har Homa decision had not been made "because I don't think it builds confidence."

"I think it builds distrust" between the Israelis and the Palestinians, Jacobson said.

What disturbed many even more was the U.S. decision to send a representative to last weekend's meeting of foreign diplomats in Gaza convened by Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat. Israel was not invited.

Blunt letter to Clinton

Despite the role the United States ultimately played in muting criticism of Israel from the meeting, many Jews said they were worried that it set a precedent that would hurt the peace process. An unusually blunt letter to Clinton from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby, said the conference "elevates the expectations of Palestinians that they can gain further concessions from Israel without negotiations."

"Second," the letter continued, "the willingness of the people of Israel to take risks for peace is based on their confidence in the support and friendship of the United States." American participation in the conference "diminishes that confidence."

AIPAC also drummed up opposition to the meeting from more than 100 lawmakers, most from the president's own party. But there were some American Jews who felt just as strongly that it was improper to criticize the president, who they believed was merely fulfilling his role as an honest broker in the peace process.

For its part, Americans for Peace Now called on its constituents to write to Clinton and "inform him of your support for his commitment to Israeli security and the Middle East peace process."

The sample letter it provided said the president's statement on Har Homa "demonstrated thoughtful leadership and a deep understanding of Jerusalem's sensitive nature. Americans for Peace Now fully supports your position on Har Homa."

On the same side of the political spectrum, Tom

Smerling, director of Project Nishma, an education and advocacy group, sought to put the administration's actions in perspective and urged the community to do the same.

"This is not loan guarantees redux," said Smerling, referring to the highly charged conflict during the early 1990s over U.S. loan guarantees for Israeli immigrant resettlement, which President Bush had made contingent on a halt in Israeli settlement building.

"Clinton is not Bush. Netanyahu is not Shamir. The issues are not at this level," said Smerling.

"The most foolish thing the community could do is misconstrue tactical gestures by the administration necessary to maintain enough trust with the Arabs to keep the peace process alive, as anything remotely resembling a policy clash that endangers Israel."

At the other end of the spectrum, Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, disagreed. "We strongly condemn President Clinton's singling out Israel building homes on Jewish land as an obstacle to peace." He said it was unfair to ignore "Arafat's true anti-peace behavior of not changing the covenant, not disarming terrorists and not keeping terrorists in jail."

He also criticized U.S. participation in the Gaza meeting. He called the gathering a "violation of the Oslo accords," noting that Israel was "conspicuously refused an invitation."

For its part, the United Rabbinic Committee for the Security of Israel, including the National Council of Young Israel, called a news conference Tuesday to protest the "American meddling in Israel's sovereignty."

The mainstream National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council sent a letter to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright expressing concern about the United States' attendance at the Gaza meeting and encouraged its agencies across the country through an "action alert" to do the same.

But Martin Raffel, NJCRAC associate executive vice chairman, used the same language as Smerling in calling the conflict a "tactical disagreement" over how to get over the "current crisis" of Har Homa.

"It sets a precedent which is counterproductive to the peace process," said Raffel, "but I don't think this reflects a shift in U.S. policy."

Still, he said, "there is always a certain amount of discomfort" among U.S. Jewry "when there are differences between Israeli judgment and American judgment, even on a tactical matter."

'There is an inherent tension'

For Raffel, the latest flap is a sign of things to come. "We're going to be in an extended period where the U.S. is juggling its unique friendship with Israel" with its need "to be the principal facilitator of the peace process with its multiple parties. There is an inherent tension."

At a weekend congress of the American Zionist Movement, the umbrella organization of grass-roots Zionist groups, reaction was also mixed.

"Har Homa is clearly part of municipal Jerusalem and it's purposefully misleading of Arafat to try to present it as another West Bank settlement," said Elihu Davison, a board member of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Metrowest region in New Jersey.

"The problem isn't with the legitimacy of development," he said. "Rather it is with the timing, which I think is unhelpful."

Joanna Weiss, national director of the campus organization the Progressive Zionist Caucus, said, "I'm terrified about Har Homa." It contradicts Israel's pledge to negotiate the future of Jerusalem, she said, adding, "Nothing that's built for Jews is going to be negotiated. It's a slap in the face to the Palestinians." □

Israeli high court rejects petitions to block Har Homa*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's High Court of Justice has refused to block construction of a Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem, as the Palestinian leadership called on its people to protest the building non-violently.

A panel of three justices rejected Wednesday two petitions submitted by left-wing Israeli activists and Arab landowners, who argued that city planners only had considered the needs of Jewish residents in the project.

The court ordered the government to provide details in two months on its decision to build for Arabs in the city. The court delayed until Thursday deliberations on a third petition, which was submitted by a Jerusalem developer who argued that land he owns was expropriated for the project.

The developer, David Mir, has demanded that the land be returned, or that his own plans for building on it be adopted.

At Har Homa, bulldozers continued work amid heavy security to clear an access road to the site.

The project supervisor said he expected the roadwork to be completed in the next day or two, at which point larger earthmoving equipment could be brought in to begin clearing the site itself.

Meanwhile, Palestinian official Faisal Husseini left a protest tent sent up near the site to meet with foreign consuls at Orient House in eastern Jerusalem on Wednesday.

Though Palestinian officials appealed for peaceful protests, they warned that the situation could get out of hand. "We cannot give our people false hope, tell them things will be better when they are not," Husseini said.

At the same time, Arab condemnation of the project continued. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak warned Israel that the decision to build on Har Homa was bringing the region toward a new era of violence.

Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat dispatched Nabil Sha'ath to Cairo for talks with the Egyptian foreign minister, Amre Moussa. He also spoke by phone the previous night with Jordan's King Hussein, as part of his efforts to coordinate positions with Arab leaders.

Hussein, meanwhile, apparently still reeling from last week's incident in which a Jordanian soldier fatally shot seven Israeli schoolgirls, engaged in a shake-up of his government. He dismissed his prime minister, Abdul Karim al-Kabariti, and replaced him with Abdul Salam al-Majali, who brokered the 1994 peace agreement with Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, meanwhile, defended the decision to build. Interviewed on Israel Radio, Netanyahu said he could not envision any peace that would not allow Israel to build in Jerusalem. □

Russian relative told belatedly of teen's murder by Jordanian*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — Nina Shvets was pleased when she received a letter last week from her granddaughter in Israel.

What the 69-year-old woman did not know was that, a day before she found the letter in her mailbox, her granddaughter, Sherri Geddayev, and six other schoolgirls had been shot dead by a Jordanian soldier while they were on a field trip to the Israeli-Jordanian border.

"When I saw the report on the TV, my first thoughts were about my granddaughter," said Shvets. "I had a premonition that something terrible would happen."

It was not until five days after the 15-year-old from Beit Shemesh was shot that officials with the Jewish Agency in Russia were able to locate Sherri's grandmother, who lives in a small village in southern Russia's Krasnodar region that has no telephones.

Shvets left this week for Israel to spend a few weeks with her daughter's family in Beit Shemesh.

The Geddayevs — Shlomo, 41, and Margalit, 35 — emigrated from the town of Bukhara in the central Asian republic of Uzbekistan five years ago. Sherri was their eldest child. Her sister, Vered, is 12. The family's youngest, 2-year-old Daniel, was born in Israel.

Three years ago, Shvets, a retired teacher of German, stayed for eight months with her daughter's family. "Sherri was so happy to be in Israel," Shvets said of that time. "The thing she loved best was to make Shabbat dinner for the family."

In her last letter, written 10 days before she died, Sherri told her grandmother that she would like to come to Russia to see her during summer vacation.

"I don't know why it happened to her," Shvets said a few hours before departing to Israel. "I always wanted everyone to live in peace." □

British chief rabbi's letter exposes deep communal rift*By Deborah Leipziger*

LONDON (JTA) — Controversy surrounding remarks made by Britain's chief rabbi have exposed a deep rift between the country's Orthodox and Reform Jewish communities.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in a recent letter to an Orthodox leader, described the Reform movement as a "false grouping" of Jews "who destroy the faith."

Sacks sent the letter to Dayan Chanoch Padwa, who heads the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, to explain his decision to attend a memorial service last month for Hugo Gryn, who was the country's leading Reform rabbi. The letter was leaked to The Jewish Chronicle and published in its edition last week.

Sacks has called the leak of his letter "scandalous" and a "breach of confidence." Sent to Padwa prior to the service, Sacks explained that he would be eulogizing Gryn as a Holocaust survivor, not as a Reform rabbi.

Sacks added that his attendance also was intended to prevent the Reform community from establishing its own chief rabbinate. Sacks warned that "the impression would emerge that there are two kinds of Torah" if there were two chief rabbis.

"The Reform, Liberal and Masorti movements know that they have no enemy or opponent equal to the chief rabbi," Sacks wrote.

Rabbi Jacqueline Tabbick, of the West London Synagogue for British Jews, where Gryn served for many years before his death, expressed pain over the letter.

"We regret and are appalled at the tarnishing of the memory of a great rabbi and are so upset that his family have to face such an unpleasant situation while they are in mourning," Tabbick said.

Reform Jews had earlier protested Sacks' decision to not attend Gryn's funeral in August.

"It is so obvious that Rabbi Sacks has an impossible juggling act to perform and at West London we are anxious that the wider issue of the chief rabbi's role in Anglo-Jewry should be suspended from our memories of Rabbi Gryn."

Meanwhile, Sacks has issued a seven-point platform known as a Coalition for Peace in the Community in which he appeals to Jewish leaders to work together to bridge their differences. □