

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israeli troops and Palestinian demonstrators clashed in an 11th day of rioting as the Arab League adopted a resolution that recommends halting all steps toward normalizing relations with Israel. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke of a "virtual collapse of the peace process."** [Page 2]

■ **U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is expected to visit the Middle East to present Israel and the Palestinians with a new American initiative aimed at breathing life into the peace process. Development of the initiative comes after U.S. envoy Dennis Ross held separate meetings with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat.** [Page 2]

■ **A member of the Third Way party proposed a compromise to delay Monday's scheduled first reading of a controversial conversion bill that would give the Orthodox sole authority over conversions conducted in Israel. Under Alexander Lubotsky's plan, converts would have identity cards that would list them as Jewish, but the population registry would specify the type of conversion to Judaism they underwent.**

■ **A crude firebomb was hurled at Rome's main synagogue Saturday night, causing minor damage to the entrance but no injuries. The synagogue, which was empty at the time, is heavily guarded by paramilitary police, who have in their custody a suspect, a 34-year-old Egyptian man who appeared drunk or mentally disturbed.**

■ **Unknown assailants in downtown Istanbul killed a Jewish businessman and three of his aides over the weekend, Turkish media reported. The attack on Joseph Behar came as the Anti-Defamation League voiced concern about anti-Semitic sentiment in Turkey.**

■ **A top official of Birobidzhan, the Russian area also known as the Jewish Autonomous Region, said his administration was committed to creating good conditions for the local Jewish community. The official also revealed plans to build Birobidzhan's first synagogue.**

Switzerland may oppose naming local Jew to head Holocaust fund

By Fredy Rom

ZURICH (JTA) — At least one member of the Swiss Cabinet is questioning whether a local Jewish leader should chair the body that will oversee disbursements from Switzerland's recently established Holocaust Memorial Fund.

Rolf Bloch, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Switzerland, confirmed last week that "it was the understanding" of Jewish leaders involved in the nomination process that he would serve as chairman of the seven-member executive board in charge of administering the fund.

But one member of the Swiss Cabinet, Interior Minister Ruth Dreifuss, called for a meeting next week of fellow Cabinet members to discuss the naming of Bloch to the top post of the fund's executive board.

Last week, the World Jewish Restitution Organization, which can nominate three members for the executive board, said it had put forward its candidates: Elie Wiesel, Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat and Israeli Knesset member Avraham Herschson.

The Swiss Cabinet, which has final approval of the nominees, will meet April 9 to discuss the list of proposed board members, according to a government spokesman.

Dreifuss, who is Jewish, questioned the wisdom of appointing a "Jewish president for the fund's directing committee" in a private letter to Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti that was subsequently made public.

In the letter, Dreifuss requested that Bloch's appointment be discussed by all seven members of the Swiss Cabinet, or Federal Council, which issues governmental decisions on the basis of a consensus of its ministers.

Dreifuss "was very upset that the content of her internal letter to Cotti was made public," Dominique Rueb, the minister's spokeswoman, said in an interview.

"It is obvious that Ruth Dreifuss has nothing against Rolf Bloch as a person," Rueb added.

Swiss leaders, stung by mounting accusations about the country's handling of Jewish wartime deposits and its economic ties to Nazi Germany, are apparently sensitive about having a local Jewish leader chair the fund's executive committee.

According to one political analyst, Dreifuss is not alone in questioning Bloch's nomination.

"It is very clear that the nomination of a Swiss Jewish leader as president of the fund's directing committee is opposed by several members of the government," the analyst said.

'A very delicate matter'

Another nominee to the fund's executive board, Eizenstat, may also be opposed by the Swiss Cabinet on the grounds that he is a high-ranking official of a foreign country.

The approval of a "U.S. government official by the Swiss government is a very delicate matter," according to a source within the government.

The Swiss Cabinet formally approved the Holocaust Memorial Fund in February, after Switzerland's three largest banks announced that they would contribute to a fund to help needy survivors and their heirs.

The fund now totals some \$190 million as a result of pledges made by the three banks, and from subsequent pledges made by the Swiss central bank and by several industrial giants.

The question of who would be in charge of distributing the funds was the subject of delicate negotiations between the Swiss government and the World Jewish Congress, which spearheaded an international campaign to compensate Holocaust survivors and their heirs who were unable to reclaim assets deposited in Swiss banks during World War II.

In late February, the two sides reached a compromise on representation whereby the foundation administering the fund would be run by a seven-member executive board.

According to the agreement, the board would include four "eminent Swiss persons," including the president of Switzerland, and three "eminent persons recommended by the WJRO," which was created in 1992 by the

WJC, the Jewish Agency for Israel and other leading Jewish groups.

The object of the fund, the agreement says, "is to support persons in need who were persecuted for reasons of their race, religion or political views or for other reasons, or were otherwise victims of the Holocaust/Shoah, as well as to support their descendants in need."

Non-Jewish victims, including Gypsies, are also expected to receive compensation.

According to Jewish and Swiss officials, the fund is expected to make its first payments in the summer.

The fund was created in an effort to provide immediate relief to needy victims of the Holocaust while investigations continue here into the whereabouts of Jewish assets deposited in Swiss banks during the war.

Needy Holocaust victims who receive payments from the fund will still be eligible to regain those assets once the investigation concludes. □

Peace process in doubt as Palestinian unrest spreads

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli-Palestinian peace process appeared to be sinking deeper into a morass as Palestinian unrest spread and as Arab states called for turning back the clock on their relations with Israel.

As violent protests against Israel's construction of a new Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem entered their second week, clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians erupted in most Palestinian population centers in the West Bank.

Tensions increased Sunday after a Palestinian was killed a day before in the unrest and as Israeli security officials braced for the annual observance of Land Day, when annual protests are held against land expropriations and other Israeli policies.

In Cairo, Arab foreign ministers adopted a resolution Sunday calling on the 22 members of the Arab League to abide by the Arab boycott of Israel in retaliation for the Jewish state's recent decision to start construction at Har Homa. In recent years, several Arab states have eased the boycott in recognition of Israeli-Palestinian peace moves.

The resolution, which will be presented to each of the ministers' governments, also calls on Arab states to stop all normalization of ties with Israel, to close Israeli offices and missions in their countries and to suspend the multilateral talks that deal with regional issues such as water, the environment and security.

The resolution was not expected to affect Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, meanwhile, spoke of a "virtual collapse of the peace process" and called for a Palestinian commitment to curb violence and crack down on terror.

"We want to see a peace process where terrorism is simply put out of the picture," he said on CBS' "Face the Nation."

Netanyahu made a similar demand on the Palestinians when he met last week with U.S. Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross, who also held a separate meeting with Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat to discuss the rapidly deteriorating situation. Ross returned to Washington over the weekend to review those discussions with Clinton administration officials.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was expected to visit the region in the near future to present the two sides with a new American initiative aimed at breathing life into the peace process.

The initiative is expected to include the following key points:

- Emphasis on the war against terror. The Palestinian Authority will be required to take real steps on the ground against terrorist organizations and to tighten security cooperation with Israel. The formation of an American-Israeli-Palestinian special forum on the war against terror is under consideration.

- Asking Israel to stop taking unilateral steps while the negotiations are continuing. The United States may ask Israel to freeze the construction work at Har Homa as the talks continue.

- A call for accelerated implementation of other aspects of the self-rule accords, including opening a Palestinian airport and seaport in Gaza and creating a safe route passage for Palestinians traveling between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, despite fears in the preceding days, Land Day protests in the main Israeli Arab towns and villages passed quietly Sunday, prompting Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani to praise Israeli Arab leaders for maintaining order.

Netanyahu had appealed to Israeli Arabs to shun violence during the annual protest day, which marks the 1976 killing by Israeli security forces of six Israeli Arabs protesting against land expropriations in the Galilee.

In the West Bank, however, violent protests continued, and the Israel Defense Force stationed tanks and reinforcements around the major West Bank towns to prevent an escalation of the violence.

The most serious clashes took place Sunday around Nablus, Jenin and Hebron, where dozens of Arabs were wounded by rubber bullets fired by Israeli troops in an effort to disperse the protesters.

In Nablus, Palestinian police set up barricades and fired into the air to prevent demonstrators from charging Joseph's Tomb, where an Israeli military unit was stationed after evacuating a group of yeshiva students who study at the site.

Skirmishes were also reported near Rachel's Tomb, outside Bethlehem, and in Ramallah, where Palestinian police reportedly used clubs to disperse hundreds of protesters surging toward an Israeli army roadblock.

Palestinians reject Israeli demands

Palestinians bearing anti-Israel banners took part Sunday in the funeral procession of Abdullah Khalil Salah, a 21-year-old Palestinian student killed in clashes the previous day in Ramallah. The funeral took place in Salah's hometown of Beit Sahur, which is located near Har Homa.

The IDF was investigating the cause of his death. Palestinians charged that he had been killed by live ammunition; Israeli officials said the soldiers were using rubber bullets.

Foreign Minister David Levy's office said Sunday that the European Union's Middle East peace envoy, Miguel Angel Moratinos, had delivered a message to him from Arafat in which the Palestinian leader pledged to do his best to curb violence.

It was unclear whether an order from Arafat had resulted in Palestinian police efforts to control Sunday's demonstrations in the self-rule areas.

The Israeli demands for Arafat to crack down on terror came after a suicide bomber detonated an explosion March 21 at a cafe in central Tel Aviv, killing three Israelis and wounding 47 others.

On Saturday, the Palestinian Authority rejected the Israeli demands.

Arafat spokesman Nabil Abu Irdeineh said Israel must implement its commitments in the peace accords and return to the negotiating table without setting any preconditions. □

San Francisco federation votes to withhold \$1 million from UJA

By Natalie Weinstein

Jewish Bulletin of Northern California

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA) — In a defiant move, the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco has decided to slice \$1 million from its annual contribution to the United Jewish Appeal, the nationwide fund-raising body for Israel.

"This should not be viewed as a vote against giving money to Israel," said Alan Rothenberg, federation board president.

Half the money withheld from the UJA will still head to Israel, but through other channels.

The other half will remain in local coffers to finance new projects.

UJA National Chairman Richard Wexler, who came to San Francisco several weeks ago to try to pre-empt the decision, reacted harshly.

"San Francisco's allocation to overseas needs through the UJA system will now become the lowest in both dollar amount and percentage of any of the 19 largest federations in the United States and Canada," he said.

The federation's action will have a "significant and detrimental impact on Jews most in need," according to Wexler.

"There will be people waiting in the former Soviet Union for freedom flights [to Israel] because San Francisco has cut its allocation by \$1 million."

Rothenberg said the federation continues to support immigration to the Jewish state.

"But it is slowing down," he said, adding that the UJA will likely cut lower-priority items before it turns away Jews who want to go to Israel.

The federation has not formally decided how to spend the freed-up money.

However, the federation's overseas committee chairwoman, Joelle Steefel, said the half-million dollars for Israel will likely finance efforts such as promoting Arab-Jewish coexistence or creating alternatives to Orthodox practice.

The other half-million dollars is expected to finance new local projects from the federation's top priorities: education, outreach, culture, elder care and local resettlement.

Has asserted independence before

The federation board's decision, approved March 20 in a vote of 29-1, stems from a number of factors, including impatience with the UJA's internal reform process, a desire for more control over how local money is spent and concerns about Jewish continuity in the San Francisco area.

This is not the first time that the San Francisco federation has asserted its independence from the Jewish communal world.

In 1984, the federation set up an advisory board in Israel called the Amuta and diverted \$100,000 to fund recommended projects, mostly in northern Israel, especially in Kiryat Shmona, its partner city there.

UJA leaders considered the trailblazing move "total treachery," Rothenberg said.

"In 1984, they went crazy. They thought we were so far out.

"They weren't sure whether to excommunicate us or ignore us."

As the federation's confidence in its alternative-funding abilities has grown, independent allocations have increased as well.

The federation spent \$853,000 from the 1996

campaign on overseas projects independent of the UJA, including those recommended by the Amuta.

Nonetheless, the bulk of the federation's overseas money has been and will still be funneled through the UJA. Last year, the federation sent a little more than \$6 million to the UJA from its record \$19 million annual campaign.

That allocation to the UJA will now drop to \$5 million.

The money sent to the UJA in turn goes to the Jewish Agency for Israel through the United Israel Appeal, and to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which aids Jews and non-Jews worldwide through its humanitarian projects.

Chief among the causes funded via the UJA are immigration and resettlement in Israel.

The local move, however, comes amid a growing re-evaluation of Israel funding among federations across the country, including other federations in the Bay Area.

Last spring, the Jewish Federation of the Greater East Bay, for example, cut its overseas contribution to about 25 percent of its annual campaign — among the lowest percentage-wise in the country and a sharp decline from nearly 40 percent earlier this decade.

"We have been watching and observing a significant turning inward by Jewish federations around the country," Wexler said.

The average amount federations are sending overseas is now 40 percent of their annual campaigns, he said.

Some give more, such as Detroit's federation, which allocates 51 percent, or Chicago's, which hands over 46 percent.

Rothenberg retorted that 35 percent of the San Francisco federation's annual campaign money will still head overseas through the UJA and other sources — compared with 37 percent last year.

The UJA's piece of San Francisco's pie, however, will drop to 27 percent of the annual campaign, down from 33 percent last year.

Adding to the complex financial picture is that if the 1997 annual campaign tops last year's — which is expected — the federation is planning to send 35 percent of the additional money overseas.

'You should feel terrible'

Both Wexler and Joel Tauber, a UJA national officer and former national chairman, traveled to San Francisco to try to pre-empt the move.

"They came and said, 'You should feel terrible about what you're doing. And we feel proud about what we're doing,'" Rothenberg said.

Wexler told the board that elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union will go hungry because they rely on food packages through the Joint Distribution Committee, which receives UJA funds.

But Rothenberg said the federation plans to boost its direct giving to the JDC to make up for any reduction via the UJA.

Wexler also fears that other federations will follow suit.

"If 189 Jewish federations in North America make 189 separate decisions on how people most in need are to be assisted, we will be able to impact even less than we do today," he said.

But Rothenberg said regardless of who handles the money, it will still aid Jews.

"Nowhere in the Talmud does it say write a check to the UJA. We want to help other Jews.

"We just want to help in lots of ways, not in just one way.

"We all care about the soul of Israel." □

Russian Parliament, Yeltsin clash over fate of seized art*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — Members of Russia's lower house have said they would continue to push for a law banning the return of art that the Red Army seized from Nazi Germany during World War II.

President Boris Yeltsin recently vetoed legislation that would have made all works of art brought to the Soviet Union during the war Russian property.

The Russian Parliament had overwhelmingly backed the measure, but it needed the president's signature.

The sensitive issue of restitution of works of art taken by the Soviet army has been a subject of negotiations between Moscow and Germany. In 1990, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a friendship treaty providing for the mutual restitution of war plunder.

A spokesman for the German Embassy in Moscow was quoted as saying that Russia's stand on the seized art was a "thorn in the side" of otherwise good Russian-German relations.

Yeltsin, in a letter to the chairman of Parliament's upper house, said the proposed bill sought to solve the problem of "trophy art" unilaterally "without taking into account international norms of law."

The vetoed bill would have created a complicated procedure for the return of seized art treasures. It also said cultural artifacts that were family souvenirs or archives, including letters and photographs, could be returned to those who had inherited them "for humanitarian reasons."

Said the deputy chairman of the Communist-dominated culture committee of the lower house, who was the bill's main author: "The law may be redrafted to create a distinction between art from our [wartime] allies and that confiscated from our enemies."

The Parliament could override the veto if both houses approve the bill again by a two-thirds majority.

Among other reasons, the issue is of importance to the Jewish community because during the World War II era, many Jews lost precious works of art. □

Anti-Semitic leaflet stuffed in 200,000 Russian mailboxes*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — About 200,000 residents of the southern Russian region of Volgograd found anti-Semitic leaflets in their mailboxes last week.

The flier, which contained various anti-Semitic slogans, also made references to members of the Russian Cabinet and other top Russian officials who are Jewish.

The leaflet claimed that Russia is an occupied country with no ethnic Russians in the federal government.

"Only [Russian] patriots are the people. The rest are slaves," it said. One can tell who a "real Russian" is by relying on "racial signs," the handout also said.

The leaflet called on local voters to support the editor of a local anti-Semitic newspaper in the upcoming elections for Volgograd's regional legislature.

The weekly newspaper Kolokol, or The Bell, is published in Volgograd, a city of 1 million located 900 miles south of Moscow. The paper has been a forum for anti-Semitic propaganda for five years.

The Volgograd Jewish community, which numbers 5,000, has expressed its deep concern over the publication, which is distributed free of charge in Volgograd's working-class neighborhoods.

The newspaper's editor, Stanislav Terentyev, recently faced in a local court charges of inciting national hatred. □

Israeli seeks to move Chagall's home from Belarus*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli gallery owner is seeking permission from the former Soviet republic of Belarus to buy the house where painter Marc Chagall was born, dismantle it and bring it to Jerusalem.

The dealer said he hoped that the Jerusalem municipality would make it possible to rebuild the house, which could serve as a museum for Chagall's works.

The idea was developed by Itamar Barkai, a gallery owner in Jerusalem who is responsible for Chagall's artistic legacy in the Jewish state, Israeli media reported.

Chagall was born in 1887 in Vitebsk, a small Russian village that is now in Belarus.

Chagall, who was a forerunner to surrealism, drew his subject matter from Jewish life and folklore.

Among his most famous works are the 12 stained-glass windows at the Hadassah Hospital in the Ein Kerem section of Jerusalem.

Chagall died in 1985. □

Israeli chief rabbi reneges on charging wedding fees*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau announced last week that he would no longer accept payment for conducting weddings.

He would instead propose that couples donate the money to worthy causes.

The chief rabbi's statement came in the wake of reports that he frequently was paid for conducting marriages.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported that Lau performed more than 100 marriages a year and regularly collected fees ranging from \$500 to \$2,000 per couple.

Because marrying couples pay a fee to their local religious councils, rabbis are not paid for performing marriages.

In a statement issued last week, the chief rabbi said he had decided to refuse any kind of payment in light of the public storm the disclosure created.

"I have taken upon myself to set a new public norm," Lau said.

"From today, I will not accept any donation for weddings and will suggest to couples who ask me to marry them to make a voluntary" donation to a charitable organization. □

Army allowed to raze bomber's home*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's High Court of Justice has given the army permission to destroy the home of the suicide bomber who killed three Israelis earlier this month at a Tel Aviv cafe.

Dozens of others were wounded in the March 21 blast.

The court Sunday rejected a petition from the family of Mahmoud Abed Al-Kader Ghonimeit, a resident of the Tsurif village in the Hebron area.

Family members had said the Israeli army order was collective punishment.

Chief Justice Aharon Barak said that demolishing homes was one of the few measures available to security forces to deter terrorist attacks.

In a dissenting opinion, Justice Mishael Heshin said the bomber's wife and four children, who were not linked to the attack, would suffer because of the demolition. □