

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Eleven Israeli soldiers were wounded when their bus overturned near the West Bank city of Ramallah after a gasoline bomb attack. [Page 3]

■ Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai criticized Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat for not unequivocally condemning violence and accused the Palestinians of "playing a terrorism game" for political gains. At a briefing in New York, Mordechai said Arafat could be pushed harder on the issue by the United States and other nations. If he understands that "he will pay a price, he can change."

■ Palestinian police arrested some 30 Islamic Jihad activists in Gaza in connection with two suicide bombings near Jewish settlements. No Israelis were injured in those explosions. The Islamic Jihad organization has denied any involvement in the blasts. [Page 3]

■ Israel deposited some \$160 million in a secret Tel Aviv bank account belonging to Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat, an Israeli newspaper reported. [Page 2]

■ France unveiled works of art recovered from Germany after World War II in the hope that their owners would claim them. Five state-run museums will display 900 unclaimed works next week, a step taken after a report accused the museums of failing to seek the works' owners or heirs.

■ A Russian journalist said Belarus authorities might have revoked his accreditation because of his Israeli citizenship. The Belarus Foreign Ministry canceled accreditation of Alexander Stupnikov, a correspondent for a Russian television channel, for his "biased" reports from the Belarus capital of Minsk.

■ About 200,000 residents of the southern Russian Volgograd region found anti-Semitic leaflets in their mailboxes. The leaflets, which claimed that Russia is an occupied country, also contained references to members of the Russian Cabinet and other top officials who are Jewish.

FOCUS ON ISSUES**As immigrants begin to lose aid, Jewish groups try to limit damage**

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — Elizabetta Kostoveskaya is paralyzed from a stroke and suffering from Alzheimer's, homebound in a subsidized apartment run by the Council for Jewish Elderly in Chicago.

Since her emigration from Kiev in 1992, the 84-year-old has relied on government assistance, to which she was entitled for five years as a refugee.

But those five years were up in February, and new laws dictate that she be cut off from food stamps and a host of other benefits she depends on for survival.

Kostoveskaya is far from alone.

Legal immigrants who are not citizens, including an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 Jews, will begin this month to feel the anticipated but dreaded federally mandated cuts in benefits that are their lifeline.

These cuts are the parts of last year's welfare reform that President Clinton himself singled out as harsh even as he signed it.

At the time, he pledged to correct the most onerous provisions, but many immigrants are certain to endure suffering and hardship before the president's or any other proposed corrections could take effect.

As of April 1, non-citizen immigrants no longer are eligible to receive food stamps. On Aug. 1, they will begin to be cut off from Supplemental Security Income, an average of \$500 to \$600 monthly, which recipients spend mostly on housing.

Anticipation of these blows has triggered a rush of applications for citizenship.

But some of the most frail and disabled will fall through the cracks because they are not able to perform the most minimal naturalization requirements.

Ostensibly, a new budget plan could ameliorate the harsh impact of the law, but it would not be implemented until the fall, at the earliest.

Experts say the budget is likely to reflect some compromise between the roughly \$14.5 billion in changes the president has proposed and other plans now circulating on Capitol Hill.

Technically, congressional leadership could decide to act sooner, by approving a supplemental appropriation in the current budget aimed at immigrant relief.

Trying to stave off the worst

And some states have initiated some "fixes" to offset the loss of food stamps and SSI.

But when such aid could be made available depends on each state's budget cycles.

Given all the uncertainty, immigrants and their advocates are taking nothing for granted.

They are up in arms and trying to stave off the worst.

The Union of Councils of Soviet Jews and the American Association of Jews from the Former Soviet Union are planning a big protest April 14 on Capitol Hill.

They are hoping to bring thousands of immigrants from across the country to demonstrate their fears and concerns.

"All the immigrants are very grateful to the United States" for providing them a home, but "we're very worried about the situation in the welfare bill depriving them of social benefits," said Leonid Stonov.

Stonov, the president of the American Association, left Moscow with his family in 1990, 11 years after he applied to emigrate and was labeled a refusenik.

Stonov, a biologist in Moscow, and his wife are U.S. citizens. But his 93-year-old mother does not know English and he does not believe that she would be able to take the citizenship test.

She has already received notice that her SSI benefits will be terminated in August, her son said.

He also worries about the loss of benefits to other "old people,"

most of whom are "veterans of the Second World War or are victims of the Nazis' or Stalin's concentration camps."

For its part, the Council of Jewish Federations has scheduled a leadership mission April 16 to lobby the administration and Congress to remedy the harsh measures.

"This is a national tragedy in the making," said Pamela Seubert, director of government programs for the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

"Those who supported welfare reform never envisioned that we would break the social contract with those who played by the rules," she said.

"When we discuss welfare-to-work, we're not talking the elderly and disabled," she said.

"As a feature of welfare reform," this makes no sense, she said.

Vast numbers of Jews entered the United States as refugees, especially from the former Soviet Union.

Refugees are not affected by the new law, and remain eligible for five years for SSI, food stamps and a host of other benefits.

But after five years, they lose the benefits unless they become citizens or meet other exemptions, such as proof of work for 40 annual quarters.

Such immigrant cutoffs are illogical on their face, said Gary Rubin, public policy director of the New York Association for New Americans.

"These are people who came here in their later years and had no opportunity to build up pensions and other benefits" for their old age.

"Nobody expects this population to be self-supporting," he said.

And if these people lose their benefits, it will be "impossible" for the Jewish community or anyone else to pick up the slack.

'Communities can't make up the difference'

The organized Jewish community is therefore concentrating its efforts on trying to soften the blows of the budget ax at the federal and state level, said Diana Aviv, director of the CJF office in Washington.

Monetarily, she said, "the communities can't make up the difference.

"This is one of the severest shudders the community has suffered in decades."

The CJF, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and other immigrant advocacy organizations are also pushing hard to get as many people naturalized as possible.

However, according to these organizations, backlogs caused by frantic immigrants means gaps of many months between the application for citizenship and naturalization, and these are months when benefits will be suspended.

Aviv said the CJF had applied for a \$2.5 million grant to the Open Society Institute established by philanthropist George Soros to help local federations naturalize immigrants, adding to the pot already targeted by some federations for this purpose.

HIAS also has "ratcheted up its efforts" with new yearlong regional programs to train hundreds of people so they can return to their communities and naturalize people, said Mark Seal, the group's associate executive vice president.

Beyond those whose refugee exemption is set to expire, these initiatives are targeting legal immigrants who have been here for years but suddenly are poised to lose their benefits unless they naturalize.

For those too frail or disabled to take the citizenship test, the Immigration and Naturalization Service issued a ruling a few weeks ago spelling out certain waivers.

Seubert and Seal both said the waivers help by allowing some people, depending on individual circum-

stances, to bypass certain portions of the test or take it in their native language.

But they said one exemption is especially problematic. This exemption allows some people to become citizens merely by taking "a meaningful oath," but it will not help some of the worst hardship cases.

Such immigrants must understand what they are pledging, which rules out people with dementia or Alzheimer's, they said.

Such an oath cannot possibly be taken by Kostoveskaya in Chicago, for instance.

She already has received a letter warning of a cutoff in her SSI benefits, which total \$480 a month. She also is losing her food stamps of \$17 a month.

Kostoveskaya's daughter and son-in-law, also non-citizen immigrants slated to lose their federal benefits, recognize that their mother cannot become a citizen and don't know how they will care for her.

"She can no longer speak Russian, let alone English," said her daughter, Rosa Kostoveskaya.

"What am I going to do with her? Should I drive her to Washington and leave her on the steps of the White House?" □

Israel deposited millions in Arafat account, says paper

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has deposited some \$160 million in a secret Tel Aviv bank account belonging to Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat since 1994, an Israeli newspaper reported this week.

An inquiry by senior officials from European Union donor countries found that only Arafat and his economic adviser were authorized to draw funds from the account, located in a Tel Aviv branch of Bank Leumi, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Other sources said the Palestinian Authority official in charge of finance, Mohammed Zuhdi Nashashibi, also has access to the account.

The money in the account is Israeli refunds of tax revenues levied on fuel used by residents of the Palestinian autonomous areas, the paper said.

Other tax revenues Israel is obligated to return under the Israel-Palestinian economic accords are deposited in four bank accounts in the Palestine Bank and the Arab Bank in Gaza.

Ha'aretz quoted an internal document from the International Monetary Fund, which said the money in the Tel Aviv account "is not under any kind of supervision or monitoring by the Palestinian Finance Ministry."

International donors have demanded full accountability of the Palestinian budget before releasing funds.

Ha'aretz reported that the Tel Aviv account appeared to be a way to circumvent this supervision.

The account also appeared to be a way for Palestinian Authority clerks whose employment was not approved by the donor nations to receive money.

An Israeli government source said some of the money was earmarked for a possible emergency.

According to the source, the money could also serve the Palestinian leader in the event of an uprising against him.

Labor Knesset member Avraham Shochat, who served as finance minister in the Rabin and Peres governments, did not deny the existence of the account.

Interviewed on Israel Radio, Shochat said the economic agreements called for various revenues to be transferred to different accounts.

"We have our own matters to deal with," he said. "We can't be on top of theirs." □

Attack on soldiers' bus adds to Israeli-Palestinian tensions*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli-Palestinian tensions rose another notch this week after a gasoline bomb was hurled at an Israeli bus in the West Bank. The bus was transporting Israeli soldiers to serve as guards at Jewish settlements.

Wednesday's attack, which occurred near Ramallah, caused the bus to catch fire. The driver lost control of the vehicle, which tumbled over an embankment.

Eleven troops were wounded, most of them lightly. They were treated for fractures and bruises at Jerusalem hospitals.

In the Gaza Strip, meanwhile, Palestinian police were reported to have arrested some 30 Islamic Jihad activists in connection with Tuesday's two unsuccessful suicide bombings near the Gush Katif settlement bloc.

In both instances, no Israelis were nearby when the bombers blew themselves up.

The two bombers were among eight recruited by Islamic militants to carry out attacks against Israel, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

A senior Israeli military source said Wednesday that Islamic militant groups had decided to step up their terrorist activities to retaliate for Israel's decision last month to start construction of the new Jewish neighborhood of Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem. An anonymous caller phoned Israeli news organizations Tuesday night and claimed responsibility for the two bombings in the name of an Islamic Jihad-affiliated cell known as "Jabal Abu Ghena'im" — the Arabic name for Har Homa.

But on Wednesday, news agencies quoted relatives of the bombers as saying that they had links to Islamic Jihad. The Islamic Jihad leader in Gaza issued a statement Wednesday denying any involvement by the group in the two explosions.

Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat has said he is willing to begin accelerated final-status talks, as Israel has proposed, but under certain conditions.

The European Union's Middle East envoy, Miguel Angel Moratinos, conveyed the message to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week.

"I spoke with Arafat and he said he would agree to accelerate the final-status talks as Israel has requested, but other matters must also be dealt with," Moratinos said. He said Arafat had four main conditions: "The framework of the Oslo process must not be broken, the Har Homa problem must be resolved, Israel must freeze its settlement activity and avoid taking unilateral steps in the future."

Foreign Minister David Levy, addressing diplomats Wednesday, said Israel is interested in moving to the final-status talks, but the Palestinians must first act against terror. He said an atmosphere of trust was required to make the negotiations effective. □

German intelligence official: New information on Ron Arad*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A German intelligence official involved in efforts to learn of the fate of missing Israeli soldiers said last week that he had new information about captured Israeli navigator Ron Arad.

But Bernd Schmidbauer, who was in Israel for the inauguration of an international center to combat terror, would not elaborate, saying that the matter was still being discussed.

Arad bailed out from his fighter plane over Leba-

non in 1986 and was believed to have been held by pro-Iranian troops in Lebanon. The last time any message was received that he was alive was in October 1987.

Israeli officials have repeatedly maintained that Iran is holding him.

In July, the bodies of Israeli MIAs Yosef Fink and Rachamim Alsheikh, killed in Lebanon in 1986, were returned to Israel as part of a prisoner and body exchange with Hezbollah that had been mediated by Schmidbauer.

Schmidbauer also met last week with Yona Baumel, whose son Zechariah Baumel disappeared June 11, 1982, in the battle of Sultan Yakoub at the beginning of Operation Peace for Galilee. □

Court: Woman must return daughter to United Kingdom*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Supreme Court has ordered an Israeli woman to return her child to England.

She had come to the Jewish state with her daughter after leaving her non-Jewish husband — the child's father — in the United Kingdom.

In a precedent-setting ruling, the court this week said that the child, who was born in England, was effectively kidnapped. The court also said, however, that the father was not a suitable parent.

According to the ruling, the mother has to return to England for a court to make a custody decision.

The two had met on a kibbutz in Israel, moved to England, and were married in 1994. The woman told the court that her husband had abused her.

The father had appealed to an Israeli court to order the return of the child, citing a Hague treaty on the kidnapping of children. The court said in its ruling that it had no choice but to order the return of the child. □

Egyptian April Fools' prank: Palestinian murders Netanyahu*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In an attempt at some April Fools' Day humor, an Egyptian newspaper ran an April 1 mock headline this week, "Netanyahu and Sharon Murdered by a Palestinian Woman."

The story in Al Watan al Arabi, a paper aligned with the centrist opposition, was described as a "Special Report from Tel Aviv."

The story described how Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and National Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon were killed by a hand grenade thrown at them by a Palestinian woman whose three sons had been killed by Israeli soldiers.

The paper, which explained that the story was a hoax in the spirit of April 1, said a real report of Netanyahu's murder would not come as a surprise.

"It is the logical result of his muscle-flexing acts," the paper said.

In a separate development, the Israeli Embassy in Cairo said Wednesday that it was filing a complaint after the Egyptian government newspaper al-Ahram left Israel off a map of the Middle East and replaced it with a depiction of Palestine in its pre-1948 borders. The map accompanied a story about a plan to export electricity from Egypt to other Arab countries. Israel is not part of the plan.

Embassy spokesman Lior Ben-Dor said he was filing a complaint to the editor of al-Ahram, adding, "We will take the necessary steps to correct what has to be corrected." The embassy has complained to Egyptian publishers in the past about attempts to ignore Israel's existence. □

National Front leader proposes union of Europe's extreme right*By Lee Yanowitch*

PARIS (JTA) — Far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen has called on the extreme-right movements of Europe to join forces.

"We propose in the coming days a form of political cooperation between our countries. Why not call this 'Euro-Nat' — a grouping of the Europe of nationalists, of the Europe of nationals," the anti-immigrant leader this week told a party congress in Strasbourg.

The congress was held while an estimated 40,000 people marched through the streets of Strasbourg to protest his National Front party, which advocates expelling France's 3 million mostly North African immigrants, reserving jobs and welfare for French nationals and taxing companies that employ immigrant workers. The congress was called to elect party leaders, draft a legislative platform and plan strategy for parliamentary elections in 1998.

But it was upstaged by the mass number of protesters, which included Jewish, left-wing and anti-racist groups. Strasbourg's Socialist mayor, Catherine Trautmann, also took part in the demonstration. It was believed to be the biggest anti-Front protest ever, and the largest in the city since the end of World War II.

Members of France's conservative ruling coalition stayed away from the mass demonstration, but they showed their opposition to the National Front by laying a wreath at the site of a synagogue the Nazis burnt down during the war.

Le Pen, who denies that he is racist or anti-Semitic though he has made anti-Jewish remarks in the past, said his sympathizers were being treated as outsiders.

He said the protesters were treating his followers as though they were "a caste of less-than-citizens, pariahs who remind us of plague victims during the Middle Ages or the Jews of Nazi Germany."

Several other European extreme rightists spoke at the congress, including Ricardo Saenz de Ynestrillas, head of Spain's National Unity Alliance, and Frank Vanhecke, president of Belgium's Flemish Bloc.

The National Front recently won control of a fourth southern town in municipal elections, but it has no seats in Parliament. In some of the towns the party controls, city officials have ordered school cafeterias to stop serving special meals for Jewish and Muslim children.

The Alsace region in which Strasbourg is located gave Le Pen a strong show of support in the 1995 presidential elections. The region has one of the lowest immigrant populations in the country. One of every four people in the region, which borders on Germany, voted for Le Pen in 1995, compared with 15 percent nationwide. □

Journalist's credentials revoked; says his citizenship may be cause*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — A Russian journalist has said his Israeli citizenship may be connected to a decision by Belarus authorities to revoke his accreditation.

The Belarus Foreign Ministry last week canceled the accreditation of Alexander Stupnikov, a correspondent for a Russian television channel, for his "biased" reports from the Belarus capital of Minsk.

The decision apparently was part of the government's campaign against foreign television broadcasters.

In 1985, the Russian-born Stupnikov immigrated to the United States. A few years later he moved to Israel, where he acquired citizenship. He has been working for Russian television since 1991.

At a news conference last week, Belarus President Alexandr Lukashenko referred to Stupnikov as "an Israeli citizen who has been damaging relations between Belarus and Russia."

Stupnikov told a news conference in Moscow this week that exploitation of his Jewish background and Israeli citizenship was a "very handy" way for the Minsk government to fan a public campaign against him.

One Belarus Jewish activist said in a telephone interview from Minsk that he did not believe that the controversy over Stupnikov would cause any adverse consequences for the 100,000-member Jewish community of this former Soviet republic.

On Wednesday, Lukashenko signed an agreement with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Moscow that could lead to a future union with Russia. Lukashenko sought the treaty as a way of supporting his ailing economy and political standing. It has been sharply criticized in Moscow because of Lukashenko's increasing authoritarianism and his curbing civil rights, including freedom of the press. □

Israel, Russia to establish Jewish university by 1998*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — Israeli and Russian officials have reached an agreement to open a new Jewish university here in early 1998 under the auspices of the city's Jewish community.

The university will offer a curriculum combining Jewish and general studies, according to Moscow Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt. "We hope that out of the 20,000 to 30,000 Jewish students that are in Moscow we will have a sizable number that will choose to study under the Jewish umbrella," he said.

The agreement was reached during a visit here last week by Zevulun Hammer, Israel's minister of education and culture, who met with Russian officials to discuss cooperation in those areas.

Moscow now has one Jewish university and several other schools offer programs in Jewish studies. The new university will emphasize training students for a variety of professions in shortage here, said Hammer, whose visit was hosted by the local Jewish community.

Goldschmidt agreed, saying that the new university would serve the needs of Russian society by training Jewish students in such fields as psychology, social work, business and computer science.

The project will be sponsored by the Russian and Israeli education ministries, the Jewish Agency for Israel and by private donors from the United States and Russia. The university's projected first year budget will be about \$1.5 million.

Goldschmidt voiced the hope that the university would open its doors next year for a first group of 750 Jewish students, who would pursue bachelor's and master's degrees in various fields.

During his visit, Hammer and his Russian counterparts agreed to set up a joint commission to ensure that school textbooks in their respective countries would be updated to provide students with a deeper understanding of each other's history, culture and geography. The commission will enable Russian students to "know more about the Jewish people and the Jewish state," said Hammer.

Most Russian schoolchildren know very little about Israel or Jewish history. The Holocaust goes virtually unmentioned in their textbooks.

Hammer and his Russian counterparts also discussed Russia's participation in next year's 50th anniversary celebrations commemorating the founding of the Jewish state. □