

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross said it could take weeks before Israeli-Palestinian negotiations resume.** American officials said Ross will remain in the region another week to continue efforts to revive the stalled peace talks. [Page 2]

■ **France's Jewish community reacted with indignation to a report that files containing the names of some 1,000 French Jews deported to Nazi death camps during the war were found on a garbage dump in southern France.** "Some people wanted to make a part of our history disappear," said Henri Hajdenberg, president of CRIF, the umbrella group of secular French Jewish organizations.

■ **Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel declined to serve on the executive board of Switzerland's Holocaust Memorial Fund for needy survivors.** In a May 6 letter to Swiss Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti, Wiesel said, "It has never been my role to measure or to quantify the suffering of others." [Page 3]

■ **Israel accused the Palestinian Authority of killing a Palestinian suspected of selling land to Jews.** Palestinian officials said last week that any Arab who sells land to Jews through unauthorized agents would face the death penalty.

■ **Three members of a terrorist cell that murdered an Israeli soldier last summer said they abducted Sharon Edri in an effort to pressure Israel to release Hamas prisoners.** The terrorists, who are in Palestinian Authority jails, discussed the kidnapping and murder during an interview with the Arab-language newspaper Al-Quds.

■ **Israel's state comptroller, issuing her annual report on government activities, recommended that the attorney general investigate three cases of alleged criminal behavior in the public service.**

■ **The Czech Republic's Presidential Office established a commission to study the country's Holocaust era.** The seven-person commission includes academics, members of the local Jewish community and representatives of other Czech groups persecuted during the war.

NEWS ANALYSIS**Palestinian promise to draft new covenant falls by wayside**

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A year has passed since the Palestine National Council voted to draft a new charter, but still there is no such document.

Palestinian leaders repeatedly have committed themselves to change their charter — most recently in the Hebron agreement signed in January — but no action has been taken.

Some Israeli officials see this as significant; others are less concerned.

The Palestinians, meanwhile, appear completely unwilling to deal with the issue.

On April 24, 1996, the PNC, with a vote of 504-54, with 14 abstentions, passed a vaguely worded resolution that, in effect, canceled the clauses in its charter that call for the destruction of Israel.

The PNC, the supreme body representing all Palestinian political parties, also adopted a resolution calling on a legal committee of the organization to draft a new charter within six months.

Then-Prime Minister Shimon Peres hailed the vote, calling it "the most important change in the last 100 years."

Benjamin Netanyahu, then the opposition leader, was more cautious, saying the vote was only a vague mandate giving a "committee the power to amend clauses sometime in the future."

Palestinian officials explained last year that no new covenant had been drafted because their Israeli counterparts had informally requested that the move be delayed.

Indeed, some of Peres' aides preferred that the PNC make do with a committee and some vague future date rather than adopt a new document.

Their reasoning was purely practical. A new charter, the aides speculated, might recognize Israel, but it could also give voice to the Palestinian goal of sovereign statehood with Jerusalem as the capital.

'Palestinians never intended to keep their word'

Now, a year later, some Israeli officials cite the absence of a new charter as proof that the Palestinians cannot be trusted to uphold their commitments.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, they say, has no right to keep alleging that Israel does not live up to its commitments to the Palestinians, given his dismal track record with the covenant.

"The Palestinians never intended to keep their word," Reserve Brig. Gen. Yigal Carmon, a former adviser on anti-terrorist affairs for premiers Yitzhak Shamir and Yitzhak Rabin, said in an interview.

"What right do they have to demand that the Israelis fulfill their commitments?"

Carmon said he doubted that the Palestinians would soon come up with a new covenant. "Even if they do, it might be an even worse version than the original one," he said.

Others, both within Labor and Likud, do not see the drafting of a new Palestinian charter as a high priority.

Knesset member Ephraim Sneh, a candidate for the Labor Party leadership, feels that the time is not right for Israel to call on the Palestinians to change the covenant.

"Had Labor been in power today," Sneh said in an interview, "it would have been right to demand that the covenant be abolished."

But, he added, given the current impasse in Israeli-Palestinian relations, Israel can hardly call on the Palestinians to make the move.

Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh sees the issue as a matter of priorities.

"The Israeli demand that the Palestinians revoke the covenant is still on the agenda," Naveh said in an interview. "But there are more immediate issues on the agenda, and I just do not know how practical our demand still is."

Fadel Tahbub, a PNC delegate from Jerusalem, stated a long-familiar argument from the Palestinian side. Last year's decision to "annul certain

clauses," he said, had removed all the passages that Israel might deem offensive.

The "time was not appropriate" to draft a new document, he added.

The Palestinian Covenant surfaced 33 years ago, on June 2, 1964.

The political manifesto of the Palestinians, it contains some particularly provocative clauses, such as Article 9: "Armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine;" and Article 19: "The partition of Palestine in 1947 and the establishment of the State of Israel are entirely illegal."

It took a lengthy and painful process, stained with many bloody clashes between Israelis and Palestinians, before Arafat announced in Paris in 1989 that the covenant was "caduc," French for null and void.

The declaration was hailed as a sign of moderation, and it undoubtedly paved the way to the historic Declaration of Principles that Israel and the Palestinians signed Sept. 13, 1993, on the White House lawn.

Four days before that ceremony, in an exchange of letters of mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, Arafat wrote Rabin that the articles in the Palestinian Covenant that negate Israel's right to exist "are no longer practical and therefore invalid."

With this, Arafat committed himself to convene the PNC to introduce the necessary changes in the covenant.

He repeated that commitment in the May 4, 1994, Cairo Agreement that ratified the transfer of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho to Palestinian self-rule.

In the Interim Agreement that was signed Sept. 28, 1995, in Washington — whereby Israel agreed to transfer six additional West Bank population centers to self-rule — the Palestinians again agreed to draft a new covenant.

Under heavy pressure from Peres — and the White House — Arafat convened the PNC on the eve of the 1996 elections in Israel.

PNC Chairman Salim Za'anun, reflecting Arafat's stance, convinced the delegates to vote for the proposed motion, telling them that they were buying time.

The resolution that was approved referred to clauses in the covenant that "contradicted the exchange of letters between Israel and the PLO."

Israel had presented to the Palestinians a list of 17 "problematic" clauses that needed to be eradicated.

The PNC vote did not make specific reference to any of them.

At this point, Arafat is apparently little concerned with the issue.

Earlier this year, when he visited Washington, an Israeli reporter asked him when the Palestinians would draft a new covenant.

His reply struck many observers as strange and irrelevant:

"When you, the Israelis, will have your own constitution." □

Israel marks Independence Day amid gloom over peace process

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel held its 49th Independence Day celebrations amid an unpromising climate for restarting Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

The state ceremony at Jerusalem's Mount Herzl on Sunday evening opened with the theme, "100 years of Zionism," to commemorate the century that has passed since the first session of the Zionist Congress was held in Basel, Switzerland, to set out the goals of the Zionist movement.

The start of Independence Day officially marked the end of Israel's Memorial Day, which commemorated the 18,538 men and women who fell in defense of the state since the 1948 War of Independence.

The total included 328 people who died during the past year.

For the first time, this year's Memorial Day observances recalled civilians killed in terrorist attacks.

As a siren brought the country to a standstill Sunday in memory of the fallen, Israeli leaders and military officers stressed that a strong Israel was essential for the country's future.

"We are moving surely, step by step, toward an era of acceptance by our neighbors of Israel's existence," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said at the main state memorial ceremony at the Mount Herzl military cemetery.

He said that a strong Israeli army was "the true basis for the hope of peace."

Meanwhile, U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross continued efforts to revive the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

His mission to the region, which began last week and was his second in a month, was to be extended by several days, American officials said.

Ross, who held a series of separate meetings last week with Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat, is encountering hardened positions on both sides.

Israeli-Palestinian contacts all but stopped in mid-March, when Israel started construction of a new Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem.

The Palestinians have been calling for a halt to the project, and to settlement expansion, as a precondition for restarting negotiations.

Israel also has a precondition — the resumption of intelligence-sharing.

Israel imposes closure

Less than optimistic about immediately finding a formula to bring the two sides back to the table, Ross said this week that it could take weeks before Israeli-Palestinian negotiations resume.

Netanyahu said he believed there were still many hurdles to be overcome before the talks would get back on track.

"They cannot expect us to make all the concessions, while they make none," Netanyahu told Israel Radio, adding that it was too early to decide whether Ross' shuttle was a success or failure.

Netanyahu also discussed Israeli-Syrian negotiations, which have been stalled since March 1996, saying that Washington would play a key role in restarting the talks.

The prime minister said that there had been recent contacts in which Damascus signaled interest in renewing the talks, but added that it was too soon to judge Syria's seriousness.

Senior Israeli army officers warned that if the peace option failed to break the deadlock over the future of the Golan Heights, Damascus could still consider the war option.

Syrian words and actions are "pointing to the possibility of Syria's using force to achieve political aims if the path of peace does not succeed," Israel Defense Force chief of staff Lt. Gen. Amnon Shahak told Army Radio.

Israel imposed a closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip Saturday evening, when Memorial Day began, as a precaution against terrorist attacks.

The closure was to be lifted Tuesday morning, after Independence Day ended. □

U.S. report provokes debate among Swiss on wartime role

By Fredy Rom

ZURICH (JTA) — A debate has erupted in Switzerland in the wake of a U.S. report that harshly criticized the country's wartime financial dealings with the Nazis.

The 200-page report, released May 7 in Washington by U.S. Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat, included charges that Swiss purchases of Nazi-looted gold helped prolong the Third Reich's war effort.

"This allegation can never be proved," said Francois Bergier, who chairs an international group of historians and lawyers appointed last year by the Swiss government to probe Switzerland's wartime past.

Bergier added that it would take at least 10 years before the probe would be completed.

Earlier, he and other Swiss officials had said it would take up to five years before the Bergier panel would complete its findings.

On the other side of the debate prompted by the Eizenstat report, parliamentarian Jean Ziegler called on the Swiss government to return immediately to the Jewish people billions of dollars in gold the Nazis had stolen from Holocaust victims.

The report had charged that some of the gold Switzerland purchased from the Nazis had been looted from Jews and later melted into gold bars.

But there was no evidence that Switzerland had knowingly purchased the gold of Holocaust victims, the report said.

Prior to the release of the Eizenstat report, months of mounting international pressure regarding the whereabouts of Holocaust-era secret Swiss bank accounts prompted the Swiss government in late February to establish the Holocaust Memorial Fund.

Wiesel declines role in Swiss fund

But last week, hopes that the fund would soon be making distributions to needy Holocaust survivors suffered a setback with word from Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel that he would not serve as international chairman of the memorial fund.

In a May 6 letter to Swiss Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti, Wiesel said, "It has never been my role to measure or to quantify the suffering of others."

His letter came less than a week after Switzerland bowed to Jewish pressures to appoint Wiesel to the fund's seven-member executive board, which will oversee the distribution of millions of dollars to needy Holocaust survivors.

Wiesel said in the letter that he had been "reluctant" to serve on the board.

He added, in a reference to the debate now taking place in Switzerland, "Recent statements in the Swiss media have only served to deepen my reservations."

Created earlier this year with contributions from Switzerland's largest banks and industrial firms, the fund is valued at about \$190 million.

According to the March 1 bylaws establishing the fund, Switzerland was to name four of the executive board's members and the World Jewish Restitution Organization would recommend the other three members.

In April, the WJRO proposed its three nominees, including Wiesel, Israeli elder statesman Yosef Burg and Knesset member Avraham Herschson.

After receiving Wiesel's letter, Cotti called on the WJRO to name a replacement for the Nobel laureate as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the Eizenstat report has generated fears

in Switzerland that the United States will seek to renegotiate the 1946 Washington Agreement.

Under the terms of that agreement, the Swiss turned over some \$58 million in Nazi-looted gold to the Allies.

According to the Eizenstat report, the Swiss held far more Nazi gold than it turned over.

The report estimated the amount at between \$185 million and \$289 million at the end of the war.

An additional \$120 million was also estimated to be held for other countries by the Swiss central bank, according to the report.

Special Ambassador Thomas Borer, Switzerland's leading troubleshooter for dealing with the accusations against his country, said no government in the world would agree to reopen negotiations on an already signed international pact.

"Where do you stop? How far do you go back — 50 years, 100 years, back to the Napoleonic war?" he asked.

"Governments have to respect international agreements," he added.

"I don't know if the U.S. would want to renegotiate certain agreements it has made in the past."

In a related development, Rolf Bloch, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Switzerland, is warning of a resurgence of Swiss anti-Semitism.

Anti-fund campaign 'playing with fire'

In a speech last week at a synagogue in Basel, Switzerland, Bloch told federation delegates and government officials that he was alarmed by a new campaign launched by the Popular Party aimed at undermining public support for two Swiss funds created to help needy Holocaust survivors.

In posters and newspaper ads, the right-wing party, which is part of the governing coalition, sharply criticized the Holocaust Memorial Fund and a separate \$7 billion "Swiss Foundation for Solidarity."

In March, Swiss President Arnold Koller proposed creating the foundation in order to help the "victims of poverty and catastrophes," including victims of the Holocaust.

The right-wing campaign charged that Jewish "blackmail" had forced the Swiss government to announce the funds.

Christoph Blocher, a Popular Party leader who financed the campaign, was "playing with fire," Bloch warned.

"This can easily end with a conflagration," added Bloch.

Last month, the Swiss government appointed Bloch to preside over the Holocaust Memorial Fund.

In another development, the president of the 40-member central committee of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Switzerland is calling on the Swiss government not to devote funds from the multi-billion "Swiss Foundation for Solidarity" to needy Holocaust victims.

Claude Nordmann said that the proposed foundation, which is expected to face a referendum next year, will not be approved by the Swiss people if some of its funds are to be given to Holocaust survivors.

Thomas Lyssy, vice president of the Jewish federation, disagreed with Nordmann's stance.

"We do not have any mandate from the survivors of the Holocaust to disclaim any single dollar" in reparations, he said.

Lyssy added the belief that the foundation would be approved in a referendum by "a comfortable majority" of the Swiss people. □

Canadian Jews rally to press government on war criminals*By Bram D. Eisenthal*

MONTREAL (JTA) — The message of a Yom Hashoah rally in downtown Montreal was clear: suspected Nazi war criminals residing in Canada better beware.

Some 2,000 Jewish demonstrators gathered last week to call on the Canadian government to take swift action against alleged war criminals living openly in the country.

The protest came in the wake of recent disclosures that there are hundreds of suspected Nazi veterans living in Canada.

"It is unacceptable that 10 years after the full report of the Deschesnes Commission, there has been only one successful denaturalization and deportation proceeding," Myra Giberovitch, a co-chair of the Canadian Jewish Congress's national Holocaust remembrance committee, said in her address to the rally.

The government commission in 1987 recommended action against 20 suspected war criminals in Canada and the investigation of 218 others.

"Murder is murder is murder," said Giberovitch, a child Holocaust survivor. "There is no statute of limitations on murder. Canada must not continue to turn a blind eye to the mass murderers among us."

While the rally was taking place, an interfaith group met in Toronto with Canadian Justice Minister Allan Rock. Officials from the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United and Evangelical Lutheran churches, as well as the World Sikh Organization, joined Jewish leaders at the meeting.

Rock promised the delegation that more suspected war criminals will find themselves before the courts.

"The best way we can honor the memory of those who died, the best way we can provide comfort to those who survived" is to take action, he said. "I am sure we have not done enough." □

Russian Jews launch magazine to counter anti-Semitic views*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — Responding to rising concerns among Jews here over the general public's indifference toward anti-Semitism, the Russian Jewish Congress has launched a new magazine.

Intolerance is becoming a commonplace in the public and political consciousness, said Andrey Kolesnikov, editor of the bi-monthly magazine, *Diagnoz*, or *Diagnosis*. The magazine aims to counter fascist and xenophobic tendencies in Russian society.

Many Russians are not concerned about fascism because they either do not know what it is or they are longing for strong discipline, Kolesnikov said.

"That is why fascism is not seen as something dangerous by policy-makers and officials, by the police," he said.

Diagnoz aims to suggest what should be done to actively counter fascist tendencies, Kolesnikov added.

The magazine's editors say that existing laws that might help to actively counter anti-Semitism and xenophobia are not effective.

In Moscow alone, there are some 100 periodicals that regularly publish anti-Semitic articles. Nearly 30 ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi groups are active across Russia.

Initially, 3,500 copies of the full-color magazine will be distributed free of charge to government officials, members of the Parliament, police officials and prominent intellectuals.

Some members of the Communist-dominated Duma, the Russian parliament's lower house, have voiced outrage over the publication.

"They are diagnosing us," one parliamentarian reportedly said after reading the magazine.

Nikolay Propirniy, the magazine's deputy editor, said that he had expected stronger negative reaction on the part of some Duma members.

The magazine sets the defense of ethnic minorities' rights as one of its major goals.

In its premier issue, *Diagnoz* explains the dangers of the widespread negative attitudes toward the peoples of the Caucasus, currently the most common object of intolerance in Russia. □

McDonald's allowed to serve non-kosher food in new mall*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The McDonald's franchise in Israel claimed victory last week in its effort to open a non-kosher restaurant in a new shopping mall opening in the Tel Aviv area.

The mall is being built in Ramat Aviv, a predominantly secular neighborhood north of Tel Aviv. Most McDonald's restaurants in Israel are not kosher.

Officials at Africa-Israel, the mall's builder, said no battle had been fought with McDonald's because the issue at stake was not whether a non-kosher restaurant could operate, but whether the mall would be open on the Sabbath.

Africa-Israel caused a stir in March with its decision to close the mall on the Sabbath. Businesses protested, claiming that their contracts said the mall would be open on the Sabbath.

Observers have linked the Sabbath closure decision to the recent purchase of Africa-Israel by Israeli business leader Lev Levayev, an observant Jew.

Lawyers from both sides have been holding consultations on the signed contracts.

McDonald's lease says opening on the Sabbath would depend on whether movie theaters in the mall also would be open.

Africa-Israel said no contract had been signed yet with the company, Israel Theaters. □

Israeli scholar claims local banks hold assets of Holocaust victims*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Some of the missing assets of Holocaust victims may be in Israeli banks, according to a geography professor at Bar-Ilan University.

The study by Professor Yossi Katz, published last week in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, indicated that German Jews deposited huge sums in the banks before World War II and that their accounts had been frozen by British authorities in Palestine.

Many of those who had deposited money died in the Holocaust, and only those heirs who knew of the deposits and had the required proof were able to request the funds. The fate of unclaimed funds remains unclear.

Katz said the accounts frozen by the British would today be worth about \$70 million, excluding accrued interest.

The state custodian, Shmuel Tzur, said last week that money deposited in pre-state Israel that was not claimed after 15 years was handed over to the state.

But he said that heirs who had proper documents proving ownership could submit a request to receive the deposits, even though the 15 years had elapsed. □