

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israel's High Court of Justice rejected petitions calling for a state inquiry into the Bar-On affair.** But the five-justice panel is considering separate petitions demanding that the prime minister and justice minister be tried for breach of trust and fraud in connection with the affair. [Page 2]

■ **A study of Jewish women of Eastern European ancestry found that those who carry a specific genetic mutation could be four times more likely to develop breast cancer than those without the mutated gene.** The study of Washington D.C.-area women was conducted by the National Cancer Institute.

■ **Israeli and Palestinian officials held talks at the Herzliya residence of U.S. Ambassador Martin Indyk on ways to break the impasse in negotiations.**

■ **Israeli opposition leader Shimon Peres met with Yasser Arafat in the West Bank town of Ramallah.** The meeting came as the Labor Party decided to formally endorse the Palestinians' right to a state with limited sovereignty.

■ **U.S. government agencies are planning a combined effort to counter the Hamas and Hezbollah movements, which have organized an infrastructure in the United States and which pose a great threat,** FBI Director Louis Freeh and Attorney General Janet Reno told a Senate panel.

■ **The Argentine government created a commission to probe how many Nazi officials arrived in the country after War World II, the level of protection extended to them by local authorities and the transfer of Nazi gold to Buenos Aires.** The committee will be headed by high-ranking members of the government, as well as non-governmental officials.

■ **The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations unanimously elected as its new chairman Melvin Salberg, a New York attorney.** Salberg, the president of the American Zionist Movement and former chairman of the Anti-Defamation League, succeeds Leon Levy.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Violent opposition to land sales highlights struggle for Jerusalem***By Gil Sedan*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The iron door at the entrance to the old Arab house in eastern Jerusalem opened only after a visitor knocked persistently for several minutes.

Inside was the mourning family of Farid al-Bashiti, an Arab real estate agent who was brutally murdered last week — allegedly because of his involvement in the sale of Arab-owned land to Jews.

The murder comes as the struggle over land in Jerusalem has intensified in advance of final-status talks that will attempt to determine the city's future. At the heart of that struggle are competing efforts by Israelis to acquire land in predominantly Arab eastern Jerusalem and Palestinian moves to forestall such purchases.

The allegation that Bashiti was murdered because of his sale of land was voiced loudly by Israeli officials — and whispered by Arabs fearful of retribution from the Palestinian Authority. In Washington, U.S. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said the Clinton administration would find it "highly disturbing" if the allegation were proven true.

Inside the mourners' home, one person introduced himself as "Mohammad al-Bashiti, a cousin from England."

Police sources said he was Bashiti's brother, but given the circumstances, it was not surprising that the man wanted to maintain some distance between himself and the deceased.

There was a palpable fear inside the house.

Farid al-Bashiti was found dead last Friday near a road in the West Bank town of Ramallah. His hands had been cuffed. A sharp blow to the head had caused his death, but there were also signs that he had been tortured. When they informed the family of his death, Palestinian officials said he had been killed in a traffic accident. But both Israeli and Palestinian sources linked the murder to suspicions that Bashiti was involved in sales of Palestinian-owned land to Jews.

Land disputes heated up after Israel began construction in mid-March at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem.

'A Jew with a Muslim identity'

Several weeks ago, the mufti, or Muslim religious leader, of Jerusalem issued a religious ruling ordering that all Muslims selling land to Jews be sentenced to death. The mufti, Sheik Akrami Sabri, referred to Bashiti during his sermon last Friday at Jerusalem's al-Aksa mosque.

"They found the body of a Jew with a Muslim identity," he said mockingly, not even mentioning the deceased by name. "He ought not to be buried in a Muslim funeral."

Bashiti's family had buried him secretly in Ramallah, but the body was later disinterred for an autopsy. They are planning another burial at a Muslim cemetery in Jaffa.

Echoing the mufti's edict, Freih Abu Medein, the Palestinian Authority's justice minister, last week said that Arabs selling land to Jews would be subject to the death penalty. After Bashiti's body was found, Medein referred to him as a "traitor," adding that traitors ought to be executed.

Bashiti was a close friend of Armenian Archbishop Ajamian, who recently sold a \$5 million villa on the Mount of Olives to the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva. The archbishop sold the house to a foreign company that was operating on behalf of Irving Moskowitz, a Jewish philanthropist from Miami who has been purchasing Arab land, according to Palestinian sources.

The villa will be used to house students at the adjacent Beit Orot Yeshiva, which has operated for several years on the slopes of the mount.

"This is only the beginning," said Chaim Silberstein, director of the Beit Orot Yeshiva, referring to the acquisition of the Ajamian villa. "We already have three acres here under Jewish ownership, and we hope we can build here an entire city of Torah."

It is not clear whether Bashiti had anything to do with the villa sale, but from a political standpoint, it does not matter. Bashiti's death is now

serving as a warning to all Arabs to stay out of any deals with Jews, whether it is the Israeli government or private investors.

But official Palestinian moves to prevent land sales have not dissuaded Jews from seeking more deals.

"We are working in terms of eternity," said Matti Dan, of Yeshivat Ateret Cohanim, the main force behind the Jewish purchase of property in the Old City's Muslim Quarter.

For their part, the Islamic religious authorities recently protested that the Israelis were planning to take over an area known as the Little Wall, which is located in a yard of an Arab home and is an extension of the Western Wall. Jews pray there on Shabbat and on holidays, and the Religious Affairs Ministry often cleans up the area.

Last week, a ministry spokesman said the government was considering setting up a prayer area beyond the Western Wall plaza — a move Palestinian religious officials said could lead to violence.

Elsewhere in eastern Jerusalem, Jewish developers have ambitious building plans.

Moskowitz has acquired almost four acres at the Ras el-Amud neighborhood, located east of the Temple Mount. Although a plan to build 132 housing units for Jews in that neighborhood was frozen by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, it was approved by the legal committees in charge of the project. Only a governmental go-ahead is needed for work to begin.

Another plan calls for linking Jerusalem to Ma'aleh Adumim, located further east on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, by building a new neighborhood of 1,500 housing units and 3,000 hotel rooms on a stretch of land covering 2,500 acres.

Other proposed projects include a new neighborhood near Abu Dis, the Arab suburb of eastern Jerusalem that has often been mentioned as a possible capital of a future Palestinian state.

This week, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported that senior political officials are secretly considering plans to expand the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem by annexing Ma'aleh Adumim, Givat Ze'ev, Betar and the Etzion settlement bloc, making them part of a Greater Jerusalem municipality.

Interior Minister Eli Suissa, who has been outspoken in his support of the idea, did not attempt to argue against the veracity of the Ha'aretz report.

But, reflecting the political sensitivity of the move, Suissa responded to an inquiry about the plans by saying it was "better not to discuss it." □

High Court hears petitions to indict Netanyahu, Hanegbi

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's High Court of Justice this week considered petitions calling for the prime minister and justice minister to be charged in connection with the Bar-On affair.

The expanded panel of five justices held a marathon session Wednesday to consider whether the prime minister and justice minister should be tried for breach of trust and fraud in connection with the short-lived January appointment of Roni Bar-On as attorney general.

The court is expected to render a decision in a few weeks.

Earlier in the day, the justices threw out separate petitions that called on the court to order a state commission of inquiry and make public a 995-page police report about the affair.

In mid-April, police recommended indicting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Justice Minister Tzachi

Hanegbi and other top officials for fraud and breach of trust because of their handling of the Bar-On appointment.

Though three attorneys in the prosecutor's office also wanted to indict Netanyahu and Hanegbi, Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein and State Prosecutor Edna Arbel decided last month that there was only sufficient evidence to recommend an indictment against Deri.

That decision drew charges from supporters of Deri, who heads the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, that an anti-Sephardi bias had led to his indictment.

Bar-On won Cabinet approval Jan. 10, but stepped down two days later amid growing charges in political and legal spheres that he lacked the experience to hold Israel's top legal post. Two weeks later, the Cabinet unanimously approved Rubinstein to serve as Israel's attorney general.

During Wednesday's court proceedings, one of the petitioners accused the justices of being part of a campaign by the country's Ashkenazi establishment against the Sephardi community. A petition to reverse the attorney general's decision regarding Deri was also rejected.

Security around the courthouse was tight Wednesday, after Shas supporters who had attended a rally for Deri the previous night briefly burst into the building's entrance hall.

Netanyahu said he viewed the matter seriously and had instructed Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani to look into the matter to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future. □

Israel's Labor Party endorses Palestinian right to statehood

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Labor Party has decided to formally endorse the Palestinians' right to a state with limited sovereignty.

Labor officials agreed to add the plank to their platform during a party convention this week in Tel Aviv.

Wednesday's decision came a year after the Labor Party decided to drop opposition to a Palestinian state from its platform. The recognition came with the limitation that the Palestinians could not establish an army or form military alliances with other countries. In addition, the Labor plank said the Palestinians must give Israel's air force access to airspace over the self-rule areas.

In response, the Likud Party issued a statement saying the move proved that Labor would succumb to Arab pressures in forthcoming negotiations on final-status issues, which is slated to include the question of Palestinian sovereignty.

The vote on the party platform, which will serve as the basis for Labor positions in the national elections scheduled for the year 2000, came a day after a stormy political showdown within the party.

Knesset member Ehud Barak, the leading contender for the party leadership in next month's primaries, at first objected to the explicit reference in the plank to a Palestinian state.

But the hawkish former Israel Defense Force chief of staff, apparently softened by a victory over outgoing party chairman Shimon Peres, ultimately withdrew his objections.

At its opening session Tuesday night, the 3,500 Labor delegates overwhelmingly heeded Barak's call and voted to postpone until September a discussion of whether to appoint Peres to the new position of party president.

The vote was viewed as a stinging defeat for Peres, who met with close colleagues Wednesday to assess its aftermath. He said he had no intention of quitting the Labor Party and that he planned to continue pursuing peace with the Palestinians. □

Israeli military chief warns against further budget cuts*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israel Defense Force chief of staff is warning that Israel's current defense budget is insufficient in light of the threats the country faces.

"The defense budget is not enough to counter the threats surrounding us as we have identified them," Lt. Gen. Amnon Shahak told a gathering of reserve officers.

In January, the Knesset cut \$2.2 billion from government programs, including military, in an effort to rein in the deficit and have it total no more than 2.8 percent of Israel's gross domestic product.

Shahak's criticism of the defense cuts comes as the government is considering an additional cut of more than \$300 million in overall spending.

Meanwhile, a senior IDF officer told the Israeli daily Ha'aretz that the army requires a significant additional budget. The source said Israel is facing new threats from the use of chemical and biological warfare, which will require a change in the army's priorities.

The criticisms of the military budget came as the head of the research division in the IDF intelligence branch, Brig. Gen. Amos Gilad, said that while Syria does not appear to have definite plans for war, Damascus is keeping the military option open.

Regarding Egypt, Gilad said President Hosni Mubarak's policies are more militant than in the past, pointing to Egypt's intensive efforts to arm itself.

He also referred to increased efforts by Arab countries to obtain surface-to-surface missiles that can be armed with chemical and biological warheads. His concerns were underscored by recent reports that Syria has developed a lethal nerve gas and is in the first stages of mounting it on surface-to-surface missiles. □

Court allows television to air documentary on Rabin killing*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — At the eleventh hour, Israel's High Court of Justice rejected petitions that would have prevented this week's screening of a television documentary on the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

On Tuesday, Israel's Channel 2 broadcast Michael Karpin's film, "The Government is Shocked to Announce..." about the political atmosphere prior to Rabin's assassination.

The documentary portrayed the extreme right wing as having fueled — and the Likud Party having tolerated — a campaign against Rabin the person, and not just his policies. The petitioners, representing right-wing groups, had argued that the film was tendentious, inaccurate and hurtful to a large segment of the population.

Jewish settler leaders said the film's producers had an agenda, and concealed this when they interviewed Jews in the West Bank and Gaza for the documentary.

In a related development, Likud Knesset member Michael Eitan said Tuesday that he had asked the attorney general to reopen an investigation into Avishai Raviv, a right-wing activist who was acquainted with Rabin assassin Yigal Amir and was alleged to have been an informant for the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security service.

Eitan told a news conference that it was unfair to accuse the right wing of inciting political violence before Rabin's murder, while at the time Raviv was allowed to wander and, in his view, tried to incite the national camp to violence.

Eitan charged that there had been "an order from above" to halt the investigation into Raviv's activities. □

Israel's state comptroller finds ethical breaches in government*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Issuing her annual report on government activity, Israel's state comptroller said last week that she had found numerous instances of breaches of ethics in the public service.

The report, which covered the end of the Labor-led government and the beginning of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud-led coalition, recommended that the attorney general investigate at least three cases of suspected criminal activities.

Miriam Ben Porat said she considered the 1,100 page report "one of the most serious" she had ever prepared.

Among the report's findings were a long list of political appointments that Porat said failed to meet required standards.

"It is natural that a new government would want to appoint people who share its views," Ben Porat said. "But unfortunately the drive to garner power sometimes pushed individuals to try to circumvent proper procedures and the law."

The report cited the appointment of a legal adviser to the Prime Minister's Office, who was later forced to step down because he lacked the required experience.

Concerns regarding army's preparedness

The report pointed to conflicts of interest in the disbursement of public funds, when members of organizations seeking such funds also sat on the ministerial committees that allocated them.

In another case, the deputy housing minister promised projects to a contractor on the condition that a Likud activist, who did not have the requisite experience, be made a deputy director of the company.

The state comptroller also criticized the lack of follow-up to ensure that funds distributed to organizations were used for their intended purpose.

On a separate issue, the state comptroller raised grave concerns regarding the Israeli army's preparedness for war. Reserve combat soldiers do not receive adequate training, and there is no follow-up assessment of their training, the report said.

The report said that the army's wartime emergency stores were low, that armored vehicles were found to be defective and that ammunition had expired. Some 2 million citizens were still without proper gas masks, which must be supplied by the army, the report said.

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai said in response that he was aware of the problems and hoped that the defense establishment would be given the necessary resources to correct them.

On another matter, Ben Porat said she had not yet decided whether to investigate the role of former Israel Defense Force chief of staff Ehud Barak in a November 1992 military accident.

Five soldiers were killed when a live missile prematurely fired during a training exercise.

Ben Porat said that in her initial investigation of the accident she had heard conflicting reports over how, and whether, Barak helped soldiers who were injured in the accident. Barak is a leading contender for the leadership of the Labor Party, which is set to hold internal elections on June 3.

Ben Porat said it was important to clarify the matter, in light of the fact that it involves an individual who could conceivably lead the country. Barak welcomed Ben Porat's remarks, and said he was sure an investigation would substantiate his version of the events. □

Holocaust denial case tests Canadian province's hate law

By Bill Gladstone

TORONTO (JTA) — A veteran British Columbia journalist is facing charges of publishing statements that are “likely to expose a group or class of persons to hatred or contempt.”

The case comes three years after Doug Collins wrote a newspaper column accusing Jews of distorting and propagandizing the Holocaust to make money.

Collins is the first person accused by the British Columbia Human Rights Council of contravening the province's 1993 Human Rights Act. If convicted by the panel of three judges in Vancouver, Collins could be fined.

The case revolves around a column, “Hollywood Propaganda,” that Collins wrote in 1994 for the Vancouver newspaper North Shore News, which has a circulation of about 60,000.

In his column, Collins dismissed the accepted figure of 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust as “nonsense,” and suggested the total was more like “hundreds of thousands.”

He described Holocaust films such as “Schindler's List” as “hate literature in the form of films” and asserted that Jews control Hollywood and are making up lies to extort billions of dollars in reparations from Germany.

The Canadian Jewish Congress, the British Columbia Human Rights Coalition and the Chinese Benevolent Association have all filed briefs in favor of conviction.

“The rights of free speech are limited by the rights of victims of hate speech,” said Michael Elterman, chairman of the Canadian Jewish Congress's Pacific Region.

“The article holds the Jewish community up to hatred and contempt,” Elterman said. “It says that the Jews are out to dupe the non-Jewish world for as much money as possible, which touches on a number of historic anti-Semitic themes and stereotypes.”

Favoring acquittal, the B.C. Civil Liberties Union and the B.C. Press Council argue that the 1993 law is unconstitutional since, they say, it exerts limits on the “freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press.”

A legal defense campaign has reportedly raised more than \$65,000 in recent weeks for Collins. Some 50 people attended a rally for his defense Sunday at a public library in West Vancouver. □

Argentina begins examination of postwar relations with Nazis

By Sergio Kiernan

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — The Argentine government this week created a national committee to probe how many Nazi officials arrived in the country after World War II, the level of protection extended to them by local authorities and the transfer of Nazi gold to Buenos Aires.

The committee will be headed by high-ranking members of the government, but will also include non-governmental personalities and an international board of trustees.

Jewish communal leaders applauded the move as a major step toward dealing with a subject long considered taboo by government officials.

Two years ago, prodding by the Jewish community led President Carlos Menem to open a dark chapter in Argentina's wartime history by releasing official records about the postwar arrivals of Nazi officials in Argentina.

The latest action comes after a commission funded by the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association, also known as AMIA, revealed the complicity of government

officials in resettling Nazi officials in Argentina. The commission's findings will be published in book form later this year.

According to sources close to the study, the book will contain extensive official documents proving not only then-President Juan Peron's active complicity in helping Nazis come to Argentina after the war, but also a continuing effort to protect them by successive Argentine military administrations. □

Neo-Nazis parade in Argentina

By Sergio Kiernan

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — In the first neo-Nazi demonstration here in years, a small group this week marked the first anniversary of the death of a skinhead who was killed in a street fight with left-wing activists.

Some 50 black-clad youngsters gathered in a park Saturday, near the spot where Marcelo Scalera was killed, to sing patriotic songs and hear a speech by a neo-Nazi leader.

The demonstration was organized by two little-known groups, the Nationalist Youth and the New Social and Patriotic Order Party.

Dozens of heavily armed police agents passively looked on during the rally.

A few neighbors walking their dogs watched the protest in amazement.

“I did not know there were such groups anymore,” said a middle-aged woman. “They are weird.”

Argentine Jewish officials expressed concern about the protest, which signaled the possible re-emergence of neo-Nazi activities here. □

Czechs set up Holocaust commission

By Randi Druzin

PRAGUE (JTA) — The Czech Republic's Presidential Office established last week 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.

“Many organizations have been examining issues related to the Holocaust,” said Jan Munk, director of the Terezin Memorial, which will be represented on the commission.

“There are several research projects underway, but there isn't communication between them,” Munk said. “This commission will ensure the exchange of information and cooperation between projects, and will fill in the gaps in information.”

Presidential spokesman Jiri Kudela said that about a year ago Czech President Vaclav Havel was thinking of bringing together “academic and professional bodies which would deal with the roots, course and the effects of the Holocaust on Czech society.” □

Forces clash in South Lebanon

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli forces killed one Hezbollah gunman and wounded another in a clash on the edge of the southern Lebanon security zone Wednesday. No Israeli troops were injured.

Earlier this week, four Hezbollah gunmen were killed when a force of some 40 fighters were repulsed in an effort to take over a position of the South Lebanese Army in the security zone.

One Israeli soldier and three South Lebanese Army troops were wounded in the clash. □