

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Palestinian officials warned of an outbreak of violence if Israel went ahead with plans to demolish some 500 structures built by Palestinians in areas of the West Bank under Israeli control.** Israel maintains that the buildings were erected illegally. [Page 3]

■ **The body of a Palestinian land dealer was found in the West Bank town of Ramallah.** Palestinian officials denied that they had any hand in the murder of Harbi Abu Sarah, who was the second Palestinian killed this month for selling land to Jews. [Page 2]

■ **Palestinian Authority officials termed U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross' two-week shuttle mission to the region a failure.** [Page 3]

■ **Hamas member Hassan Salameh pleaded guilty in an Israeli military court to 46 counts of murder resulting from terror attacks he masterminded.** Salameh, who was arrested by Israeli authorities last year, is likely to be sentenced to multiple life sentences.

■ **Israeli fighter planes raided Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon.** The strikes hit areas where three Israeli soldiers were killed and seven wounded in clashes with Hezbollah gunmen last week.

■ **Israeli Transport Minister Yitzhak Levy announced that he was closing Jerusalem's Bar-Ilan Street to traffic during prayer times on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.** Opposition Knesset members said they would challenge his decision if it did not abide by a recent High Court of Justice ruling.

■ **Uruguayan security officials are investigating an arson attack against a Holocaust memorial in the capital of Montevideo.** [Page 3]

■ **A former senior engineer at Israel's electric company was sentenced to 11 years in prison for spying for the former Soviet Union.** The Tel Aviv District Court said Anatoly Gendler had caused great harm to Israel in the 1980s by passing on sensitive information about Israeli military bases.

NEWS ANALYSIS**Switzerland may backtrack on compensating survivors**

By Fredy Rom

ZURICH (JTA) — None of the funds from a \$5 billion humanitarian foundation should go to needy Holocaust survivors, according to a spokesman for the Swiss Finance Ministry.

The spokesman's comment last Friday, which threw into doubt what may have been a source of significant financial support for survivors, came a day after a Swiss official sought to garner sympathy in Washington for Switzerland, the target of increasing attacks for its wartime dealings with the Nazis.

The spokesman, Hugo Schnittenhelm, said in an interview that the \$5 billion Swiss Foundation for Solidarity should be devoted to the victims of future, not past catastrophes. Other Swiss officials have also voiced Schnittenhelm's view that Holocaust survivors should seek assistance from a separate Holocaust Memorial Fund that was established in February and is expected to begin making payments this summer.

But the total amount available from the memorial fund is in doubt, as more than one-third of the fund's anticipated value may be subject to a national referendum.

Questions about Switzerland's commitment to recompense Holocaust survivors are arising in the wake of a stinging U.S. government report that detailed and sharply criticized Switzerland's wartime dealings with Nazi Germany, and continuing pressures from Washington to redress that past.

Some observers here feel that Swiss officials were never serious about devoting any of the solidarity foundation's resources to Holocaust survivors.

"The idea of the foundation was a big bluff of the government from the beginning to protect Swiss banks" from threats earlier this year that American officials would impose sanctions on the banks if Switzerland did not provide adequate restitution to Holocaust victims, parliamentarian Jean Ziegler said in an interview Sunday.

'Just pay this money back'

A historian at the University of Geneva, Ziegler said Swiss banks still possess "billions of dollars of Jewish money."

"The Jewish people do not need any presents," Ziegler added. The banks "should just pay this money back."

In March, Swiss President Arnold Koller proposed the creation of the foundation during a speech to Parliament, saying it should be used to help the "victims of poverty and catastrophes," including victims of the Holocaust.

To create the foundation, the Swiss National Bank would sell off some \$5 billion of its gold reserves. Interest and other investment income from the proceeds of that sale would generate some \$200 million annually to support humanitarian causes.

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

Anti-Semitic rhetoric has surfaced in the ongoing public debate over the proposed foundation.

Thomas Lyssy, vice president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Switzerland, was sharply critical of the Finance Ministry spokesman.

"We will not allow that Holocaust victims should be taken from the list [of the foundation's eligible recipients] only because parts of the establishment are afraid of the anti-Semitic arguments" in the referendum debate, Lyssy said.

In New York, Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress, which has spearheaded international efforts to get the Swiss to confront their wartime past, repeated what he stated when Koller first proposed the foundation. "We are expecting some 5 to 10 percent of the foundation's moneys to go to Holocaust victims," he said.

If Switzerland lived up to that percentage, it could mean some \$10 million to \$20 million in annual support for Holocaust survivors and the heirs of victims.

Meanwhile, the exact size of the separate Holocaust Memorial Fund

that was set up in February is uncertain. Created with contributions from Switzerland's largest banks and industrial firms, the fund is valued at about \$190 million.

But \$71 million of that total, which was promised by the Swiss central bank, must be approved by Parliament, a step expected later this year.

While a majority of parliamentarians are expected to support the move, it could also face a national referendum if 50,000 people sign a petition requesting one.

Christoph Blocher, a right-wing politician, has already threatened to force a referendum.

In Washington last week, the Swiss envoy who heads a government task force handling the Nazi gold issue, struck a decidedly defensive posture, saying that his country is growing weary of being portrayed as an "international outcast."

Testifying before the U.S. Senate Banking Committee in a hearing broadcast live in Switzerland last week, Thomas Borer seemed well aware of his audience.

Borer's remarks came in the wake of the U.S. government report on Switzerland's dealings with Nazi Germany. The report has been criticized in Switzerland as part of an ongoing campaign to discredit the country as an international banking center.

Borer's tone, which one Jewish observer characterized as not only defensive but "offensive," marked a departure from the conciliatory rhetoric Swiss officials used when the report was released May 7.

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, called the hearing to examine the 200-page U.S. report, which was compiled by Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat and State Department historian William Slany.

Borer ticked off a number of steps Switzerland has taken to try to resolve the controversy surrounding its financial transactions with Nazi Germany and its handling of Jewish assets.

"The Swiss, old and young alike," Borer said, "are perplexed and wonder why, in spite of these efforts, they continue to be treated as an international outcast."

Swiss called on to 'complete the journey'

"It would indeed be tragic for all concerned if the numerous individual and collective initiatives taken nationwide in my country should be discouraged and dampened by this harsh and negative campaign."

In testimony before the committee, Eizenstat acknowledged that the Swiss have "come a long way." But he added, "We would like to see them complete the journey." Specifically, he called on the Swiss to augment the Holocaust Memorial Fund.

He also called on other neutral nations who purchased looted Nazi gold to follow Switzerland's lead and make similar contributions to Holocaust survivors.

D'Amato, for his part, renewed his call to renegotiate the 1946 accord on the return of looted Nazi gold. Under that agreement, Switzerland returned only \$58 million out of \$400 million in looted gold known to have made its way to Switzerland, according to the Eizenstat report.

That money became part of a larger pool distributed to central banks and governments through the Tripartite Commission for the Restitution of Monetary Gold.

Established in September 1946 by the United States, Britain and France, the commission was charged with the distribution of so-called monetary gold looted by the Nazis from the central banks of those European countries they had overrun.

Rather than renegotiate the accord, Eizenstat said the commission should now make available to Holocaust survivors the last \$70 million in gold that has yet to be

distributed. That gold is stored in the Bank of England and the Federal Reserve Bank in New York.

D'Amato, meanwhile, floated the possibility of freezing Swiss assets in the United States if Switzerland fails to return all looted Nazi gold and provide a substantial amount of money to Holocaust survivors.

Eizenstat rejected such a "drastic measure" as premature.

"Our search for truth now progresses to the more urgent pursuit for justice," he said. "Cooperation, not confrontation, is the best path to achieve results."

Meanwhile, D'Amato continued to press for quick Congressional action to secure permanent resident status for Christoph Meili, the Swiss bank guard who was fired after he turned over to Jewish groups Holocaust era documents awaiting the shredder.

A Senate Judiciary subcommittee is scheduled to take up a bill that would allow Meili and his family, who are currently visiting the United States, to immigrate. World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman has offered Meili a job.

Senate sources say two or three such "personal relief bills" come before lawmakers each session. While the legislative road is long, Meili has many supporters in the halls of Congress after reports of death and kidnapping threats against him and his two young children.

Meili cannot immigrate under normal procedures because he has no family in the United States, does not possess a specific trade necessary for an employment visa and is not fleeing persecution.

(JTA correspondent Daniel Kurtzman in Washington contributed to this report.)

Second Palestinian land dealer murdered for selling to Israelis

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The body of an Arab land dealer who sold land to Jews was found Sunday in the West Bank town of Ramallah, according to Palestinian officials.

The officials denied that they had any hand in the murder of Harbi Abu Sarah, who was the second Palestinian killed this month for selling land to Jews.

On May 9, the body of eastern Jerusalem land dealer Farid al-Bashiti was found in Ramallah.

Israeli authorities charged that Palestinian security officials had a hand in that killing.

An Israeli court last week authorized the continued custody of a Palestinian man and woman suspected of involvement in the murder of Bashiti.

One of the detainees was Nadia Davash, a 33-year-old eastern Jerusalem resident who allegedly met Bashiti in an eastern Jerusalem hotel hours before his body was found in Ramallah. The second suspect was identified as Yasser Anani, a Palestinian police officer. The court banned publication of details of the investigation.

Days before Bashiti was killed, Freih Abu Medein, the Palestinian Authority's justice minister, said that any Arab selling land to Jews would be subject to the death penalty.

The funeral of Bashiti, 70, was held Sunday, after his family, which had received threats, repeatedly put it off. He was buried at Nebi Moussa in the Judean Desert.

The Palestinian mufti, or religious leader, of Jerusalem had earlier issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, banning him from being buried in a Muslim cemetery on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

The mufti, Sheik Akrami Sabri, had said at the time that he issued the ban because Bashiti had sold land to Jews. □

Ex-justice minister's acquittal could mean face-saving removal*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Tel Aviv court has acquitted former Israeli Justice Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman of charges of perjury and obstruction of justice.

Last week's court decision could pave the way for Ne'eman to return to that post. At the same time, it gives Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a face-saving way to remove current Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, who has been dogged by allegations of influence peddling in the appointment of Roni Bar-On as attorney general.

Ne'eman stepped down in August, just two months after being appointed justice minister, when then-Attorney General Michael Ben-Yair launched a criminal investigation into allegations that he had obstructed court proceedings relating to the ongoing trial of Shas Knesset member Aryeh Deri.

Deri, a former interior minister in the government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, resigned from his Cabinet post in 1993, after being indicted on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of public trust.

Authorities last month recommended that Deri be indicted on separate charges relating to the Bar-On affair.

Netanyahu appointed Tzachi Hanegbi to replace Ne'eman in September, saying at the time that he hoped the appointment would be short-term.

Though state prosecutors last month decided not to indict Hanegbi for involvement in the Bar-On affair, they found grave improprieties in his handling of the appointment, prompting pressures to oust him.

While Netanyahu welcomed Ne'eman's acquittal, it was not immediately clear whether he planned to move to reinstate him. Netanyahu met with Ne'eman briefly last week and said he would hold consultations with all relevant officials before deciding what to do.

The acquittal was also welcomed by Hanegbi, though he refused to say whether he planned to step aside to let his predecessor take up the post again.

Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein also approved the court's decision, but he rejected criticism of the state prosecutor's office for launching the investigation.

Officials at the state prosecutor's office said it was too early to say whether they would appeal the ruling.

In the May 15 decision, the judges at the Tel Aviv Magistrates Court cleared Ne'eman of all wrongdoing.

They said that inaccurate information he had conveyed in a court affidavit related to the Deri case was the result of human error.

Reacting to the decision, Ne'eman thanked "the Almighty for bringing justice to light."

Officials from across the political spectrum welcomed the acquittal.

One note of dissent was voiced by Meretz leader Yossi Sarid.

Pointing to Ne'eman's attack on officials in the Justice Ministry following the decision to launch a criminal investigation against him, Sarid said Ne'eman should not be allowed to resume his former responsibilities. □

Palestinian Authority warns of new outbreak of violence*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Palestinian officials have warned of an outbreak of violence if Israeli security forces proceed with plans to demolish structures built by Palestinians in the West Bank.

Israel Radio reported Sunday that Israeli security forces and police, under orders from the government, were

preparing to demolish some 500 buildings in West Bank areas under sole Israeli control. Israel maintains that the buildings were erected illegally.

In an interview with Israel Radio's Arabic service, Yasser Abed Rabbo, the Palestinian Authority official in charge of information, likened the policy to "systematic ethnic cleansing" which could bring about "certain confrontation in the region."

Palestinian officials pointed to the planned demolitions as another Israeli action aimed at extinguishing any chance for overcoming the two-month impasse in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross left the region last Friday after a two-week shuttle mission failed to get the two sides to soften their stances and return to the negotiating table.

Prior to his departure, Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat turned down a meeting with Ross, a snub intended to highlight his dissatisfaction with the U.S. mediation effort.

The Palestinians believe the United States is biased in favor of Israel.

The European Union, which has launched its own effort at restarting the negotiations, is viewed by Israel as having a pro-Palestinian bent.

Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and security cooperation broke off in March after Israel began building a new Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem, and a Palestinian suicide bomber launched an attack on a Tel Aviv cafe.

Israel has demanded the resumption of intelligence sharing as a condition for renewing the talks.

The Palestinians want Israel to cease all construction in the territories and Jerusalem before they return to the bargaining table.

The Israel Radio report said that the security forces were also planning to demolish illegal structures put up in the Jewish settlement of Yitzhar, located near the West Bank town of Nablus. The structures were built after Israeli police demolished earlier this month three other illegal buildings at Yitzhar.

Knesset member Hanan Porat, of the National Religious Party, appealed to the government not to order the demolitions, and instead to try to work out the dispute with the settlers.

Porat said Sunday that officials in the defense establishment had denied that there were immediate plans to destroy the illegal settlement structures.

He added that whoever leaked the information to Israel Radio had been trying to create friction between settlers and the government. □

Uruguay probes for suspects in Holocaust memorial attack*By Sergio Kiernan*

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Uruguayan security officials are investigating an arson attack against a Holocaust memorial in the capital of Montevideo.

A letter left at the site by a group calling itself the Eastern Special Command said, "All Jews must leave Uruguay at once or they will be exterminated."

The attack, which caused little damage, took place May 8, but was only made public last week.

"This attack is not an act of terrorism but our way to fight Jews, Communists, Anarchists and any other negative element in our country," the letter said.

Uruguay, with a Jewish population of some 32,500, is virtually free of anti-Semitic violence.

Authorities in Uruguay said they were "amazed" by the attack. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD
In isolated Siberian outpost,
Jews discover family secrets

By Lev Krichevsky

ULAN-UDE, Russia (JTA) — Three years ago, Vladimir, an 18-year-old student from the Siberian city of Ulan-Ude, suddenly found out about his family's Jewish roots.

"I discovered that my late grandmother on mother's side was Jewish," he says. The rest of Vladimir's family are Buryats.

Now, Vladimir teaches Hebrew in his hometown. Though his family does not share his growing interest in Jewish religion, history and culture, Vladimir says he will go on rediscovering his Jewish roots.

His situation does not appear unique in the mountainous Buryat Republic.

The republic, with a population of 1 million, is an autonomous region inside the Russian Federation, located in southern Siberia along the eastern shore of Lake Baikal.

For most of its history, the region has been under Asian influence, something clearly visible in the facial features of indigenous Buryats.

The area is known as the home of the 13th century Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan.

Because of Soviet installations on the Mongolian border, the city was tightly closed to visitors until 1987.

The Buryat Jewish community — one of the most isolated in Russia — numbers about 1,000.

Most of them live in the capital of Ulan-Ude, formerly known as Verkhneudinsk, a city of 300,000 that is located about 3,500 thousand miles east of Moscow.

Discovering Jewish roots

Dmitri Madason, a 25-year-old member of Ulan-Ude's Jewish youth club, says that until he reached the age of 16, he also did not know that his mother was Jewish.

She died when Dmitri was only 9 years old. His father is Buryat.

Dmitri cherishes memories of his Jewish grandmother, with whom he spent much time as a child in a tiny Buryat village.

"She never told me anything about Jews, but somehow she conveyed to me a special Jewish spirit, which now means much to me," he says, explaining his growing interest in Judaism.

Today, most Buryat Jews are second- or third-generation descendants of mixed marriages.

Jews intermarried with ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars and Buryats.

Buryats number some 350,000, the largest ethnic minority in Siberia.

Jews first appeared in the republic, also known as Buryatia, about 200 years ago, as exiles from then-Russian-dominated Poland and the Pale of Settlement.

The most recent wave of Jewish migration to the Lake Baikal area took place on the eve of World War II, when dozens of Jewish families were exiled or evacuated to Buryatia from eastern Poland and Byelorussia.

However, most of them left Buryatia for other Siberian centers in the late 1950s.

Says 22-year-old Yana Shlenkevich, "I don't know what the crime of my ancestors was who were exiled from Poland to Buryatia in the 1840s."

Raisa Kurtik, 75, says that she also does not know any details of her family's history.

Kurtik has two teen-age grandsons.

"One of them considers himself Jewish, another says he does not want to be Jewish," she says.

Says another Jewish woman in her 70s: "Fifteen years ago, my daughter did not get a promotion at her job because she is Jewish.

Then she said she would never marry a Jew and her kids would be non-Jews. Could I blame her for that?"

This vast area was first colonized in the 1600s by Russians in search of wealth, furs and gold.

In 1923, the autonomous republic was created as a part of the Soviet Union.

The republic's economy is based on agriculture, timber and textiles production, fishing, hunting, fur farming, mining and stock raising.

Most of Buryatia's heavy industry that was introduced in the area during Soviet times has fallen victim to the severe economic crisis the region has been experiencing since the collapse of communism.

Local Jews say Buryats have always been friendly to Jews and other minorities and that the republic has been known for its low level of popular anti-Semitism.

But because of strong official anti-Semitism over the years, the majority of Jews here avoided identifying themselves as Jews and preferred to intermarry.

Shlenkevich, a youth leader in the community, says that many Jews are still trying to conceal their Jewishness.

She believes that the actual number of Jews here is four times larger than the official figure of 1,000.

"Many of them do not even know they are Jewish; others are trying to hide this fact, but a lot will reappear as Jews very soon," she predicts.

Jewish emigration, as well as organized Jewish life, started in Buryatia just four years ago — later than in most of the former Soviet Union.

Faina Oller is one of five mothers whose children were the first to leave for Israel in 1993 as a part of the Jewish Agency for Israel's academic program for school-children.

The mothers of the five teen-agers are now the most active members of the community.

In 1993, they set up the Ulan-Ude Society for Jewish Culture, the republic's only recognized Jewish group.

'I didn't know we have so many Jews.'

"We got involved in Jewish life only because our sons left for Israel. Our Jewish activities just help us to feel closer to our children there," says Oller, a single mother whose only child, Dmitri, has recently finished secondary school in Israel and is planning to join the Israel Defense Force.

Since 1994, about 60 Jews have emigrated annually from Buryatia to Israel. Jewish activists here say the number could increase if more Jews identify themselves as Jews.

"Many Jews here are scared of leaving the country," says one Jewish man.

"We've been raised in the Soviet Union where emigration has been looked at simply as betrayal," the man adds.

But times are clearly changing for Buryat Jewry.

"I didn't know we have so many Jews," says Golda Petrova, 70, looking at the crowd of 400 Jews that packed an Ulan-Ude restaurant for a recent Passover seder organized by the Jewish Agency in Russia.

"We have never had such a big Jewish event, though we have kept most of the Jewish tradition here."

Another Jewish pensioner says, "It is good that the younger people are coming back to their Jewishness. Probably, many of them will leave.

"But the community will not die out," he says. "We, the older generation, are staying in Buryatia, which was home for our ancestors over centuries." □