



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israeli and Palestinian officials downplayed expectations that an Israeli-Egyptian summit would lead to renewed peace negotiations.** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak are scheduled to meet Tuesday in Egypt in an effort to break the two-month impasse in Israeli-Palestinian talks.

■ **The Israeli Prime Minister's Office said that police had arrested 76 Palestinian security officials in the past 15 months who were operating in Jerusalem.** A majority of those detained by Israeli police were involved in the abduction of Palestinian residents of eastern Jerusalem for questioning in the self-rule areas, the premier's office said.

■ **Jewish leaders are giving differing assessments of the Swiss government's reaction to a U.S. report that was sharply critical of Switzerland's war-time dealings with the Nazis.** While Swiss Jewish leaders welcomed the Swiss Cabinet's statement, the World Jewish Congress claimed the government admitted nothing. [Page 3]

■ **Israel and Jordan have begun discussions on establishing rail links.** Ariel Sharon, Israel's national infrastructure minister, said the links would be built in the Dead Sea area, and between the Red Sea cities of Aqaba and Eilat.

■ **Edith Stein, a Jewish-born nun who was killed during the Holocaust, has reportedly been approved for sainthood by Pope John Paul II.** No date for the actual canonization ceremony has been set.

■ **Former SS Capt. Erich Priebke, who is on trial for the murder of 335 Italian men and boys at the Ardeatine Caves in 1944, said the massacre was a small detail of World War II.** [Page 4]

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hopes that the election of Mohammad Khatami, a relative moderate in Iran's presidential elections, will bring a "positive development" for Israel.** But others doubt there will be any change in Iran's policies toward the Jewish state. [Page 3]

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Tiny African community makes transition from Zaire to Congo

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — What a difference a week can make.

The Shabbat promise of peace and tranquility proved elusive for the Jews of Kinshasa two weeks ago, as their country was transforming itself overnight from Zaire to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This past Shabbat emerged a lot more peaceful, as the community breathed a sigh of relief that the strife that had for years torn apart the African nation appeared to be over.

Though the coup of the rebels led by Laurent Kabila ended without widespread bloodshed, for two long days, the future of the capital city had felt precarious to the tiny Jewish community within.

As about a dozen Jews ate their Friday night meal at the home of Rabbi Shlomo Bentolila on May 16th, the sound of heavy artillery boomed overhead and sporadic shooting was heard echoing throughout the city.

Zairian rebels, who for most of the last year had been challenging the country's dictator, President Motubu Sese Seko, were at the edge of the city.

No one knew whether they would succeed or fail.

No one knew how devastating the fighting might be, or how much blood might be shed.

After dinner, when everyone had already returned to their homes, foreign embassies issued a warning to their nationals not to move from their houses, that anyone seen outside after curfew could be shot.

The cellular phone that the rabbi keeps by his side remained on throughout Shabbat.

Though Jewish law requires that all use of electronic appliances cease on the day of rest, the commandment of "pikuach nefesh," or saving a life, takes precedence when lives are in danger.

Throughout Friday night, "we heard what sounded like bombs and constant shooting," wrote Bentolila in a letter he e-mailed to the Brooklyn headquarters of the Lubavitch emissary network of which he is a part.

"Needless to say, none of us slept very much," he wrote. By Saturday afternoon, it was clear that the worst was over.

"It was a miracle the way Kinshasa was taken," the rabbi said in a telephone interview last week as he, his congregation and entire adopted country were trying to return to normality as a new nation.

'Thank God, we were saved'

For the dozens of Jewish families that had stayed through the chaos, that meant being able to return to the synagogue canteen to enjoy local kosher specialties, to swim at the community's recreational pool and to resume Judaic studies for the 15 to 25 children in the community.

"Thank God, we were saved. Even a heretic can appreciate the miracle," said the young Moroccan-born rabbi, who has lived in Kinshasa since 1991.

Motubu had ruled Zaire since 1965. When the rebels entered Kinshasa, they were welcomed by the populace with song and dance.

On Shabbat afternoon the men and boys now locally known as "the liberators" passed Bentolila's synagogue, and the rabbi and his congregants went outside to greet them.

Many of Kinshasa's 135 Jewish families left temporarily during the last few months, said the rabbi, who lives there with his wife and two young children. He said he believes most will come back.

Many more had left permanently after the riots that racked the city of 4.5 million souls in late 1991 and early 1993.

Bentolila, though based in Kinshasa, serves as spiritual leader of the small Jewish communities in several central African countries.

A handful of Jews from Europe, the United States and Israel live in these nations, working in the diamond and precious stone industries, and as traders of more prosaic goods, such as clothing and electronics.

As the only Jewish spiritual leader in the area, Bentolila's experiences are unlike those of ordinary rabbis.

Last Friday, for instance, a week after the revolution, when some of

the world's major news media were trying to leave the country, Bentolila said he got a call from a Jewish CNN producer.

He was frustrated that he and his crew had been waiting on the docks of the Congo River for more than a day for permission to leave the country.

The local Catholic priest had been by and offered a blessing, so the producer figured he might as well get one from the area's rabbi as well.

The Lubavitcher Chasid was happy, if not amused, to oblige, he recounted by phone.

Though the nation's future under the new leadership is unclear, the Jews of Kinshasa are optimistic, said Bentolila.

However, he expressed fear about saying anything overtly political about the deposed Mobutu or about the country's new leader.

He would only say that "for eight months we were very stressed. We never knew exactly what to expect. Now we know it's over and we wish luck to this new government. We wish better for the whole humanity."

Though peace seems to have come to Congo for now, the region is still facing the results of years of civil and intertribal wars.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee has been serving the sick and the orphaned victims of the wars in Zaire and neighboring Rwanda since 1994, when a coalition of 39 American and international Jewish organizations began raising close to \$1 million for the purpose.

Now that the Zairian revolution has ended with the creation of the Democratic Republic of Congo, JDC officials said they expect many of the people who had poured into eastern Zaire to try to return to their native Rwanda.

Some observers have expressed fear that the new government of Congo would drive them out or even kill those refugees.

In any case, the return of the refugees "will put additional strain on the social services there," said Gideon Taylor, JDC's assistant executive vice president. □

High Court upholds decision to shut street at prayer times

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Quiet prevailed on Jerusalem's Bar Ilan street this week, after the decision to close the thoroughfare was implemented.

Israel's High Court of Justice ruled last week that the street would be closed to traffic during Sabbath prayer times.

In doing so, the court upheld a decision of the transportation minister announced earlier last week.

Citing technical reasons, the judges convinced the secular activists who challenged the decision to withdraw their petition.

The court also suggested that the petitioners, Meretz leader Yossi Sarid and Ornan Yekutieli, a member of the Meretz faction on the Jerusalem City Council, wait four weeks before deciding whether to file a petition again.

By then they will be able to determine whether violence has resumed on the thoroughfare after being reopened to traffic during non-worship hours, the court said.

The street, which runs through fervently Orthodox, or haredi, neighborhoods, has been at the center of a bitter and sometimes violent dispute between secular and religious Jews.

Earlier this year, the high court ruled that if Bar Ilan Street is closed to traffic during prayer times for the

religious residents, alternative routes would have to be provided for secular residents.

Transportation Minister Yitzhak Levy, of the National Religious Party, announced last week that a 600-meter-long section of Bar Ilan street would be closed during the hours of prayer.

He said that secular residents would be given special tags for their cars, enabling them to park "within reasonable walking distance" of their homes.

Rather than closing off the street with police barricades during the times of prayer, electronic signals would be posted at either end of the street alerting drivers. Emergency and police vehicles would be allowed to pass through the street at all times.

Petitioner Yekutieli said that while the petition was being withdrawn for now, he would resubmit it if there were any incidents of violence or attempts to close off the road outside of the prescribed hours of worship. □

Swiss bank official attempts to explain anti-Semitic remark

By Fredy Rom

ZURICH (JTA) — The honorary chairman of the Union Bank of Switzerland is trying to backtrack on anti-Semitic comments he made to an American magazine.

In an interview with The New Yorker magazine in April, Robert Holzach said, "The banking scandal is really a war. This had to do with a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world's prestigious financial markets, something which is already happening in New York, London, and even Frankfurt." The quote was part of a lengthy article on Switzerland's dealings with Nazi Germany.

But in an interview here last week, Holzach said he did not remember using the word "conspiracy."

He said his remarks about a war were intended to show support for Carlo Jagmetti, the former Swiss ambassador in Washington.

Jagmetti resigned in February after the publication of a confidential diplomatic cable he authored calling for a public relations "war" against "adversaries," such as the World Jewish Congress and U.S. Senate Banking Committee Chairman Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.).

Thomas Lyssy, vice president of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, questioned in a statement how long the largest Swiss bank would allow Holzach to remain with the bank. UBS spokeswoman Gertrud Ehrismann said the bank's board of directors regretted Holzach's interview and that his statements did not reflect the views of the bank. □

Poll: Hatred of Arabs on rise

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Some 40 percent of Israeli high school students "hate Arabs" and 60 percent "want revenge," according to a survey released this week.

The study, conducted by Dr. Ofra Meisels of Haifa University and Dr. Reuven Gal of the Carmel Institute for Social Research, polled some 5,300 high school students from 84 Israeli schools.

The respondents who said they hated Arabs went up significantly in state religious schools, where 79 percent of girls studying in vocational tracks said they hated Arabs.

Fifty-six percent of those in academic tracks said they hated Arabs, while 41 percent of boys in state religious schools said they hated Arabs.

The figures indicate an increasing trend since the survey was first carried out in 1974, when 32 percent of the youth polled said they hated Arabs. In 1988, 39 percent gave that response. □

Swiss reaction to U.S. report elicits mixed Jewish response

By Fredy Rom

BERN (JTA) — Jewish leaders are giving a mixed response to the Swiss government's reaction to a U.S. report that was sharply critical of Switzerland's wartime dealings with the Nazis.

Switzerland last week acknowledged that it entered into "questionable deals" with the Third Reich, but denied that the country helped prolong World War II by serving as banker for the Nazis.

The May 22 declaration from the Swiss Federal Council, the nation's Cabinet, represented the most detailed Swiss reply yet to a blistering 200-page U.S. government report that was issued May 7 by U.S. Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat.

The Eizenstat report accused Switzerland of cynically profiting from the war and of bankrolling the Nazi war machine through its purchases of Nazi gold.

In the Swiss government's response, which was presented by Foreign Minister Flavio Cotti, the Cabinet maintained that the country was "seeing to its own interests" when it traded with the Nazis.

"The Swiss government regards the representation of Switzerland as the banker to the Nazis as a one-sided broad-brush judgment," the government said.

A landlocked and officially neutral nation surrounded for much of the war by the Axis powers, Switzerland took actions that were first and foremost designed to protect its own population from the ravages of war, according to the Cabinet.

Swiss trade with the Nazis as well as with the Allies "was a question of national, political and economic survival," the Cabinet maintained.

Switzerland's wartime activities also allowed the country to remain a refuge for tens of thousands of refugees fleeing fascism and to serve as "an oasis of democracy and freedom in a totalitarian Europe," the declaration added.

The government conceded that the "Swiss business community had also pursued its own interests with the Axis and the Allies." This was viewed by some observers as a first step by the government to distance itself from questionable wartime activities pursued by private Swiss banks and industry.

'A difficult tightrope walk'

Though the government admitted that the country made mistakes during the war, it also presented a defense of the country's actions at the time.

"All in all, neutrality led to a difficult tightrope walk between adaptation and resistance. Today we know that this also led to mistakes. The faint-hearted refugee policy for Jews was inexcusable," the Cabinet said, referring to the decision by the Swiss federal government to turn back tens of thousands of European Jews fleeing the Holocaust.

As a result of that decision, more than 30,000 Jews were returned at the Swiss border and most of them died in the Holocaust.

At the same time, however, Switzerland provided haven to some 25,000 Jewish refugees, who survived the war together with Switzerland's 20,000 Jewish citizens.

The Cabinet also maintained that accusations found in the foreword and summary of the Eizenstat report were not backed up by the remaining, purely historical sections of the report.

Others who have studied the Eizenstat report in its entirety have issued a similar criticism.

The suggestion in the foreword that Switzerland

prolonged the war by trading with the Nazis is "unsupported" by the "report's contents," the Cabinet said.

The Federation of Jewish Communities in Switzerland, the communal umbrella group, welcomed the Cabinet declaration. The federation was particularly pleased that the government admitted the "inexcusable immigration policy toward the Jews" during the war, said Thomas Lyssy, the federation's vice president.

On the other hand, the World Jewish Congress, which has spearheaded international efforts to get the Swiss to confront their wartime past, claimed that the Cabinet had admitted nothing in its declaration last week. But this charge was criticized by Swiss Jewish leaders.

"Who said this on behalf of the WJC?" Rolf Bloch, the federation's president, said in an interview.

"The WJC is a conglomerate of many people," added Bloch, who was supportive of the Cabinet declaration. "They have a hundred vice presidents. They are speaking with a thousand tongues."

His criticism, which reflected a split between the local Jewish community and the WJC over how best to deal with the Swiss government, was also voiced by Lyssy.

WJC Executive Director Elan Steinberg, who issued the WJC's criticism of the declaration, is "doing politics, too," said Lyssy.

Steinberg "heard the things he wanted to. He responded to the things he wanted to," said Lyssy.

But he did have one criticism of last week's Cabinet declaration.

"The one thing they did not mention was the victim's gold," he said, referring to charges that a portion of the Nazi-looted gold purchased by the Swiss had been stripped from Jewish victims of the concentration camps.

"It would have been wise to state it" in the declaration, Lyssy said. □

(JTA foreign editor Mitchell Danow contributed to this report.)

Netanyahu hopes Iran's leader will shift policy toward Israel

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said this week he hoped the election of a relative moderate in Iran's presidential elections would bring a "positive development" for Israel.

But Netanyahu stressed that it was still too early to draw conclusions about the implications of the Iranian elections, and he added that he was awaiting assessments from intelligence analysts.

Diplomatic sources said Israel is still waiting to see if Saturday's surprise election victory of Mohammad Khatami would mean a change in Iranian policy towards Jerusalem. They noted that Khatami's victory in the presidential vote was largely a protest against continuing economic hardships in Iran, and they said it was possible he would focus on a domestic agenda.

The sources, quoted by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, said that any significant change in foreign policy would require the backing of Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, who is known for his hostility toward Israel.

Uri Lubrani, Israel's coordinator of policy toward Lebanon and a former ambassador to Iran, said Khatami's victory shows that the ideological fires of the Islamic Revolution have ebbed somewhat.

Lubrani told Army Radio that Khatami's victory gave him some sense of relief.

"This is a protest, primarily on the part of youth and women, against the regime," he said.

But Lubrani added that Khomeini is still the main decision-maker in Tehran. □

Canadian unity primary issue for voters in national ballot*By Bill Gladstone*

TORONTO (JTA) — National unity has emerged front-and-center as the key issue affecting Canada's 30 million citizens in the nation's June 2 elections.

For the Canadian Jewish Congress, unity is the primary issue.

"We've targeted national unity as a major issue because in a sense, the other questions become moot if the country can't stay together," said Eric Vernon, an Ottawa-based Canadian Jewish Congress official.

But among Canada's 300,000 Jews, political perspectives vary geographically.

Like many easterners, Reisa Teitelbaum, Montreal-based chairwoman of CJC's Quebec Region, regards national unity as the top issue because the separatist movement has destabilized Quebec's economy and produced the high provincial jobless rate that is forcing Jewish youth to leave.

Western Canadians are not as obsessed about national unity, according to Marilyn Berger, who serves as Vancouver-based associate director of the CJC's Pacific Region.

"We care very much what happens and we're hoping for the best, of course, but it's not at the top of our agenda," she said.

"Jobs are more important."

Contentiousness of federalist-separatist politics

The campaign has been anything but mundane.

First, Prime Minister Jean Chretien, who has headed the Liberal majority government since 1993, alienated many midwest voters by calling the election just as spring floodwaters from the Red River were cresting at historic levels, threatening the city of Winnipeg.

Then former Quebec premier Jacques Parizeau, who blamed "ethnics and big money" for the separatist loss of the sovereignty referendum in 1995, made headlines again by revealing in a new book that he would have unilaterally declared Quebec independent within 10 days had the separatists won.

As if to highlight the contentiousness of federalist-separatist politics even more, a televised French-language debate had to be stopped abruptly after the moderator fainted on stage just as the five party leaders were turning to the topic of national unity.

While the separatist party, the Bloc Quebecois, has been faltering on its home turf, Conservative leader Jean Charest has been riding a surge of popularity — especially in Quebec where historically the Tories have never been strong.

The Conservatives, the historically-powerful party of former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, held only two seats in the last Parliament, and many observers say a partial comeback is in the works.

A poll in mid-May showed a sizeable drop in popular support for the Liberals, who held 174 of the total 295 seats in the last Parliament.

An even greater drop in popular support was registered for the Bloc Quebecois.

With 50 seats in the Parliament, Bloc Quebecois has been the official opposition.

In previous elections the Jews have traditionally supported the Liberals and, to a lesser extent, socialist parties like the New Democratic Party, which held nine seats in the last Parliament.

But David Matas, a Winnipeg-based representative of B'nai Brith Canada, sees no specific Jewish voting pattern emerging this time.

"It's a sign of the integration of the Jews into the Canadian community that the Jewish community tends to divide politically among all the parties," he said.

An expert on the issue of Nazi war criminals in Canada, Matas sees no real difference between the parties on this issue.

"There has been foot-dragging for decades through both Tory and Liberal governments," he said.

"It's hard to see whether a change in government would make a difference to the dossier. It's caught up in a lethargy that seems pervasive, that's almost non-partisan."

To help the country's Jewish community make more informed choices on voting day, the CJC has released a 24-page summary of policy positions.

In addition to national unity, the CJC paper identifies the prosecution of Nazi war criminals in Canada, the battle against anti-Semitism and racism, and the federal policy on refugees as key Jewish concerns, along with a host of more generic domestic and social-service issues like unemployment and health care. □

Ex-Nazi officer on trial in Rome views massacre as 'small detail'*By Ruth E. Gruber*

ROME (JTA) — Former Nazi SS Capt. Erich Priebke considers the March 1944 massacre of 335 Italian men and boys as a small detail of war.

"The Ardeatine Caves were terrible for the Jews, but for me it was something small that was lost among everything else — the bombings, Dresden, Hiroshima, my dead, the lost war, beginning again from nothing," Priebke was quoted as saying Saturday in an interview with the Rome daily *Il Messaggero*.

"I was a soldier. I never thought it was a crime," he said.

"People have written that I fled Italy" to Argentina from a prisoner-of-war camp after the war because of the caves, he said. "I didn't even think about the caves."

Priebke, 83, is currently being held under house arrest in a monastery near Rome during a second trial for his involvement in the Ardeatine Cave massacre near Rome.

He has admitted taking part in the mass execution, which was ordered by the Nazis in reprisal for an attack by the Italian resistance in downtown Rome that had killed 33 German soldiers the day before.

Last August, a military court ruled that Priebke was guilty of participation in the massacre but said he could not be punished for it because of extenuating circumstances and a statute of limitations.

The verdict provoked a public uproar in Italy and Priebke was rearrested.

The verdict was quashed on appeal last October, and Priebke went on trial a second time before a new military tribunal in April.

The massacre is considered the worst Nazi atrocity to have been carried out on Italian soil, and the caves have been transformed into a national shrine.

Rome's Jewish community has been particularly vocal in calling for Priebke to be punished, and media coverage has fostered the impression that the case is primarily a Jewish issue, although only 75 of the massacre victims were Jews.

In the interview with *Il Messaggero*, Priebke denied that he was anti-Semitic, but he praised Hitler's pre-World War II policies.

"My wife's best friend was Jewish," he said. "It's true we were fans of Hitler, but I didn't understand his racial laws. If he had died in 1939, he would have been a perfect leader of Germany." □