

**NEWS AT A GLANCE**

■ A Senate subcommittee adopted a one-year extension of the Lautenberg Amendment, which eases entry requirements for refugees from the former Soviet Union. The move came after the Congressional Budget Office revised its cost estimate, saying a one-year extension would incur no additional costs. Jewish activists had been looking to the Senate to protect the measure after the House dropped it.

■ The head of Home Depot donated more than \$10 million to the Atlanta Jewish Federation as part of its Community Capital Campaign. Bernie Marcus' gift is part of a \$50 million campaign. More than \$40 million has already been pledged.

■ The U.S. State Department urged Congress to remove controversial measures related to Jerusalem from legislation it is currently considering. Both the Senate and the House passed legislation that reinforces Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem. The administration's view is that the city's status should be left to negotiations.

■ Palestinians and Israelis clashed in a fifth straight day of strife in the West Bank town of Hebron. Israeli soldiers shot and wounded three Palestinians. Palestinians, throwing stones and fire-bombs, inadvertently set an Arab-owned butcher shop on fire.

■ Israeli Finance Minister Dan Meridor resigned after a showdown with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Some commentators believe that Meridor was forced out in an attempt by Netanyahu to consolidate power. [Page 4]

■ Israeli planes hit suspected Hezbollah targets in parts of the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. There was no word of casualties in the attacks, which were the 39th raid by Israeli planes in Lebanon this year.

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**FOCUS ON ISSUES****Anti-Semitism in former USSR: Not as easy to pinpoint as before**

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Dealing with the situation in the former Soviet Union used to be relatively simple.

Few doubted the discrimination and peril faced by Soviet Jews, and the worldwide Jewish goal was to help as many as possible emigrate.

In the chaos of the post-Soviet days, however, the causes and the solutions — even the extent — of anti-Semitism in what used to be the U.S.S.R. are all up for debate.

The Union of Councils for Soviet Jews has just released a report, "Anti-Semitism in the Former Soviet Union, 1995-1997," that it hopes will clarify the issue.

The report, some 250 pages long, contains chapters on anti-Semitism and related human rights abuses in 12 of the former Soviet republics where sizeable Jewish populations exist. Lithuania, Estonia and Armenia are excluded.

Some of the report's main points:

- While Jews, in general, now enjoy freedom to emigrate and freedom of religious expression, anti-Semitic acts are still widespread;
- Despite official rhetoric, governments in the former Soviet Union fail to combat anti-Semitism effectively, and in some cases, they encourage it;
- Anti-Semitism and other crimes that violate human rights are difficult to prosecute because laws are unevenly enforced; and
- The Clinton administration should press governments in the former Soviet Union to budget resources for education and to link trade policy to improved human rights in these areas.

The UCSJ decided to undertake the project, said the group's president, Yosef Abramowitz, because it believed that both American Jewish leaders and the U.S. government were not taking anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union "seriously enough."

The group also hopes to pressure Congress to keep open refugee slots for Jews who want to emigrate from the former Soviet Union and to provide evidence for those currently seeking asylum in the United States.

The just-published report documents anti-Semitic and human rights abuses, describing extremist groups, crimes against individuals, anti-Semitic statements by political leaders, attacks on Jewish communal property and anti-Semitic publications that have taken place during the past few years.

The report quotes one Western expert as saying that "the threat of anti-Semitism in the post-Soviet states is greater today than it has been at many point in the last decade."

**Differences over UCSJ assessment**

Local Jewish activists who are involved in monitoring anti-Semitism, however, differed over the accuracy of the UCSJ's assessment.

"Anti-Semitism still remains the major concern of Russian Jews," said Mark Krasnoselsky, head of the Center for Monitoring Anti-Semitism of the Va'ad, the umbrella group for Jewish organizations in Russia.

According to President Boris Yeltsin's Judicial Chamber on Information Disputes, in Russia alone there are about 130 periodicals that regularly print ultranationalist and anti-Semitic articles.

But the executive vice president of the Russian Jewish Congress, Alexander Osovtsov, disagreed, saying the situation requires a "more balanced, well-founded approach."

According to Osovtsov, the increased number of anti-Semitic publications does not reflect a rise in anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union.

"What it does illustrate is the absence of any kind of censorship we used to have."

The lifting of censorship, he said, "resulted in the emergence of openly anti-Semitic newspapers and groups which we didn't have just a few years ago."

Other reports on the situation also appear to contradict the dire tone

of much of the UCSJ's report. According to the section on Russia in the American Jewish Committee's world report on anti-Semitism, which will be released later this summer:

"It is encouraging that the increased number of individuals of Jewish extraction prominent in government and commercial circles has not brought about a higher level of popular prejudice."

And while anti-Semitism remains one of the reasons behind Jewish emigration from Russia, according to a leading Russian Jewish sociologist, "its importance for emigration today is much less than it was just five years ago."

Vladimir Shapiro of the Jewish Research Center, an affiliate of the Russian Academy of Sciences, said an increasing number of Jews are leaving the country to reunite with relatives who left earlier.

Furthermore, recent public opinion surveys, such as last year's survey of the Russian population sponsored by the AJCommittee, suggested that hostility toward Jews in Russia appears to be lower than enmity toward other ethnic groups such as people from the Caucasus.

There are two major reasons for the disagreements on the subject of anti-Semitism.

#### Situation is 'complex'

The first is that, ironically, in some ways it was easier to monitor anti-Semitism in the U.S.S.R. — which was state-sponsored and controlled — than it is in the post-Soviet era.

"The situation is more complex than it might appear on the surface," said Michael Chlenov, president of the Va'ad.

"It's much more difficult to watch 15 countries than it is to watch one bad monolith," agreed the UCSJ's Abramowitz.

The UCSJ report points out, for example, that the situation is particularly perilous in three of the former republics — the former Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and in Belarus.

The second reason for disagreement is that the root causes of current anti-Jewish sentiment are up for debate.

For his part, Chlenov said, "I don't think that state anti-Semitism is present in any of the post-Soviet countries, while popular prejudices against the Jewish minority have a relatively limited base within society."

The UCSJ report, however, contains examples not only of grass-roots anti-Semitism, but examples of communities whose Jewish residents have been discriminated against by local officials.

One such community is the central Russian city of Orel.

The city's and the region's communist-dominated administrations are connected to extremist political movements.

Semyon Livshitz, a local Jewish leader, said in an interview that Jews in Orel fear that "things might change for the worse."

"Given that the present situation in Orel reminds [us] of the recent days of Soviet rule, many Jews are scared of expressing themselves as Jews," Livshitz said.

Despite a Russian law calling for the return of religious property to its former owners, only Orthodox Christians in Orel have regained ownership of dozens of churches and monasteries in the last few years.

Orel's largest religious minorities — Jews and Catholics — have been repeatedly denied the right to get back their houses of worship.

The lack of an effective legal structure to prosecute anti-Semitism and other human rights abuses is, in fact, a problem throughout the former Soviet Union.

"Although both laws and decrees exist, post-Soviet

governments generally display little will to enforce them," according to an essay in the UCSJ report.

Jewish activists in the former Soviet Union agreed with the UCSJ's evaluation of this problem.

"Courts and prosecutors in many cases are not willing to make existing laws against hate crimes and propaganda work. The incompetency of law enforcement agencies undermines all political statements by the country's leadership," said Henry Reznik, a lawyer who chairs the anti-defamation commission of the Russian Jewish Congress.

Most of the perpetrators of anti-Semitic acts, including attacks on communal property and Jewish cemeteries, have not been apprehended or prosecuted. In some instances, no official investigations into these acts have been launched.

As part of its conclusion, the UCSJ makes a series of recommendations that it believes will help the situation. One of its conclusions is that the Clinton administration needs to press the countries of the former Soviet Union to provide human rights training, monitoring and advocacy for police, lawyers and judges, and that U.S. trade policy should be linked to human rights improvements.

"Linkage has always been a successful weapon in the Soviet Jewry movement and now is not the time to abandon it," says Abramowitz.

Some, however, believe that the situation will improve only after economic and political conditions are stabilized. "The future of the community depends totally on the political and economic future of the Russian state," Osovtsov said.

The UCSJ also concludes that the situation in each country needs to be closely monitored. Despite the disagreements, there is general accord on this point.

"The threat to Russian Jews is still there," said Yuri Stern, a former Soviet dissident and now a member of the Knesset. "Some political forces that can make use of the long-established anti-Semitic tradition are present in the political arena."

"I'm not sure if there is enough ground for pessimism, but I'm sure the situation requires serious monitoring." □

(JTA staff writer Peter Ephross contributed to this report.)

#### **Planned 'Duce' exhibit protested**

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Organizers of an exhibit on Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini plan to go ahead with the show despite a flood of protests against it, according to Italian news reports.

The show, "Man of Providence: Iconography of the Duce, 1923-1945" is due to open July 13 in the small Tuscan town of Seravezza.

The daily Corriere della Sera newspaper reported that left-wing political parties, former anti-fascist resistance fighters and schoolteachers had mounted a campaign against the exhibit, which includes propagandistic pieces from the fascist era that idealize Mussolini.

"Such an exhibition is inappropriate and in very bad taste," one schoolteacher wrote in a letter to the local mayor.

Local townspeople and residents of other towns in the area said that any exhibit on Mussolini should also show some of the atrocities carried out by the fascists and Nazis in the region during World War II.

Curator Giorgio Di Genova, who conceived the idea of the exhibit, rejected the criticism, calling it "superficial." He told Corriere della Sera he was simply presenting a display of art. □

**BEHIND THE HEADLINES**

**Russian community on sidelines of passionate conversion debate**

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Despite the roiling controversy about conversion legislation that is certain to affect many of their lives, immigrants from the former Soviet Union remain curiously low-key about the issue.

While American Jewish leaders speak passionately about the plight of Israel's 150,000 to 200,000 non-Jewish Russian olim, many of whom have been turned away by the Orthodox Rabbinate when they tried to convert, the immigrant community itself has been far less vocal.

Difficult though it is to generalize about an entire community, conversations with those familiar with its members and needs reveal a startling fact: Most members of the community simply do not care about the conversion bill, which would enshrine in law exclusive Orthodox authority over conversions performed in Israel.

The conversion bill "should be a major issue for our constituents, but it's not," says Motti Inbari, a spokesman for Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, the immigrant-rights party headed by Industry and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky.

"There have been no opinion polls that I know of, but I would say that the conversion issue concerns the Russian people in a very minor way. Immigrants are preoccupied with the problems of feeding their families and keeping a roof over their heads."

Larissa Remennick, a Russian-born sociology professor at Bar-Ilan University, agrees.

"I don't think they discuss it much among themselves," she says. "To be sure, it is present in the Russian press, but it's not a high-priority issue."

If anything, Remennick says, immigrants would like to see an alternative to the monopolistic sway that the Orthodox Rabbinate has over personal-status issues such as marriage, divorce and burial.

"One of Yisrael Ba'Aliyah's slogans vowed to diminish the influence the religious establishment has on the life of society as a whole. The immigrants aren't seeking religious alternatives as much as a separation between religion and the state."

**Immigrants' apathy stems from history**

To understand the immigrants' apathy toward the conversion legislation, Remennick says, one must understand their history.

"Soviet Jewry was 99 percent secular. Religious influences were virtually nil during 70 years of socialism.

"By the late 1980s and early 1990s, close to 100 percent of Soviet Jews were completely secular or only slightly connected" to their Jewish roots.

Few of the 700,000 immigrants who came from the former Soviet Union since 1989 are really affected by the conversion issue, says Remennick.

"Of these, many are older and have no desire to convert. Mainly, the ones seeking conversion are non-Jewish mothers with young children, because their children are not recognized as Jewish and are stigmatized."

These women "are in a disadvantaged position. They must walk the tightrope of an Orthodox conversion, despite being completely secular, to get a formal [conversion] document for the sake of their children."

Asked why more immigrants do not enroll in Reform and Conservative conversion classes, Remennick says, "Many immigrants are unaware of the very existence of Reform and Conservative Judaism.

"Those who are aware view it as an American import, something ethnically American. The non-Orthodox movements aren't doing enough outreach."

Even if more immigrants were aware of their options, she says, "most would not seek a conversion that isn't recognized by the state and other Jews. Russians are very pragmatic."

Inbari of Yisrael Ba'Aliyah agrees that only a small percentage of immigrants wish to convert.

Those who do, he says, prefer the Orthodox Rabbinate.

Inbari adds that his party will not try to persuade other coalition partners to accept the legitimacy of non-Orthodox conversions in Israel, despite the problems facing many immigrants.

Instead, he says, it will attempt to liberalize the strict conversion criteria within the Rabbinate.

"Our goal is to make things work smoother in the Rabbinate. Those who want to convert must do it in a manner that is acceptable in Israel.

"The Reform and Conservative movements can't change this. We must work within the system."

Rabbi Michael Boyden, chairman of the Israel Council of Progressive (Reform) Rabbis, rejects this claim.

He asserts that, given the proper recognition, thousands of immigrants from both the former Soviet Union and elsewhere would seek non-Orthodox conversions.

"Were we recognized," says Boyden, "I have no doubt that we would be flooded with applicants. Those who say the numbers would be very small want to leave things as they are.

"If people really believe this is the case, let's test it in the open market and end the Orthodox monopoly."

**'What can we do?'**

Although many Diaspora Jews champion the cause of non-Jewish immigrants, a substantial number of Russian Jews do not.

"I know this is a ticking time bomb for this country, but what can we do?" says Svetlana Arolov, a 36-year-old teacher who describes her religious beliefs as "traditional."

"How can you convert someone who isn't willing to keep the mitzvot [commandments]? They can't be Jewish otherwise."

Her comments reflect the feeling among many here that non-Jewish emigres from the former Soviet Union came to Israel solely because of economic motives and have no attachment to Judaism.

If it were up to Arolov, "Non-Jewish immigrants wouldn't have been allowed to come in the first place. I moved here to escape anti-Semitism, but many of those who came never experienced anti-Semitism because they're not Jewish.

"In the future, any non-Jew who wants to come should undergo a conversion in the former Soviet Union and only then be allowed to immigrate."

But Bob Eliaz, an immigrant from the United States with Russian roots, warns against generalizing about Russian olim.

"Sure there are opportunists, but that's not the rule," he says.

"I have a second cousin from Russia who married a non-Jewish woman. They have three children, two grown and one in high school.

"When my cousin's wife married, she accepted the fact that her children would be Jewish."

When the time came to make aliyah, Eliaz says, "She was the biggest Zionist of them all. She came on aliyah because she didn't want her children to be called 'zhids,' the Russian equivalent of kike."

Now that they're here, Eliaz says, "her children aren't Jewish and no one sees them as Jewish." □

## Finance minister quits Cabinet over foreign currency reforms

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Finance Minister Dan Meridor has resigned his post following a showdown with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over foreign currency reforms.

Meridor submitted his letter of resignation Wednesday after the Cabinet adopted a decision to widen the shekel exchange rate band, a move he staunchly opposed.

He accused Netanyahu, his longtime rival in the Likud Party, of exploiting the issue to push him out of the government.

“There was no reason to bring this issue [to the Cabinet] today,” he told a news conference after the seven-hour meeting. “When it became clear to me that there were ulterior motives for this whole affair, I informed the ministers and the prime minister that I intend to resign from the government.”

Under the new plan, which was adopted by a vote of 8-3, with two abstentions, the band in which the shekel can fluctuate against foreign currencies was widened to about 28 percent. Meridor had said the move could hurt exports and ultimately cause higher unemployment.

As a result of the Cabinet decision, Bank of Israel Governor Jacob Frenkel, who supported widening the band, cut interest rates by 1.2 percent.

Frenkel had refused calls to lower interest rates in recent months. He attributed his change of heart to the government decision on foreign currency reforms and indicators showing declining inflation.

Other economic reforms adopted by the government include freeing up foreign currency restrictions to make it easier for Israeli companies and banks to invest in foreign stock markets. This move would also allow Israeli citizens to open foreign currency accounts and take more foreign currency with them when they travel abroad.

Meridor is the second Likud member to quit Netanyahu's government over policy differences.

In January, Ze'ev “Benny” Begin resigned as science minister in protest over the signing of the Hebron redeployment accord, which handed over about 80 percent of the West Bank town to Palestinian rule.

Commentators noted that Meridor and Netanyahu were longtime rivals in the Likud and that Netanyahu only reluctantly appointed Meridor, who is considered a moderate.

They also noted that Netanyahu was deeply angered by Meridor's critical remarks when the prime minister was implicated in an influence-peddling scandal surrounding the short-lived appointment of Attorney General Roni Bar-On. They said the High Court's rejection this week of petitions demanding that Netanyahu be indicted in connection with the Bar-On affair left him confident enough to seek revenge.

National Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon was said to be the leading candidate to replace Meridor. Sharon hinted he had discussed the matter with Netanyahu even before Tuesday night's Cabinet meeting. □

## Egypt peace initiative falters as violence spreads in Hebron

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Egypt's efforts to jump-start Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have hit a brick wall.

As violence continued in the West Bank this week, Egypt's foreign minister warned that the gap between Israel and the Palestinians was wide, and hinted that the Egyptian shuttle diplomacy between the sides may stop.

Speaking after talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Foreign Minister Amre Moussa said there was no discussion of dispatching presidential envoy Osama Al-Baz to Israel for further consultation with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. But he added that Egypt had not given up efforts to resolve the peace process crisis.

“Even if there is no real progress on the issue of Israeli settlements in Palestinian lands, this does not mean we have lost hope,” Moussa said after meeting with Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat in Cairo.

For his part, Erekat welcomed the Egyptian mediation effort and blamed the deadlock on Israel.

“We support the Egyptian effort to pull the peace process out of the mud,” Erekat told Israel Radio. He said Israel's settlement policy “continues to shut the door” to resuming negotiations.

Talks between Israel and the Palestinians broke down in March after Israel began construction of a new Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem and a Palestinian suicide bomber killed three Israelis at a Tel Aviv cafe.

A mediation effort launched recently by Al-Baz led to an Israeli-Palestinian meeting last week in Cairo, the first in three months. But the Egyptian envoy's efforts to arrange a follow-up meeting of Israeli and Palestinian negotiators proved to be futile.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said this week that negotiating a permanent agreement should be the sole purpose of renewed talks.

“If the political negotiations with the Palestinians resume, they will resume with the sole purpose of reaching a final settlement,” Netanyahu told an economic conference.

“They cannot be renewed in order to continue step-by-step when you have no idea where this will lead.”

Earlier this month, Netanyahu briefed the Inner Security Cabinet on the principles of a final-status accord he envisioned, which reportedly would call for Israel maintaining control over nearly half of the West Bank.

Meanwhile, unrest in the West Bank continued throughout the week.

More than 20 Palestinians were wounded, two of them seriously, in clashes Tuesday and Wednesday with Israeli soldiers in the West Bank town of Hebron.

One of the wounded was a 12-year-old boy who was hit by a rubber bullet fired by troops to disperse the rioters.

The Israeli army charged that Palestinian police failed to take action to prevent demonstrators from approaching the areas where the Israeli- and Palestinian-controlled parts of the city meet. □

## High-tech firms meet in Israel

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Representatives from approximately 125 high-tech firms convened in Jerusalem this week for an Internet conference aimed at promoting Israel's image as the Silicon Valley of the Middle East.

“The purpose of the meeting is to gather all the Internet companies and Israel on one side, and bring in people from abroad, who already recognize that Israel is the center of Internet in the world. After Silicon Valley, we call it ‘Silicon Wadi,’ ” one of the exhibition organizers, Yisrael Peled, told Israel Radio.

International companies interested in business opportunities in Israel attended the conference, as did Israeli software and Internet companies.

In a related development, the American-based Sun Microsystems firm signed an agreement with Israel's Trade Ministry this week to purchase software in Israel. □