



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said foreign aid to the Palestinians is critical to the peace process and now would be a "terrible time" to cut U.S. aid, according to leaders of Americans for Peace Now who met with the premier in Jerusalem. He also said Arafat had "improved" his performance as a result of Israeli pressure, according to APN.

■ The Reform and Conservative movements in Israel are planning to file a joint petition to the High Court of Justice on Wednesday demanding that their representatives be permitted to sit on four local religious councils. The court has ruled that non-Orthodox Jews cannot be barred from religious councils on the basis of their beliefs, but that ruling has not been honored.

■ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed a new science minister, Michael Eitan, to round out his Cabinet shuffle. The appointment came after his government survived a no-confidence motion in the Knesset. The prime minister intends to focus on "important matters of state" now, his spokesman said.

■ The Knesset passed a final reading of a bill declaring the anniversary of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination a national day of mourning. Under the bill, flags would be flown at half-mast and a memorial service would be held at his graveside every year on the Hebrew date of his assassination.

■ Swiss banks discovered another \$7.1 million in unclaimed assets from Holocaust victims, according to the Swiss banks' ombudsman. Last year the ombudsman, Hanspeter Haeni, said he could find only \$8,000 in assets. Some Jewish groups claim that Swiss banks owe Holocaust victims or their heirs up to \$7 billion.

■ Former National Basketball Association star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is due to meet with Israel's chief Ashkenazi rabbi and other survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp Thursday. Abdul-Jabbar's father helped liberate the camp during World War II.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

NATO expansion seen as positive move for former Soviet-bloc Jews

By Ruth E. Gruber

STRASBOURG, France (JTA) — Is there a Jewish stake in the expansion of NATO?

Jewish leaders from Eastern and Central Europe see the expansion as a way of anchoring their countries within the West, strengthening overall democratic development and providing a more secure base for a viable Jewish future.

"With membership in NATO and especially with [eventual] membership in the European Union, people will be able to migrate freely, and I think Jews would settle here, and our population would grow," Tomas Kraus, executive director of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic, said in an interview.

"We expect that after the enlargement of NATO, we will get new immigration from the former Soviet Union," he said.

Those Jews "are seeking not only political refuge, but higher economic standards," Kraus said. "They'll settle in our country, knowing that it is militarily secure from the Russians and economically stable."

Meeting in Madrid this week, leaders of the North American Treaty Organization countries officially invited the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to become the first wave of former Soviet bloc states to join the western defense alliance.

Some 4,000 Jews live in the Czech Republic, as many as 100,000 Jews live in Hungary and 10,000 or more live in Poland.

Further eastern expansion of NATO is expected.

The expansion, less than a decade after the collapse of communism, formally erases the Cold War's East-West divide.

It creates a broader, more seamless, European landscape and verifies former Eastern-bloc states as members of the European political mainstream.

"It's a sort of confirmation of our identity, of being a part of what we always felt a part of, and were rarely recognized as," Michael Zantovsky, a leading Czech political figure who is of Jewish background, told the Associated Press.

The move has parallel ramifications for Jews.

Since the collapse of communism, a renaissance of Jewish life has taken root in countries throughout the former Soviet bloc states.

Eastern European Jews demand recognition

No longer "captive Jews" behind the Iron Curtain, these Jewish communities now are demonstrating a growing self-confidence in their identity and are demanding recognition as full-fledged members of the Jewish world.

"Of course we need and appreciate cooperation with all the international Jewish organizations," Warsaw Jewish representative Stanislaw Krajewski told attendees at a recent conference in Strasbourg on "Strengthening Jewish Life in Europe."

"But being partners means we should not be ignored."

Poland's Jewish leadership was particularly blunt on the issue last month.

Jerzy Kichler, the newly elected 49-year-old president of the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland, issued a statement backing Poland's entry into NATO.

In doing so, he categorically rejected attempts by the World Jewish Restitution Organization to link NATO entry to Warsaw's handling of the restitution of Jewish property.

Polish officials fear that such opposition could harm the chances of securing the U.S. congressional approval needed to ratify the admission of new members to NATO.

"We believe that Poland's entry to NATO serves the interests of our country and of all its citizens, including Polish Jews," Kichler's statement said. "It can only improve the situation of Jews in Poland."

Half a century after 3 million Polish Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, the Polish Jewish community, though numbering only in the

thousands, is trying to re-establish a viable presence as an integrated part of Polish society.

Kichler's election in May put community leadership firmly in the hands of a post-Holocaust generation.

This generation's aim is to create a Jewish life that fits present-day Polish Jews — who, as one community member put it, are "as Polish as French Jews are French."

Kichler's statement backing NATO membership demonstrated the community's growing desire to make its voice heard — and heeded — on issues relating to the future of both the community and Poland.

At the Strasbourg conference, Krajewski called a threat by the WJRO vice chairman, Naphtali Lavie, to lobby against Poland's entry into NATO as a means of pressing the Polish government on the restitution issue a "slap in the face" to Poland's Jewish leaders.

But according to Israel Singer, secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress and chairman of the WJRO executive, the WJRO has not taken a position on the issue.

"There was discussion, but it never came to any vote," he said.

Singer added that while Poland's position on restitution is not "an issue to keep them out of NATO," it should be "encouraged to behave like other countries," such as Hungary, which have moved faster to address restitution of Jewish property.

Meanwhile, the American Jewish Committee's board of governors, meeting in New York last month, also passed a resolution supporting Poland's entry into NATO.

"We have expressly pointed out that it is wrong to couple" the "issue of restitution and the issue of support for Poland's entrance into NATO," Jeffrey Weintraub, director of the AJCommittee-linked Center for American Pluralism, said during a trip to Poland last week. □

Swiss Holocaust fund to benefit East Europe's oldest and neediest

By Fredy Rom

BERN (JTA) — The stewards of Switzerland's highly touted Holocaust Memorial Fund have concluded their first meeting with at least one thing certain: They intend to issue the first payments to the oldest and neediest survivors in Eastern Europe.

But members of the fund's executive committee appear to disagree over when the checks will be issued and how much recipients will get.

Rolf Bloch, the committee's Swiss chairman, announced after the committee met Monday in Bern that it had authorized an initial payment of \$12 million to survivors in Eastern Europe, of which \$2 million would go to non-Jewish survivors.

Payments would not begin until after the next meeting of the board, which is slated for late September, said Bloch, who also is a Swiss Jewish leader. But one of the international Jewish representatives at the Bern meeting said the fund has agreed to issue checks totaling \$15 million as early as next month.

The Swiss members of the seven-member committee "responded in a speedy and moral way to deal with the oldest and neediest cases," said Singer, secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress.

Singer said that the committee approved the payment of \$60 million to 60,000 survivors in the formerly Communist countries of Eastern Europe, and that the first quarter would be paid during the summer.

Jewish organizations are assembling the list of those cases, said Singer, who attended the Bern meeting on behalf of WJC President Edgar Bronfman.

Set up earlier this year with help from Switzerland's largest banks and industrial firms, the fund was seen

as an effort to counter the torrent of criticism of Switzerland's handling of dormant bank accounts of Nazi victims.

The fund is currently valued at \$116 million.

The Swiss National Bank has pledged an additional \$70 million, but that contribution requires approval by the Swiss Parliament. The legislature is expected to take action in September.

Meanwhile, Swiss banks this week uncovered an additional \$7 million in unclaimed accounts.

Switzerland turns a blind eye

The Bern meeting came on the heels of a controversy over a BBC documentary that claimed Switzerland turned a blind eye to trainloads of Italian Jews shipped through Switzerland on their way to work as slave laborers in Germany.

Thousands of Italian Jews were taken by train via the St. Gotthard pass through the Alps, according to "Inside Story," which aired on Swiss television last week.

"The transports of forced laborers through Switzerland clearly continued with the knowledge of the government," said David Marks, the film's associate producer.

The program, which previously aired in the United States and Britain, based the claim partly on an interview with an unidentified Swiss woman known as "Elizabeth."

She said Jewish volunteers in Zurich were asked by the Red Cross to attend to a train passing through the city's station in late 1943.

"We were told that they were Jewish people, Gypsies and others who were being transported to Germany and beyond," said Elizabeth, who was 14 at the time.

The documentary was sharply criticized by Swiss officials and historians.

"It is unlikely that Jews were transported via the Swiss Alps to the death camps," said Francois Bergier, the Swiss head of an international commission that is examining Switzerland's wartime past.

Bergier said in an interview that his commission would investigate the allegations in the documentary.

Switzerland's ambassador to the United Kingdom, Francois Nordmann, wrote in a letter of protest to John Bort, director general of the BBC, that the documentary's producers "chose to present an outrageous scenario, disseminating hatred and casting discredit on a whole country by exploiting a register of emotions, insinuations and calumnies."

Swiss Jewish leaders criticized their government's reaction to the film and urged the Bergier Commission to investigate the claims immediately.

"We should not accuse the filmmakers that opened our eyes," said Thomas Lyssy, vice president of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities.

"The Jews all over the world and, of course, in Switzerland are anxious to know if the Swiss government allowed the Nazis to transport Jews in trains via Switzerland." □

Arafat's guards condemned to die

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Palestinian military court has sentenced to death three members of Yasser Arafat's elite bodyguard unit for murdering a Gaza man.

The victim had lived next door to one of the defendants, a senior officer in Force-17, and had made a remark about the officer's wife. If the sentences are carried out, the three convicted officers will be brought before a firing squad.

More than 10 people have been sentenced to death in Palestinian courts since the authority came to power. None of the sentences has been carried out. □

New dialogue with chief rabbis touted as important, but limited

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — In yet another effort to defuse tensions sown by a controversial conversion bill in the Knesset, Diaspora Jewry and Israel's Chief Rabbinate have launched a new dialogue.

Given the minefield of Israeli religious politics, some are touting the talk between the Orthodox rabbis and the three major streams as a Jewish diplomatic breakthrough.

They said the rabbis heard the Diaspora's fears of a growing schism among the Jewish people and a passionate plea for respect and tolerance of differences.

For its part, the rabbinate is downplaying the initiative in what sources say is deference to the sensitivities of its fervently Orthodox constituents.

The rabbis met last week for the first time with members of the Committee on the Unity of the Jewish People of the Jewish Agency for Israel following the agency's annual assembly.

The meeting came as the divisive conversion legislation — which would formalize the Orthodox rabbinate's monopoly over conversions performed in Israel — is on hold amid government-sponsored efforts to hammer out a resolution.

The initiative has created a serious strain in relations between Israel and non-Orthodox Diaspora Jewry.

It also has fueled anger and alienation among some donors to the campaigns of the United Jewish Appeal and local federations, which contribute a major portion of the Jewish Agency's budget.

But in spite of the agency committee's efforts to bridge the gaps with the rabbinate, it is clear there are limits to the dialogue and that some fundamental differences are irreconcilable.

Meeting serves everybody's purposes

Chief Rabbis Yisrael Meir Lau and Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron issued a statement four days after the meeting, in an apparent response to the intense Israeli media coverage it drew.

In the statement, they said they had reaffirmed their commitment to the unity of the Jewish people.

But in a clear reference to the Reform movement, they set limits to the dialogue, stating: "Negotiations with movements who deny the authority of halachah (Jewish law) would not be constructive or appropriate."

Said Bakshi-Doron, "Judaism does not need reformation. The only way to insure Jewish continuity is via rededication to halachic principles."

Kurt Rothschild, an Orthodox member of the committee who is the president of the Canadian Zionist Federation, said the rabbis made it clear that "no part of the Jewish people should be disregarded or considered outsiders."

But they also made it clear that matters of marriage, divorce and conversion "must remain within the jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbinate," he added.

Still, Rothschild, chairman of World Mizrahi, an Orthodox Zionist organization, said, "The very fact that such a meeting took place in a courteous manner is an accomplishment."

"Both sides listened to the concerns of each other and stated their case. That is a healthy exercise."

The members of the committee were gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish Agency's annual assembly, where the issue of the agency's role in promoting religious pluralism was high on the agenda.

Jewish Agency Chairman Avraham Burg said he

initiated the meeting to "open a dialogue" between the rabbis and the three major Jewish streams against the backdrop of the crisis over the proposed conversion law.

But the agency's committee meeting with the rabbis deliberately steered clear of politics and particular solutions to the conversion crisis, participants said, in recognition of the efforts of a separate, government-appointed committee working to resolve the crisis.

At the same time, Burg is eager to position the agency as the only world forum through which the rabbinate will sit with leaders of all Jewish streams.

In turn, the agency serves the Chief Rabbinate with the political cover to sit with the leaders of the non-Orthodox streams.

Rabbi Vernon Kurtz of Highland Park, Ill., president of the UJA Rabbinic Cabinet and a committee member from the Conservative movement, said the meeting, despite its very clear parameters, was constructive.

"It was clear they have problems with some of our religious views," he said, but "we tried to lower the decibel level on both sides. And there was a willingness to listen."

"Our committee did not expect to go in and solve issues," he added.

"No one wanted to damage the ability of the [government's] committee to come to a compromise."

The dialogue is expected to continue on a regular basis. □

Hamis terrorist sentenced to 46 consecutive life terms

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The head of Israel Defense Force intelligence said this week that Hamas is not interested in carrying out suicide bombing attacks while it works to strengthen its hold in the Palestinian self-rule areas.

Addressing the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Tuesday, Maj. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon said that Hamas members had not taken part in the recent riots in the West Bank town of Hebron and Gush Katif in the Gaza Strip.

But he warned that another fundamentalist group, Islamic Jihad, was interested in carrying out mass terror attacks.

Israeli media reported this week that security forces had received warnings of possible attacks inside Israel.

Ya'alon's remarks came a day after an Israeli military court sentenced a Hamas terrorist to 46 consecutive life terms for planning suicide bombings in Israel last year.

Hassan Salameh was convicted last week of 46 counts of murder resulting from two bombings on the No. 18 bus in Jerusalem and one at a hitchhiking post near the coastal city of Ashkelon.

In a related development, a Hamas terrorist turned himself in to Palestinian authorities this week in Hebron, four days after breaking out of jail.

The man was among several captured by Israel and the Palestinian Authority after a March suicide bombing in Tel Aviv that killed three people.

He was arrested in connection with the murder of an Israeli soldier.

Meanwhile, American officials were said this week to have been involved in efforts to arrange another meeting between the Israeli and Palestinian security agencies.

Security coordination has been operating on a very limited level since the Palestinians broke off peace talks in March, after Israel began construction of a Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem. □

**Subsidized apartment sales
subject of Israeli police probe***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli police are probing possible corruption in the sale of subsidized apartments at a Jerusalem housing project.

The claims, raised in an Israel Television report this week, alleged that up to 40 percent of the Shuafat Ridge housing project, which had been built for needy fervently Orthodox families, was sold at subsidized prices to people who were not eligible to receive assistance.

Those who benefited included friends and relatives of the religious parties and organizations that marketed the project, the report said.

Labor and Social Welfare Minister Eli Yishai of the Shas Party, Yehuda Levinger, head of the National Religious Party's Jerusalem branch, and relatives of Deputy Housing Minister Meir Porush of United Torah Judaism were implicated in the report.

The project in northern Jerusalem was begun under the tenure of Ariel Sharon as housing minister in the late 1980s with a view to alleviating the housing problems of fervently Orthodox families.

Most of the construction and marketing was conducted between 1992-1996, when Binyamin Ben Eliezer served as housing minister under the Labor government.

The implicated members of the political parties denied any wrongdoing.

Yishai, who was reported to have purchased a four-room apartment for \$110,000, and sold it last year for \$210,000, without ever having lived in it, said he was told that people not eligible for assistance could also purchase houses.

The Housing Ministry spokesman said that additional housing was built that could be sold at non-subsidized prices, and that no eligible families had lost out because apartments were purchased by others.

Meretz leader Yossi Sarid said that the television report hinted at a "massive corruption" scandal. He also said he planned to lodge a criminal complaint on the matter. □

**Austrian students initiate
monument to Kristallnacht***By Ruth E. Gruber*

INNSBRUCK, Austria (JTA) — The ski resort town of Innsbruck in the Austrian Tyrol has erected a Kristallnacht monument thanks to a grass-roots initiative by local students.

The monument, a 20-foot tall, stylized menorah, was unveiled in June.

The candles on the monument, which is located on a central Innsbruck square, will be lighted by a laser beam each year on Nov. 9 in commemoration of the Kristallnacht pogroms on that date in 1938.

During these attacks, synagogues were burned, Jewish businesses were destroyed and Jews were assaulted, arrested, and killed throughout Germany.

Nazi Germany had annexed Austria earlier in 1938. In Innsbruck, four Jews were killed.

"The monument was erected as a result of an initiative by local students who petitioned the Tyrolean parliament to commemorate the event," 83-year-old Erik Welsch, one of the few Jews living in the eastern part of Austria, said in an interview.

Nearly 50 students from 11 local schools entered a design competition for the monument, which was won by 19-year-old Mario Joerg.

During the inauguration ceremony, students read

from SS orders directing the Kristallnacht pogrom that commanded the police not to intervene.

They also explained why it was important for them that the pogrom and its victims be commemorated.

"I am not a highly sentimental person, but I was close to tears," Welsch said.

Attending the ceremony were Austria's chief rabbi, Paul Chaim Eisenberg, the Israeli ambassador to Austria, Austrian church and political dignitaries, and representatives of Austrian Jewish communities.

About 40 former Innsbruck Jews also attended the ceremony at the invitation of the town. □

**Australian paper apologizes
for article that used 'Protocols'***By Jeremy Jones*

SYDNEY (JTA) — Australia's largest mainstream Arabic-language newspaper has published two front-page articles criticizing its publication that quoted a well-known anti-Semitic tract.

The articles were printed as a result of mediation conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission after the Executive Council of Australian Jewry lodged a complaint following the publication of the offending story.

The original article, which was published last year, was written by the publisher and editor in chief of the Lebanese-based publication *Al-Diar*, and quoted the 19th-century Russian forgery "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

It alleged that there is a "covenant" of the "Old Testament" to the effect that "the Lebanese fields must be burnt," and claimed that Jews are "snakes."

It also maintained that the Jewish people plan that "all the people will submit to the Jews" for the aim of achieving their "Global Order."

One of the two articles published recently, headed "The Protocols — We Were Wrong," explained why anti-Semitism is unacceptable.

In the other piece, senior Jewish communal leaders focused on the need for members of the Jewish and Arab communities to work together.

Diane Shteinman, a leader of the Australian Jewish community, said in an interview that *El Telegraph* is a well-regarded newspaper and that the publication of the article was out of character. □

Hungarian neo-Nazi sentenced*By Agnes Bohm*

BUDAPEST (JTA) — The Budapest City Court has sentenced a Hungarian neo-Nazi leader to one year in prison for inciting racial hatred.

The judge ruled that a speech given by Albert Szabo last October to mark the 40th anniversary of the Hungarian anti-Soviet uprising went beyond the limits of freedom of speech.

As part of the speech, Szabo said, "Hungary will soon be handed over to the caftan-robbed and kippah-wearing Zionists."

He also called for the exclusion of Jews from high-profile Hungarian political jobs.

Last year, Hungary's Supreme Court acquitted Szabo on similar charges.

Since that decision, however, the Hungarian Parliament has tightened its laws regulating freedom of speech.

The ruling against Szabo was issued by the same court that earlier banned the publication of a Hungarian-language edition of Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf." □