



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ President Clinton promised in a letter to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations to continue to facilitate successful Israeli-Arab peace talks that enhance Israeli security. Clinton, who was responding to a letter he received from the Conference of Presidents last week, agreed that the U.S. and Israel should try to resolve their differences privately.

■ U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Martin Indyk told Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy that Israel has until January to formulate the specifics of its further redeployment from the West Bank, according to Israel Radio. Indyk met on Monday with Syrian President Hafez Assad in Damascus, where the two reportedly discussed a revival of the long-stalled Syrian-Israeli peace talks.

■ Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan cut short his visit to Israel. Farrakhan, who arrived unexpectedly in the West Bank on Sunday, said he changed his itinerary because he was worried about his safety in Jerusalem. [Page 2]

■ Some 40 countries, meeting in Paris under the auspices of the World Bank, committed more than \$700 million in aid for Palestinian economic projects in 1998. The money is part of the more than \$3.5 billion pledged to the Palestinians in 1993.

■ A Shas Party Knesset member proposed the establishment of special units for fervently Orthodox soldiers who wish to enlist in the Israel Defense Force. The recommendation came amid reports that the number of yeshiva students receiving army deferments increased by 9 percent in 1996.

■ The first-ever Siyum HaShas by a women's yeshiva was celebrated in New York on Sunday. The event, marking the completion by 100 women and men of study of the entire Talmud over the course of a year, was organized by the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education to honor the memory of Maida Katz, 34, a Torah scholar and attorney who last year committed suicide.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Iran appears open to mending foreign ties — but not with Israel

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Iran appears eager to mend fences with other countries — but Israel, for the time being, is not among them.

Hosting a conference of Islamic nations last week, Tehran signaled that it wanted to improve relations with several Arab countries in an effort to overcome years of hostility that date back in some cases to Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

On Sunday, Iranian President Mohammed Khatami announced at a news conference that he hoped to re-establish dialogue with the American people.

Since his election in May, Khatami has been viewed as more of a moderate than his predecessor, Hashemi Rafsanjani, particularly in the domestic arena. But Iran-watchers have wondered whether his moderation would extend to foreign affairs.

Also subject to doubt was whether he would emerge victorious in the internal debates raging among Iranian leaders — a debate that pits Khatami against Rafsanjani and the country's supreme spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

At his news conference, Khatami expressed "great respect" for the "great people of the United States," and abandoned the hot rhetoric previous leaders directed at the American government.

By contrast, at last week's Islamic summit, Khamenei lambasted the United States, Israel and Western civilization in general, where, he said, "Money, glutton and carnal desires are made the greatest aspiration."

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the West is hesitant to draw conclusions too quickly about where Tehran is headed.

The U.S. State Department reacted cautiously to Khatami's news conference, saying that Washington remains "open to a dialogue" with Tehran. But it categorically denied reports that the United States was engaged in any clandestine talks with Iran.

In Israel, as in Washington, Khatami's statements drew reserved applause.

Israeli leader wary, Iranian experts sanguine

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israel would always welcome any signs of moderation in Iran, but it was too early to tell whether there was indeed such a change.

Netanyahu said that Iran must still be regarded with caution because it continued to arm itself with weapons of mass destruction and to support Middle East terrorism.

But some Iranian experts are more sanguine.

"This is a genuine attempt by the Iranian president to create a new, more positive image of Islam," Menashe Amir, head of Persian-language broadcasts on Voice of Israel Radio, said in an interview.

According to Amir, Khatami believes in an intercultural dialogue with the West that would allow Iran to break out of its international solitude.

But Amir cautioned that it was premature to believe that Iran's revolution was dying. It may undergo a process of moderation, some of the leadership may change, but one should not underestimate the power of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, he said.

In fact, Amir warned, Iran may use improved relations with the West to strengthen itself militarily — a process that should be viewed by Israel with great concern.

Uzi Landau, the hawkish chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, shares that view.

"We have no indication whatsoever that the Iranians even think" of improving relations with Israel, Landau said.

While he believes that Israel should maintain an official policy of encouraging moderates in Iran, he nonetheless believes that Israel should constantly be on the lookout, since Tehran has not yet adopted any concrete moderate policies.

If there is a change in Tehran, Landau added, it has not yet reached

Israel. Indeed, at last week's summit, the traditional anti-Israel stance prevailed. Moreover, Iran, which served as the summit's host, sought a strongly worded resolution against Israel and the peace process.

As it turned out, the communique issued at the end of the triennial meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference was moderated by some of the attendees, some of whom were unhappy with the harsh text prepared by Iran.

Just the same, the final declaration condemned Israel for practicing "state terrorism" and called for the creation of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

It also condemned terrorism, but supported the "struggles of people" against "alien domination" — which mirrored Iran's support of Hezbollah and Hamas in their fight against the Jewish state.

Summit members were also critical of Turkey, calling for a suspension of its expanding security ties with Israel — illustrated by last week's visit of Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai to Turkey.

In a sign of a growing breach with other Muslim countries, Turkish President Suleyman Demirel walked out of the conference to protest what a Turkish official called "attempts to force Turkey to end its political and military cooperation with Israel."

Tehran used the summit to boast that it was winning broad acceptance from the Islamic world.

And indeed, every member of the 55-nation organization came to Tehran.

But the level of attendance was another story: Only six of the 22 Arab states belonging to the conference were represented by heads of state.

Among those countries sending lower-level delegates were Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, all of which are key Arab allies of the United States.

Despite Tehran's pronouncements, the time had not yet come for its total rehabilitation among its Arab neighbors. Just the same, there are those who believe that a sea change is taking place in Iran.

At a recent international congress held in Florence, a panel of Middle East experts suggested that Iran has already taken steps to put portions of the Islamic Revolution behind it.

Expert refers to power struggle

Professor Bassem Tibi, a Syrian expert who lectures at Gottingen University in Germany, went a step further: Not only is the Iranian revolution slowly dying, but the message of Islamic zealots has not been accepted by wide segments of Islamic society in the Middle East.

Professor Shireen Hunter, an Iranian working at the Center for the Studies of International Policies in Brussels, spoke of the power struggle between Khatami and the old guard headed by Rafsanjani and Khamenei.

Hunter suggested two possible outcomes to the struggle: a gradual liberalization of Iran under a tacit agreement between the old guard and the Khatami leadership — or a civil war in which the army would wipe out the Islamic Revolutionary Guard and seek to institute secular rule.

Meanwhile, there were indications that Israel may be attempting to revive a dialogue with Iran.

According to a recent story in Al-Kayhan, a Persian-language newspaper published in London, Israel has offered to open negotiations with Iran over a debt stemming from a pipeline they jointly owned prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Iranian-Israeli ties were severed after the revolution and Israel withheld some \$650 million it owed Iran.

The debt has since swollen to \$1 billion, according to Israel; to \$8 billion, according to the Iranians.

The report has not been confirmed in Israel, but according to Al-Kayhan it was none other than Ariel Sharon, the hawkish national infrastructure minister, who was behind attempts to reopen negotiations over the debt.

Landau reacted to the report with caution.

"If it's a matter of settling financial accounts, than why not — as long as we take into account the debts Iran owes Israeli businessmen and all the damages it had caused Israel since the revolution."

Even this comment from the hawkish Likud Knesset member says something.

It means that Jerusalem, too, is attune to possible new winds blowing from Tehran — even if it is still premature to talk of a new Middle East. □

Farrakhan quickly leaves Israel after meeting Palestinian leaders

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan left Israel as abruptly as he had arrived.

Farrakhan had caught Israeli officials off guard on Sunday, when he crossed the border from Jordan into the West Bank, to meet with Palestinian leaders.

He originally was not expected to arrive before mid-January.

But he departed only a day later, citing concerns for his security despite Israeli assurances that he was safe.

The American black Muslim leader suddenly dropped his plans to visit the Al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem when he learned of plans by Jews to protest.

"If anything should happen to me in this land it could not bring good results in black-Jewish relations in the United States, so in the interest of peace I think it is best that I leave," Farrakhan said in the West Bank town of Ramallah before leaving for Jordan.

An Israeli Foreign Ministry official said that despite Farrakhan's statements, Israel had cooperated with his plans and had been involved in arrangements to make the Jerusalem visit possible.

Farrakhan has drawn criticism in Israel for remarks viewed as anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist.

After meeting Sunday with Palestinian officials in the West Bank town of Ramallah, he reiterated to reporters that he is not an anti-Semite.

"I think I have been critical of some aspects of Jewish behavior toward black people. I have never been, I am not now anti-Semitic," he said.

Farrakhan later met with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat in the Gaza Strip. Before Farrakhan left the United States, his aides told Israeli officials that he would arrive in Israel on Jan. 18.

While Farrakhan's arrival had taken Israeli officials entirely by surprise, they said he was allowed to cross into Israel because he is an American citizen and there was nothing barring his entry.

Farrakhan, who in the past has referred to Judaism as a "gutter religion," had said before leaving the United States that he hoped to meet Israeli leaders to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Israeli officials responded that they would not officially receive Farrakhan until he issued a public apology for his anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist declarations.

In New York, Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said that if Farrakhan were to attempt to return to Israel, "the Israeli government would be justified in barring him because he broke a trust" by showing up without notice.

Foxman, who has refused to meet with Farrakhan, had initially voiced support for the Nation of Islam leader making a private visit to the Jewish state. □

Russia probes alleged member of mafia awaiting trial in Israel

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Russia has launched an investigation into a suspected Russian mafia member who is sitting in an Israeli jail.

The decision to investigate Gregory Lerner, who changed his name to Zvi Ben-Ari after moving to Israel, came after months of speculation that Russia would not help Israel with the case.

Lerner, who has been in custody since his arrest in May, has been charged with trying to blackmail Israeli bank and political officials and with defrauding banks and corporations in Israel, Russia and Europe.

In a case brought by the Public Prosecutor's Office in Moscow last week, Lerner is suspected of misappropriating \$200 million from five Russian banks.

A spokesman for the prosecutor's office said it would not seek Lerner's extradition because the Jewish state does not extradite its citizens, adding that the case had been opened in an effort to bring any Russian accomplices to justice.

Israeli Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani visited Moscow last August, when he reportedly sought help from Russian officials with Lerner's case.

According to a news report, Jerusalem provided information on Lerner's criminal activities in Russia to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Unnamed, high-ranking officials in the ministry, however, intercepted the information and withheld it from minister Anatoly Kulikov in an attempt to sandbag the Israeli probe.

After learning about the interception, Kulikov reportedly fired one police general.

Meanwhile, in an interview last week with the Moscow-published newspaper Kommersant Daily, Lerner said his arrest in Israel was a result of the efforts of Vladimir Goussinsky, the head of the Most media empire who also serves as president of the Russian Jewish Congress.

Last July, Goussinsky's independent NTV television station began regular broadcasts to Israel.

Lerner said in the interview that he was against the NTV expansion and that he had been warned by Goussinsky that his opposition might lead to serious consequences.

Goussinsky subsequently denied the allegations about his involvement in Lerner's case.

But he confirmed that Lerner was indeed trying to stop NTV's expansion.

NTV, which has an audience of 120 million across the former Soviet Union, recently unveiled plans to expand its Russian-language broadcasts to Western Europe and other parts of the Middle East.

Lerner maintained his innocence in the newspaper interview, but said he expected to be found guilty because "the Israeli state machine has made a No. 1 enemy out of me." □

University in Germany plans to display portrait of top Nazi

By Deidre Berger

FRANKFURT (JTA) — A German university plans to display a portrait of a leading Nazi ideologue, despite protests by Jewish community leaders.

Karl Astel, who led the University of Jena from 1939 to 1945, was an ethnologist.

But according to Wolfgang Nossen, president of the Jewish community of Thuringia, the German state in

which Jena is located, Astel also played a key role in developing racial theories for the Nazi government.

Noting that during the Third Reich, Astel headed a state office for racial ideology, Nossen said it is shocking that the university would display a portrait of a top-ranking Nazi.

The controversy erupted after the university announced a showing of newly commissioned portraits of eight former university presidents.

University spokesman Wolfgang Hirsch said the school did not commission the portrait of Astel from artist Anke Doberauer, who painted the picture on her own initiative.

Hirsch added that the university had decided to display Astel's picture separately from the other seven portraits.

In order to emphasize Astel's Nazi ties, Doberauer did not paint a full-face portrait.

The painting depicts a young boy with a flushed face who is looking at a photograph of Astel. The background of the painting is brown, the color that symbolized the Nazis.

The university has kept a visual archive of its presidents since 1558. □

New German political party emulates Austrian extremists

By Deidre Berger

FRANKFURT, Dec. 15 (JTA) — A new extremist political party has surfaced in Germany — and its founder says he plans to use Europe's most popular extremist party as his model.

About 300 people gathered recently in the central German town of Kirchheim for the inauguration of the party, which is called Offensive for Germany — the Liberals.

The party's platform includes demands for stricter controls on immigration and a halt to Europe's proposed single-currency plan.

Party members say they hope the party can unite existing right-wing political groups.

The party was founded by Heiner Kappel, a long-time member of Germany's centrist Free Democratic Party who has ties to ultra-right organizations.

Several other members of the Free Democrats known for their right-wing ideology are expected to join him.

Kappel says he is modeling his group on Austria's Freedom Party.

Under the leadership of the charismatic Jorg Haider, who has made favorable comments about the Nazi regime, that party regularly captures about 20 percent of the national vote in Austria.

The Freedom Party has explicitly called for a ban on immigrants and opposes Austria's presence in the European Union.

According to an American Jewish Committee survey released in 1995, one in three supporters of the Freedom Party manifests strong anti-Semitic prejudice.

Haider's party won nearly a quarter of the votes in that year's general elections.

About 100 protestors demonstrated against the new party in the eastern German town of Eisenach where the inaugural event was originally scheduled.

Two right-wing parties, the National Democratic Party and the Republicans, currently have representatives in several German city councils.

Neither party has ever managed to earn the 5 percent of the vote necessary for representation in the national Parliament. □

Israelis see Internet as means to promote Jewish community

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — For months, thousands of people around the Jewish world have been taking part in a Virtual Zionist Congress over the Internet.

Some of them will be here for the 33rd Zionist Congress, scheduled from Dec. 23-Dec. 26, where they will convert their discussions and resolutions from "virtual" to "real."

After the congress ends, they will be back at their computers, reliving their experiences and refining their positions on the various issues on the Jewish agenda in preparation for Jewish Web Week.

Slated for Feb. 22-27, the Web Week hopes to attract some 600,000 online enthusiasts to visit the 613 participating Jewish sites.

The Zionist establishment, Israel's Education Ministry and top high-tech companies are involved in the Virtual Congress, which is the brainchild of Mordechai Friedman, a Jerusalem educator who heads the pedagogic center of the Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, an arm of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the World Zionist Organization.

The Virtual Congress, in a string of draft resolutions to be submitted at this month's "real" Zionist Congress, calls for the massive development of Jewish "electronic citizenship," enabling Jews around the world to be part of the debates that are at the core of Jewish communal life.

In discussion groups led by experts in Israel and the Diaspora that were held over the Internet during the past few months, the strongest theme was that of the need — and the possibility — of greater grass-roots involvement through new technology.

One resolution emerging from the online deliberations that is sure to arouse interest and controversy calls for Israeli and Diaspora Jewish leadership to create a Jewish electronic university.

If put into effect, this would translate into the finest minds in the Jewish world lecturing and tutoring in a global classroom.

A women's issues discussion group is weighing in with a resolution urging that the Internet and electronic communications be harnessed to afford women a more intensive role in Jewish affairs.

Creating a 'global shtetl'

In another discussion group, young businessmen are looking forward to the next General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, which is scheduled to convene November 1998 in Jerusalem, as a venue where many of them will have the chance to meet and crystallize ideas and ventures that they brought into being in their electronic forum.

At this month's congress, participants can shuttle between real and virtual meetings, says Friedman, creating a "global shtetl" that will engender a sense of connection and community weakened by the modern world and urbanization.

Most of the participants in the Virtual Zionist Congress have been youngsters, drawn into the activity through their schools or youth movements.

The "webmasters" involved with the Virtual Congress are providing resource materials, reference archives and even games that address specific areas of Jewish and Zionist history, providing a rich learning experience in addition to the discussion groups.

The World Wide Web address of the Virtual Zionist Congress: <http://www.jajz-ed.org.il/>

Suicide bombers' homes demolished

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli army has begun demolishing and sealing up the homes of four Palestinian suicide bombers who were involved in two terrorist attacks earlier this year.

Monday's action was taken after Israel's High Court of Justice rejected petitions from the bombers' families, saying the punishment was justified because the families had provided the terrorists with food and shelter for a prolonged period of time.

In its Dec. 9 ruling, the court also rejected a challenge from some of the families regarding the veracity of genetic tests that linked them to the men who carried out the two attacks in Jerusalem which claimed the lives of 21 victims, wounding some 360 others.

Two suicide bombers struck in the Mahane Yehuda open-air market on July 30, and three hit the Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall on Sept. 4.

The Hamas fundamentalist movement claimed responsibility for both attacks.

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat denounced the demolitions as a violation of the peace accords.

Meanwhile, the army spokesman said only parts of some of the homes were being sealed in order to leave undisturbed those inhabitants who were not involved in harboring the terrorists.

Founder of settlers movement jailed

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli court has sentenced one of the co-founders of the Hebron settlers movement to six months in jail.

Rabbi Moshe Levinger also received a six-month suspended sentence and a fine of about \$2,300 for assault and disturbing the peace three years ago in the volatile West Bank town.

Levinger was convicted of disturbing Muslim prayers at Hebron's Tomb of the Patriarchs in 1994.

He was also found guilty of blocking an army commander from entering Kiryat Arba, a settlement located near Hebron.

In 1990, Levinger served three-and-a-half months of a five-month sentence for killing an Arab shopkeeper in Hebron during a 1988 stone-throwing incident.

Prior to that, he also received a four-month sentence for assaulting an Arab family and insulting an Israeli soldier.

Israel's cost of living falls

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's cost of living index fell by 0.3 percent in November.

The decline fit in with forecasts for sluggish economic growth during the coming year.

Israel's economy is expected to grow only by about 2 percent in 1998, following several years of record growth.

The November figure brings annual inflation to an estimated 8 percent for all of 1997.

The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had set a target of 7 percent to 9 percent.

The drop in the cost of living was attributed to declines in the prices of produce and housing.

In a further sign of the economic slowdown — which some attribute to the faltering peace process — November's unemployment figures showed that 151,600 people were out of work — a rise of 1.2 percent compared to October.