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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Rabbinate to issue decision

Israel's Orthodox Chief Rabbinate is slated to convene Monday for deliberations on a solution to the crisis over conversions in the Jewish state.

Meanwhile, Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Avraham Burg announced that the three streams of Judaism were nearing agreement to have those converted in Israel by the non-Orthodox streams listed as Jews on their identity cards. [Page 3]

Israelis, Palestinians remain split

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel did not intend to cede any more territory to the Palestinians unless there were clear indications the Palestinians were living up to their commitments.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority's chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said direct contacts with the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had completely fallen apart.

Iran cited in U.S. report

The U.S. Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad issued a report stating that members of all the world's major religions suffer mistreatment, including torture and death.

The report said "certain Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian communities" in Iran were "victims of harassment, persecution and extrajudicial killing."

Russia denies Iranian connection

Russia again denied allegations that it is helping Iran create missile technology.

"Russia has not taken part, is not taking part and will not take part in the implementation of Iran's missile program," a presidential spokesman said.

Swiss send anti-Semitic letters

The Israeli Embassy in Switzerland and Jewish leaders there received hundreds of anti-Semitic letters.

Community officials said the letters came as a backlash to recent reports that the Swiss mistreated Jewish refugees in World War II labor camps.

Papon judge calls for speedup

The proceedings against French war crimes suspect Maurice Papon should be speeded up, the judge in the trial told prosecution and defense lawyers.

The slow pace of the trial against the former Vichy official and diluted the case against him and may lead to his acquittal, according to observers.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Pained families of terror victims demand justice for the perpetrators

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — It has been almost two years since Matthew Eisenfeld and Sara Duker boarded Jerusalem's bus No. 18 on the last day of their lives.

For the parents of the two Americans killed in that February 1996 terrorist bombing attack, the pain endures.

"Our families hoped and prayed that one day we would dance at their wedding," Matthew's father, Leonard, recalled last week.

"We instead cried at their funeral and watched as they were lowered into their graves side by side."

Matthew was 25; his fiancée, Sara, 23.

Last week, their parents joined with a handful of others whose children were slain by terrorists in Israel to plead for the extradition of their killers.

Accompanied by several members of Congress at a Capitol Hill news conference arranged by the Zionist Organization of America, they urged the Clinton administration to demand that Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat extradite the suspected perpetrators to stand trial in the United States.

"We're asking for what's right and what's just and we have an expectation that we'll be listened to," said Arline Duker, speaking on the eve of Clinton's meeting with Arafat at the White House.

Nine Americans have been murdered by terrorists in Israel and the territories since the Oslo peace process was launched in 1993.

Subsequent agreements between Israel and the Palestinians require the Palestinian Authority to transfer accused terrorists to Israel for prosecution, but Arafat has not complied.

Some of the terrorists identified by the Israeli government are currently being held under Palestinian custody, some continue to live free under Palestinian control, while the whereabouts of others remain unknown.

The parents of the slain Americans are calling for the extradition of the perpetrators in accordance with U.S. anti-terrorism legislation, which permits the United States to prosecute those who murder American citizens abroad.

Meanwhile, more than 20 U.S. lawmakers sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright last week urging the administration to "make all diplomatic and legal efforts to guarantee that the terrorists guilty of killing and maiming Americans are brought to justice."

"There's a simple message here," said Rep. Steve Rothman (D-N.J.), who sits on the House International Relations Committee.

"If you murder innocent Americans and tear innocent families apart, the United States of America will never forget and will demand justice until justice is realized," he said.

Jewish leaders, for their part, recently raised the issue in a meeting with President Clinton, and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations said it is preparing to send a follow-up letter to Clinton about the United States' responsibility on the issue.

The ZOA has placed full-page ads in newspapers and magazines urging the administration to take action.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, meanwhile, sought during his visit in Washington last week to bring attention to the Palestinian Authority's failure to comply with 34 requests to transfer terrorists suspected of killing Israelis. He brought with him

MIDEAST FOCUS

Cabinet secretary slams Arafat

Israel's Cabinet secretary said he would have been "ashamed" had Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat visited the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum during his visit to Washington.

Danny Naveh said the visit would have been a sham because Arafat has failed to curb anti-Semitism within his own administration.

Yassin tells Arafat to back off

The spiritual leader of Hamas called on Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to stop cracking down on his movement and to start standing up to Israel.

Hamas co-founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin told an Israeli television station that he views the hounding of the Hamas movement as "wrong."

Hussein, Mubarak meet

King Hussein of Jordan arrived in Cairo to discuss the state of the Middle East peace process with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Syrian paper: Jews set up Clinton

A Syrian newspaper accused the "Zionist lobby" of being responsible for the sex scandal plaguing President Clinton. The English-language Syria Times accused Jewish interests of blackmailing Clinton "to influence Washington's decision-making in internal and foreign policy affairs."

Vanunu confinement criticized

An Israeli legislator told the Associated Press that Israel is "staining its democracy" by holding a convicted nuclear spy in solitary confinement for more than 11 years.

Dedi Zucker of the dovish Meretz Party made the comment after visiting Mordechai Vanunu, who is serving an 18-year sentence for disclosing Israel's nuclear weapons capabilities to the Times of London.

Judith Shahor, whose 19-year-old son Uri was killed while hiking in the West Bank in 1995, and Sigal Megiddish, whose brother, also named Uri, was murdered in the Gaza Strip in 1993. Netanyahu said some of their killers are "sipping cafe under the Jordan Valley sun, completely free," while others "are serving in the Palestinian police, giving interviews, boasting about their act."

Palestinian officials dismissed Netanyahu's comments as "a pack of lies." They said they took the CIA chief in Tel Aviv to visit a West Bank prison last week where Megiddish's killers are being held.

More than 240 people have died in terrorist attacks in Israel and the territories since former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn in September 1993.

David Boim, a 17-year-old New York native with dual American-Israeli citizenship, was victim 215.

His mother, Joyce, remembered her son this way:

"He was a wonderful boy, always with a big smile, always with a kind word for everybody.

"He had a terrific sense of humor that kept his friends rolling, as they showed me when I went to see his dorm room" after he died.

"They showed me the floor. I said, 'What are you showing me the floor for?' They said, 'This is where we rolled for hours, laughing at the jokes that David entertained us with.'"

Two terrorists riddled David with bullets in a drive-by shooting while he was waiting for a bus near the West Bank town of Beit El in May 1996.

One of the terrorists, Imjad Hinawi, was detained by the Palestinian police in early 1997, but has been missing since he was released on a weekend holiday leave.

The other terrorist sought in the Boim shooting, Khalil Sharif, blew himself up in last September's triple-suicide bombing at the Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall in Jerusalem.

That attack claimed the life of another American, 14-year-old Yael Botwin.

Joyce Boim was walking on Ben Yehuda Street just minutes before the three suicide bombers transformed the tourist area into a grisly scene of blood and carnage.

"I could have been a victim of the same terrorist that killed my son," she said.

The idea that their children's killers may strike again compounds these parents' grief.

"We must seek justice," Boim said, adding that she speaks not only for herself, but for "the many families and parents who cannot physically and mentally cry out and do what we are doing."

"We must demand extradition. These murderers cannot continue to walk free," she said. □

Ethiopian-born Israeli soldier reunited with family members

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Blood is thicker than thousands of miles.

That's the moral of the story of an Ethiopian-born soldier in the Israeli army who was reunited with family members last week after trekking through Ethiopia to find them.

Tazazu Tasame, 23, had asked the Jewish Agency for Israel to help locate his family members who stayed in Ethiopia when he and some other relatives immigrated to Israel in 1992.

The agency learned that Tasame's mother did not want to leave Ethiopia because she was caring for his grandmother. After he learned that his grandmother had died, he decided to make the trip.

After landing in Ethiopia in November, the Israeli soldier walked for three days to find his mother, finally making contact with her in a village near the Ethiopian-Sudanese border.

His mother, younger sister, and his older sister and her children agreed to come to Israel. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Ardeatine suspect sought

The Simon Wiesenthal Center is calling on Italy to extradite a man suspected of involvement in the Ardeatine Caves massacre, considered the worst Nazi atrocity carried out in wartime Italy.

According to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, the center seeks the extradition of Wilhelm Schubernig, 83, who has lived openly in Austria for 43 years.

Meanwhile, convicted war criminal Erich Priebke said he will meet with a relative of one of the victims of the World War II massacre.

Priebke, a former Nazi SS captain, was convicted last year for his role in the massacre, which killed 335 Italians 75 of them Jews, south of Rome.

He is serving out his sentence under house arrest.

Bridge collapse suit filed

A damage suit was filed by the widow of an Australian athlete killed in last July's bridge collapse during the opening ceremonies of the Maccabiah Games in Israel.

The negligence suit was filed against the Games' organizers, those responsible for building the bridge and the Yarkon River Authority.

Two Australian athletes were killed immediately in the collapse, and two more died weeks later as a result of complications that medical officials linked to contaminants in the river water.

Dresden Jews plan synagogue

The Jewish community of Dresden, Germany, is reportedly planning to build a new synagogue on the site of the previous one, which was destroyed on Kristallnacht.

Construction is slated to begin Nov. 9, the 60th anniversary of the night in 1938 when marauding bands of Nazis destroyed Jewish property in Germany.

Germans brawl over exhibit

German leftists and neo-Nazis brawled Saturday on a train on the way to Dresden, Germany, where a controversial exhibit about World War II was being shown.

The exhibit on atrocities committed by the German army during the war drew protests when it was displayed in other German cities last year.

Adoption agencies accused

Christian and Muslim children in Israel who are orphans or from broken homes are being sent abroad for adoption, according to a report cited by the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*.

The report said Israeli adoption agencies were concealing the children's religion and their identities.

Identity card compromise could stem conversion crisis

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Orthodox Chief Rabbinate was slated to convene Monday for what some Israeli legislators viewed as "make-or-break" deliberations on a recommended solution to the crisis over conversions performed in the Jewish state.

The Ne'eman Committee, which presented its recommendations to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last Friday, called for the Conservative and Reform movements to participate along with Orthodox representatives in conversion classes, but granted the Orthodox the sole right to carry out the conversions.

Although the committee's Orthodox, Conservative and Reform members were said to be in agreement on the proposal, the report was submitted to Netanyahu unsigned, waiting for final comment from the Chief Rabbinate.

But amid uncertainty over whether the rabbinate would endorse the recommendations, the chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel offered an alternative that could temporarily assuage the crisis if the Ne'eman Committee's recommendations were rejected. Avraham Burg announced Sunday that the three major streams of Judaism had reached a "technical understanding" on the registration of individuals converted in Israel.

Under the arrangement those converted in Israel by the non-Orthodox streams would be listed as Jews on their identity cards, but the population registry would keep a record of the type of conversion.

This arrangement would not affect a convert's rights as an Israeli citizen, but the Religious Affairs Ministry could continue to deny recognition of their marriages and burials because they were not converted under the aegis of the Orthodox.

While Orthodox authorities would probably not recognize such converts as Jewish, an agreement to record them as Jewish on identity cards would be a significant breakthrough for the non-Orthodox movements.

Rabbi Yehuda Gilad, who acted as a representative for Chief Sephardi Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron in the discussions organized by Burg over the past several months, stressed that "this solution means one thing for the state, and another entirely for the religious authorities."

Burg said the plan is "not intended to replace the Ne'eman Committee work by any means, but to offer an alternative, if necessary."

Meanwhile, the recommendations of the Ne'eman Committee, which came after seven months of deliberations, may provide a solution to a protracted crisis that has the potential to bring down the Netanyahu government.

In a letter to the prime minister, Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman, who heads the committee, termed the compromise a "breakthrough for the unity of the Jewish people" and expressed hope that Israel's Chief Rabbinate would view it the same way.

But there was uncertainty over whether the rabbinate would agree.

Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau this week denied reports that he had rejected the Ne'eman Committee's recommendations out of hand, saying he had yet to review them. And Bakshi-Doron, while welcoming the work of the committee, still evaded questions over whether he would agree to meet with Reform leaders, saying that he would not refuse to meet "any Jew."

But representatives from Israel's religious political parties were more to the point.

While they said they welcomed any decision that would firmly establish the Orthodox establishment's sole authority over conversions performed in Israel, they said they could not accept any move that legitimized the non-Orthodox movements.

If both the Ne'eman Committee's proposal and the "technical understanding" are rejected, Israel's religious political parties are likely to demand renewed legislative action on the conversion bill, which would codify the Orthodox establishment's sole authority over Jewish conversions in Israel.

Coalition partners from the Third Way and Yisrael Ba'Aliyah factions said Sunday that if the committee's proposal is rejected, they would vote against the conversion bill — even if presented as a no-confidence vote against the Netanyahu government. □

Appointment of Israeli Arab creates political controversy

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When an Israeli Arab was appointed to a senior municipal post in Haifa, the move ignited a controversy between the coalition partners in the Israeli port city's government.

It also illuminated the struggle among Israeli Arabs for greater political power.

The incident comes as a recent survey, conducted by Elie Rekhess of Tel Aviv University, confirms that Israeli Arabs — many of whom identify themselves as Palestinians — are more concerned about achieving "genuine political equality," as the poll put it, than with the political aspirations of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The story began earlier this month, when the Meretz Party appointed Ghassan Abu Warda to head the city's education department.

The move appeared to be innocuous. After all, Arabs make up 10 percent of Haifa's 250,000 population, Jews and Arabs have peaceably coexisted in Haifa since the establishment of the state of Israel and Meretz usually holds the education portfolio.

But the Haifa city council, led by Mayor Amram Mitzna of the Labor Party, rejected Abu Warda, saying that he was "unfit for the job."

Meretz quit the coalition that governs the city in protest, accusing both Mitzna and the council of racism, a charge endorsed by at least two Israeli newspapers.

"The basic reason for keeping the job from Abu Warda was that he is an Israeli Arab," the Israeli daily Ha'aretz said.

The Jerusalem Post, a politically conservative English-language daily, said, "To believe that a member of a minority cannot faithfully represent everyone's interests, majority and minority, is pure clannishness and profoundly anti-democratic."

In the wake of the stinging criticism, Haifa's mayor announced that he would appoint an Arab member of the city council from the predominantly Arab Hadash Party to the education slot — and would ask for the council's approval on Feb. 1.

The incident came soon after the release of the survey's results. The survey, which was based on face-to-face interviews with 600 Israeli Arabs in October and November, showed that:

- 41 percent of Israeli Arabs consider "genuine political equality" as the most important issue;
- 32 percent give preference to improvement of social services, such as education and health;
- 8 percent gave the most importance to "the national identity of Israel's Arabs"; and
- only 5 percent prioritized the struggle to establish a Palestinian state.

These figures are the consequences of the peace process and its effect on the local Arab population, said Rekhess, who heads the university's program on Arab politics in Israel.

While Israeli Arabs feel less identification with the Palestinian issue — the Israeli component of their identity is getting stronger — "this does not mean that the process of Palestinization has disappeared," he said.

Instead, Rekhess said, the results demonstrate that Israeli Arabs are fighting for increased political power for themselves.

One example of this increasing political assertiveness can be

found in the Knesset. Hadash Knesset member Azmi Beshara recently proposed a bill that would guarantee Arabs proportional representation on the boards of government-owned corporations — similar to guarantees that are given to women in Israel. Currently, only 15 out of 1,500 directors of these corporations are Arabs.

Beshara, who already has declared his candidacy for prime minister in the next elections, has been working hard to show his constituency that he can be effective.

Some 44 percent of Israeli Arabs believe that parliamentary work is the most effective way to achieve equality, according to Rekhess' survey.

But, in reality, despite a record number of 11 Arabs in the 120-member Knesset, they have less influence than they did under the previous Labor governments, when prime ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres leaned on their support. Some 81.5 percent of Israeli Arabs believe that a unified Arab party would be best for their interests, according to the survey. But more than 50 percent admitted there was little or no chance for such a party to emerge.

But a majority of Israeli Arabs — 73 percent — would favor an Arab candidate for prime minister, according to the survey.

All of the Arab participants at a recent symposium in Tel Aviv called to analyze the survey agreed that an Arab candidate for prime minister was necessary even if he has no chance of being elected — if only as a signal to the Labor Party not to take Arab voters for granted. One theory is that an Arab candidate would force a runoff, presumably between the Labor and Likud candidates, and that would enable Arab voters to press for stronger commitments from the two main parties. □

Russian minister agrees to help Jews regain hundreds of Torahs

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A top-ranking Russian official has promised to help the Jewish community regain hundreds of Torah scrolls.

Justice Minister Sergey Stepashin told Jewish religious leaders that the scrolls, which are currently in the nation's museums, should be returned to their original owners according to an law on the restitution of religious property signed by President Boris Yeltsin several years ago.

Since then, the Jewish community has been trying to reclaim over 500 scrolls from museums in Russia's three largest cities. According to Zinovy Kogan, executive director of the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organizations, there are about 180 scrolls in museums in Moscow, and some 400 scrolls are stored in museums in St. Petersburg and Nizhny Novgorod.

The scrolls were taken from the synagogues by the Bolshevik authorities and transferred to museums where most of them have been "gathering dust in depositories," said Kogan.

The Ministry of Culture has been reluctant to return the scrolls to the Jewish community.

In a meeting with the leadership of Kogan's group, an umbrella organization representing some 50 Orthodox and Reform synagogues in Russia, Stepashin promised to allow rabbis to serve in the Russian army and penitentiaries.

Russian legislation does not address the question of chaplains serving the needs of servicemen and prisoners. □