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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Mother dies seeking masks

Gulf tensions claimed their first fatality in Israel: Malka Shalom, a 35-year-old mother of seven, was killed in Tel Aviv when she fell four floors after trying to retrieve gas masks for her children from an apartment from which her family had been evicted.

The woman, four months pregnant, had entered the apartment from a neighbor's balcony and fell after she was unable to locate the masks. [Page 3]

Knesset urges compromise

Proponents of a compromise proposal to resolve the conversion crisis in Israel garnered more support among members of the Knesset. A day after the Chief Rabbinate Council rejected the proposal, 72 Knesset members signed a petition supporting the Ne'eman Committee's recommendations.

Meanwhile, the High Court of Justice deferred hearings on the case of an adopted child converted to Judaism by a Conservative rabbi in Israel. [Page 1]

Iraq denies communique

Iraq sent Israel a message promising not to launch a missile attack on the Jewish state, an unnamed official in the Israeli defense establishment was reported as saying. The promise reached Israel on Monday via Russian intermediaries, the official said. Iraqi officials, however, publicly denied ever sending the communique. [Page 3]

Albright denies linkage

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright unequivocally denied any linkage between Israel's peace policies and American problems reassembling the Gulf War coalition. Albright, who made the assertion in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was criticized in the Jewish community for making such a linkage last fall — when the previous crisis over U.N. weapons inspectors in Iraq erupted.

Clinton urged to release Pollard

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations is urging President Clinton to take "immediate" action to release Jonathan Pollard.

"We believe that Mr. Pollard has paid his debt after more than 13 years of incarceration," the Conference of Presidents wrote, according to a copy of the letter that was read to JTA but not released. [Page 3]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Back to court and Knesset?

The pluralism battle plods on

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Back to the courts and the Knesset? No one is sure where the battle over religious pluralism in Israel is headed now that efforts for resolving the conversion crisis through negotiations apparently have failed.

The Reform and Conservative movements are vowing to return to the Israeli courts to press their legal case for official recognition in the Jewish state, and the fervently Orthodox say they will revive efforts to pass conversion legislation.

But nothing is that simple when it comes to the issue that has galvanized forces on all sides of the debate and threatened to create a rift between Israel and American Jewry, the majority of whom are not Orthodox.

The latest chapter in the ongoing struggle comes after Israel's Chief Rabbinate Council failed Monday to endorse a recommended solution to the conversion crisis. The solution was formulated by an interdenominational committee headed by Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman. But the council stopped short of rejecting the Ne'eman Committee's proposals explicitly.

And Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose coalition is threatened by this dispute, maintained that the council's decision was a step toward consensus.

Despite the blow to a 7-month effort to resolve the issue through negotiations, for the short term at least, the rabbis and the politicians are likely to persevere in their efforts rather than admit failure and immediately trigger a political crisis.

After all, none of the parties involved in the dispute wants to be accused of provoking a coalition crisis while anxious Israelis scramble to get the latest-model gas masks in case an American attack on Iraq prompts Saddam Hussein to launch missiles at Israel.

But the Iraqi crisis may provide only a temporary respite to the religious pluralism battle in Israel.

The Orthodox political parties, which have opposed any initiative to grant legal recognition to non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel, are committed to leaving the Netanyahu government if the Knesset does not pass legislation codifying the Orthodox control over conversions.

Given the current political sentiment, the Orthodox parties, if forced to choose between legislation and secession, would likely find themselves forced toward the latter.

A day after the Chief Rabbinate Council's meeting, 72 Knesset members, including Netanyahu, signed a petition supporting the Ne'eman Committee's recommendations — a clear sign that the Orthodox, who hold 23 seats in the 120-member Knesset, would lose the legislative battle.

The signatories also voiced support for the Ne'eman Committee's negotiation process, rather than litigation, which has been pursued by the Reform and Conservative movements.

The High Court of Justice may be hoping for a negotiated solution as well.

On Tuesday, the court deferred hearings on the case of an adopted child converted to Judaism by a Conservative rabbi in Israel.

Lawyers for the state told the court that the government needed time to win approval both for the Ne'eman Committee proposals and for those of a separate committee that dealt specifically with the conversion of adopted children.

Legal sources warned, though, that another case, involving several adult converts,

MIDEAST FOCUS

Mordechai charges Russia again

Israel's defense minister said that in addition to providing Iran with ballistic missile technology, Russia was helping Tehran develop chemical and biological weapons.

Yitzhak Mordechai charged that Iran's weapons project included the development of missiles that could cover the entire Middle East and large parts of Europe. Russia has denied Israeli and American charges that it is aiding the Iranian weapons program.

Palestinians ban demonstrations

The Palestinian police banned pro-Iraqi demonstrations after a number of protests staged recently by Palestinians turned violent and included calls for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to launch missiles at Tel Aviv. The demonstrations violate the Israeli-Palestinian peace accords, according to the Palestinian police chief, Ghazi Al-Jabali.

Aircraft officials want latitude

Officials at the state-owned Israel Aircraft Industries asked the Defense Ministry to release them from a requirement to seek American approval for technology transfers to other countries. The officials said American concerns were hampering their efforts to complete deals with Russia and China.

Palestinian donates kidney

A 45-year-old Israeli woman from northern Israel received a kidney from a 19-year-old Palestinian man who died in an accident, according to news reports.

The woman had waited six years for a transplant.

Israeli raped in Thailand

Three Thai men were arrested after robbing and raping an Israeli tourist who was walking alone in the outskirts of Bangkok, according to news reports. Israeli Embassy officials in the Thai capital said the 23-year-old woman was improving in a local hospital.



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is due to be heard next month and is likely to bring the controversy to a head unless a solution amenable to the three main streams of Judaism is achieved.

Both sides had agreed last year to suspend the legislative and legal efforts while the Ne'eman Committee sought a solution. Last month, the committee recommended that the Orthodox Rabbinate retain sole jurisdiction over conversions in Israel, and that non-Orthodox rabbis be allowed to participate in a conversion training institute to be overseen by the Jewish Agency for Israel.

The Chief Rabbinate Council, in a unanimous decision Monday, pledged to set up more religious courts to handle conversions. But the council pointedly declined to address the crucial part of the proposal — the creation of a joint institute to prepare candidates for conversion.

The Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, said in an interview following the decision that the religious courts were indifferent as to where a candidate had learned about Judaism. They received everyone "with open hearts" and applied the same criteria regardless, he said.

This, like the wording of the council's decision, seemed intended to create a vague impression that the rabbinate did not totally reject the Ne'eman Committee's formula.

But the rabbinate issued a statement vowing to prevent any conversion "or mimic conversion" in Israel that was not carried out under the rabbinate's authority — and demanded that this exclusivity be enshrined in law.

Without referring to the liberal movements explicitly, the statement blasted "those who are trying to shake the foundations of the Jewish religion, causing rifts among the people and causing them to stray from the generations-old heritage."

Such efforts "have already had a disastrous effect and caused confusion among Diaspora Jewry," the statement added. "The sages of Israel have barred any cooperation with them and their methods, and no one should consider establishing joint institutions with them."

This seemed to rule out any hope that the council might in the future accept Ne'eman's recommendation that a joint body run the proposed conversion training institutes.

Some observers felt the choice of language was an attempt to rule out cooperation with the Reform movement while leaving some room for cooperation with the Conservatives. But the two movements displayed unity in their bitter reaction to the rabbinate's position.

"This is a declaration of war on the Jewish people," said Rabbi Uri Regev of the Reform movement and Rabbi Ehud Bandel, who heads the Masorti, or Conservative, movement in Israel.

Netanyahu, in a very different reaction, congratulated the rabbinate on a move "which advances Jewish consensus in the Jewish people and in the State of Israel."

The Ne'eman Committee recommendations, which were formulated in principle some months ago, have been through a roller-coaster of high hopes and bleak prospects.

The highest hopes had centered on the Sephardi chief rabbi, Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, who had appeared to indicate that he favored the recommendations.

Observers predicted that if Bakshi-Doron took the lead, a majority of the Chief Rabbinate Council would endorse the recommendation.

But last month the fervently Orthodox leadership in Israel and in the United States mounted a concerted public campaign designed to bring pressure on the council and its chairmen, Bakshi-Doron and Lau.

The climax of this effort was a thundering proclamation, issued last week, by leading fervently Orthodox rabbis in Israel condemning all dealings with the liberal movements. The proclamation left no doubt that it expected the Chief Rabbinate to reject the Ne'eman recommendations.

Among the signatories — and marking the success of this haredi effort — was Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, spiritual mentor of the Shas Party and universally considered the foremost Sephardi authority in the Orthodox world. Bakshi-Doron, who is seen as Yosef's disciple, would be left dangling alone in the cold wind of Orthodox disapproval — unless he swiftly executed a sharp change of course.

The Chief Rabbinate Council's decision this week reflected this new alignment — and made the likelihood of a negotiated solution to the conversion crisis extremely doubtful. □

JEWISH WORLD

Association to probe artworks

An association representing the 170 largest museums in North America is going to verify whether any of their holdings were once looted by the Nazis, according to the World Jewish Congress.

The American Association of Art Museum Directors also established a task force to establish guidelines for settling any claims filed by people who maintain that artworks were taken from their families.

Holocaust gallery causes stir

Plans to build a Holocaust gallery in the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa were suspended after complaints from veterans groups and others ignited a debate and prompted a series of senatorial subcommittee hearings.

The Royal Canadian Legion and other veterans organizations complained that they weren't consulted about the gallery and claimed that the Holocaust had little to do with the experience of the Canadian military during World War II.

Vatican to open archives

British lawmakers received permission to study portions of the Vatican's wartime archives, said Lord Janner, a member of the House of Lords who has spearheaded British attempts to locate assets of Jews plundered by the Nazis.

He said the archives, which the Vatican previously refused to make public, might shed light on financial dealings the Holy See may have had with the Nazis.

CBS viewers question 'swastika'

The CBS television network received calls from concerned viewers who saw what looked like a swastika at a Japanese temple in Nagano, where the network is broadcasting the Winter Olympic Games.

The symbol, known as a "manji" in Japanese, means "temple" and predates by many centuries the somewhat different Nazi symbol.

Schindler receives pension

Argentina's president approved a government pension for 90-year-old Emilie Schindler.

The widow of the industrialist featured in the film "Schindler's List" will receive \$1,000 per month to ease her economic difficulties. The Schindlers are credited with saving some 1,300 Polish Jews from Nazi death camps by putting them to work in his factories.

Close, but no cigar

A Cuban-born Orthodox Jew failed to win \$1 million when he missed a 3-point shot at the National Basketball Association's All-Star Weekend. Saul Holcman of Queens, N.Y., did receive a car, stereo equipment and \$10,000 as a consolation prize.

Woman in Israel killed while looking for gas mask

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Persian Gulf tensions have claimed their first Israeli fatality.

A 35-year-old mother of seven was killed Monday in Tel Aviv when she fell four floors after trying to retrieve gas masks for her children from an apartment from which her family had been evicted.

The woman, who was four months pregnant, had entered the apartment from a neighbor's balcony and fell when she left the apartment and again climbed onto the balcony.

She was unable to locate the masks.

Her death came amid reports that Iraq sent Israel a message promising not to launch a missile attack on the Jewish state.

The promise reached Israel on Monday via Russian intermediaries, an unnamed official in the Israeli defense establishment was reported as saying.

Iraqi officials, however, publicly denied ever sending the communique.

Meanwhile, Israelis concerned about a possible Iraqi missile attack are flocking to distribution centers to obtain gas masks.

Israel Defense Force officials estimate that they are short some 200,000 gas masks.

Israel's defense minister, Yitzhak Mordechai, said that supplies began arriving from Germany, Holland and Sweden, and that inventories were expected to be full within a matter of days. □

Jewish group urges Clinton to release Jonathan Pollard

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Four weeks after promising to call on President Clinton to free convicted spy Jonathan Pollard, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations has sent a letter to the White House urging some "immediate" action.

Pollard is serving a life sentence for passing classified information on to Israel.

The delayed letter from the Jewish community's umbrella organization came after Pollard's supporters lobbied the Conference of Presidents to follow through on its promise to seek his release.

"We believe that Mr. Pollard has paid his debt after more than 13 years of incarceration," the Conference of Presidents wrote to Clinton, according to a copy of the letter that was read to JTA.

"We respectfully request you to consider this humanitarian plea to allow Mr. Pollard to start anew and rebuild his life."

The letter is the latest effort by American Jews to intensify the campaign for Pollard's release.

The issue was not a top priority on the Jewish agenda for many years.

But recently, many Jewish organizations have advocated for the release of the former Navy intelligence analyst who pleaded guilty in 1986 to stealing secrets for Israel.

The undated letter, which has not been released, was signed by the organization's chairman, Melvin Salberg, and executive vice chairman, Malcolm Hoenlein, according to a source.

Hoenlein said the letter has not been made public because he thought the matter was better handled privately and because he was awaiting the president's response.

The plea cited Pollard's expressions of remorse and the "excessive" punishment compared to other convicted spies.

"As a matter of compassion and justice, we believe immediate action to be warranted," the letter concludes. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Non-Orthodox in U.S. vow to press their case in Israel***By Debra Nussbaum Cohen*

NEW YORK (JTA) — News that Israel's Chief Rabbinate had rejected a key component of a proposed resolution to the conversion crisis came as no shock to representatives of the largest American Jewish movements.

Leaders of the Conservative and Reform movements, which together represent about 85 percent of affiliated American Jews, said that although they may have lost this battle, they are in it for the long term — and expect to win the war for religious pluralism in Israel.

"This battle won't be over very quickly. I don't believe we can even foresee the end of it," said Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, which has about 800 congregations and 1.5 million members.

"Change requires patience and persistence. My biggest fear is that people will throw up their hands and walk away from supporting Israel" out of frustration, he said.

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, warned that "this is only the beginning" of the religious pluralism fight.

"Let's get the conversion issue behind us one way or another and get on to what's next. We want to advance the larger cause — a more tolerant society and the equality of all the religious streams" in Israel, he said.

"We also expect to bring about the dispossession of the Orthodox from their monopoly over religious life."

This week's look to the future came after Israel's Chief Rabbinate ruled out working with non-Orthodox parties to create a joint conversion institute.

Such an institute was a key component of the compromise on conversion presented by the Ne'eman Committee, which included Orthodox, Conservative and Reform representatives and had worked for seven months to reach an agreement acceptable to all.

That proposal called for an Orthodox-run religious court to finalize all conversions in Israel. But it also gave the Reform and Conservative movements a role in a joint conversion institute.

The Chief Rabbinate Council, which debated the matter Monday, restricted its discussion — and endorsement — to the Ne'eman Committee's recommendation that conversions be conducted in Israel according to halachah, Jewish religious law.

Just the same, it appeared that the Chief Rabbinate Council would not accept the creation of the conversion institute.

In a statement released after its meeting, the council lashed out at those "who are trying to shake the foundations of the Jewish religion, causing rifts among the people and causing them to stray from the generations-old heritage."

The statement did not actually name the Reform and Conservative movements, but it seemed clear they were the intended targets.

Such efforts "have already had a disastrous effect and caused confusion among Diaspora Jewry," the statement added. "The sages of Israel have barred any cooperation with them and their methods, and no one should consider establishing joint institutions with them."

The Chief Rabbinate's reaction was decried as harmful by leaders of the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist move-

ments in the United States. In Israel, representatives of the Reform and Conservative movements said that with this ruling, the rabbinical council had "declared war on the Reform and Conservative movements."

For his part, Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, president of the Orthodox Union, welcomed the rabbinate's position as "courageous."

Orthodox groups in the United States have lobbied hard in Israel not to change the status quo, which grants Orthodox control over conversions and other matters of personal status, such as marriage and conversion. Agudath Israel of America called the statement mentioning war "incendiary" and "slandorous."

"The only war proponents of classical Judaism are fighting is a defensive war — against Jewish assimilation and intermarriage on behalf of the Jewish people," said Rabbi Moshe Sherer, president of Agudath Israel.

Meanwhile, few leaders of the major American movements believe that the technical solution — offered by Israel's Sephardi chief rabbi, Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, and the Jewish Agency for Israel's chairman, Avraham Burg, just before the Ne'eman Committee's proposals were released in late January — is likely to work.

This solution, which would enable the Israeli government to register as Jewish — with a special marking — any convert who came through any of the movements, would be a short-term measure that could potentially discriminate against converts, said observers, and doesn't have any significant political support in Israel.

Immediate plans for both the Reform and Conservative movements focus on reviving court cases that they have held in abeyance as the Ne'eman Committee worked out a compromise.

Both movements said they would reactivate their cases this month that involve the recognition of their converts.

They expect the courts to move quickly — and to rule in their favor — to require the government to recognize their rabbis' conversions performed in Israel and to require the Interior Ministry to register them as Jews.

Because the Chief Rabbinate has rejected any notion of compromise with the non-Orthodox movements, the Reform movement now feels "free to resume our activities on legal and political fronts," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, executive vice president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which has over 850 member congregations with about 1.5 million members.

Yoffie said that in addition to conversion issues, his movement would pursue matters related to religious pluralism, including its quest to allow men and women to pray together at the Western Wall and to allow non-Orthodox Jews to sit on local religious councils.

"We'll go back now and prioritize but expect to proceed very aggressively on all fronts," he said.

Hirsch, of ARZA, said that pressing for the right of liberal rabbis to officiate at weddings in Israel will also be high on the agenda.

Though on the surface, the Ne'eman Committee's attempts to work out the tension between the Orthodox — who are working hard to protect the status quo and maintain one standard of Jewish practice in Israel — and the liberal movements, who are yearning to be enfranchised in the Jewish state, went nowhere, much good did come of it, some said.

"Many significant Orthodox voices came to the fore in support of Conservative and Reform rights in Israel," Hirsch said, adding that the support among Israeli and American Jews for their cause has been a "huge victory."

"They will prove to be an important asset as days and weeks go on." □