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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Vatican document criticized

Jewish leaders are disappointed by a Vatican document on the role of the church during the Holocaust.

"We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah" is an "apologia full of rationalization for Pope Pius XII and the church. It takes very little moral and historical responsibility" for the church's traditional teaching of contempt for Jews, the Anti-Defamation League said in a statement.

A Vatican official described the document as an act of repentance for members of the Catholic Church who failed to do enough to save Jews from the Holocaust. [Page 1]

U.N. to consider resolution

The United Nations General Assembly is slated to meet in emergency session Tuesday to discuss a resolution being circulated by Palestinian officials.

The resolution includes the allegation that recent Israeli actions are in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which calls for the protection of civilians in time of war.

Poll: U.S. Jews back Netanyahu

A majority of American Jews support Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's handling of the peace process and have decreasing confidence in Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, according to the American Jewish Committee's sixth annual public opinion survey of American Jews.

The survey indicates that 69 percent of the respondents favor increased American pressure on Arafat to advance the peace process, with 52 percent opposing similar pressure on Netanyahu. The telephone survey of 1,000 self-identified Jews has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent.

Palestinian official warns settlers

The Palestinian security chief in the West Bank warned Jewish settlers that if they tried to enter self-rule areas in Hebron and attack Arabs, they would not "make it out alive." Jibril Rajoub's remark came after a group of Jewish settlers entered the Palestinian-ruled section of Hebron last Friday and threw rocks at Palestinian buildings and cars. The settlers said their action came after Palestinians fired from the self-rule area on Jewish enclaves in Hebron. [Page 3]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Response to Vatican paper: Open the Holocaust archives

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — A long-awaited Vatican document addressing its role in the Holocaust is being greeted with nearly universal dismay and anger by Jewish experts on Catholic-Jewish relations.

And it is prompting a renewed call from national Jewish organizations for the Vatican to open its Holocaust-era archives so that the truth of the church's role during the attempted extermination of the Jews can once and for all be examined by historians.

Delegations of Jews slated to meet with the pope in coming days and weeks intend to voice that demand directly to the pontiff.

The document, a 14-page paper titled "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," was issued at the Vatican on Monday by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. The document, which took 11 years to produce, acknowledges that individual Catholics did things that were wrong or even sinful in their support of anti-Semitism and Nazi persecution of Jews, and it repents for this — using the Hebrew word "teshuvah."

But it absolves the church as such from complicity in the Holocaust.

It even warmly praises the controversial wartime Pope Pius XII — who has long been accused by scholars and other observers of remaining silent in the face of Nazi genocide — for saving hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives "personally or through his representatives."

Oddly, say the experts, the Vatican document fails to do what the current pope, John Paul II, himself has done in less formal documents and speeches — that is, take direct responsibility for the church's failure to try to ameliorate the attempted genocide of the Jewish people.

Three key European bishops' conferences — the Polish, French and, most recently, the German — have acknowledged more culpability than the Vatican statement does.

Those involved in interfaith work are struggling to figure out why the church didn't go as far as the Jews had hoped — or expected.

"After so many years of dialogue, why at this point have they come out with this very weak document?" asked Rabbi Leon Klenicki, director of interfaith affairs at the Anti-Defamation League, who has been involved in Catholic-Jewish relations for more than three decades. Klenicki called the paper "a real insult" and "a pretext for an apology for Pius XII."

Rabbi Mark Winer, who was in Rome this week as part of a delegation of rabbis and Catholic bishops traveling together to Israel and the Vatican, called the document "a well-crafted speedboat which is so encrusted with barnacles it doesn't get very far."

Winer, a White Plains, N.Y., rabbi who is president of the National Council of Synagogues, an umbrella organization of Reform and Conservative congregations, said that although the right terminology is included in the document, "the 'remembrance' is incomplete, the 'repentance' is lacking and the 'resolve' for the future is pretty weak-kneed."

"In ascribing sinfulness to individual Catholics, it sidesteps responsibility on the part of the church," said Winer, who is slated to become senior rabbi of London's largest Reform synagogue. "It never says that Catholic teaching was central to the teaching of contempt about the Jewish people."

The document was signed by Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Vatican

MIDEAST FOCUS

Crash victims found

Israeli army officials confirmed that they had recovered the bodies of an air force brigadier general and another officer who were reported missing after their helicopter crashed during a training exercise off the coast of central Israel.

The two were identified as Brig. Gen. Tal Shmuel Eldar, 45, of Kibbutz Palmachim, and Lt. Ilan Gur, 20, from Kibbutz Malkiya.

Hamas official shrugs off threat

A Hamas political leader living in Jordan said he was not intimidated by Israeli threats to assassinate him.

Israeli Cabinet Minister Ariel Sharon said over the weekend that he had told Jordan's King Hussein that Israel would still seek to "liquidate" Khaled Mashaal.

Mashaal was the target of a failed assassination attempt by Mossad agents last September.

Sharon made the comment to Hussein when seeking the release of the Mossad agents captured by Jordanian officials in the wake of the botched operation.

Hezbollah forms new unit

A new brigade formed by the Shi'ite Hezbollah movement that includes Lebanese men of all religions launched its first attack on Israeli troops in southern Lebanon.

The attack, which pro-Israel sources said caused no casualties, was timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the first Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when 7,000 troops swept through southern Lebanon to the Litani River.

Israel hit by sandstorm

A winter sandstorm carried by strong winds from North Africa covered much of Israel.

The storm reached as far north as Cyprus.

Commission, and the Revs. Pierre Duprey and Remi Hoeckman, who serve as its vice president and secretary, respectively. Cassidy told a news conference announcing the document that it was "more than an apology."

"We feel that we have to repent," he said, "not only for what we may have done individually but also for those members of our church who failed in this regard."

The Vatican Commission took up the task of creating this document at Pope John Paul II's request in 1987 — a year after the pope had a historic meeting with Rome Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff in Rome's central synagogue.

It is the third formal document prepared by the commission, following the landmark Nostra Aetate declaration of 1965, which marked the first official gesture of reconciliation by the church to Jews.

The document begins by calling "the catastrophe that befell the Jewish people" the "worst suffering of all."

Then it opens a survey of Christian-Jewish relations by stating that "disputes between the early church and the Jewish leaders and people who, in their devotion to the Law, on occasion violently opposed the preachers of the Gospel and the first Christians."

Saying that Jews persecuted Christians in the first century of the common era is a statement straight out of things Christians said of Jews "in the Middle Ages," Klenicki said. "There were confrontations, fights in the synagogue between early Christians and Jews, but never persecution. Did the Jews establish concentration camps or gas chambers for Christians? How can they put this at the same level?"

The Vatican statement takes pains to separate anti-Judaism from anti-Semitism, suggesting that only the Nazis were guilty of anti-Semitism.

It also stops far short of taking responsibility as a religious institution for promulgating the tenets of anti-Judaism, in particular the teaching that the Jews killed Jesus. The widely accepted view is that this central Christian teaching provided the theological foundation for the anti-Semitism of the Nazi years that culminated in the murder of 6 million Jews.

Instead, the Vatican's document distances Christianity from the Holocaust. "The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime," it says.

Ultimately, several experts in interreligious affairs said, the only way to resolve the concerns over this statement will be to open the Vatican archives to outside scrutiny.

"Then historians and researchers will be able to read all the correspondence of Vatican ambassadors in different cities, the answers Pius XII sent to the nuncios, what he told them to do or not to do," said Klenicki.

Rabbi A. James Rudin, the American Jewish Committee's director of interreligious affairs, agreed, suggesting that the Vatican might now accede to Jewish demands to open the archives. He said that, despite its flaws, the Vatican's document represented an important step forward since it put the official stamp of the Holy See on a number of important tenets.

"One of its important aspects is that it doesn't give credence to Holocaust deniers who are growing in number and will grow in number as the actual survivors of the Holocaust die a natural death," said Rudin, who also was in Rome this week on the interfaith mission.

"It is a permanent statement that will stand up and be used hopefully as a teaching document" in all Catholic institutions "from now into the future."

The document's inconsistencies, many say, clearly reflect deep divisions within the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

"I think that there's a deep division" between "those Catholics who find the image of a church which acknowledges its sins of the past appealing, and those who find it very threatening," Winer said.

"I think some see acknowledgment of guilt for the Shoah as a Pandora's box."

The document itself appeared to anticipate Jewish disappointment and ask Jews for understanding. Stressing that it was addressed to Roman Catholics throughout the world, not just in Europe, it invited "all Christians to join us in meditation on the catastrophe which befell the Jewish people, and on the moral imperative to ensure that never again will selfishness and hatred grow to the point of sowing such suffering and death."

And "most especially" it called on "our Jewish friends" to "hear us with open hearts." □

(JTA correspondent Ruth Gruber in Rome contributed to this report.)



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JEWISH WORLD

Insurer to open records

An Italian insurer agreed to open its records to American investigators probing allegations that European insurance companies refused to make good on unpaid policies from the Holocaust era.

Assicurazioni Generali's decision to provide access to its records was confirmed by the insurance commissioner of Washington state. Deborah Senn heads a U.S. task force that is meeting in Salt Lake City to investigate allegations that European insurance firms blocked payments to the families of death camp victims.

King addresses Conference

Jordan's King Hussein told members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations that he was disappointed with the slow pace of the peace process, but declined to pin blame on Israel or the Palestinian Authority.

Hussein, who is slated to meet with President Clinton on Thursday, also told the gathering of Jewish leaders in New York that he hoped to see a change in Iraq's leadership.

France to return artwork

France said it was returning an artwork looted by the Nazis to the heirs of a Jewish art collector who fled Paris during the war.

The drawing by 19th-century artist Francois-Marius Granet is the second artwork to be returned by France in recent months to the heirs of Alphonse Kann.

National Front shows strength

The far-right National Front won 15.5 percent of the vote in France's regional elections — the anti-immigrant party's best electoral showing. Political analysts said the results reflect increasing voter alienation from the country's mainstream parties.

Poles protest cross' removal

Hundreds of Poles protested plans to remove a 26-foot tall wooden cross from a site near the Auschwitz death camp. The Polish government said it was seeking a compromise with Jewish groups that have criticized the presence of a Christian symbol at the site of so much Jewish suffering.

Belarus accredits Jewish group

Belarus granted a Jewish human rights group the right to operate in the former Soviet republic.

Officials with the Belarussian-American Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law, which is affiliated with the Washington-based Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, said they were surprised that their application was accepted only two weeks after being submitted.

Netanyahu appeals for calm amid violent clashes in Hebron

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Tensions are again escalating in the West Bank town of Hebron.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week called on Hebron's settler community to "abide by the law" after settlers there claimed responsibility for smashing the windows of Arab-owned cars in the volatile West Bank town.

Sunday's incident came after two days of violence between Hebron's Jewish and Arab populations.

The violence was sparked by the shooting deaths last week of three Palestinian workers at an Israeli checkpoint in the West Bank.

Palestinians protested the shootings during a series of violent confrontations with Israeli troops across the West Bank in recent days, with the latest clash reported Sunday near Ramallah.

Scores of Palestinians and several Israeli soldiers were wounded in the clashes following the March 10 shootings at the military roadblock.

Meanwhile, Israeli forces beefed up security in urban centers and on the highways after two weekend bomb blasts that police blamed on Arab terrorists.

A 53-year-old Israeli man lost his hands and was blinded in one eye when a suspicious-looking package he was inspecting blew up in a park near Afula's central bus station.

Five Palestinians were lightly wounded by a bomb blast that occurred in eastern Jerusalem.

Palestinian Authority officials said the explosion was the work of West Bank settlers.

In the incident that set off the violent demonstrations, Israeli soldiers manning the roadblock opened fire on the van after it veered toward them, causing light injuries to one soldier.

The troops later said they believed the van's driver was deliberately trying to run them over.

This account was denied by Palestinian officials and by a passenger in the van, who said the driver had sped up in an attempt to bypass a line of waiting cars at the roadblock.

Senior Israeli army officials later admitted this was probably true.

The unrest that ensued throughout the West Bank reached its highest pitch in Hebron.

The windshields of more than 20 Palestinian-owned cars were smashed Sunday by a group of settlers calling themselves the Committee for the Defense of the Roads.

Last Friday, a group of Jewish settlers entered the Palestinian-ruled part of Hebron and began throwing rocks at buildings and cars.

The settlers said they were protesting what they described as the Israeli army's failure to protect them from Palestinians who were firing into the town's Jewish enclaves.

The demonstration by the settlers touched off Palestinian protests. Israeli troops fired rubber bullets to disperse the crowds, wounding at least 14 Palestinians, including eight journalists.

Police summoned 15 Jewish settlers Sunday in connection with last Friday's demonstration.

The demonstration sparked the ire of the Palestinian security chief in the West Bank.

Jibril Rajoub warned West Bank settlers Monday that if they again tried to enter the Palestinian self-rule areas in Hebron and attack Arabs, they would not "make it out alive."

This in turn provoked criticism from Netanyahu.

"These are grave statements, which could cause an escalation at a time when we all need to work to calm the situation," he said. □

2 Jews suing Switzerland for World War II restitution

By Fredy Rom

ZURICH (JTA) — Two Jewish men are bringing separate suits against Switzerland linked to the country's policy toward Jewish refugees during World War II.

Charles Sonabend, whose parents were murdered in Auschwitz after Swiss authorities deported them in 1942, is bringing his compensation claim before Switzerland's Supreme Court. The move comes after the Swiss Cabinet recently rejected his claim.

Sonabend, a 67-year-old resident of London, is seeking \$68,000 in damages — the largest amount possible under Swiss regulations — under a new law that allows individuals to make liability claims against public officials.

The law leaves the decision to the Cabinet, but allows for an appeal to Switzerland's Supreme Court.

Sonabend was 11 years old when he and his parents entered Switzerland in 1942 from Belgium. Two days later, his parents were arrested and deported to Nazi-occupied France. They were then sent to Auschwitz.

His suit, which was first filed last year, focused renewed attention on the refugee policy of Switzerland, which expelled more than 30,000 Jews during the war. Most of these Jews died.

At the same time, however, Switzerland provided haven to some 25,000 Jewish refugees, who survived the war together with Switzerland's 20,000 Jewish citizens.

A second suit is meanwhile being brought by a 71-year-old Jewish man living in Australia. Joseph Sprung is seeking compensation for having twice been turned away at the Swiss border.

The first time, according to Sprung, Swiss border guards sent him back to occupied France, but on the second occasion he and three others fleeing with him were handed over to the Germans.

In that second attempt to cross the Swiss border, Sprung and his companions had false papers to mask their religion.

But when they arrived in Switzerland, they showed their real papers, thinking they would get asylum more easily as Jews.

Handed over to the Germans, they produced their false papers to avoid detection as Jews. But German officials knew they were Jewish — because, Sprung charged, the Swiss border guards gave the Germans their real identity papers.

Sprung was sent to Auschwitz, where he managed to survive the war. □

Jews silent as veterans of Latvian Nazi unit gather

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Hundreds of Latvians who fought for Nazi Germany have gathered to commemorate the 55th anniversary of the founding of their unit.

Human rights groups and organizations representing Latvia's Russian minority had unsuccessfully tried to convince the Baltic nation's leadership to ban this week's commemorations — but the Jewish community was quiet. One Jewish activist in the Latvian capital of Riga, who did not want to be identified, said in a telephone interview that the "Jewish community wanted to avoid

open clashes" with ultranationalists and neo-Nazis. The commemoration drew criticism from the Russian Foreign Ministry, which said in a statement that the pro-Nazi unit was responsible for the deaths of "thousands of Jews, Russians and Belarussians."

The Latvian government said it would not participate in the events, but several high-ranking officials, including the deputy speaker of the Latvian Parliament, several legislators and the commander in chief of the Latvian armed forces, were among those who attended the rally.

And Latvia's foreign minister, Valdis Birkavcs, said, "Latvian residents are free to organize and participate in the events."

March 16, known in Latvia as Legion Day, is not a state holiday.

But it is widely celebrated by veterans of the Nazi-allied unit to commemorate their fellow soldiers killed during World War II. Many Latvians consider the Legion heroic because its soldiers fought the Soviet forces that overran the country at the beginning of the war.

Most experts say it is unlikely that the Latvian SS Legion participated in the genocide because by the time the unit was created in spring of 1943, the majority of Latvian Jews had already been killed. But it is probable that many of those who joined the legion had already participated in killing Jews, they say. □

Belarus may supply arms to nations hostile to Israel

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Belarus might become an arms supplier to the Middle East.

The president of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, recently wrapped up a trip to Tehran and Damascus during which he said he welcomed increased cooperation between the former Soviet republic and the two countries.

Some experts worry that Belarus, which has been increasingly ruled with an iron fist since Lukashenko took office in the summer of 1994, might become a conduit for Russian and Ukrainian arms technologies to the Middle East.

Indeed, in Damascus, where Lukashenko and Syrian President Hafez Assad signed an agreement on military and technical cooperation, the Belarusian leader said his country could provide equipment to substitute for the arms previously supplied to Syria by the Soviet Union — and, in more recent years, Russia.

In Tehran, Lukashenko held talks with Iranian President Mohammed Khatami and the Islamic republic's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Khatami called for the boosting of economic, political and scientific ties between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Russia said last week it would continue to help build a nuclear power plant in Iran despite opposition from the United States.

The news came as Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin was holding talks with U.S. Vice President Al Gore in Washington on issues that included the transfer of Russian nuclear technology to Iran.

The United States and Israel have been pressing Russia to drop the project to develop the Bushehr nuclear power plant, suggesting that Iran may be using the technologies involved in the project to help develop nuclear weapons. □