



# Daily News Bulletin

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81<sup>st</sup> Year

## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### **Albright presses Jewish leaders**

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright urged American Jewish leaders to help her convince Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accept an American proposal for an Israeli redeployment in the West Bank.

In a conference call last Friday to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Albright also warned that the United States might withdraw from the peace process unless progress is made soon. [Page 3]

### **Ross continues shuttle**

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross held a series of weekend meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders in an effort to get the two sides to advance the peace process.

The inconclusive talks came amid signs of increasing American frustration with the stalemated talks.

Ross was slated to visit Egypt on Monday before returning for additional talks in Israel. [Page 3]

### **Gun-suppliers cleared of charges**

A federal jury in New York ruled that gun suppliers are not liable in a 1994 shooting incident that left one yeshiva student dead and another gravely wounded.

The parents of Aaron Halberstam, who died in the attack, and Nachum Sosonkin, who lives with a bullet in his head, filed the suit claiming that the manufacturers bore some responsibility for the shooting.

Fourteen yeshiva students were in a van when it was riddled with bullets by a Muslim cab driver. Prosecutors contend that Rashid Baz fired at the students in retaliation for the murder of Muslim worshippers in Hebron several days earlier.

### **Rabbi to seek new group**

The president of the New York Board of Rabbis plans to form a national umbrella organization involving rabbis from Judaism's four religious streams.

Rabbi Marc Schneier, who is slated to announce the initiative when he is formally installed as the board's president Monday, says he plans to invite rabbis from some 25 to 30 American cities to discuss the plan in May.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

### **Swiss bank bid to settle claims leaves thorny issues unresolved**

*By Daniel Kurtzman*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — An agreement by Switzerland's three biggest banks to negotiate a global settlement of Holocaust-era claims marks a partial breakthrough, but it leaves many thorny issues unresolved.

The settlement, to be worked out in coming months, would involve a compensation fund for Holocaust survivors to cover all victims' assets that ended up in Swiss banks, and possibly other assets as well.

But in the days since a possible settlement was announced last week, it has become clear that the devil will be in the details of the agreement to be reached — and there are indications that Switzerland and Jewish groups are poised for a major conflict.

The agreement to negotiate a settlement was reached after months of intensive bargaining involving the World Jewish Congress, lawyers who have filed a multibillion-dollar class-action lawsuit on behalf of Holocaust victims and their heirs, and representatives of Credit Suisse, Swiss Bank Corp. and Union Bank of Switzerland. The bargaining was conducted under the aegis of Stuart Eizenstat, U.S. undersecretary of state for economic affairs.

At issue are claims for dormant bank accounts, Nazi-looted gold that was purchased by the Swiss central bank, Swiss companies that benefitted from slave labor during World War II and stolen artworks that wound up in Switzerland. But it remains unclear whether the Swiss banks will negotiate regarding anything except the dormant accounts.

An agreement to seek a settlement finally came in a dramatic turnabout March 26, just minutes before U.S. public finance officials meeting in New York were set to recommend a boycott of Swiss banks after the March 31 expiration of a moratorium on such punitive measures.

A first round of talks regarding a possible settlement is scheduled to take place April 24.

New York City Comptroller Alan Hevesi, who is leading the panel of U.S. public finance officials, said a final deal could be worked out within 90 days of the April session. But in the wake of last week's accord, confusion abounds as to what exactly has been agreed to and how things will progress from here.

In a letter to WJC Secretary-General Israel Singer, the chief executives of the three banks said the talks aim for "an honorable and moral conclusion through a global resolution of Holocaust-era issues directly related to our banks."

But WJC officials see last week's accord as an agreement in principle with the Swiss to negotiate a settlement to all Holocaust-era claims — not just an agreement with the banks on settling bank-related matters.

"There is a whole array of Holocaust-related claims that we want satisfied," said Elan Steinberg, the WJC's executive director. "How the Swiss choose to deal with that internally is for them to decide."

But the banks insisted following last week's meeting that only claims against banks themselves will be on the table.

Last week's agreement provides a framework "to go ahead and discuss details of the bank-related issues. It is not a global settlement in the common sense of the word," a spokesman in Switzerland for Credit Suisse was quoted as saying.

The agreement does not involve the Swiss National Bank or the Swiss government, which told the banks last week that they are on their own in seeking a global settlement

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### Arafat welcomes summit

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat said he welcomed an American proposal for a peace summit in Washington that he and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would attend along with other world leaders.

A Netanyahu adviser said he had not heard about the American proposal.

But David Bar-Illan added that Netanyahu would also attend, given the premier's repeated calls for a Camp David-style summit with Arafat.

### Israeli minister meets Arafat

The Middle East peace process topped the agenda during a meeting in the Gaza Strip between Israeli Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Kahalani later told reporters that he reiterated Israel's firm commitment to peace during the session. But he did not indicate whether Israel would be willing to turn over more than 9 percent of West Bank lands as part of a further redeployment.

### Deadly explosion in West Bank

An explosion in the West Bank town of Ramallah killed at least one person and injured an undetermined number of others, according to Israel's Army Radio.

The blast took place near the office of the individual in charge of all Palestinian security forces in the West Bank, Jibril Rajoub. The cause of the explosion was not immediately known.

### Ex-mayor of Bethlehem dies

The man who was a long-time mayor of Bethlehem died at the age of 80.

Elias Freij, a Greek Orthodox Christian, was mayor of the West Bank town from 1992 until last May. He was known as a confidant of Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.



## Daily News Bulletin

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of Holocaust survivors' claims. Indeed, Swiss politicians have been at pains to state that a settlement would not involve Swiss taxpayers' moneys or the reserves of the Swiss National Bank. Jewish officials in Switzerland, however, are expecting their government to offer compensation on one issue — the treatment of Jewish refugees during the war.

Switzerland expelled more than 30,000 Jews during the war, most of whom 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.

But those refugees were accepted on condition that Jewish groups pay in advance for their support — a sum that is estimated at some \$40 million.

This policy did not extend to the 300,000 non-Jewish refugees who flocked to Switzerland and whose needs were paid for by the wartime Swiss government.

"We are expecting some compensation" from the government regarding the refugee issue, said Thomas Lyssy, vice president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Switzerland.

In the global settlement negotiations, the Swiss government's involvement is likely to be key in arriving at a final settlement of claims that remain beyond the purview of the banks. But a spokeswoman for the Swiss Embassy in Washington said the Swiss government is "not involved and does not intend to be involved" in the settlement talks.

For now, this would appear to leave the banks negotiating with Jewish representatives on a settlement to only one component of the larger series of claims stemming from Switzerland's wartime activities.

"If they only agree to a partial settlement, they have partial closure," Steinberg said.

The question, he added, is "whether the principle" of a global settlement to all claims "will become a reality. If it, does everybody wins. If it doesn't, we lapse back into a crisis."

Other Jewish officials had a sober reaction to last week's developments.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, characterized the agreement as a "small step" forward, saying that remarks from Swiss bank officials backing away from a global settlement shows "this is not as crucial a development as one would have hoped for."

"It also points to the fact that the Swiss government is going to have to take a much more direct role," he added.

In Israel, Avraham Burg, chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, said the agreement would not satisfy Holocaust survivors.

"The principles in the agreement may be acceptable to the U.S. government, but they are contrary to the interests of the survivors," Burg said in a statement.

As for the amount of any settlement, the banks, WJC officials and lawyers representing Holocaust survivors in a \$20 billion class-action lawsuit filed in New York have not reached a consensus, though some sources have said it could range between \$1 billion and \$3 billion.

"I felt it was very important not to put the cart before the horse, not to start throwing dollar amounts out before we agreed to a structure," Eizenstat told reporters.

U.S. and Jewish officials said the fund, to be supervised by the Federal District Court in Brooklyn, N.Y., will pay claims from victims whose bank accounts were lost or who can provide evidence that family assets were looted by the Nazis. □

## German police raid extremists

FRANKFURT (JTA) — German police have confiscated a cache of weapons in raids on the homes of suspected right-wing extremists.

The raids were conducted in connection with investigations related to the desecrations of Jewish cemeteries. Police said one of the pistols they found was used in an attack on a Turkish fast-food restaurant in 1996.

The supplier of the confiscated weapons is a 42-year-old man. Officials say his customers face charges of illegal possession of weapons and explosives as well as violations of the German arms control law.

Several of the weapons owners belong to an organization called Stahlhelm, or Steel Helmet, which participants claim is dedicated to the maintenance of military traditions. Intelligence officials say the group propagates racist and anti-Semitic ideology. □

## JEWISH WORLD

### Crown Heights sentencing set

Sentencing is slated for Tuesday in the case of a man convicted on federal charges related to the fatal stabbing of rabbinical student Yankel Rosenbaum during the 1991 riots in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, N.Y.

Lemrick Nelson could get 20 years in prison if the judge who sentences him believes the stabbing was premeditated murder.

He faces seven years if the judge rules the death was manslaughter.

In a related development, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said he would apologize on the city's behalf for its handling of the racial disturbances at the time.

The move comes as part of a financial settlement community leaders said they were negotiating with the city in their lawsuit stemming from the violence.

### Swastikas scrawled in Philly

Swastikas were scrawled on two Philadelphia Jewish institutions over the weekend.

In addition to a swastika, vandals left a frozen pig's head on the steps outside the Orthodox Congregation B'nai Abraham.

Similar black swastikas were also discovered on a marker outside the historic Mikveh Israel Cemetery that contains graves of Jews from the colonial era.

### Parisians protest National Front

Some 30,000 protesters marched in Paris to condemn the extreme-right National Front.

Leftist parties organized the march in Paris and in other cities after President Jacques Chirac promised last week that he would seek to diminish the political influence of the Front, whose recent electoral strength, he said, could "damage France."

### Jews cancel dinner with Cook

Britain's Jewish community canceled a dinner with British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook to protest his diplomatic dash with Israel during a visit earlier this month.

The London Jewish Chronicle reported that the Board of Jewish Deputies withdrew an invitation to Cook to address its annual fund-raising dinner in May and put the event off until the end of the year.

### Canadian group elects new head

A 39-year-old Toronto lawyer and son of Holocaust survivors was elected president of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

Moshe Ronen, who has served the organization in various positions since 1980, recently completed a three-year term as chairman of the group's Ontario region.

## Albright asks Jewish leaders for help in swaying Netanyahu

WASHINGTON (JTA) — In an extraordinary move, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has asked American Jewish organizational leaders to help push the peace process forward.

In a conference call she initiated last Friday with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Albright urged the leaders to help her convince Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accept an American proposal for an Israeli redeployment in the West Bank.

The proposal, which has been widely reported but never made officially public, reportedly calls on the Jewish state to withdraw from an additional 13 percent of land in the West Bank in exchange for specific Palestinian steps to live up to its security commitments.

In a series of weekend meetings with the Israeli premier and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, U.S. Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross made an inconclusive attempt to pressure the two sides to advance the long-deadlocked peace process.

Ross was slated to go to Egypt on Monday, where he was scheduled to meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Ross was then expected to return to Israel for additional discussions.

During the conference call, Albright told Jewish leaders that the peace process was in trouble and that the Clinton administration might cease its participation if no progress were made soon.

The fact that the secretary of state initiated the 30-minute call underscored the American belief that something needs to be done quickly to save the peace process, which has been stalemated for a year amid Israeli and Palestinian charges and countercharges.

"We need your help in having the Israeli government understand that we believe what we are doing is to benefit Israel's security," Albright told the American Jewish leaders.

The Israeli Cabinet, which has stated it would not approve more than a 9 percent redeployment, recently rejected the U.S. proposal.

Netanyahu said last week he would focus on the quality of the redeployment, rather than the quantity, and offered the possibility of giving the Palestinian Authority control over contiguous areas of the West Bank.

Albright told the Jewish leaders that the American proposal was "just a set of ideas," not a formal plan or proposal, and said the United States would issue "no public threats" to force the two sides to sign on.

In response to Netanyahu's statements that Israel alone would determine its security needs when deciding on the scope of the redeployment, Albright assured the Jewish leaders, "We will not second-guess Israel's security."

But, she added, the United States could not accept non-credible offers from either side.

The State Department issued no transcript of the telephone call, during which Albright spoke for five minutes before fielding questions.

State Department spokesman James Rubin said Sunday that Albright had wanted to express her worries about the peace process to the group.

"Secretary Albright has been making clear, both privately and publicly, that the peace process is in trouble," Rubin said.

During the call, Albright also criticized British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook's decision to visit Har Homa during his recent Middle East trip.

Cook angered Israeli leaders when he met with a Palestinian official at Har Homa, the site of a proposed Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem. Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were suspended a year ago when groundbreaking began for the new neighborhood.

Albright said during the conference call that American officials had attempted to discourage Cook from visiting Har Homa, which she described as a "lousy idea" and a "misstep."

## NEWS ANALYSIS

## Interfaith work advances amid dismay over document

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — The Vatican's recent document on the Holocaust, and a series of meetings it hosted last week with Jewish leaders, show how far relations between the two faiths have come in recent years — but also how far they have to go.

At an audience last week with Pope John Paul II, and in discussions with senior Vatican officials, an international group of Jewish leaders bluntly conveyed their disappointment with "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," saying the recently released document assessing the Roman Catholic Church's behavior during World War II "did not go far enough."

But the same meetings underscored unflagging momentum in Jewish-Catholic contacts and raised for the first time the possibility that Vatican archives from the Holocaust period may eventually be opened to study, as Jews have long demanded.

"There was such honesty and frankness in our meetings that it augurs well for Jewish-Catholic dialogue," Rabbi Marc Schneier, a participant in the talks, said in an interview.

"It's come a long way since 1965," Schneier added, referring to the year when the Vatican issued its landmark *Nostra Aetate* declaration, which repudiated the concept of Jewish guilt for Jesus' death and called for mutual respect and dialogue between Catholics and Jews.

The meetings last week of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee — the first session of the joint group in four years — had been scheduled long before the Vatican issued its document on the Holocaust on March 16.

But the release of the document may have been timed to enable it to become the centerpiece of last week's high-level, formal discussions.

The sessions were described as "intense but not contentious" by B'nai B'rith's international president, Tommy Baer, who also participated in the talks.

Another who took part in the talks, Rabbi A. James Rudin, pointed to the joint communique issued after the discussion as evidence of significant progress on the part of the church.

According to Rudin, who is the interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, the statement calls for:

- the formation of a joint team of Catholic and Jewish scholars to "review the relevant material" in an 11-volume study of the church's behavior during the Holocaust, produced by a Jesuit team of scholars between 1965 and 1981;
- the establishment of a working group to continue dialogue and work toward implementing interfaith education around the world; and
- the transfer of a 23-foot-high cross at the site of the Auschwitz death camp to another location.

Religious symbols at Auschwitz have exacerbated tensions in Catholic-Jewish relations for more than a decade.

The cross, which is the final religious symbol standing at the concentration camp, made news last week.

Cardinal Jozef Glemp of Poland declared, in a provocative March 22 sermon, that the cross "has stood and will stand" at Auschwitz, despite commitments by the Polish government and

other church officials that it would be removed.

"Many have not liked the Eiffel Tower, but that is not a reason to move it or tinker with it," said Glemp, whose hard-line statements on symbols at Auschwitz have often outraged Jewish leaders.

Bishop Stanislaw Gadecki, chairman of the Polish Catholic Church's council for dialogue with Judaism, who attended the Vatican talks last week, made it clear that Poland's Bishops Conference does not support Glemp's unyielding stand.

And the liaison committee's communique said: "We have learned about recent statements concerning the cross at the former Auschwitz convent and wish to express our deep concern and to appeal to all those involved to work together patiently in order to find an acceptable solution for the transfer of the cross to an appropriate alternative site."

"This is a very emotional issue," said Rudin of the AJCommittee.

"That a high-level group of Catholics would make this statement is a very important step."

The working group to implement interfaith education around the world will continue a process that began in 1971, when Jews and Catholics began meeting on an official basis.

But perhaps the most significant potential step forward is the formation of the Catholic-Jewish scholars team to review documents on the church's conduct during the Holocaust.

Jewish leaders have long called on the Vatican to open its archives so that the church's wartime role could be studied more thoroughly. This demand has gained momentum since the release of the Vatican document on the Holocaust.

That document praised the wartime pope, Pius XII, for saving hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives "personally or through his representatives." But Jews and some Holocaust historians have long maintained that Pius XII remained silent in the face of Nazi genocide.

While the creation of the team of scholars falls far short of opening the Holocaust archives, the liaison committee held out the possibility that "if questions still remained," the team would "seek further clarification."

Schneier called the move "quite a significant step."

So while Jewish leaders remain deeply disappointed by the Vatican document on the Holocaust, those involved in Catholic-Jewish dialogue appear to be taking the longer view, saying it should be seen as just one step by the Church toward reconciliation.

In the past 30-odd years, they say, the church — and this pope — has gone a long way from blaming Jews collectively for the death of Jesus.

The Vatican's current tough stance on anti-Semitism is also a development since the 1965 document.

That 1965 document merely "deplored" anti-Semitism. Current church teaching calls it an "offense against God and the Church."

In 1986, Pope John Paul II prayed at Rome's main synagogue, the first ever recorded visit of a pope to a synagogue.

In 1994, Israel and the Vatican established full diplomatic relations.

"With all of its flaws," said Rudin, the document "could never have been issued 20 or 30 years ago." □

(JTA staff writer Peter Ephross in New York contributed to this report.)