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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Netanyahu, Albright to talk again

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrived in Washington carrying new ideas to break the impasse in the Middle East peace process, according to Israeli officials. U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who met with the Israeli premier for 90 minutes, scheduled a second meeting with Netanyahu for Thursday.

At issue in the talks is a U.S. demand that Israel turn over another 13 percent of West Bank land to the Palestinians.

Netanyahu faces stiff opposition to the U.S. plan from members of his government, including Cabinet minister Ariel Sharon, who rejected an invitation to join Netanyahu in his meetings with Albright.

But he also got a letter of support to sign a deal from 10 members of his coalition, including representatives from Shas, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, the Third Way and United Torah Judaism.

Family's aliyah effort interrupted

A black American family that converted to Judaism was detained at Ben-Gurion Airport when they arrived seeking to make aliyah. Sources involved with the case said the family's effort to immigrate to Israel has repeatedly been thwarted. [Page 1]

Food stamp restoration hailed

Jewish activists hailed the U.S. Senate decision to restore the food stamp program to legal immigrants who had been cut off under the 1996 welfare reform law. The organized Jewish community had made the issue the centerpiece of its domestic legislative agenda during the past year. [Page 3]

Palestinian stabbed to death

A Palestinian was stabbed to death in a fervently Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem. Police believe that the stabbing may have been revenge for recent stabbings of Jews in Jerusalem's Old City. [Page 2]

Bomb explodes at Moscow shul

A bomb damaged a synagogue in Moscow. The explosion at the Maryina Roscha shul, a Lubavitch congregation, damaged two of the building's three floors. The attack was the second to hit the synagogue in as many years. [Page 4]

Israeli officials thwart effort of family seeking to immigrate

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — The attempt of a black, Jewish American family to immigrate to Israel was interrupted this week when they were detained at Ben-Gurion Airport and told they had to leave the country.

The family members had converted to Judaism under the auspices of the Conservative movement.

Though it is not yet clear why the Yaisrael family has been singled out, there is conjecture that it has more to do with their race than their Conservative conversion, sources say. The father, Elazar Yaisrael, had immigrated 18 months ago and had become a citizen of the Jewish state.

The rest of the family members — his wife, Sahrah Williams Yaisrael, four of their children and two grandchildren — were told when they arrived at Israel's main airport Monday that since they had begun the process of obtaining Israeli citizenship in Chicago, they were required to complete the process there, according to Israeli Foreign Ministry sources.

But sources familiar with the case said that the Chicago branch of the Israel Aliyah Office was instructed six months ago by the Ministry of Interior in Jerusalem to stop helping the rest of the Yaisrael family make aliyah.

In an unusual step, the Chicago office was instructed to "butt out," said the source, who asked not to be identified.

Conservative Rabbi Andrew Sacks, a representative of the movement in Israel, wrote a letter in August 1996 to the aliyah authorities seeking to expedite the by-then already protracted process of facilitating the family's immigration.

"The reason for the delay [in Elazar Yaisrael's application] was the color of his skin," he wrote. "Any additional delay [in the family's application] will not be tolerated by our rabbinic organization."

The Interior Ministry often questions whether converts to Judaism under the auspices of any movement — from Reform to Orthodox — are truly part of the Jewish community, said the Aliyah Center source. In such cases, applicants furnish references from people in their synagogue or other Jewish groups.

Sahrah Yaisrael did the same, providing a letter from the rabbi of Conservative Congregation Am Echad, which is located in Park Forest, Ill. But the letter did not help.

The attorney hired by the Conservative movement in Israel to represent the family, Dan Evron, did not return several telephone messages left by Jewish Telegraphic Agency reporters.

When the family was first detained this week, Sacks distributed an e-mail titled "S.O.S. — Help Needed," asking recipients to communicate with Israeli consulates about the case.

About a dozen people sent e-mails to consulates around the country, said Yehuda Ya'akov, consul for media and public affairs at the Israeli consulate in New York.

All were forwarded immediately to the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, he said.

"The preliminary examination into this shows it to be much more complicated than first thought," Ya'akov said. "The word is that we have to wait for the further examination of the Ministry of the Interior."

What is known is that when Elazar Yaisrael immigrated to Israel last year, he settled first in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo, and became a member of the Conservative Congregation Sheveth Achim there, said Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israelis attack Palestinian base

Israeli warplanes killed at least 10 people in a raid on a radical Palestinian base in Lebanon. The base is home to a faction that opposes the Oslo peace process.

Palestinians march against Israel

Hundreds of Palestinians marched in the West Bank to protest the founding of the State of Israel. The march, at which some Palestinians burned Israeli, U.S. and British flags, is part of a weeklong series of demonstrations scheduled to culminate Thursday with a mass protest.

Israel to indict lawmaker

Israel's attorney general decided to indict Shas Knesset member Aryeh Deri for allegedly transferring public funds to educational institutions linked to his party.

Deri is already on trial for alleged financial irregularities.

Israel slams E.U. call

Israel criticized a call from the European Union's executive body to exclude Jewish produce exported from the territories, Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem from preferential trade agreements.

A statement from Israel's Foreign Ministry called the move "a blatant attempt to intervene" in Middle Eastern affairs.

Knesset honors transsexual

An Israeli transsexual who won the Eurovision song contest over the weekend was the guest of honor at a Knesset meeting.

One religious legislator walked out as a result of the honor for Dana International.

Some fervently Orthodox leaders have said they would prevent Israel from hosting next year's song competition.



Daily News Bulletin

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of the New York-based Rabbinical Assembly, the umbrella organization of Conservative clergy. Yaisrael has since moved to Beit Shemesh, a town west of Jerusalem.

When he arrived in Israel with his family this week, he was told they would be released from custody only if they promised, in writing, to leave Israel within a month, Sacks said.

Evron, the attorney, intervened to get them released to Yaisrael's home in Beit Shemesh without making such a promise, according to sources close to the case. They are permitted to stay in Israel while the matter is resolved. Elazar and his wife, Sahrah, converted to Judaism a decade ago under the auspices of the Conservative movement at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, where they lived at the time.

After they completed the six-month Introduction to Judaism course required of all proselytes, they were tested for their knowledge of Judaism and their sincerity about converting.

Then Elazar Yaisrael underwent a symbolic circumcision, and both he and his wife submerged in the ritual bath called the mikvah, according to University of Judaism officials who provided copies of conversion documents.

They also converted their three youngest children — Emahnuel, Yahudeth and Rephaela. Their youngest child, Yerusha, was born several months after the family became Jewish.

The couple has legal guardianship of the two grandchildren who arrived with them in Israel.

Officials at the University of Judaism remember the Yaisraels both for their distinctive garb, which reminded some of the way the biblical patriarchs are thought to have dressed, and their devotion to Judaism.

"They were very observant, keeping kosher and dressing religiously," said Rabbi Neal Weinberg, director of the University's conversion court. "They seemed sincere."

Even then they spoke of their desire to immigrate to the Jewish state.

"They were so happy to be making their life in Israel," recalled Lillian Zelcer, administrative secretary for the Los Angeles office of the Rabbinical Assembly, and the "mikvah lady" at the University of Judaism, who got to know them as they pursued their goal of joining the Jewish people. □

Jerusalem Arab murdered while walking in Mea Shearim

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli police believe that one person may be responsible for a series of attacks on Arabs in a religious Jewish neighborhood here.

A 51-year-old Arab was stabbed to death in the Orthodox Mea Shearim neighborhood Wednesday in what was the sixth knife attack on an Arab in four months. None of the other five attacks was fatal.

Police said Khairi Musa Alkam was repeatedly stabbed in the back as he walked through the neighborhood on his way to work.

"There is a link between all these attacks, which are perhaps being carried out by a man seeking to avenge the spate of knife attacks on Jews in eastern Jerusalem," Jerusalem's police chief, Yair Yitzhaki, told Israel Radio.

Earlier this month, a 28-year-old yeshiva student was stabbed to death in Jerusalem's Old City. Another Jewish man was also killed there in February.

Shortly after Wednesday's stabbing, police arrested a man in the area for questioning about the attack. He was later released after police concluded that he was not linked to it.

Yitzhaki also said that it was possible the knifings were being carried out by the same person or persons responsible for firebombing an apartment inhabited by three Israeli Arab women in a neighborhood adjacent to Mea Shearim. The apartment has been attacked three times.

But Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert said the knifings and firebombings were being considered "entirely separate incidents." Olmert condemned Wednesday's murder, saying in a statement that police should "act with the same determination that they employ when responding to attacks on Jews." □

JEWISH WORLD

Judge orders return of paintings

A judge in New York ordered the return to Austria of two paintings that may have been pilfered by the Nazis during World War II. New York officials seized the paintings by Egon Schiele in January after they were displayed as part of an exhibit in New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Religious legislation in peril

The Clinton administration said legislation aimed at fighting religious persecution overseas could interfere with diplomacy and create a backlash against some religious minorities.

John Shattuck, U.S. assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the administration was willing to work with lawmakers in crafting a bill that gives more flexibility to the president in dealing with the issue.

The House of Representatives is scheduled to vote Thursday on a similar measure, which President Clinton has threatened to veto.

Swiss fund to pay \$10 million

Administrators of a Swiss fund set up to benefit Holocaust survivors decided to pay out an additional \$10 million to survivors living in Eastern Europe.

The group has already paid out \$10 million to these survivors. Payments of \$30 million are also expected to be distributed to Holocaust survivors in the United States beginning within the next six months.

Estonia launches commission

Estonia launched a commission to examine "crimes against humanity" committed during the Nazi and Soviet occupations. "The commission's main aim is to find out if there are 'criminals walking free on our streets,'" said Estonia's president. Jewish groups have criticized the Baltic nations — Latvia and Lithuania, in addition to Estonia — for failing to prosecute war criminals.

ORT dedicates school in Odessa

Women's American ORT dedicated a new school and technology center in the Ukrainian city of Odessa.

The New York-based ORT, which supports a network of vocational schools throughout the world, now operates five schools in Russia and Ukraine that teach vocational skills and Jewish studies in addition to a secular curriculum.

Cemeteries desecrated in Europe

Vandals desecrated Jewish cemeteries in Romania and Russia, according to news reports. Both incidents are being investigated.

Jewish activists celebrate Senate vote on food stamps

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The only thing that stands between 250,000 legal immigrants to the United States and food stamps is action by the House of Representatives and President Clinton.

And that action is expected soon.

The U.S. Senate this week approved a sweeping restoration of the nutrition program by an overwhelming 92-8 vote.

Jewish activists hailed the Senate vote as a major victory. The organized Jewish community had made the issue the centerpiece of its domestic legislative agenda over the past year.

The measure would restore the food stamp program to some legal immigrants who had been cut off by the 1996 welfare reform law.

The measure extends from five years to seven the eligibility for food stamps for refugees, including tens of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union. Refugees are afforded benefits similar to those for citizens because they are believed to be fleeing persecution.

The Senate measure also would allow elderly, disabled and young immigrants who were in the United States before the welfare bill became law in 1996 to collect food stamps.

"This is a major victory in a lot of ways," said Diana Aviv, director of the Washington Action Office of the Council of Jewish Federations.

"The cost to our system is substantially less. We can concentrate our resources in other areas," said Aviv, whose office staff erupted in cheers as they watched the final Senate vote tally on television on Tuesday.

Local Jewish communities had said they would not be able to step in to make up the loss to immigrants.

The move leaves virtually all Jews who had faced the loss of benefits now covered by the program.

No definitive figures exist of how many Jews receive food stamps or how many were cut off the roll by the 1996 law. But Aviv said the measure amounts to tens of million of dollars for poor, elderly and frail Jews in need.

The Senate measure excludes about two-thirds of the 935,000 legal immigrants cut off by the welfare law who, for any number of reasons, do not qualify under the legislation.

The \$818 million plan, which is included in a broader piece of legislation on agriculture, comes from administrative savings in the food stamp program.

The move is the latest effort to reinstate some of the benefits lost to legal immigrants as a result of the 1996 welfare reform law.

Last year, Congress reinstated two other benefits, Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income, to some legal immigrants.

The House, which is expected to pass the legislation, plans to vote on it after its Memorial Day recess.

Indicating his support for the measure, President Clinton has threatened to veto the agriculture bill if it does not arrive on his desk with the food stamp restoration. □

Jews, Arabs cooperate on kidneys

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Two Israeli couples, one Jewish and one Arab, took part in cross-kidney transplant operations this week. In the operations, a Jewish man received a kidney from an Israeli Arab. The Jewish man's wife donated a kidney to the Arab man's wife.

The couples were matched up by a computer data base, which doctors said they hoped could be used to speed up the wait for organ donations. Doctors said both couples were recovering well from the surgery, and that the transplanted organs were functioning. The operations were performed at the Rabin Medical Center in Petach Tikva.

First lady's 'Palestine' words: An intended shift in U.S. policy?

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Did Hillary Rodham Clinton send a message of support for a Palestinian state on purpose?

Speaking during a satellite hookup with teen-agers in Switzerland last week, she said "Palestine" or "state" at least seven times.

The White House contends she did not mean to signal a shift in U.S. policy when, in response to a question, the first lady said, "I think it will be in the long-term interests of the Middle East for Palestine to be a state."

But many Israeli officials and Jewish groups remain unconvinced. The statement has set off a fury in Israel and among many American Jews who saw the comment as another way to pressure Israel to make concessions in the peace talks.

Intentional or not, Hillary Clinton's statement would represent a major shift in U.S. policy, which for decades opposed the creation of a Palestinian state. Only after Israel and the Palestinians signed the Oslo accords earlier this decade did the United States say that statehood is a matter for negotiations between the parties.

The question is whether that shift was intended.

The White House said she was not speaking for the United States.

But New York Times columnist William Safire expressed the opinion of many in the Jewish community when he wrote Monday that the White House denial of the first lady's statements "was not merely implausible; it was laughable."

Especially troubling, many Jewish and Israeli officials said, is the first lady's own reputation as a thoughtful and deliberate person. In the fallout from the statement, the organized Jewish community has asked President Clinton to respond personally.

For their part, Palestinians and Arab leaders adopted it as a clear American signal.

"We are very grateful to the first lady regarding the Palestinian state," Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat said in Brussels this week. "This is a very important and clear signal."

As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to seek President Clinton's promise that he would not recognize a threatened unilateral declaration by Arafat of Palestinian statehood if the final-status talks do not conclude by their May 1999 deadline, the first lady's statement hit Israel hard.

The day after the first lady's comments, White House spokesman Mike McCurry continued to distance the Clinton administration from the statement.

"That view expressed personally by the first lady is not the view of the president," said McCurry.

"This was not part of any kind of calculated strategy, and I think it speaks for itself when an immediate clarification is issued by her staff that this is something that she did not say in the context of any formal administration policy-making role," he said.

When pressed on the issue, McCurry said to laughter from the White House press corps, "I expect that she will always continue to express her views, but I doubt that she'll be venturing into the Middle East peace process anytime soon."

A letter from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations to Clinton accepted the administration's disavowal of the first lady's statement. But in a separate statement,

the umbrella group said the president "must make clear to Chairman Arafat that any unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state in violation of the Oslo accords would be rejected by the U.S. and not recognized."

For Israel and some Jewish groups, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's comments on the issue at this week's news conference did not go far enough.

Without mentioning the first lady by name, Albright said any unilateral statements on issues reserved for the final-status peace talks, including the status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, are "courting disaster."

The organizers of the Seeds for Peace conference, at which Hillary Clinton spoke, never thought the first lady would cause an international diplomatic brouhaha.

Long before the first lady's remarks, the 75 teens had grappled with the explosive issue of statehood.

Incensed that their conference T-shirts listed their country of origin as "PNA" for Palestinian National Authority when the other delegates got shirts that read Israel, Jordan, Egypt or the United States, the Palestinian representatives covered PNA with tape and wrote "Palestine."

In a negotiated settlement, all the delegates covered their country's name with their name tags, leaving only a flag showing, according to source involved in the program.

Then the first lady came on satellite television to talk to the delegates.

As the Palestinian children asking questions gave their names and "Palestine" as their country of origin, WorldNet beamed back a caption with their name and "Palestine" for Clinton to see. □

Russian Jewish children narrowly miss bomb blast

NEW YORK (JTA) — A Lubavitch synagogue in Moscow has been severely damaged by a bomb.

No one was injured in the attack, which occurred at 11:15 p.m. Wednesday night, according to a spokesman for Lubavitch World Headquarters in New York.

But the explosion occurred just minutes after some 70 children and their teachers had left the three-story synagogue building after celebrating the Jewish holiday of Lag B'Omer, the spokesman said.

This was not the first attack on the Maryina Roscha synagogue, which also is a center for Lubavitch outreach across the former Soviet Union.

In December 1993, the 70-year-old wooden synagogue was destroyed by an act of arson.

Two months after the reconstructed synagogue was dedicated in July 1996, a bomb blast seriously damaged the building. No one was injured in that attack.

"While miraculously no one was seriously hurt, we cannot continue to rely on miracles," Berel Lazar, the synagogue's rabbi, told Lubavitch officials here.

Lazar called on "municipal and national authorities to find and prosecute those responsible for this clearly anti-Semitic act, in order to reassure the Jews of Moscow and Russia that they are still safe."

No suspects have been apprehended in connection with any of the attacks on the synagogue. □