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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

State Dept. criticizes demolitions

The U.S. State Department criticized Israel for demolishing homes in the West Bank.

"At a time when we are trying to bring the parties together, these house demolitions send the wrong signal," said State Department spokesman James Rubin.

"We renew our call on both sides to refrain from provocative ads which only make the task of reaching agreement more difficult."

Palestinian incitement cited

Israel's U.N. ambassador said in a letter to the secretary-general of the United Nations that the Palestinian Authority has recently increased its statements inciting violence against Israelis.

Referring to several statements made by Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat that he called inflammatory, Dore Gold said in the letter to Kofi Annan, "No nation can pursue peace and simply ignore this sort of incitement."

Jewish activist hit by lightning

A former legislative assistant at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism was struck by lightning Saturday during an outdoor concert in Washington.

Lysa Selfon remained in intensive care Monday, but in considerably improved condition, after being slammed to the ground by a lightning bolt — the victim of a fast-moving storm that swept through the city. [Page 4]

Eizenstat: Talks are troubled

The U.S. undersecretary of state for economic affairs acknowledged difficulties in the negotiations between Swiss banks and Jewish representatives on a settlement of Holocaust-era claims.

But Stuart Eizenstat said he "wouldn't forecast a demise just yet."

Speaking to reporters in Israel, he said a negotiating session was still scheduled for June 23, but it remained to be seen whether it would be productive.

Eizenstat also criticized a Swiss humanitarian fund set up last year to benefit Holocaust survivors.

He said he was disappointed that only \$11 million had been paid out of the nearly \$200 million fund.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Religious pluralism battle moves to claims over wall

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — One of the holiest sites in Judaism has moved front and center in the battle over religious pluralism in Israel.

Orthodox officials boycotted a tour Monday that was aimed at finding a site for egalitarian and women's prayer groups to worship at the Western Wall.

The tour was organized by the Ne'eman Committee, which was created last year by the Israeli government to seek solutions to religious pluralism issues.

After claiming recently that it had worked out a compromise over conversions performed in Israel — a claim disputed by the liberal Jewish streams — the committee began to seek a site at the wall where women's and mixed prayer services could be held without sparking clashes with Orthodox worshippers.

Orthodox Jews maintain that men and women should be separated during worship and that women should not don prayer shawls or lead services.

When representatives from the Chief Rabbinate and the Religious Affairs Ministry refused to participate in Monday's tour of the wall, Rabbi Ehud Bandel, president of the Masorti movement, as Conservative Jews in Israel are called, said the Orthodox officials were proving that they had no wish to engage in dialogue with the liberal streams of Judaism.

One day before the tour, a delegation of U.S. Reform movement leaders held a mixed prayer service at the wall plaza under police protection.

It was the second time in a week that the delegation, which included 170 lay leaders and rabbis, prayed near the wall.

Unlike times past, the mixed prayer services did not provoke violent confrontations with fervently Orthodox Jews.

In both instances, the worshippers, surrounded by police barricades and about 20 police officers, were closer to the parking lot than to the wall itself.

The Religious Affairs Ministry canceled its participation in Monday's tour of the wall because of the previous day's Reform prayer service. The Chief Rabbinate, which had also criticized the mixed service, soon joined the boycott.

Even before the Ne'eman Committee began its work, a group called Women of the Wall — made up of modern Orthodox, Conservative and Reform women — have been petitioning Israel's Supreme Court for several years to win the right to pray at the wall.

The Women of the Wall, who have been coming to the holy site each month for the past nine years, have been forced to retreat to other areas of Jerusalem's Old City to read from the Torah in order to be safe from the taunts of the haredi, or fervently Orthodox, community, which considers their practices sacrilegious.

Betsy Cohen-Kallus, a member of Women of the Wall, was angry when she saw police protecting the American Reform leaders when they prayed Sunday at the wall.

"The government has said it would be unable to protect us if we pray at the Kotel, and this is obviously a lie," said Cohen-Kallus.

"We are demanding the right to pray inside the women's section at the Western Wall's prayer plaza, wearing tallitot, singing out loud and reading from the Torah," said Cohen-Kallus.

"The Supreme Court has made it clear that a solution must be found for us within the prayer plaza at the Western Wall."

The court empowered the committee headed by Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman

MIDEAST FOCUS

Netanyahu confronts Shahak

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office sought to clarify a reported confrontation between Netanyahu and the army's chief of staff during Sunday's Cabinet meeting.

Netanyahu's office said the premier cut off a routine briefing by Lt. Gen. Amnon Shahak in order to prevent crucial details about negotiations with the Palestinians from being leaked to the media. Opposition members charged that Netanyahu had halted Shahak's briefing in order to prevent the ministers from hearing about the dead end the negotiations have reached.

Premier to attend fund raiser

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to attend a fund raiser in Jerusalem sponsored by two groups that have recently generated controversy with their actions to expand Jewish settlement in eastern Jerusalem.

Other Cabinet ministers are also expected to attend the June 29 event, which is sponsored jointly by Ateret Cohanim and the Beit Orot Yeshiva. Meanwhile, a leftist member of Knesset and a peace group asked Israel's High Court of Justice to reopen an investigation into the practices of Ateret Cohanim and other settler groups.

El Al accepts female candidate

Israel's national airline admitted the first woman ever to its pilots course.

Orit Katzir, who petitioned the High Court of Justice to change El Al's policy, is slated to begin her training July 12.

Katzir already has a pilots license in the United States. Katzir argued that El Al's rejection of her initial application in 1993 represented sexual discrimination because, at the time, no women were accepted into the Israeli air force pilots course. Since then, that course has started to accept women.



Daily News Bulletin

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to find that solution. Because the issue of Reform and Conservative worship at the wall has also entered the debate, the committee is also seeking a site that would be suitable for mixed services.

One site discussed during Monday's tour was the southern wall, which is also a remnant of the outer wall that surrounded the Temple. The committee also considered an area adjacent to the Western Wall prayer plaza near a site known as Robinson's Arch, near the corner of the western and southern walls, where the Antiquities Authority has carried out extensive archaeological excavations.

Cohen-Kallus said neither site would be acceptable to the Women of the Wall because the Supreme Court specifically said the group should be entitled to pray at the prayer plaza.

"We don't need to be told to go pray somewhere else because that is what we already do," she said.

Bandel of the Conservative movement said the liberal movements would not be satisfied at the southern wall.

"It is the Western Wall which has been the symbol of the Temple's destruction and our longing for Jerusalem over the past 2,000 years," he said.

The liberal movements would prefer being allocated a prayer space within the main prayer plaza, Bandel said. But he added that his movement would "not automatically reject" the Robinson's Arch area if the Ne'eman Committee and Religious Affairs Ministry offered the site. □

Court convicts assassin's friend for not reporting plan to kill Rabin

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A friend of Yitzhak Rabin's assassin has been convicted of knowing his plans in advance but failing to warn police.

A Tel Aviv court ruled Sunday that there were inconsistencies in the testimony of Margalit Har-Shefi, 22, who had maintained she thought Yigal Amir was merely boasting of plans to assassinate Rabin.

The offense — knowing about but failing to prevent a crime — carries a maximum sentence of two years. Sentencing is scheduled for Sept. 15.

Amir, an ultranationalist university student opposed to the peace process with the Palestinians, assassinated Rabin at the end of a Nov. 4, 1995, peace rally in Tel Aviv.

Amir, who stated that he wanted to prevent Rabin from ceding land to the Palestinians, is serving a life sentence for the assassination.

Amir's brother, Hagai, and a friend, Dror Adani, were convicted in a separate conspiracy trial of plotting to kill Rabin.

Hagai Amir was sentenced to 12 years in prison; Adani was sentenced to seven.

Har-Shefi, a resident of the West Bank settlement of Beit El, knew Amir from their days at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan and from rallies they both attended to oppose the peace process. Har-Shefi had testified that she never took Amir's invective against the prime minister seriously and did not think he would act on it.

But the court ruled that she and Amir shared a common political activism, that she knew of two previous attempts Amir made on Rabin's life and that she was aware of Amir's interest in forming an underground group to attack Palestinians.

During the reading of the verdict, Har-Shefi remained expressionless.

Her uncle, Knesset member Binyamin Alon of the far-right Moledet Party, later described the ruling as ridiculous.

"This young girl is found guilty of failing to prevent the assassination of the prime minister, while no steps are taken against the General Security Service, which failed in its explicit responsibility of failing to prevent such a thing from happening," Alon told Israel Radio. "I think all this will come out in the appeal."

Meanwhile, Rabin's widow, Leah, termed the ruling a "ray of light in the darkness surrounding us."

She said the trial had thrown a spotlight on the climate of right-wing incitement that had preceded her husband's murder. □

JEWISH WORLD

Clinton signs Holocaust bill

President Clinton signed into law a bill that creates a presidential commission to examine Holocaust victims' assets in the United States.

Presidential approval had been expected after the House and Senate recently passed the measure.

Far-right party scores gains

A far-right party in Australia earned 25 percent of the vote in a state election.

The One Nation Party, which ran on an anti-immigrant and anti-welfare platform, will apparently earn 12 of the 89 seats in the Queensland legislature.

Jewish leader criticizes Chirac

The head of France's Jewish community criticized President Jacques Chirac for saying during a trip to Lebanon last month that Israel must withdraw from Lebanon and the Golan Heights without any conditions.

Henri Hajdenberg said the remarks showed that France had proven itself to be too pro-Arab to act as a mediator in the Middle East peace process.

Army head to avoid reunion

Estonia's army chief announced that he would not attend an upcoming reunion of his country's World War II veterans.

A spokesman said the decision was influenced by the international outcry that occurred after a similar event was held in Latvia in March. Estonia's foreign minister and prime minister have already announced that they would not attend the gathering, which is scheduled for July.

Russian neo-Nazi sentenced

A neo-Nazi leader in the Russian city of Orel was sentenced to two years in prison for inciting hatred toward Jews and people from the Caucasus Mountains area.

The city's small Jewish community is outraged because the judge in the case against Igor Semyonov refused to consider a 1993 leaflet in which the defendant termed Judaism a "misanthropic religion."

In his verdict, the judge said Semyonov's judgment of Judaism was not reprehensible because the Torah and the Talmud do indeed contain misanthropic dogmas.

Jewish museum opens in Italy

A new Jewish museum opened in the Italian town of Merano.

During the ceremony, Bishop Wilhelm Egger apologized for Catholic failings to fight anti-Semitism in the past. Only a few dozen Jews currently live in the northern Italian spa town.

JNF wants to settle accounts of Holocaust-era land purchases

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Swiss banks and Italian insurance companies are trying to settle past accounts, and now the Jewish National Fund wants to do the same.

The JNF, best known for its blue charity boxes and making Israel's deserts bloom, recently published a list of more than 1,800 people who, more than five decades ago, purchased some 3,400 acres of land in what are now the central and northern regions of Israel. After the Jewish state was born in 1948, and these landowners didn't show up to claim their property, it was assumed that they had perished in the Holocaust.

Israel gave the land to Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael, the Israeli side of JNF.

Starting in 1948, Keren Kayemet "made every attempt to find these families" by notifying them by mail and publishing their names in newspapers, said Russell Robinson, JNF's executive vice president.

In 1975, Israel passed a law converting Keren Kayemet's trusteeship of the land to outright ownership. Now, though, in an atmosphere in which every asset that once belonged to Jews who died during World War II — from life insurance policies to valuable works of art — is under scrutiny, some Jewish groups are coming forward to offer descendants of those who perished an opportunity to stake their claims.

"Times have changed," Robinson said. "Information is easier dispensed through newspaper and television, and with all of the revelations that have happened with Swiss bank accounts, we felt it was due diligence to give it one more attempt."

In late April, JNF published in Israeli newspapers the names of people who own the unclaimed land. Since then, JNF and Keren Kayemet have received some 1,000 phone calls — most of them in Israel but some in New York — but none has panned out.

The land, most of it in the Hadera area, north of Tel Aviv, has been used in the intervening years in a variety of ways. Some of it has become residential, some has been used by moshavim, or farming collectives, and some has been paved over to become roads. Still other land remains undeveloped. Those who have called the agency have been unable to substantiate their claims to the property, Robinson said.

"We have had a lot of phone calls, but the majority of them are saying that they heard their grandfather had bought property, and that was all they knew," Robinson said. "Any time property was purchased, a document, a deed, was given," he said. Though these papers were unlikely to have survived the war, even a letter from a surviving relative from that era establishing that there was such property in the family would suffice, he said.

Even if someone did produce the right kind of paperwork, though, it is unlikely that anyone would be able to take over the property that has since found other uses.

In that case, heirs would be compensated for the property, Robinson said.

Income from each parcel has been kept in a special fund, he said, from which taxes and maintenance costs have been paid. In some cases the cost of owning the property has exceeded its value, and so an heir would receive nothing.

In other cases, a token amount, of say \$100, might be awarded. In still others, the property is worth a more substantial amount, he said.

The JNF isn't the first Jewish group to make an attempt to find heirs to such assets.

Last August, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee appointed a committee to explore the possibility of repaying loans from Jews imprisoned in ghettos during the war. At the same time, representatives of the JDC were providing food for children and the elderly Jews under occupation. But they were not permitted to transfer money to areas under Nazi rule and were desperate for cash.

They asked local Jews for loans — the total amount collected is unknown, said JDC spokesman Amir Shaviv — and promised that they would be reimbursed once they got to free territory. Many were paid back, as early as 1942. By the 1960s the JDC believed that it had repaid most of the loans.

Some of these Jews did not survive, and in the current atmosphere of inquiry, the JDC wants to try to repay any outstanding loans. The committee has collected 600 files with details of such loans and hopes to arrive at preliminary conclusions by December, said Shaviv. But the timing will "really depend on what they find." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Arab Americans voice anger as Clinton backs off pressure***By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — With great pains and no clear-cut conclusions, the American Jewish community has debated for months whether the Clinton administration is exerting too much pressure on Israel.

But among many in the Arab American community, there is no uncertainty. In their view, Clinton capitulated in his showdown with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the president sought to revive the long-dormant Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Delegates to the 15th annual conference of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee held here last week expressed frustration that Clinton backed down from pressuring Netanyahu to accept a U.S. peace plan that calls for Israel to turn over more land to the Palestinians.

Attending sessions such as "50 Years of Biased U.S. Foreign Policy" at a conference dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the "catastrophe," as the founding of Israel is known in the Palestinian community, delegates expressed deep dismay with the White House. Many blamed the American Jewish community for stepping in to stop Clinton from pushing Netanyahu to make concessions to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

"There was a point when we thought Clinton was moving to pressure Netanyahu in a serious way," said Hala Maksoud, the president of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

"Then the influence of the Jewish lobby" stopped Clinton as Jews "rallied to help" Netanyahu.

With Clinton widely regarded by the Jewish community as one of the most pro-Israel presidents, it seems almost inevitable that Arab Americans would disagree with many of his Middle East policies. Ironically, however, many Jews would agree that it was Jewish political efforts that forced the Clinton administration to back down from its confrontation with the Jewish state.

The Arab American gathering, which brought together more than 600 delegates from around the country, is one of the largest annual Arab American conferences in Washington.

The four-day conference ended with a Capitol Hill rally, where hundreds of activists viewed a quilt with 418 panels that Arabs say represent each Arab village destroyed during Israel's founding.

There has been no survey of Arab American opinion on the peace process, Arab activists said. But in interviews with delegates, it was clear that most had lost hope that Clinton would follow through with a tougher approach to Israel that the president had laid out earlier this year.

After initially refusing to meet with Netanyahu until he accepted the U.S. plan and threatening to re-evaluate the American approach to the peace process, Clinton, by all accounts, has changed his course. After repeatedly missing American deadlines, Netanyahu has taken more time to consider the U.S. plan to redeploy from a further 13 percent of the West Bank in exchange for specific Palestinian steps to combat terror.

Israeli reports this week say Netanyahu appears to be waiting until the Knesset adjourns at the end of July to commit to a course of action. What many Arab Americans see as a Clinton retreat has them seething. "What Clinton has done, it's not even a drop in the

bucket," Ghaith Faisal, a delegate from Annandale, Va., said, echoing the sentiments of many interviewed at the conference.

Hanna Elias, a Hollywood filmmaker who was one of the producers of the joint Palestinian-Israeli "Sesame Street," which was launched earlier this year, criticized the "Jewish lobby" for "putting obstacles" in the path of peace.

"If the United States is a real friend of Israel, it should work to avert war. Clinton should exert more pressure to go back to the peace process," said Elias, a self-described peace activist.

Furthermore, Elias said, it's important to "educate Americans that Palestinians are not from outer space."

"The Jewish community in the United States came from the Holocaust and is a community of fear," he said. "You have to bring the Jewish community to a platform of trust."

When asked what they would like to see Clinton do, delegates expressed near unanimity: pressure Netanyahu until he withdraws from the West Bank, stops settlement activity and agrees to a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

Some in the American Jewish community would agree with the Arab assessment of Jewish influence in shifting Clinton away from pressuring Israel. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby, led a lobbying effort in the Senate that resulted in 81 senators urging Clinton not to pressure Israel.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations wrote its own letter to Clinton, urging him to allow Israel to make its own decisions on security matters, including redeploying troops from the West Bank.

But there are also those in the Jewish community who supported Clinton's faceoff with Netanyahu and have called on the president to continue his vigorous efforts to revive the peace talks.

Americans for Peace Now, for instance, intensively lobbied to encourage the administration to pursue its plan. □

Victim has ties to Reform

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A former legislative assistant at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism was struck by lightning Saturday during an outdoor concert here.

Lysa Selfon remained in intensive care Monday, but in considerably improved condition, after being slammed to the ground by a lightning bolt — the victim of a fast-moving storm that swept through the city. Other spectators in the vicinity of the blast, including Selfon's sister, suffered minor injuries.

Selfon, a 25-year-old law student at The George Washington University, was badly burned and went into cardiac arrest after the strike, which hit the Tibetan Freedom Concert at Washington's RFK Memorial Stadium. Paramedics were able to revive her at the scene. Her sister, Amanda, 21, was also hurled to the ground and suffered a bruised knee.

At Washington Hospital Center, a spokeswoman described Selfon's condition as fair and said she was alert and talking and no longer needed a ventilator.

Selfon, a native of Lancaster, Pa., worked at the Religious Action Center from 1995 to 1996, specializing in church-state issues. Two of her old bosses, Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the RAC, and Rabbi Lynne Landsberg, now director of the Middle Atlantic Council of the UAHC, heard about the incident while on a mission to Israel and called the Selfon family to express their concern. □