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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.N. schedules Palestinian vote

The U.N. General Assembly scheduled a July 7 meeting to discuss a Palestinian request to upgrade its status at the United Nations. The Palestinians and their supporters in the United Nations agreed to delay the meeting after pressure from the United States. [Page 1]

Jewish groups merge

The United Jewish Appeal, the Council of Jewish Federations and the United Israel Appeal officially closed down their separate headquarters in New York City and will begin operating in partnership in a single location on Tuesday.

The move culminates years of planning to combine the central fund-raising organizations. The partnership is expected to become a complete merger within a year.

Court hands win to Nazi-hunters

The U. S. Supreme Court ruled that a suspected Nazi collaborator could not invoke the Fifth Amendment's right to remain silent to avoid foreign prosecution. The 7-2 ruling in the case of Aloyzas Balsys, an 85-year-old resident alien born in Lithuania and now living in Woodhaven, N.Y., means he would face a contempt citation if he continues to refuse to explain his activities in Europe during World War II. [Page 3]

Israel swaps prisoners

Israel received the remains of a commando killed in a raid in Lebanon last summer as part of a prisoner swap. As part of the exchange for Itamar Ily, Israel handed over the remains of several dozen fighters from Shi'ite groups. Israel was also slated to release 60 prisoners on Friday. [Page 2]

Reform rabbis warn Israel

The rabbinical arm of the Reform movement passed a resolution warning that passage of conversion legislation in Israel would further distance Diaspora Jewry from Israel. The resolution warned that enshrining the Orthodox monopoly over conversions in Israel "would cause severe and deleterious consequences in the political, philanthropic and religious realms." The move came at the annual meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in Anaheim, Calif. [Page 4]

Palestinians press their case to upgrade status at the U.N.

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Palestinians appear determined to press their claim to statehood at the United Nations.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright this week failed to convince the Palestinians to halt their effort to upgrade their status at the world body from observer to what is called "near state."

Instead, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat told Albright that he would ask supporters at the United Nations to delay a General Assembly vote on the measure until next month. Sudan, acting on behalf of the Arab states, apparently agreed. Discussion has tentatively been rescheduled for July 7.

Since 1974, the Palestinians have been represented at the United Nations by an observer mission of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Israel has worked feverishly against the move by the Palestinians to change their status, as has the United States. Israel argues that such a move violates the Oslo peace accords, which call for the parties to negotiate the final status of a Palestinian entity.

If successful, the PLO, whose name was changed to "Palestine" at the United Nations in 1988, could attain most rights accorded a state, including the right to sponsor resolutions. It would not, however, be able to vote.

The issue last surfaced in December, when the U.N. General Assembly voted against the Palestinian request.

"We view this as a serious violation of the Oslo agreements," Dore Gold, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, said in a telephone interview. Gold would not say what retaliatory measures Israel would take if the Palestinians succeeded, but said that "it makes it much more difficult" to move forward on the peace process.

U.S. officials agreed.

"We oppose enhanced status for the PLO in the General Assembly. The PLO is not a state and should not enjoy rights tantamount to those of a state," said Jamie Rubin, the State Department spokesman. Echoing Israel's concerns, Rubin said that U.N. action "will only encourage the parties to be less flexible, it will harden their positions and make it less likely that the peace in the Middle East could be advanced."

The United States' veto power over Security Council resolutions does not apply to General Assembly decisions. The United States is calling on other members of the General Assembly to oppose the PLO's move, arguing that "passing such a resolution will set a dangerous precedent that could be copied by others, and it would overturn decades of practice and precedent in the General Assembly," Rubin said.

Officials in Jerusalem have warned that Israel may shut the United Nations out of regional activities such as multilateral peace talks if the body upgrades the PLO mission.

The deputy director-general of Israel's Foreign Ministry told reporters in Jerusalem on Wednesday that raising the PLO status could ultimately lead to a situation in which its position was enhanced over Israel's.

Because Israel is not included in any regional grouping at the United Nations, it has difficulty getting elected to U.N. institutions, said Yitzhak Lior, whereas it is likely that the Palestinians would be able to participate in such groupings.

After Gold, Israel's ambassador, briefed the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations during an emergency conference call this week, the umbrella group of American Jewry weighed in on the debate.

"The U.N. should not allow itself to become a venue for undermining the peace

MIDEAST FOCUS

Falash Mura arrive in Israel

A plane carrying 58 Falash Mura arrived in Israel from Ethiopia in what the government described as the end of its campaign to bring Ethiopians as part of a family reunification plan.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Absorption Minister Yuli Edelstein and Avraham Burg, chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, welcomed the new arrivals at Ben-Gurion Airport.

The immigrants arrived amid continuing controversy over the status of other Falash Mura — Ethiopians of Jewish descent whose current status as Jews is disputed — who are seeking entry to Israel. In addition, a few thousand Jews remain in the Kwara region, near Sudan.

Two Israelis killed in Lebanon

Two Israeli soldiers were killed in the southern Lebanon security zone in a roadside bombing.

After the killings of the two members of the Israel Defense Force, Lt. Amit Assulin and Sgt. Or Cohen, Israel attacked positions of the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah.

TV installed in Old City

Israeli Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani approved the installation of closed-circuit television in Jerusalem's Old City as a security measure. The decision to install the system was taken following the murder of yeshiva student Gabriel Hirschberg earlier this year.

Meretz to make proposal

The Meretz Party said it plans to present legislation in the Knesset calling for a national referendum on whether to draft yeshiva students, according to Israel Radio.

Meretz officials were quoted as saying that they believe there is widespread support for drafting yeshiva students.

process by conferring on the PLO a status that provides attributes of a state," the group said it wrote in a letter Thursday to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The effort "puts in doubt the Palestinian Authority's commitment to bilateral negotiations with Israel," the group's leaders said in a statement.

As Gold lobbied U.N. ambassadors for support and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu contacted his counterparts from European nations — many of whom support the Palestinian effort — Israel faced criticism on another front at the United Nations.

Arab states have circulated a draft resolution criticizing Israel for a plan announced last week to expand the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem.

The U.N. Security Council could hold a meeting as early as Friday on the matter.

The United States remains sharply critical of the Jerusalem plan but opposes a Security Council discussion. "It might feel good to engage in such an exercise at the United Nations, but it will do bad to the peace process," Rubin said. Countries that pursue this "will only harm those they claim they are supporting." □

Israel may register black family seeking citizenship, lawyer says

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Interior Ministry may soon register a black, Jewish American family as immigrants after refusing to recognize their right to Israeli citizenship when they arrived in the country last month, according to the lawyer representing the family.

Dan Evron, a lawyer for the Conservative movement in Israel, said he has not received an official response from the ministry, but "we hear unofficially that it may be resolved soon."

Elazar Yaisrael, the father, was granted citizenship when he immigrated to Israel last year. However, when he returned on May 11, 1998, with his wife, Sahrah Williams Yaisrael, their four children and two grandchildren, the rest of the family was denied citizenship. Instead, they were temporarily detained and then given a 30-day visa — which expired about two weeks ago.

The Yaisrael family was converted to Judaism by the Conservative movement in the United States. Under Israeli law, every Jew is entitled to immediate citizenship upon arrival in Israel, including converts from all streams if converted outside Israel.

Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, met with Israeli officials this week in an attempt to resolve the family's status.

Interior Ministry officials could not be immediately reached for comment.

After his meetings, Meyers said earlier statements by Conservative movement members, including himself, that attributed the incident to racism in the Interior Ministry appear to be mistaken. "We are clearly saying that this was not an issue of racism," he said, adding that the movement did not intend to turn the Yaisrael case into a campaign for civil rights in Israel.

"The Conservative movement sees the incident as a bureaucratic mishap," said Meyers. "But if we were to find that this in fact was racist or had to do with the fact that they were converted by the Conservative movement, believe me, we would mount a severe protest."

Meyers said the mishap probably occurred because the Yaisraels came from Chicago, an area from which many Black Hebrews have come to Israel. The Black Hebrews are an African-American sect whose members have settled mostly in the Negev Desert town of Dimona. But Israel tries to prevent their entry into Israel because they are not Jews and therefore not legally eligible for automatic citizenship.

Meyers also said the Yaisrael's "colorful dress," which resembles the garb of many Black Hebrews, may have contributed to the misunderstanding.

Meyers said the Yaisrael family was "distressed and obviously worried" about the incident, but they remained upbeat because they were determined to settle in Israel.

Members of the family could not be reached for comment. □

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JEWISH WORLD

Court: suspected war criminals cannot invoke Fifth Amendment

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Supreme Court has issued a decision that is likely to boost efforts to bring Nazi war criminals to justice.

The high court, by a 7-2 vote Thursday in a case of a suspected Nazi collaborator, ruled that the Fifth Amendment's right to remain silent applies only to criminal proceedings in the United States.

The ruling means that Aloyzas Balsys, an 85-year-old resident alien born in Lithuania and now living in Woodhaven, N.Y., would face a contempt citation if he continues to refuse to explain his activities in Europe during World War II.

The ruling handed a victory to the Justice Department, which warned that extending the Fifth Amendment's protection to foreign prosecution would hurt U.S. law enforcement efforts to thwart terrorists, drug smugglers and other international criminals.

"It is an enormously important decision," said Eli Rosenbaum, director of the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations. "The Supreme Court's ruling will have a profound implication not only for OSI's program, but for American law enforcement generally."

The decision resolves a problem that has plagued OSI's work for the last 15 years. Rosenbaum said it has been very common for suspected war criminals to invoke the Fifth Amendment and for OSI investigators to "get doors closed in our faces."

The ruling "allows the Office of Special Investigations to go full steam ahead in terms of tracking down the Nazi war criminals in our midst," said Elizabeth Holtzman, a former member of Congress who was the first to blow the whistle on the presence of Nazi war criminals in the United States and who helped create OSI, the Nazi-hunting arm of the Justice Department.

"Time is running out and this decision will have an important impact," added Holtzman, who wrote a friend-of-the-court brief for the World Jewish Congress and Holocaust survivors urging the action the justices took.

Balsys emigrated to the United States in 1961, telling immigration officials at the time that he served in the Lithuanian army from 1934 to 1940 and then lived in hiding in Lithuania between 1940 and 1944.

The Justice Department, however, suspects that during those years Balsys was a member of the Lithuanian secret police, which persecuted Jews in collaboration with the Nazis. The Justice Department has sought to question Balsys since 1993, but he has refused, arguing that his answers could subject him to prosecution in Lithuania, Israel and Germany.

A federal judge initially ruled that Balsys had to testify, but the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals later ruled that he could invoke the Fifth Amendment's protection against self-incrimination.

In reversing the appeals court decision, Justice David Souter, writing for the court majority, said, "Concern with foreign prosecution is beyond the scope of the self-incrimination clause."

He said the court was "unable to dismiss the position of the United States in this case, that domestic law enforcement would suffer serious consequences if fear of foreign prosecution were recognized as sufficient to invoke the privilege."

Justices Stephen Breyer and Ruth Bader Ginsburg dissented. □

Body of Israeli commando returns home

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel received the remains of a commando killed in a raid in Lebanon last summer as part of a prisoner swap. In exchange for Itamar Ilya, Israel handed over the remains of several dozen fighters from Shi'ite groups and released several dozen others. French representatives transported the bodies between Israel and Lebanon. □

Y.U. sued over discrimination

The American Civil Liberties Union sued Yeshiva University on behalf of two lesbian medical students who allege they were denied campus housing because they are not married. Yeshiva's medical school, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, issued a statement that said its housing policy is "applied equally to all applicants for student housing without regard to their sexual orientation."

Austria agrees to pay survivors

Austria agreed to turn over its share of residual Nazi gold to an international humanitarian fund set up last year to benefit Holocaust survivors. Austria's share of the remaining gold in the Tripartite Gold Commission's pool amounts to about \$8 million.

The move by Austria means that more than a dozen European countries have agreed to donate their gold to the commission.

Israel compared to Iraq

Russia's foreign minister compared Iraq's deployment in the Gulf War of missiles armed with VX nerve gas to Israel's actions during the 1967 Six-Day War. Yevgeny Primakov said that Israel prepared between 12 and 16 nuclear weapons during the war, a charge that Israeli governments have denied.

Romanians rope in teens

Romanian police arrested two teen-agers in the desecration of synagogue in the western part of the country earlier this week. According to police, they have confessed to the attack, which included breaking windows and scrawling obscene slogans on the wall.

Lithuania appoints liaison

Lithuania's president appointed a former professor of political science at Indiana University to fill the post of special adviser on Lithuanian-Jewish relations. The adviser, Julius Smulkstys, said, "Full investigations on what was happening in Lithuania during Nazi occupation should be launched."

Croatia to interview witnesses

Croatian prosecutors said they would begin interviewing witnesses next week in the trial of a former concentration camp commander. From 1942 to 1944, Dinko Sakic was commander of the Jasenovac camp, where an estimated 500,000 Serbs, Jews and Gypsies died.

Germans raid neo-Nazis

German police raided the houses of suspected neo-Nazis and a neo-Nazi newspaper in a search for weapons.

Reform rabbis urge Knesset to reject conversion legislation

By Tom Tugend

ANAHEIM, Calif. (JTA) — America's Reform rabbis have lashed out at controversial conversion legislation in Israel, warning that its passage "would devastate the Israeli-Diaspora relationship and cause severe and deleterious consequences in the political, philanthropic and religious realms."

The bill, now pending in the Knesset, would codify the Orthodox establishment's control over conversions performed in Israel and "create two classes of Jews," said a resolution adopted unanimously by the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

The Reform rabbis, meeting here this week, also called on all Jewish federations, synagogues, communal organizations, and the Conservative and Reconstructionist movements to join in appeals to the Israeli government and Knesset to kill the legislation.

The appeal for an all-out effort against the bill was echoed by Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which represents 1.5 million Reform synagogue members in the United States.

Speaking by telephone from Israel, he warned that the Israeli government was working hard to neutralize opposition among American Jewish leaders.

Rabbi Charles Kroloff, vice president of the CCAR, urged in an interview that a portion of the funds raised in the United States for Israel go directly toward building Reform synagogues and ordaining Reform rabbis in Israel.

But Rabbi Richard Levy, the CCAR president, sought to defuse a potential conflict with Jewish federations. He said in an interview that financial support for the Reform movement should not be at the expense of federation fund-raising campaigns.

However, Rabbi Paul Menitoff, the CCAR's executive vice president, warned that the anger among Reform Jews ran so deep that they may not accept Levy's exhortation.

The emotional intensity generated by the conversion resolution stood in contrast to the generally low-key tone of the three-day meeting, which drew 500 Reform rabbis.

A potentially explosive issue — whether rabbis should officiate or sanctify "commitment" ceremonies or other rites for same-sex couples — was skirted by a prearranged decision to avoid floor discussion and a vote for at least two years.

The delay was criticized by some at the conference. A petition circulated among the CCAR's 1,700 members before and during the convention, stating, "We have officiated, or are willing to officiate, at a ceremony affirming the union of a same-gender Jewish couple," was signed by 530 rabbis.

There was a lively discussion on one committee report setting guidelines for handling charges of sexual misconduct against rabbis. In no-nonsense tones, the report set standards of near-puritan severity.

"Unacceptable behavior," the report stated in part, includes "an unwelcome verbal, physical or visual conduct of a sexual nature."

During the floor debate, one delegate asked for a definition of "visual conduct of a sexual nature," and the chairman said "leering" might fall into that category.

The committee also urged rabbis, of either gender, to refrain

from dating members of their congregations. This led one young rabbi to protest that in small communities, unmarried rabbis might not be able to find any dates. □

Swiss-Jewish negotiations on settlement near collapse

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Talks between Jewish and Swiss negotiators all but collapsed this week, leaving only the dimmest prospects of settling Holocaust-era claims anytime soon.

Daylong discussions at the U.S. State Department on Tuesday failed to yield progress, with Swiss banks again saying their best offer was \$600 million, and the World Jewish Congress and lawyers for Holocaust survivors again rejecting that amount as insulting.

"We are left with little hope for a settlement before July 1," said Elan Steinberg, executive director of the WJC, referring to a date set by U.S. public finance officers to review the negotiations and possibly impose sanctions on Swiss banks.

"The negotiations by the banks are a sham," a source familiar with the negotiations said, adding that no further meetings were scheduled. The secretive talks, brokered during the last three months by Stuart Eizenstat, U.S. undersecretary of state for economic affairs, soured recently amid detailed public disclosures about the negotiations.

The WJC last week slammed the banks — Union Bank of Switzerland, Swiss Bank Corp. and Credit Suisse — for going public with their \$600 million offer despite confidentiality agreements signed by both sides. The package includes about \$70 million the banks have already paid into a Swiss fund set up last year to benefit Holocaust survivors.

The banks, for their part, said they would reject "unfounded and excessive" demands and accused Jewish negotiators of jeopardizing the process by disclosing previous details.

With no amicable resolution in sight, the next phase in prodding the banks to return Holocaust victims' assets is likely to involve punitive measures taken by elected officials.

The July 1 meeting of state and local finance officers, led by New York City Comptroller Alan Hevesi, could result in sanctions against the banks — a move the WJC has said it does not plan to oppose. The finance officers agreed to a moratorium on sanctions in March, pending the outcome of settlement talks. The Clinton administration has opposed sanctions against Swiss banks.

At the same time, Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) said the Senate Banking Committee that he chairs plans to reopen a 50-year-old accord signed with Switzerland on the return of Nazi-looted gold. Switzerland agreed to return \$58 million to the Allies in the 1946 Washington Accord despite records that showed Switzerland accepted about five times that amount in looted gold.

D'Amato and others have long threatened to reopen that accord if Swiss banks and the Swiss government did not prove to be forthcoming in returning stolen assets.

And in New York, a federal judge is still considering whether to hear a class-action lawsuit brought against the banks by Holocaust survivors. In the absence of a settlement, lawyers representing Holocaust survivors have threatened to step up U.S. court action against the banks. □