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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Insurers sign agreement

Four European insurance companies signed an agreement that will eventually provide millions of dollars in compensation to Holocaust survivors. The companies signing the memo included Germany's leading insurer, Allianz Holding; France's AXA Group; and the Winterthur and Basel insurance firms in Switzerland. The agreement comes one week after Italy's largest insurer, Assicurazioni Generali, signed the same memorandum of understanding and agreed to pay \$100 million to settle Holocaust-era claims. [Page 4]

Rockets fired at northern Israel

Lebanese gunmen fired Katyusha rockets into the northern Israeli town of Kiryat Shmona, where at least 12 people were injured, according to Israel Radio. The attack came after Israeli helicopters made a raid near the southern Lebanon city of Tyre, killing an official of the Shi'ite Amal militia.

HIAS officials 'concerned'

Officials from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society returned from an 11-day fact-finding mission to Russia and Ukraine "deeply concerned" about the state of religious protections in the former Soviet Union.

With Russia's currency devalued by some 34 percent in recent days, HIAS issued a statement calling Russia's environment "a breeding ground for anti-democratic and anti-Semitic forces." [Page 1]

Agreement may soon be signed

A new agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority could be signed in Washington on the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Oslo accords, U.S. diplomatic sources were quoted as saying.

Word of a Sept. 13 signing comes amid signs that the two sides have softened their positions and are closer to reaching agreement on a further Israeli West Bank redeployment.

Report: Abu Nidal arrested

Abu Nidal was arrested in Egypt, according to U.S. officials. He reportedly has leukemia and crossed the border from Libya to seek treatment. Abu Nidal, whose real name is Sabri al-Banna, is linked to attacks in 20 countries that killed or injured some 900 people. Egypt has repeatedly denied that it is holding him.

Recent convulsions in Russia heighten concern among Jews

By Julia Goldman

NEW YORK (JTA) — As Russia suffers through its latest series of political and economic convulsions, Jews in the former Soviet Union are bracing themselves for possible repercussions, immigrant and advocacy groups here report.

Executives from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society returned from an 11-day fact-finding mission in Russia and Ukraine, "deeply concerned" about the state of religious protections in the former Soviet Union.

Even before Boris Yeltsin's surprise shift in Cabinet personnel, including the sudden reinstatement of former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, the ruble's drastic devaluation in recent days prompted HIAS Executive Vice President Leonard Glickman to call Russia's socioeconomic environment "a breeding ground for anti-democratic and anti-Semitic forces."

The deteriorating conditions come at a time when the number of Russian and Ukrainian Jews refused refugee status by U.S. officials has risen, prompting concern among Jewish migration and resettlement agencies.

Although precise data on the denials is not readily available, HIAS records show that the refusal rate rose from around 3 to 5 percent in 1995 to around 10 or 11 percent in 1996 and 1997, with another 5 percent or so decategorized for lack of proof that they were Jewish. Anecdotal evidence for this fiscal year indicates that the 1998 rate is higher than previous years and may be as high as 30 percent.

HIAS officials point out that these refusals have been offset by an increase in the number of Jews granted special "parole status" permission to immigrate to the United States. But unlike refugees, these immigrants are not entitled to public assistance — which means the Jewish community bears the full financial burden of their immigration and resettlement.

Glickman said agents of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service assured him in Moscow that there is no campaign to decrease the number of refugee approvals.

In order to qualify for refugee status, applicants must show a "well-founded fear of persecution," which in the case of Jews from the former Soviet Union may include historical experience.

A ceiling for the number of refugees admitted to the United States per year is fixed annually by the president and Congress. The ceiling for the former Soviet Union is higher than that of any other country. This year, 27,000 visas are available to refugees from the region, which may include Jews, evangelical Christians and Ukrainian Catholics.

The HIAS delegation also investigated the cases of some Jews who had been granted refugee status as early as 1991, but had not yet left for the United States. Most of those refugees said they were staying to care for relatives too infirm to relocate to a new country.

Glickman was joined on his fact-finding mission by HIAS President Neil Greenbaum of Chicago and by Dail Stolow, HIAS director of overseas operations.

In meetings in Ukraine and Russia with Jews from Vinnitsa to Moscow, with refugees bound for America, with human rights groups and with the U.S. ambassador to Russia, the three-person delegation heard the same message: Despite advances on the human rights front in the region, there is still a great deal of uncertainty — and fear.

Upon his return this week, Glickman told reporters that refugees bound for the United States reported that in the post-Soviet era they felt "freer than before, but not

MIDEAST FOCUS

Netanyahu visits Hebron

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Hebron to pay an unannounced condolence call to the family of a rabbi slain last week. The premier said any agreement with the Palestinian Authority depends on their taking action against "murderers" of Jews.

NRP demands halt to talks

Israel's National Religious Party demanded that the government halt all negotiations with the Palestinians "as long as acts of terror are still being perpetrated." Party officials also want the army to be more "aggressive" and pursue suspected terrorists into areas under the sole control of the Palestinian Authority.

Barak calls for terror conference

Israeli Labor Party Ehud Barak called for an international conference to combat terrorism. Speaking in front of Labor members of the Knesset, the former Israeli army chief of staff also praised last week's American strikes in Sudan and Afghanistan.

Women offering tallitot

A group of women in Jerusalem is offering women the opportunity to wrap themselves in a tallit, the ritual shawl traditionally worn by men during prayer.

According to one member of Women of the Wall, the inspiration for the new strategy came directly from Chabad-Lubavitch, which offers tefillin, the ritual cases men fasten with long leather straps to their arm and head during morning prayers, to Jewish men on the street.

Waqf closes Temple Mount

Muslim religious authorities in Jerusalem closed the gates of Temple Mount to tourists. The Waqf made the move to protest the arrest of two young Palestinians by Jerusalem police inside the Temple Mount.



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safe." He cited anecdotal evidence of ethnic attacks by skinheads, religious discrimination in the workplace and a pervasive feeling of uneasiness about the durability of human rights protections.

"So long as the economy is perceived as making progress, people are focused on their own lives," Glickman said. But he warned that the threat of economic instability brings with it the shadow of the region's "historic ways of reacting" to adversity.

Mark Levin, executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, articulated similar concerns about Russia's political and economic uncertainty.

"There are a lot of Jews in the elite of the business and political worlds," he said. "And Jews have always proven to be convenient" targets for societal frustrations in the region. The Union of Councils of Soviet Jews was even more cautionary. Citing openly anti-Semitic regimes in some provincial regions of the Russian Federation, UCSJ President Yosef Abramowitz said in a statement that "this trend can only expand under current conditions" at the Kremlin.

Glickman at HIAS also confirmed that the incidence of hate crimes and persecution — and the lack of official protection against them — is greater outside the large cities in Russia and Ukraine. He quoted U.S. Ambassador to Russia James Collins as expressing concerns about human rights protections.

"There is some progress," Glickman said, pointing to statements by Russian executives in support of religious diversity and against anti-Semitism. "But there is a very far way to go."

Glickman and Stolow of HIAS noted that Jewish human rights activists are tracking 300 fascist newspapers in Ukraine and 400 in Russia. Some are sold openly outside the Kremlin subway station in Moscow, even though government regulations restrict such literature. Summing up the HIAS mission, Glickman said Jews in Ukraine and Russia stressed three overriding concerns: care for their elderly relatives, the ongoing need for human rights protections and the continuing importance of the refugee program as a hedge against increasing anti-Semitism.

Some Jewish leaders are looking to the upcoming opening of a Holocaust museum and memorial synagogue on Moscow's Memorial Hill as a chance to raise the profile of Russian Jews. Levin of the National Conference said his organization has been encouraging the White House to put the Sept. 2 event on President Clinton's agenda during his brief visit there next week.

Through a visit to Russia's first Jewish museum, the president could send a two-part message, Levin said. "Much has been accomplished, but much more" needs to be done, he said. "At the same time, problems with issues related to pluralism, tolerance, protection of religious and ethnic minorities" persist.

The administration decided to go ahead with the Moscow visit despite the recent political and economic upheavals.

Officials at the World Jewish Congress did likewise. The group had scheduled a conference on Holocaust-assets for the same period, with the museum dedication ceremony as a centerpiece of its itinerary.

WJC Executive Director Elan Steinberg said plans were unchanged for the time being, but that he was monitoring the Russian political and social climate carefully.

"We're taking our political cues from President Clinton," he said. □

Unemployment rises in Israel

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Signs of an economic slowdown are mounting in the Jewish state.

No rise was recorded in industrial production in the first half of this year, and according to the Central Bureau of Statistics, industrial growth will be 2.5 percent this year.

The figure was particularly alarming in view of the latest unemployment figures, which showed another rise — to a rate of 9.4 percent.

This figure means that one in almost every 10 adults in the Jewish state is unemployed.

Despite the figures, Israeli Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman said the government's economic policy would not change. □

JEWISH WORLD

Author of Bakke decision, dead at 90, is remembered as voice of conscience

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell will be remembered by many in the Jewish community as an important voice of conscience who cast decisive votes on some of the country's most controversial social issues.

Powell, who died Tuesday at the age of 90, served as a crucial swing vote for 15 years.

He staked out positions in support of affirmative action, abortion rights and continued separation of church and state.

He wrote the majority opinion in the landmark 1978 affirmative action case, *University of California vs. Bakke* — the high court's first endorsement of preferences for racial minorities.

The opinion "limited the worst excesses of affirmative action, and yet allowed the idea to go forward in theory," said Marc Stern, co-director of the legal department at the American Jewish Congress.

A consistent defender of the constitutional separation of church and state, Powell wrote a concurring opinion in *Aguilar vs. Felton*, a 1985 decision that banned public school teachers from offering remedial instruction at parochial schools. Powell said there was "too great a risk of government entanglement in the administration of religious schools."

The Supreme Court reversed that decision last year, saying the practice does not violate church-state separation.

Appointed by President Nixon in 1971 to serve on a deeply divided court, Powell did not share the rigid ideology of his colleagues, siding with the court's liberal wing in some cases and the conservative wing on others.

He joined the majority in upholding a woman's right to an abortion in *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973.

He also cast the deciding vote in a 1986 ruling that said consenting adults have no constitutional right to engage in homosexual conduct, but later said he regretted that vote.

Beyond his substantive contributions to American law, Powell was "unfailingly polite, unfailingly civil and his opinions were never angry or dismissive," Stern of the AJCongress said.

"There was an attitude of respect for everyone with whom he came into contact," he said. □

Youths celebrate Oslo accords

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The political process might be stalemated — but don't tell the children.

On Tuesday, hundreds of Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians and Lebanese youths celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Oslo peace accords in the Jordanian town of Naharayim.

The Lebanese who participated in the ceremony were children of workers in Israel and other Lebanese who have contact with Israelis.

Defying an explicit ban by Israel's Education Ministry, children from some of Israel's youth movements also took part in the ceremony.

The ministry had banned the participation of Israeli youth on the grounds that it could not vouch for their safety.

The ceremony was also attended by two families of the seven girls from the Israeli town of Beit Shemesh who were killed by a Jordanian soldier in 1996 while visiting Naharayim, which is called the "Island of Peace."

But Danny Va'aknin, the mayor of Beit Shemesh, refused to attend the youth ceremony.

Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani represented Israel at the commemoration. □

New sanctions proposed

U.S. Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) proposed new sanctions on nations that shield terrorists' assets. Schumer, a candidate for New York's Democratic Senate nomination, said he would introduce legislation prohibiting banks in countries with impenetrable bank secrecy laws from trading in U.S. currency.

Meanwhile, U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) said he would call for the creation of a commission headed by former President Bush to re-evaluate U.S. counter-terrorism strategy.

Bubis criticizes memorial's delay

A top Jewish leader in Germany criticized an agreement to delay a decision on a national Holocaust memorial.

Ignatz Bubis said the move reached by German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Berlin Mayor Eberhard Diepgen to wait until after the Sept. 27 national election was "disgraceful."

But opposition party leader Gerhard Schroeder said he agreed with the move.

Gold fund has \$57 million

A fund launched last December for victims of Nazism has received pledges of \$57 million from 11 countries.

Britain's Lord Mackay, who chaired the Nazi gold conference in London that launched the fund, also announced that the archives of the Tripartite Gold Commission — created after World War II to distribute looted Nazi gold — would be opened within a month.

Germany investigates candidate

German prosecutors are investigating a convicted neo-Nazi bomber who is running for Parliament in the Sept. 27 elections.

A spokesman for the prosecutors said Manfred Roeder, who is running on the far-right National Democratic Party ticket, is being investigated for inciting racial hatred during campaign speeches he made during the weekend.

Kosher craze grows at stadlums

The first kosher stand for football fans opened at the Baltimore Ravens' new stadium.

Prayer services will be held near the stand at the end of the third quarter.

The opening of the stand, which will offer sandwiches, pretzels and peanuts as well as beverages, comes after kosher stands began operation at both baseball parks in New York earlier this spring.

A kosher stand has operated at Baltimore Orioles' baseball games since 1991.

European firms latest to join rush to settle Holocaust claims

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — In a major step toward settling wartime claims, four European insurance companies signed an agreement this week that will eventually provide millions of dollars in compensation to Holocaust survivors.

The agreement, signed here Tuesday by the insurers, Jewish officials and U.S. insurance officials, comes one week after Italy's largest insurer, Assicurazioni Generali, signed the same memorandum of understanding and agreed to pay \$100 million to settle Holocaust-era claims.

One week before that, Switzerland's largest insurer, Zurich Allied, signed the memo.

The companies signing the memo this week included Germany's leading insurer, Allianz Holding; France's AXA Group; and the Winterthur and Basel insurance firms in Switzerland.

All of the companies are among 16 European insurers targeted in a \$16 billion class-action lawsuit filed last year by Holocaust victims and their families, who alleged that the firms withheld, concealed or converted the proceeds of policies sold before World War II.

The memorandum, signed by the insurers in an effort to block the suit from going forward, calls for:

- creating an international commission to probe the firms' archives for unpaid insurance claims;
- establishing a claims resolution mechanism to settle the claims; and
- immediate contributions by the firms to a fund from which the claims will be paid and to a second humanitarian fund, similar to one created last year in Switzerland, to help Holocaust victims.

The international commission will comprise 12 members — six representing the insurers and European regulators and six drawn from Jewish groups, according to Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress. He said the commission will also have a chairman independent of any of these groups.

Steinberg, who called Tuesday's signing a "major step toward justice," said the move is significant because it establishes a process for resolving survivors' claims.

"We can't simply settle" with the insurers, he said, because it is impossible at this point to know the exact value of the prewar policies involved in the claims.

But he pointed out that preliminary assessments of the policies put them at between \$2 billion and \$2.5 billion in today's currency — 10 times their value in postwar dollars.

The insurers' decision to sign the memo was also prompted by mounting pressures from state insurance commissioners across the United States, who threatened to impose sanctions on the firms' U.S. subsidiaries if there were no resolution of Holocaust-era claims.

Earlier this month, Switzerland's two leading commercial banks agreed to a \$1.25 billion settlement of claims dating from that era.

Observers of the restitution process say that settlement also prompted the insurers to begin signing onto the memorandum of understanding.

The Swiss banks' settlement has also had major repercussions among German firms:

- Two of Germany's leading banks, Deutsche Bank and Dresdner Bank, have confirmed that they are negotiating with Jewish officials to reach a possible settlement. The banks face an \$18 billion class-action lawsuit over allegations that they knowingly laundered gold and other valuables stripped from concentration camp victims.

- Germany's third-largest bank institution, Commerzbank, said it had appointed a panel of independent scholars to probe whether it profited from gold and jewelry looted from concentration camp victims or was withholding the proceeds of bank accounts from their rightful Jewish owners.

- The Bonn government suggested Tuesday that German companies could channel money into funds for Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe as a way of pre-empting lawsuits against them by former Jewish slave laborers and other groups. The suggestion that private German firms contribute to such a fund came days after Chancellor Helmut Kohl said the government would not participate. He noted that Germany has already paid more than \$55.5 billion since the end of the war in various forms of Holocaust compensation.

- Two leading German firms recently announced their intention to make available substantial funds for former Nazi slave laborers. Volkswagen, Europe's largest car maker, said it would make its own payments to claimants. Daimler Benz, the Stuttgart-based industrial giant, said it would be willing to contribute to an existing government fund for former slave laborers.

The idea of contributing to existing funds has been much discussed recently by German firms.

Most historical experts maintain that settlements with individuals would be difficult to reach because of a lack of specific evidence regarding where a former slave laborer had worked or for how long. □

(JTA correspondent Daniel Dagan in Bonn contributed to this report.)

Jewish festival held in Bulgaria

ROME (JTA) — Jews from five countries attended a Sephardi Jewish festival recently held in Bulgaria.

More than 150 participants from Turkey, Bulgaria, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Yugoslavia attended Esperansa '98.

Esperansa was a four-day festival at the end of July that featured lectures, workshops, concerts, exhibitions and food tasting.

"Long into the night, songs and dances filled the terrace," said one participant.

"At one point, a drummer from Turkey, an accordionist from Bosnia-Herzegovina and a guitar player from Croatia played 'Hava Nagila' while a woman from Bulgaria led a group of dancers," this participant said.

The festival was organized by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the European Council of Jewish Communities and World Jewish Relief, in collaboration with Shalom, the organization of Bulgarian Jews.

"The purpose was to promote regional cooperation among Jewish Communities and to spark renewed expression of a shared Sephardi civilization," JDC representative Yechiel Bar Chaim told JTA.

"It surpassed our expectations," he said. □