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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Vote prompts calls for unity

Calls are growing in Israel for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to form a national unity government or go to early elections. The calls came after most of the legislators voting against the Wye accord were members of Netanyahu's own governing coalition.

While the Knesset approved the accord by 75-19 with nine abstentions, most of the support came from the opposition Labor Party. Two of Netanyahu's ministers voted "no," and seven others did not show up for the vote. [Page 2]

Cabinet meeting postponed

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu postponed by one day a Cabinet meeting to discuss implementation of the Wye accord. At the meeting, now scheduled for Thursday, the Cabinet will review whether the Palestinian Authority has taken specific steps called for under the accord.

These steps include the publication of orders against incitement and the collection of illegal weapons. The Cabinet will also attempt to verify that the Palestinian Authority has imprisoned 10 terrorists from a list of 30 and that the anti-Israel clauses in the Palestinian charter have been revoked by the PLO Executive Committee.

Final-status talks to start soon

Israeli and Palestinian officials held preliminary talks regarding the final-status negotiations.

The talks brought together Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's deputy, Mahmoud Abbas, who said the actual negotiations would begin within about 10 days.

Top lawyer warns government

Israel's attorney general is refusing to defend the government before the Supreme Court in a dispute over whether non-Orthodox representatives should be appointed to Jerusalem's religious council.

Jerusalem's Orthodox chief rabbis convinced a ministerial committee dealing with the issue to object to the appointments, claiming the non-Orthodox representatives are "not committed" to strengthening religious practices in the Holy City. Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein asked to delay Thursday's hearing because he said the reasoning lacks "factual basis" and would likely be rejected by the court.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

German youth behind campaign to aid former Nazi slave workers

By Deidre Berger

FRANKFURT (JTA) — Two years ago, when high school students in a city near here started researching the fate of 1,700 Hungarian Jewish women forced to work in their hometown as slave laborers during World War II, they had no idea their work would become a town project.

Today, their effort to gain recognition for the survivors is supported by the mayor of Moerfelden-Walldorf, their school principal, the city museum director and other local citizens of prominence.

More than 1,500 people have signed an appeal to the former employer of the survivors, the Stuttgart-based construction company Zueblin, to acknowledge its wartime role in the mistreatment of forced workers.

The local initiative is a rare example of pressure for compensation for World War II victims coming from Germans instead of survivors. It is also a sign of changing public attitudes in Germany toward confronting the role ordinary Germans played during the Holocaust.

Rudi Hechler, who belonged to the Communist Party after the war, supported a group of students who in 1972 started researching the history of the former slave laborers. They assembled a list of 200 survivors.

"I was told that I was dirtying the nest. People said, 'Oh God, Rudi, what are you doing to the reputation of our city?'" according to Hechler. "I am very glad that times have changed."

In 1980, the city erected a memorial stone to commemorate the women who died while working in Walldorf between August and October 1944.

They were "requisitioned" from Auschwitz by Zueblin, which used the women to help build a new runway at the nearby Frankfurt airport.

They unloaded train cars, unearthed and carried heavy cables and helped clear terrain. They were forced to keep working during the frequent bombing raids.

To help protect against below-zero temperatures, the women stuffed reeds and cloth sacks under the only clothing they owned — summer dresses.

There was little interest in the fate of the survivors, however, until 1996, during a Hungarian cultural week sponsored by the city.

Cornelie Ruehlig, director of the city's museum, assembled an exhibition on the former female slave laborers, who were deported from Hungary.

"We could not just feature wine and ceramic tiles and forget the rest of our history," she says. During a tour of the exhibition, a group of local high school students were so moved that they decided to take a class trip to Hungary and visit a survivor.

"We had mixed feelings about going. We did not know how she would react to us young Germans," says 19-year-old Ljubomira Erac. Classmate Daniela Rieken, also 19, added that after the students were critical of the German past, the survivor spoke freely.

When the students returned, they made a presentation of the results of their trip and wrote to Zueblin, asking them to make a public gesture toward their onetime employees. There was no response until more people from the town became involved.

"The townspeople were very impressed that the students took the subject so seriously and they wanted to support them," according to museum director Ruehlig. "The local newspapers have also done a lot to draw attention to the matter."

Eventually, Zueblin sent a member of the board to Walldorf to meet with the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Palestinians plan arms roundup

Palestinian police said they would begin a campaign next week to round up illegal weapons in the self-rule areas. They added that Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat is planning to issue an order declaring that anyone possessing or selling the weapons will be jailed and fined.

Israel honors Swiss critics

Israel honored several Americans who spear-headed efforts to pressure Swiss banks to compensate survivors for Holocaust-era dormant accounts.

While honoring the Americans, including some strong critics of Switzerland such as Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) and World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also acknowledged the efforts of the Swiss government in bringing about a recent \$1.25 billion settlement of claims relating to the accounts.

Though bitter about the awards, Swiss officials decided not to cancel Netanyahu's planned trip to Switzerland next week.

Hamas members indicted

Members of a Hamas terror cell used a beeper to remotely detonate bombs in two attacks in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv earlier this year, according to court indictments against the suspected terrorists. In one attack, in Tel Aviv in August, 16 people were wounded. An Israeli soldier was lightly wounded in the second attack, on Jerusalem's Mount Scopus in September.

Deputy minister faces indictment

Israeli police recommended that Deputy Housing Minister Meir Porush, of the fervently Orthodox Agudat Yisrael Party, be charged with fraud and breach of trust for allegedly promising favors to firms that promised to appoint his associates to senior positions. The case will be reviewed by the prosecutors office, which will decide whether to issue a formal indictment.



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growing circle of people pressing the company to take action. At a recent news conference, Mayor Bernhard Brehl reported that the board member only seemed interested in asserting the company's innocence.

"We were not interested in proving personal guilt. We want Zueblin to take responsibility and deal with their history constructively. We expected at least a gesture, such as an apology to the Hungarian women they used as slave laborers," Brehl said.

Members of the initiative emphasized that they were not trying to press the company for financial compensation as much as for a signal that Zueblin was confronting its past. However, the company's lack of cooperation has pushed those involved in the initiative to call for compensation for the survivors, about 50 to 100 of whom are probably still alive, according to Ruehlig.

"This is a case of arrogance, ignorance and historical obstruction," said Ruehlig.

In a statement, Zueblin recently said it had checked archives and found no evidence of company responsibility for the treatment of the slave laborers.

To maintain public attention on the issue, several students are petitioning two state parliaments to discuss the subject of the Walldorf slave laborers.

Earlier this fall, Volkswagen and the electronics giant Siemens each announced plans to establish an \$11.9 million compensation fund for former slave laborers.

Student Julia Achenbach says she hopes Zueblin takes responsibility for its past and follows the example set by those two firms.

However, the more likely solution is a nationwide compensation fund for former slave laborers that Germany's new center-left government has promised to set up in conjunction with companies that used slave laborer during the war. □

Calls grow for unity government after Knesset passes Wye accord

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has won a major Knesset vote, thanks to the opposition.

Far from receiving applause for his victory, Netanyahu faced growing calls to form a national unity government or go to early elections after most of the legislators who voted against the Wye accord late Tuesday night were members of Netanyahu's own governing coalition. While the Knesset approved the accord by 75-19 with nine abstentions, most of the support came from the opposition Labor Party.

Two of Netanyahu's ministers from the National Religious Party voted against the accord. Seven other ministers, five of them from Netanyahu's Likud Party, absented themselves from the Knesset floor when the vote was taken.

Among those calling on Netanyahu to change his government or seek early elections was legislator Aryeh Deri, a member of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, which is part of the governing coalition.

"The prime minister should come out in a public call, out in the open, not in back-room dealings, to [opposition leader] Ehud Barak and his colleagues to join a national unity government," Deri said.

"If not, the prime minister has to go to the people and say, 'I did the best I could,' and go to elections," he told Israel Radio. "I don't think that the coalition can function as it is, just as Ehud Barak knows he can't bring down the government."

For his part, Barak downplayed the idea of joining a national unity government.

But at the same time, he pledged the Labor Party's continued support for the Wye accord — "even if no Cabinet ministers support it."

Transport Minister Shaul Yahalom, a member of the NRP, defended his decision to vote against the Wye agreement, even though it constituted a vote of no-confidence in the government.

Referring to a decision earlier this week by the NRP Central Committee to defer for at least six weeks any support for a bill to call for early elections, he said that if Netanyahu continues to call on the Palestinians to live up to their part of the accord, "I will propose staying in the current government, which is still a bad alternative, but better than all the others." □

JEWISH WORLD

Priebke put in jail

A former Nazi officer was imprisoned after Italy's highest appeals court upheld the life sentences imposed on him and a second officer for their involvement in the worst Nazi war crime committed on Italian soil.

Under house arrest until his appeal was heard, former SS Capt. Erich Priebke was led off to prison as neighbors called, "Gas him" and "The holiday is over." Former SS Capt. Karl Hass, also 86, remained in a clinic after doctors said he is too ill to be imprisoned. The two were sentenced for their role in the March 1944 massacre of 335 Romans, including about 75 Jews, at the Ardeatine Caves south of Rome.

British government to join search

The British government said it would join British museums in searching for Nazi-looted artworks that may be in the museums' collections. According to a new report, many such artworks ended up in London after the war.

Report issued on seized homes

The city of Paris already paid back those Jews whose homes were seized during World War II, according to a new report.

The report, which came soon after the French Foreign Ministry published an extensive catalog of artworks looted from French Jews, also found that only a few Jews owned property in Paris before World War II.

Farrakhan: Cabinet has no Arabs

The anti-Semitic leader of the Nation of Islam told an audience of about 1,000 people in Detroit that President Clinton is pro-Israel because his Cabinet includes Jews but no Arabs. Among the people Louis Farrakhan mentioned as Jewish members of the Cabinet was Defense Secretary William Cohen, who was raised a Unitarian.

Foxman: Struggle may backfire

The national director of the Anti-Defamation League said he is worried that the ongoing struggle for the recovery of Holocaust-era assets would reinforce anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews and money. Abraham Foxman's comments came during the ADL's 85th annual meeting.

Lubavitch emissaries gather

Some 1,000 Lubavitch emissaries from around the world held their annual meeting in Brooklyn.

Reports of the group's recent expansion in the former Soviet Union and California were highlighted at the event, which was also marked by singing and dancing.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

UJA young leaders deliver Torah to Prague's egalitarian synagogue

By Julia Goldman

PRAGUE (JTA) — A group of young American Jewish leaders has provided a valuable gift to a progressive Jewish group here.

Members of UJA Federations of North America's Young Leadership Division delivered a refurbished Torah scroll to Beit Praha, an organization in the Czech capital that holds mixed-gender services, during a special Sabbath morning service last Saturday.

The 193 active federation members — aged 25 to 45 — visited Prague over the weekend as the first leg of their biannual mission to Israel.

Of the 90,000 to 100,000 Jews who once lived in 153 communities throughout what is now the Czech Republic before the Holocaust, more than 80 percent were killed.

Of those, some 1,300 are registered members of the Prague Jewish community, which is served by three prayer groups: Beit Praha, Chabad House and an Orthodox group led by Chief Rabbi Karol Sidon.

Beit Praha was started by a group of young expatriates living in Prague who did not identify with the city's Orthodox, predominantly elderly community. Since then, Lisa Frankenburg, one of Beit Praha's founders and the publisher of the English-language newspaper Prague Post, said many Czechs have joined the group, which now has about 100 members.

Peter Gyori, the 29-year-old leader of the group, said the donated Torah "had a huge impact" on the dozen members of Beit Praha who attended the service, which was held in the banquet hall of a modern hotel in Prague's old Jewish Quarter where the Orthodox group was staying.

Gyori said he now sees potential for the group to have regular Saturday morning services in addition to the Friday night services held on the third floor of the Jewish Town Hall, a pink Baroque building located next to the 17th-century synagogue where the Orthodox services are held.

The genesis of the Torah delivery lies in a meeting that Lewis Norry, the mission's Rochester, N.Y.-based co-chair, had with Gyori in the Czech capital during the summer.

After meeting with Gyori, Norry saw an opportunity to support pluralism among Prague's younger generation.

Norry eventually turned to Avi Eisenbach, a Torah scribe on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Norry and his wife, Jill, paid some \$10,000 for the restored Torah — estimated to be between 100 to 150 years old — complete with new wooden rollers and a new midnight blue velvet cover that is embroidered with an inscription from the UJA mission.

During the Torah service, Deborah Friedman, a member of the Young Leadership Cabinet and its former ritual and Judaica chair, read the Torah portion in a lilting soprano as Beit Praha members surrounded the reader's table for their first glimpse of the new scroll. □

(JTA correspondent Richard Allen Greene in Prague contributed to this report.)

Poll: Majority back nuclear option

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Some 70 percent of Israelis support the use of nuclear weapons in response to a non-conventional weapons attack on the Jewish state, according to a survey published by the Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University.

The study also found that 92 percent of the respondents backed Israel's development of nuclear weapons.

Approximately 78 percent of Israelis supported it in a study that was performed 10 years ago. □

G.A. helps bridge division between Israel and Diaspora

By Julia Goldman

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Thousands of Diaspora Jews witnessed with their own eyes the gulf that divides them from their Israeli counterparts, but they also caught a glimpse of a bridging solution.

North American Jews participating in the 67th General Assembly of the UJA Federations of North America found that meaningful discussion between Israeli and Diaspora Jews may be the key to buttressing the relationship.

The theme of this year's G.A., as the event is known, is, "Many People, Many Roads, One Heart." But another multiple — many voices — more aptly describes the activity going on at Jerusalem's International Convention Center, where 5,000 participants from North America and Israel gathered this week for the largest annual meeting of Jewish communal leaders.

The event's setting — this is the first G.A. to be held outside of North America — has also renewed many participants' conviction that federations in North America must make cultural exchange with Israelis a higher priority.

Through two-person panel discussions and face-to-face meetings, the American and Canadian Jews overflowing the conference rooms in the sprawling white stone complex here had the chance to hear Israeli points of view and present their own conceptions of Israel. They have also had to confront Israelis' perception of American Jews — and sometimes their disinterest in American Jews altogether.

The "major gap" between Israel and the Diaspora, said one panelist, Rabbi David Saperstein, exists because many Israelis — and many North American Jews as well — don't care about the disconnection.

"The ability to engage in dialogue, the sense of common interest is key to American Jewish identity," said Saperstein, who is director of the Washington-based Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. "As American Jews, we are defined by the nature of this dialogue," he said.

But as North American participants discovered, Israelis have a completely different idiom for discussions of identity.

Haim Arzan, from the northern Israeli town of Afula, told his North American discussion-mates, "We are the same people. I recognize that you care. I respect your opinion."

But, he said, living in Israel is difficult and tense. "There you see it on TV. Here, you feel it."

Many G.A. participants were surprised to learn, for example, that many Israelis "feel more Israeli than Jewish," as Shiva Ben-Yemini put it.

The question of nationality over religion was an unfamiliar one for Marilyn Forman-Chandler of Greensboro, N.C., who said she feels Jewish first and was shocked by the notion that in Israel "being Israeli is enough." But engaging in conversation with Israelis during one session devoted to "Two Cultures, One People," Forman-Chandler also discovered some important similarities.

"I've had many dialogues with Israelis in a number of different settings," she said. "But this is the first time that I've walked away with the sense that Jewish continuity is just as important in Israel as it is in the Diaspora."

Robert Soloway of New York's UJA-Federation said that while Israelis "sense life is easier" for North American Jews, "there are struggles on both sides to be a Jew and to decide what that means."

At a time when many American federations are turning inward to attend to the exigencies of maintaining interest in Jewish life and Jewish philanthropy, the G.A.'s sessions seemed to suggest that the issues might best be addressed cross-culturally, through such programs as organized trips to Israel, professional exchanges and social justice and philanthropic partnerships.

Representatives from local federations that have linked up with Israeli cities through programs such as Partnership 2000 reported tremendous success in developing personal and professional connections between the communities.

Dr. Sidney Miller of Dayton, Ohio, cited Partnership 2000 as having transformed his federation's involvement with Israel into a person-to-person exchange, rather than what his wife, Barbara, called "a money-to-money" relationship.

They have friends in their sister city of Nahariya, and Dr. Miller has helped arrange for medical training of a Nahariya doctor at a hospital in Dallas.

Steven Schanes and Michael Kleinman of Detroit praised their federation's teen exchange program, which includes five weeks in Israel for American teens and one week in Detroit for Israelis.

To make that kind of experience more universal, a group of Jewish philanthropists, led by Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman, have announced the creation of Birthright Israel, a \$300 million fund that will support first-time travel to Israel by Jews aged 15 to 26 on existing accredited programs. The plan's organizers hope to enlist local federations and communities worldwide in joining the coalition of philanthropists — there are four additional partners committed to the project to date — and the government of Israel in providing \$1 million for each of five years beginning in January 1999.

Bronfman, who was also the international chair of the G.A., said at a news conference here Tuesday that he hopes local communities will provide follow-up programming for the travelers when they return to build on the Israel experience in the hope of forging a strong and vibrant Jewish identity.

Bronfman said local communities would also be responsible for deciding who would be eligible for the program. Many other programmatic details about what Bronfman called "an audacious initiative" remain to be resolved over the next year prior to the program's inauguration.

Natan Sharansky, Israel's minister of industry and trade and the chairman of the ministerial committee on Israel-Diaspora relations, who spoke at the news conference, said the Birthright program is essential for forging bonds and creating a "common educational background" among world Jewry.

G.A. participants got a taste of what that education would be like this week by being in Israel, and that experience, in turn, could have widespread effects on North American Jewish philanthropy concerning Israel.

Barbara Infeld of Sacramento, Calif., cited distorted news reports of bombings and religious conflicts as one reason why some North Americans have decreased their giving to Israel.

"We hear that we're supporting the ultra-Orthodox" by giving money to the UJA, she said, "but the only way to know that that's not who we're funding is by being on the land, in the land." □