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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel suspends withdrawals

Israel announced it is suspending all further West Bank redeployments called for under the Wye agreement until the Palestinian Authority complies with a list of demands, including a promise not to declare statehood next May. The announcement came after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged President Clinton to object publicly to Palestinian violations of the accord. [Page 1]

Russia to seek return of artworks

U.S. officials applauded an announcement by Russia that it would work to return art looted by the Nazis to Holocaust survivors or their heirs. Undersecretary of State Stuart Eizenstat said the move by Russia, which agreed to a U.S.-proposed set of principles to guide the restitution process, was a "breakthrough." The announcement came during a four-day conference in Washington on Nazi-looted art. [Page 4]

11 companies used slave labor

The chairman of Britain's Holocaust Education Trust said a new study completed by his group found that about 1 million Jews died as a result of Nazi slave labor. Lord Greville Janner said at the Washington Conference on Holocaust-era Assets that 11 companies used slave labor from Nazi concentration camps, including BMW, I.G. Farben, Ford and Volkswagen.

U.S.-Palestinian group formed

A new U.S.-Palestinian commission was launched during a meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat. U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin said the commission would work to create a channel for \$900 million in new U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority that was pledged earlier this week.

Premier still talking with Levy

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's efforts to bring former Foreign Minister David Levy back into the governing coalition hit a snag when Levy said he would accept nothing less than the Finance Ministry portfolio. Speaking after a meeting with Netanyahu, Levy said he had rejected the offer of becoming national infrastructure minister, adding that he expects an answer to his demand soon.

Israel puts brakes on pullback after Palestinians attack soldier

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Implementation of the Wye agreement has hit another roadblock.

Israel announced Wednesday that it is suspending all further West Bank redeployments called for under the agreement until the Palestinian Authority complies with a list of Israeli demands.

Among the demands is that Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat back off recent promises to declare statehood next May.

Israel's announcement came just hours after Palestinian demonstrators severely beat an Israeli soldier near the West Bank town of Ramallah.

While the United States condemned the attack, State Department spokesman James Rubin said the redeployment is an obligation and "should be implemented as signed."

The Palestinian Authority rejected the Israeli decision and blamed Israel for instigating the violence.

Earlier in the week, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged President Clinton in a letter to object publicly to Palestinian violations of the accord.

"There is a danger to the peace process if the violations continue," the letter said, according to Netanyahu spokesman David Bar-Illan.

The Wye accord, signed in Washington in late October, called for Israel to transfer an additional 13 percent of the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority in exchange for concrete actions by the Palestinians on security issues.

Israel turned over 9 percent of West Bank land to Palestinian control last month, and was slated to transfer another 4 percent by early January.

The decision to delay the pullback came less than two weeks before Clinton's scheduled visit to Israel and the Palestinian self-rule areas. During his visit, Clinton is slated to address the Palestine National Council, which will be convening to annul the anti-Israel clauses in the Palestinian Covenant.

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross is expected to visit the region in the coming days in an effort to ease the tensions in advance of the president's trip.

The Clinton administration is concerned that Netanyahu is looking for excuses to avoid any further redeployments, the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot reported, citing what it called "credible sources in Washington."

Bar-Illan said that in the letter to Clinton, dated Monday, the premier noted "four major areas of violations" of the Wye accord, including:

- Palestinian plans to unilaterally declare statehood next year;
- anti-Israel incitement in statements by Palestinian officials;
- the Palestinian Authority's position in an ongoing dispute over the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails; and
- statements by Palestinian officials regarding how the Palestinian National Council will deal with anti-Israel clauses in the Palestinian Covenant at a Dec. 14 meeting that Clinton is scheduled to attend.

The dispute over the prisoner releases fueled Wednesday's violence in Ramallah. Under the Wye accord, Israel agreed to free some 750 Palestinian prisoners. Of the 250 freed in the first batch, most were serving time for criminal offenses. The Palestinians were outraged that more political prisoners were not released.

Israel has refused to release any prisoners who have Jewish blood on their hands and, on Wednesday, Israel demanded that the Palestinian Authority acknowledge that

MIDEAST FOCUS

Avital suspended from post

A senior Israeli diplomat was suspended from her post for two weeks amid allegations that she leaked a classified Foreign Ministry document regarding the peace process.

According to the allegations against her, Colette Avital provided journalists with a document outlining possible Israeli reactions to a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state. Avital, a former consul general to New York and former ambassador to Portugal, denied the allegations.

Peace Now protesters arrested

Israeli police arrested Peace Now demonstrators who tried to block a group of land developers from touring the controversial Har Homa site in southeastern Jerusalem. The tour came before a deadline at the end of December to submit bids for building there. Groundbreaking at the site in March 1997 triggered an 18-month-long stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Legal euthanasia performed

What is believed to be Israel's first legal euthanasia was performed in October, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

The euthanasia was conducted by a member of the Israel Medical Association's board of ethics for Etai Arad, 49, a former fighter pilot who suffered from a degenerative muscle disease and who waged a lengthy legal battle for the right to die. Arad's request had been approved by an Israeli court.

Dig sites closed

Most archaeological digs in Israel were closed down after a ruling by the Supreme Court. The Israel Antiquities Authority, which oversees archaeological digs, made the move after the country's high court ruled that the government must pay for pre-development excavations that search for ancient remains.



Daily News Bulletin

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Israel did not commit to releasing terrorists as part of the Wye accord.

Israel also called on the self-rule government to stop incitement against Israel and to punish those responsible for the disturbances.

Israeli officials said Wednesday's announcement was prompted in part by an outbreak of violence that day near the West Bank town of Ramallah.

Israeli troops opened fire on Palestinian protesters after the demonstrators beat two Israelis, one of them a soldier, and set fire to their car.

The protesters were demanding the release of some 2,500 Palestinians held in Israeli jails.

In an assault captured by news cameras, the angry crowd began pelting the car with stones and smashing its windows. The driver ran off after a large rock struck him in the face. The soldier was then dragged from the car and beaten for close to a minute before he ran off, his head bleeding.

As the attack took place, some in the crowd shouted "Yahudi, Yahudi" — the Arabic word for Jew.

In a separate incident, an Arab street-cleaner was murdered Wednesday morning in the mixed Jerusalem neighborhood of Abu Tor. Police believe the assailant was a Jewish right-wing extremist.

During the funeral of Osama Natche, a father of six, disturbances and rock-throwing broke out in eastern Jerusalem. A number of Palestinians were detained. □

Poland wants to try British Jew for alleged role in killing war hero

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — A 79-year-old Jewish woman living in England is facing possible extradition to Poland for her alleged role in prosecuting and executing a leading Polish war hero more than 40 years ago.

Polish Justice Minister Hanna Suchowka has reportedly asked the British authorities to extradite Helena Brus to face charges of falsifying evidence and wrongful arrest in her role as a chief prosecutor in Poland's Stalinist show trials during the 1950s.

The Polish authorities claim that Helena Wolinska, as she was then known, ordered the arrest of Gen. Emil Fieldorf, a former leader of the anti-Communist Polish resistance movement, in 1951 because he had refused to collaborate with the new Communist regime in Poland. The Polish authorities now allege that Fieldorf was falsely accused of having killed Soviet soldiers and Communists.

He was executed one year after his 1952 trial, but he was posthumously cleared of all charges when the Communist regime collapsed in Poland in 1989.

Brus, who has lived in Britain for 26 years, is now a British citizen and married to a retired Oxford University professor. She has denied the charges, which carry a 10-year jail term. Speaking from her Oxford home, she described the allegations as a "shameful pack of absurd lies."

"I welcome the news about the extradition request because I will at last be able to give the real answer — to reveal in front of unbiased people the absurdity of the allegations against me," she said.

"It makes me furious. I don't give a damn about the Polish authorities, but I am upset about the attitude of those in England," she said.

Brus has refused to discuss her role in the Stalinist trials, but said she had served in the Polish Resistance during World War II.

"I came from the Warsaw Ghetto," she said, "and was in the underground movement, which is how I survived."

Brus, who has lived in England for 26 years, is reluctant to return to Poland because she does not believe she will get a fair trial there. She said she wants to answer the charges in Britain. There were reports that Poland would decide whether to extradite Brus by the end of the week.

Janusz Palus, a spokesman for the Polish military prosecutor, said Brus had contravened Communist-era law by holding the general for more than six months without charge. □

JEWISH WORLD

Poland vows to remove crosses

Poland's prime minister pledged to remove "as soon as possible" the crosses erected earlier this year outside the site of the Auschwitz death camp. Fundamentalist Catholics set up the crosses to mark a place where a massacre of Poles occurred during World War II.

Anti-extremism bill planned

The Russian government is set to introduce legislation against political extremism.

The bill, which comes in the wake of recent anti-Semitic statements by Communist lawmaker Albert Makashov and Nikolai Kondratenko, the governor of the southern Russian region of Krasnodar, obliges parties to disavow extremist statements by their members or risk being banned. Meanwhile, a Russian Jewish legislator walked out of the country's lower house of Parliament, saying he could no longer sit in the same room as Makashov.

Heirs sue Paris museum

The heirs of a Jewish art collector sued one of Paris' leading art museums for the return of a painting.

The heirs of Alfonse Kann sued the Georges Pompidou Center for Georges Braque's "The Guitar Player," which the museum purchased in 1981. A museum official was quoted as saying the painting had been bought in "good faith."

Swiss ready to host conference

Switzerland said it is prepared to host an international conference on the fight against racism and anti-Semitism pervading the Internet.

Thomas Borer, the Swiss government's leading trouble-shooter on Holocaust issues, said such a conference "would send an important signal showing that the participants are committed to learning from the past and to fighting anti-Semitic and racial hatred."

Two dynasties marry

Thousands of fervently Orthodox Jews celebrated the marriage of two members of dynastic Chasidic families in Jerusalem.

The groom was the son of the Gur Rebbe, while the bride was the granddaughter of the Rabbi of Lublin.

Cross erected in Cincinnati

The Ku Klux Klan erected a cross in downtown Cincinnati. The group, which was jeered by protesters, has a 10-day permit from the city. The Klan began erecting a cross in the city after a Jewish group put up a menorah in 1990.

Former Swiss bank guard gets four-year scholarship

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — The Swiss security guard who prevented the shredding of vital Holocaust-era bank records has been awarded a full four-year scholarship at a private American university.

During his studies at Chapman University in Southern California, Christoph Meili and his family will be supported by a group of Holocaust survivors and the Jewish community.

Meili was making his rounds as a night watchman at the Union Bank of Switzerland in January 1997 when he discovered the Holocaust-era documents headed for the shredder.

Meili later stated that he was shocked to discover that the documents included financial records regarding bank accounts and other assets belonging to European Jews, many of whom had perished in the Holocaust.

He secretly turned over some of the records to a Jewish organization in Zurich — a move that created a storm of controversy in Switzerland, cost Meili his job and forced him to flee the country because of threats on his life.

In May 1997, Meili testified about some of the documents he had saved at a hearing of the U.S. Senate Banking Committee.

Two months later, President Clinton signed into law a bill unanimously adopted by Congress granting permanent U.S. residency status to Meili, his wife and their two children.

He subsequently found work as a hotel doorman in Manhattan, but told reporters that he hoped one day to attend college.

Last March, he flew to California to speak at a Whittier Law School conference on gold looted by the Nazis — and unwittingly took the first step toward realizing his ambition.

Among his listeners were William Elperin, president of the 1939 Club, an organization of mostly Polish Holocaust survivors and their families, and Marilyn Harran, professor of religion at Chapman University and founder of the school's Holocaust education program.

As a result of their efforts, the university provided the four-year scholarship, covering annual tuition costs of \$18,000, and the 1939 Club is offering living expenses for up to five years for Meili, his wife and two young children.

Meili will start his studies next fall at the 130-year-old university, which enrolls about 2,200 students. □

Soccer fans sport anti-Semitic banners

ROME (JTA) — The president of Rome's Jewish community said local Jews must react to an outbreak of anti-Semitism that occurred at a soccer game here last weekend.

Sandro Di Castro made the comments after a match between arch-rival teams Roma and Lazio, during which fans displayed banners deriding the other team's fans with anti-Semitic slogans.

"Auschwitz Is Your Homeland, the Ovens Are Your Homes," read a banner unfurled in the stands by Lazio fans. Roma fans in turn displayed an anti-Semitic sign that used Nazi and Holocaust imagery.

"We've been fighting against this for years, but we don't get anywhere. It's high time to put an end to it," said Vittorio Pavoncello, the Rome Jewish community board member in charge of sports activities.

During the past decade, soccer fans in several European countries have occasionally used racist and anti-Semitic slogans to denigrate their opponents.

"It's a very serious matter that can't pass unobserved," said Di Castro. "Maybe it is just the work of a handful of idiots, but nonetheless the enormity of the question is clear." □

World leaders agree to step up Holocaust restitution, education

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish officials have called for action — and not merely deliberation — as representatives of 44 nations gathered in Washington for an international conference examining the fate of Holocaust-era assets.

The State Department and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum convened the conference this week to focus on a range of looted assets not covered by last year's London conference on Nazi gold — namely, artworks, unpaid insurance claims and Jewish communal property.

But, in a larger sense, Jewish leaders, Holocaust survivors, historians and government leaders who have been seeking over the last few years to write what has been called the last chapter of the Holocaust were looking to the conference as a gauge of the international community's commitment to completing the historical record and providing survivors with a long-delayed measure of justice.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright opened the conference Tuesday with an appeal to the nations gathered to bring closure by the end of the century to the unresolved financial matters of the Holocaust by opening all archives, returning Jewish property and paying all claims.

"Whether we're seeking the payment of life insurance to families of those who perished in the camps, researching art ripped from the walls of the museum in Warsaw or weighing compensation for a synagogue reduced to ashes in Czechoslovakia, the moral imperative is the same," Albright said. She struck an emotional and deeply personal note as well, invoking the memory of her Jewish grandparents who died in the Holocaust.

"I think of the blood that is in my family veins," said the Czech-born Albright, who was raised Catholic but has said she discovered her Jewish lineage only last year. "Does it matter what kind of blood it is? It shouldn't. It is just blood that does its job. But it mattered to Hitler and that matters to us all, because that is why 6 million Jews died."

Her voice breaking, she recalled the "innocent, irreplaceable people, people who loved and enriched life with their warmth, their smiles and the embrace of their arms, people whose lives ended horribly and far too soon." She added that the research and restitution efforts are "about much more than gold and art and insurance; it's about remembering that no one's blood is less or more precious than our own."

The hundreds of delegates gathered at the State Department gave her a standing ovation, and many said afterward they were deeply moved by her words linking her personal history to the work before them. The speech marked Albright's most extensive public reflection to date about her Jewish heritage — a subject, she said, "for which I have not yet found, and may never find, exactly the right words."

At the outset, it remained unclear to what extent the four-day conference, which was not intended as a decision-making forum, would succeed in prodding countries along the path toward full disclosure of their handling of Jewish assets and providing restitution. Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Congress, urged the delegates to adopt "practical and immediate

proposals to secure financial restitution."

He warned against having another Bermuda Conference, referring to a 1943 gathering dealing with the issue of Jewish refugees that is widely regarded as a sham. "Let us establish an ongoing mechanism to verify that practical steps are indeed being taken, for this effort must not end with this conference," said Bronfman.

There were some early signs of progress as the delegates, including representatives of Jewish organizations, met to discuss looted art, perhaps the most contentious issue. The U.S. delegation, led by Undersecretary of State Stuart Eizenstat, offered a set of principles aimed at forging an international consensus on how to match art with claims and resolve disputes over claims.

Russia, believed to be one of the leading repositories of looted artworks, surprised the conference when its representative pledged Moscow's cooperation to locate and return art that was taken by the Soviet regime as reparations for its losses during the war.

Eizenstat, who organized the conference, called the Russian declaration "a real breakthrough," adding that the other delegations also seemed to have a "collective sense of urgency."

The WJC, for its part, said it wants to see governments that are retaining looted art either return the works to their rightful heirs, auction them for the benefit of Holocaust survivors or provide appropriate compensation. It singled out France, which has acknowledged that it has more than 2,000 looted artworks, but has returned only a few.

French President Jacques Chirac subsequently rejected a WJC proposal to auction the artworks, adding that France would search for the rightful heirs. Earlier this week, a Monet painting hanging in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts that is on loan from France was revealed to have been stolen by the Nazis during the war.

Ronald Lauder, chairman of the board of the Museum of Modern Art and the head of WJC's commission on art recovery, told the delegates that an estimated 110,000 artworks worth between \$10 billion and \$30 billion are still missing, adding that he believes every large institution, art museum and private collection contains looted works.

But for all the focus on material claims, many of those involved in the restitution battle have been stressing that money must not be the last word on the Holocaust. Underscoring that point, officials from the United States, Sweden, Britain, Germany and Israel called on all the countries represented to agree to strengthen programs for Holocaust education, research and remembrance.

"Some countries have already begun various educational programs, and we applaud them for these efforts," said Miles Lerman, chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, who co-chaired the conference along with Eizenstat. "However, we must aim to create a global network of Holocaust education that will be both general and country-specific."

Meanwhile, as the United States calls on other nations to commit themselves to full transparency, it is also moving to take a closer look at its own dealings during and after World War II.

President Clinton on Monday named Bronfman as chairman of a newly created 12-member commission to examine Holocaust victims' assets in the United States. The commission will identify dormant bank accounts, artworks, insurance policies, looted gold and a range of other assets that made their way to the United States and will report to President Clinton by the end of next year. □