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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel arrests cult members

Israel ordered the deportation of members of a Denver-based apocalyptic Christian cult suspected of planning violent actions in the coming year to hasten the second coming of Jesus.

Capping a surveillance operation that lasted several months, Israeli security forces detained eight members of the cult, known as the Concerned Christians, and six of their children. Israeli officials began their surveillance of the cult after the FBI informed Israel in October that a number of its members were reported missing from the Denver area. [Page 4]

2 Israelis injured in West Bank

Two Israeli women were wounded when gunmen opened fire on a van traveling between Kiryat Arba and Hebron. A terrorist who recently escaped a Palestinian-run prison near Nablus was behind the attack, Palestinian sources were quoted as saying. Israel imposed a curfew on Hebron and blocked roads leading into the West Bank town following the attack.

Israel to allow civil marriages?

Israel's Chief Rabbinate is now prepared to allow civil marriages in certain problematic cases, mainly involving Russian immigrants. Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi-Doron told members of the Knesset Law Committee the chief rabbis would not object to such marriages in cases where they do not recognize either partner as Jewish, or in other cases where traditional Jewish marriage is impossible. Currently all Jewish marriages in Israel must be performed by Orthodox rabbis.

Albright refuses to meet Sharon

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright rejected a request for a meeting this week with Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon, according to the Israeli Embassy in Washington. Instead, Sharon will meet with U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross during his visit to New York.

U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv reopens

The U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv reopened after being evacuated last week amid warnings of a possible terrorist attack. American diplomatic officials said the threat was not as credible as initially believed.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Ex-prisoners of Zion fighting for pensions and their dignity

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When Vladimir Slepak languished in a Soviet prison between 1978 and 1982 for being involved in Zionist activities, he never imagined that someday he would have to fight for dignity against the Israeli government.

But today, Slepak, 71, lives with his wife in Israel on a meager pension of about \$670 a month, including about \$400 from the Jewish Agency for Israel, for the years he spent in prison.

About 900 people — including ex-prisoners of Zion and former activists from such countries as Iraq, Syria and Hungary — are facing economic hardship, and they are angry and insulted by a new law that was scheduled to go into effect Jan. 1.

The law was designed to improve their situation, but the former activists say it will only make matters worse for them.

Having received no help from the government or Knesset, they are now looking for support from the U.S. Jewish community.

"Israel used us when they needed us, and now they don't need us," said Slepak, explaining why he thinks their plight has been ignored.

"We think it's only fair to count our years of activism in the Soviet Union as work for the State of Israel and the people of Israel."

During the 1970s and 1980s, many of these immigrants now fighting for improved pension benefits were household names in American Jewish communities, which were at the forefront of their fight for freedom.

Today, many live in poverty.

"But money is only part of the issue," said Ida Nudel, 67, who was imprisoned for 16 years. "This is about our dignity and the dignity of the Jewish people."

"Not so many years ago, our stories were in the headlines of the Jewish press," she added. "The same people who are running the country were proud of us, they celebrated our birthdays and demonstrated on our behalf. And suddenly we became a nuisance — people of the past, people whose stories you cannot use now."

For Nudel, Slepak and many others who arrived in Israel late in their lives, the problem is particularly pressing.

Slepak arrived in Israel in 1987, three days before he turned 60. He had no way of working the requisite 10 years to accrue a pension before retirement.

Under the old system, the Jewish Agency for Israel administered pensions for needy former prisoners of Zion according to a formula based on how many years a retiree had been jailed. Slepak, for example, received about \$400 a month. The Slepaks also received another \$270 a month from the National Insurance Institute, which administers Israel's social security program that pays out a sum to all elderly people who have no fixed pension.

In 1994, the ex-prisoners tried to get a new law adopted that would transfer their pensions from the Jewish Agency to the state budget. They were afraid that budget cuts at the Jewish Agency threatened their security.

The original draft law was designed to boost their pensions by including payment for the years they worked as Zionist activists — even when they were not imprisoned. Several lawmakers objected, fearing this could open the door to a flood of new applicants.

The ex-prisoners insist they put themselves in extreme danger as activists. In

MIDEAST FOCUS

Stage set for early elections

Israel's Knesset gave final approval to a bill to dissolve the Parliament and hold early elections on May 17. The bill passed a first vote two weeks ago after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu acknowledged that his coalition was crumbling and agreed to dissolve his government.

Meanwhile, the Knesset also gave preliminary approval to a bill designed to make it harder for Israel to return the Golan Heights as part of a peace agreement with Syria. That bill, which still must pass two additional votes, calls in part for a national referendum on whether to cede the Golan to Syria.

Bids made for controversial land

Seven Israeli contractors submitted bids for construction of a controversial housing project in southeastern Jerusalem.

Housing Ministry officials plan to award the contract for construction at Har Homa to one of the contractors within two weeks, and they hope that construction of the first of 1,025 planned homes at the site could begin within a matter of months. Negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority ground to a halt for more than a year after bulldozers began clearing the site in March 1997.

Israel wounds Lebanese civilians

Israel wounded several Lebanese civilians in a raid on suspected Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon. Meanwhile, Israel said it killed a top Hezbollah bomb expert last week.

Barak's guard arrested

Israeli police arrested a security guard assigned to protect prime ministerial candidate Ehud Barak after the guard was heard saying that the Labor Party leader needed to be murdered. The man later said his comment was a "slip of the tongue" and he hadn't meant it.

addition, many had to forgo academic studies or pursuit of a profession when they went underground to elude the Soviet KGB.

Slepak estimates the law, as originally proposed, would cost the government about \$4 million a year.

But instead, a watered-down version was adopted this summer. Not only does the law ignore their years as Zionist activists, but it eliminates several additional benefits — such as reductions on municipal housing taxes and medical fees.

Under the new law, Slepak will receive about \$100 more than before, but he says the loss of the extra benefits actually leaves him worse off.

Ironically, the law was passed in a Knesset that has more Russian immigrant legislators than ever before.

The Yisrael Ba'Aliyah immigrants-rights party boasts seven Knesset members and is led by Trade Minister Natan Sharansky, arguably the most famous former prisoner of Zion.

The ex-prisoners accuse Sharansky of being too busy with affairs of state to address their situation.

"I am astonished" at Sharansky, said Yosef Mendelevitch, who spent 11 years in prison after hijacking a Soviet airplane in 1970.

"I would have expected him to make sure that the law would grant a respectable status for former prisoners of Zion."

Mendelevitch, 51, is today an Orthodox rabbi and president of the Zionist Forum, an apolitical umbrella group for Russian immigrants. He arrived in Israel in 1981 and has worked long enough to get a pension, so the law does not personally apply to him.

But like Nudel, he says this struggle is not just about money.

"For many years, prisoners of Zion have said not only is the money not sufficient, but the status we are given is degrading," said Mendelevitch.

He added that under the new law the pensions will be handled by the National Insurance Institute, which distributes welfare payments.

"Prisoners of Zion are simply not recognized as people who have done something important for the Jewish people. Rather, they are looked at as a welfare case. This is the root of the problem," he said.

Immigrant Absorption Minister Yuli Edelstein, also of Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, rejects the criticism.

"The idea of having a special law for prisoners of Zion is 30 years old," said Edelstein, who himself was imprisoned for three years in Russia between 1984 and 1987. "It took Yisrael Ba'Aliyah in the Knesset to get it pushed through."

Edelstein is aware of the flaws in the final version of the approved law and says he is working to change it.

Yet he says the current situation is still better than when the former prisoners were handled by the Jewish Agency.

"It is an illusion to think the Jewish Agency could continue to pay these pensions," he said.

Bobby Brown, the prime minister's adviser on Diaspora affairs, is also sympathetic, but does not offer concrete solutions.

"Their problem is legitimate and deserves a hearing," said Brown. "Those heroes of the Jewish people that were imprisoned or fought for Jewish rights should be guaranteed a certain minimum sustenance in their old age."

As a last resort, frustrated prisoners of Zion have turned to their friends in the U.S. Jewish community who supported their struggle in the 1970s and 1980s.

Some, such as Shoshana Cardin, past chairman of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, have sent letters to the government on behalf of the former prisoners.

Saying the ex-prisoners "put their lives on the line" for Israel, Cardin said she feels that "those who were unable to be employed in the former Soviet Union because of their activities should have benefits" in Israel for the years that they were denied employment.

Despite such statements of support, Slepak is not optimistic. Alluding to what he considers a tedious Israeli legislative process, he thinks it could take 10 years before any improvement is made to the law.

"But that will be too late," he said. "We might be dead then." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Swiss banks revolt against audit

Some Swiss regional banks have stopped paying for an audit of dormant accounts from the Holocaust era that are held in some of the banks, according to a Swiss newspaper.

The head of the commission conducting the audit, former U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, has reportedly appointed an ombudsman to look into the issue.

France sued over deportations

A French Jew whose parents were deported to Auschwitz is suing the French government and the country's national railway for his family's suffering and property losses.

Jean-Jacques Fraenkel charged that the deportation of French Jews during the war could not have been accomplished without the complicity of the Vichy government and the railway.

Pope speaks of Shoah lesson

Pope John Paul II referred to the Holocaust and the destruction of life during World War II as one of the tragic lessons of this century.

But the pope, speaking to thousands of worshipers who gathered at St. Peter's in Rome for the first Mass of 1999, also noted that this century had seen the passage of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A British Oskar Schindler?

A British diplomat who saved as many as 10,000 Jews from the Holocaust deserves official recognition from Israel, according to a British Jewish leader.

Lord Janner said Frank Foley should be designated one of the Righteous Among Nations by Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in recognition of Foley's efforts to rescue Jews from Nazi Germany during World War II.

As director of the British passport office in Berlin during the 1930s, Foley freely handed out visas to Jews in Germany and sheltered several in his home, Janner said in an open letter to officials with Yad Vashem.

Church-state issue tops 1998 list

Attempts to erode separation of church and state topped the Anti-Defamation League's top 10 list of issues affecting Jews in 1998. The Middle East peace process, hate crimes, Holocaust restitution and anti-Semitism in Russia also made the list.

Positive signs in the past year, according to the ADL, included the United States' crackdown on terrorism as well as the United Nations General Assembly's acknowledgment that anti-Semitism is a form of racism.

France prevents disputed Monet from going to exhibition in London

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — French authorities are preventing an oil painting by Impressionist Claude Monet from moving to a London exhibition because it is believed to have been looted by the Nazis.

Currently on loan to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, "Waterlilies" has been claimed by the descendants of Paul Rosenberg, a prominent Jewish art collector in prewar Paris.

The 1904 painting has an estimated value of some \$10 million.

"Waterlilies" was identified as a looted work in July by specialists at the Art Loss Register, a London-based international database of stolen art, after the widow of Rosenberg's son recorded it among a total of 58 works believed to have been looted from Rosenberg during World War II.

In August, "Waterlilies" was traced to an art museum in the northern French city of Caen.

It is now believed that the work was looted specifically for the personal collection of Nazi Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and was among 40,000 plundered pictures "of French origin" that were returned to the Allies after the war.

The legitimate owners of 2,085 of those works could not be traced and the paintings were then distributed to the Louvre in Paris and various provincial museums, with the acknowledgment that they had been "recovered" after the war.

Rosenberg, who died in 1959, is known to have had five Monets looted by the Nazis in September 1941.

"Waterlilies," one of 80 works that comprise the exhibition "Monet in the 20th Century," has been seen by more than 550,000 visitors to the Boston museum in recent weeks and was scheduled to be transferred to the Royal Academy of Art in London for the opening on Jan. 23.

French authorities will now return the work to the Caen museum, where it will remain until a final decision is made on its ownership.

French officials are said to be worried that a loophole in the British legal system could allow a disputed painting to be sent to a third country if a claim were made while the work was in London.

"Waterlilies" has been included in foreign exhibitions several times over the past 20 years, including a 1995 exhibition in Chicago. □

Holocaust money should be used to build future, says college president

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A president of a leading Israeli university has urged the world Jewish community to channel Holocaust restitution funds to programs that fight assimilation.

"The danger is that the money will be wasted and invested in the past, instead of being designated for the struggle for the Jewish future," the president of Bar-Illan University, Moshe Kaveh said, at a conference held this week on assimilation. He said the moneys from the funds should be spent on Jewish identity and education programs.

"Those who perished in the Holocaust would have wanted the money that was stolen from them to be donated to the struggle against the spiritual Holocaust taking place before our eyes," he said at the conference held at the school, which is located in a Tel Aviv suburb.

Meanwhile, a professor of contemporary Jewry said assimilation has reached a "historic record," with only about 25 percent of children of intermarried Jews in the United States defined by their parents as Jewish.

Professor Sergio DellaPergola of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem made the comments on Israel Radio before appearing on a conference panel. □

Ex-aide to Netanyahu says he will start a new party, too

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Vowing to dethrone Israel's "elitist establishment," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's former right-hand man launched a new political party this week.

The new immigrant-rights party launched Monday by Avigdor Lieberman is the latest in a flurry of new parties to emerge since the Knesset voted last month to call elections for May.

But political observers believe this party, unlike the others, is aimed at rallying support for the beleaguered premier.

The controversial director general of the Prime Minister's Office until his resignation in November 1997 launched the new Israel, Our Home Party with pledges to limit the power of the Supreme Court and cut back the police force.

Observers described Lieberman's populist rhetoric as dangerous, and Netanyahu distanced himself from the former Soviet emigre's attack on the Supreme Court.

A former bouncer known for his brusque manner, Lieberman railed against what he said was abuse of power in government, specifying the Jewish state's Supreme Court, attorney general and police.

"There is no doubt that the Supreme Court has more power than the prime minister," Lieberman said. "And the head of the Supreme Court was not even elected."

Lieberman, who has been the subject of police inquiries, lashed out at what he called an "administrative dictatorship" and vowed to strengthen the separation of powers among the legislative, judicial and executive branches to ensure that the government is "not dependent upon this kind of coalition or that."

An emigre from the former Soviet Union in 1979, Lieberman said his new party could draw voters who previously supported the Yisrael Ba'Aliyah immigrant-rights party.

Yisrael Ba'Aliyah won seven Knesset seats in its first political bid in the 1996 elections.

The head of that party, Trade Minister Natan Sharansky, has yet to take an official stand for or against Netanyahu in the upcoming elections.

In the past, some Likud members alleged that Lieberman used strong-arm tactics, including the use of potentially damaging videotapes, against Netanyahu rivals.

Some Likud officials used strong language to denounce him this week.

"Lieberman poses a danger to Israeli democracy," said Michael Eitan, a deputy minister.

"He moves in the company of criminals and is aided by them to attain his political goals."

Opposition legislators suggested that Lieberman's announcement was intended to serve as a front for Netanyahu, with Lieberman laying out a tough line that the premier himself could not afford to enunciate.

Yossi Sarid, leader of the left-wing Meretz Party, speculated that Lieberman might land a Cabinet position as a reward for his efforts on behalf of Netanyahu.

Sarid added that if a "destructive and violent person" like Lieberman could become justice minister or police minister, "we might as well turn off the lights and close the business." □

Israel arrests members of cult in move against Christian pilgrims

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With the countdown to the year 2000 already under way, Israel has taken its first action to stem possible disturbances by some of the hundreds of thousands of Christian pilgrims expected to visit here to mark the millennium.

On Sunday, Israeli police arrested members of a Denver-based apocalyptic Christian cult suspected of planning violent actions in the coming year in order to try to bring about the second coming of Jesus.

Capping a surveillance operation that lasted several months, Israeli security forces detained eight members of the cult, known as the Concerned Christians, as well as six children.

The police roundup was the first by a special task force, established in conjunction with the Shin Bet domestic security service, to deal with the possibility that dangerous elements will be among the hundreds of thousands of Christian pilgrims expected to flock to the Holy Land for celebrations marking the second millennium since the birth of Jesus.

Israeli security officials began their investigation of the cult members after receiving information from the FBI that 78 members of the cult had disappeared from their homes in the Denver area in October.

At a detention hearing Monday for three of the cult members, police said the suspects pose a threat to public order and could face charges of conspiracy to commit a crime.

The Interior Ministry, meanwhile, called for the deportation of all the cultists.

The head of the Concerned Christians cult, Monte Kim Miller, 44, has declared that he will die in the streets of the Israeli capital of Jerusalem in 1999.

Miller was not among those arrested by Israeli police.

According to reports, the cult members did not resist when police raided their homes in the Jerusalem suburbs of Mevasseret Zion and Motza.

One member of the cult was said to have denied allegations of planned violence or collective suicide.

Israelis who lived next door to the cult members described their neighbors as polite, but added that they tended to keep to themselves.

Aliza Hanouni, who lived next door to the house rented in Mevasseret Zion, was quoted as saying that there was something that did not sit right with her about her neighbors, but she could not place it.

Her husband, Nir, said he became wary when he noticed that his neighbors did not appear to be going to work and their children did not attend school.

In anticipation of problems connected to the millennium, Israeli officials created a task force — including representatives from the police, Shin Bet and Mossad foreign intelligence service — to monitor those who may engage in acts of violence connected to the mass pilgrimage.

Said Tourism Minister Moshe Katzav, who heads a ministerial committee on events connected with the year 2000, "We are continuing to follow the matter and will take the necessary steps. We want the year 2000 to pass quietly." □