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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Orthodox, Reform clash in Israel

Israeli police restrained fervently Orthodox demonstrators as a delegation of American Reform rabbis held a mixed prayer service at the Western Wall. Meanwhile, fervently Orthodox leaders in Israel are raising money to cover penalties that the High Court of Justice is imposing on the heads of some local religious councils. [Page 3]

U.S. asks Arafat to show restraint

The U.S. State Department called on the Palestinians not to declare statehood or make any other statements on the issue. The call came on the eve of Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's visit to the United States. President Clinton is scheduled to meet with Arafat on Thursday.

Poll: U.S. voters support state

American voters support U.S. recognition of Palestinian statehood by a 2-1 margin, according to a Jan. 28 poll conducted for the Arab American Institute. Among the 1,011 respondents, 54 percent responded yes when posed a question on the issue. Some 21 percent said no and 24 percent said they were not sure. The poll has a 3 percent margin of error.

Moscow mayor vows crackdown

Moscow's mayor vowed to crack down on political extremism after Russia's largest ultranationalist group marched in the capital. Yuri Luzhkov, a possible contender for the Russian presidency, also lashed out at his own police force for failing to prevent the march by Russian National Unity, whose members favor black shirts and Nazi-style armbands. Meanwhile, Luzhkov last week ordered that neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic newspapers not be sold in a central Moscow square near the Kremlin.

Holocaust legislation introduced

U.S. Reps. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) and David McIntosh (R-Ind.) introduced legislation to ensure that any settlements paid to Holocaust survivors and their heirs are exempt from federal income taxes. Allowing survivors to keep the entirety of the sums they are being paid as compensation for plundered assets is "nothing less than common decency," Nadler said. Similar bills have been introduced in several states to exempt the settlements from state income taxes.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Intense speculation underscores Jordan's deep political significance

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — In almost any other circumstances, Jordan might be an insignificant speck on the map.

It has no oil wealth, no economic clout, no military might.

But a quirk of geography has placed the Hashemite kingdom at the epicenter of one of the most explosive pieces of real estate on earth. Bordering Iraq, Syria and Israel, it has acquired a strategic importance that is out of proportion to what should be its innate significance.

So the political upheavals that swept through the kingdom during the past few weeks — the triumphal return of King Hussein after six months of cancer treatment at the Mayo Clinic and his race back to Minnesota; the dumping of his brother Hassan as heir apparent and the appointment of his son Abdullah as crown prince — made the world sit up and take notice.

The upheavals, both unexpected and unpredicted, sent the region's military, intelligence and political analysts into overdrive.

Publicly, the concern of neighboring leaders took the form of a flood of messages to the royal palace in Amman, expressing sympathy for the king's medical setback and good wishes to Crown Prince Abdullah.

Privately, there was a flurry of speculation about the reasons for his unexpected decision to depose Hassan, the likelihood of the king's survival and his return to power, the chances of Jordan surviving King Hussein and the positions his new heir might adopt.

Underscoring the importance that the United States ascribes to the well being of the Hashemite throne, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright interrupted a diplomatic swing through the region last week to make a high-profile 90-minute stopover in Jordan to wish Abdullah well and reiterate Washington's commitment to the kingdom.

She was also anxious, according to diplomatic sources, to determine whether Washington could continue to rely on Jordan's overt and covert support of U.S. policy on Iraq.

The answer was yes.

Apart from what is regarded as a brief aberration when Jordan appeared to side with Iraq during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis — a posture dictated by the kingdom's overarching economic dependence on Baghdad — Hussein has led Jordan down a thoroughly pro-Western path.

The most tangible expression of Jordan's commitment to the West, and Hussein's personal affinity with Britain and the United States, was the 1994 peace treaty with Israel, unencumbered by the ambiguities and inherent hostility in Israel's pacts with Egypt and the Palestinians.

Jordan's peace treaty with Israel was, indeed, merely the formalization of longstanding military and intelligence cooperation supported by a powerful sense of mutual self-interest and overlaid by regular secret contacts between Hussein and a succession of Israeli leaders.

For Israel, Jordan represents vital strategic depth against Iraq in the East.

For Jordan, Israel's support for a strong Hashemite throne represents a guarantee of its very survival against a predatory Syria, a menacing Iraq and the national aspirations of over-zealous Palestinians, who comprise some 60 percent of Jordan's

MIDEAST FOCUS

Netanyahu scrambles on budget

The government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scrambling to secure a majority for the nation's 1999 budget before the Knesset recesses later this week. The opposition Labor Party is calling for passage of an interim budget until June, when the government voted into power in the May elections can draw up the budget for the remainder of the year.

Arabs call for terrorism parley

Ministers from the Palestinian Authority and seven Arab countries called for an international conference on terrorism.

The ministers made their call after a two-day meeting in Jordan, where they pledged to cooperate in the fight against terrorism.

The gathering included representatives from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Sudan, Algeria, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

Hamas founder launches strike

The founder of Hamas launched a hunger strike to protest the detention of what he described as "political prisoners" held in Palestinian jails. Sheik Ahmed Yassin said he was joining a fast begun last week by more than 60 prisoners held in a West Bank jail. Human rights groups have criticized the Palestinian Authority for arresting members of opposition groups, many of them from Hamas.

Court rules against ex-smokers

An Israeli court ruled that 80 smokers could not file a class-action suit against the Dubek cigarette company.

The plaintiffs will instead have to seek damages on a case-by-case basis, the court ruled.

The plaintiffs had sought some \$243,000 apiece, charging that the Israeli manufacturer had failed to adequately inform the public of the dangers posed by smoking.

population. Today, two central question occupy the minds of analysts, both within the region and beyond: Will the Hashemite throne survive Hussein? And, if it does, in what direction will Abdullah lead the vulnerable kingdom?

Hussein, who has occupied the Jordanian throne since 1952, learned his survival craft on the job, acquiring skills that allowed him to defeat a bloody Palestinian attempt to topple his throne in 1970, resist pressure from Damascus to lapse into a Lebanese-style Syrian protectorate, escape a dozen assassination attempts, maintain contacts with Israel and balance competing domestic interests.

One irreversible misstep along that tortuous, 47-year path was his decision to enter the 1967 Six-Day War against Israel, a decision that cost him the West Bank and Jerusalem.

After that traumatic event, Hussein paid lip service to pan-Arabism but never bought into the philosophy, preferring to follow a path of strict pragmatism.

In a kingdom that is so identified with the person of Hussein, Abdullah, an army general whose skills have been honed in martial rather than political arts, will have to display some fancy diplomatic footwork if he is to succeed in winning the allegiance and affection that his father achieved from both the power elites and the grass roots.

In the past, the 37-year-old Abdullah had shown little interest in political affairs, but he is known to support the mix of reform, modernization and democracy that his father has carefully started to institute.

The new heir gave some indication of his future direction in his maiden address as regent last Friday when he told a conference of Arab ministers in Amman that he was committed to working for "comprehensive peace and security in the Middle East."

And, in a clearly coded message to Syria and Iraq, he warned that the army would continue to deal rigorously with attempts at terrorism and subversion.

Analysts assessing Abdullah's chances of success believe he holds two strong cards: First, his military power base will be a key element in crushing internal and external subversion; second, his wife's Palestinian origins will go some way toward assuaging Jordan's potentially irredentist Palestinian majority.

Why, then, are Israeli analysts cautious when assessing the long-term prospects for the survival of the Hashemite throne?

Much, they say, will depend on the ability of the royal family to bury the poisonous rivalries that led to last month's dramatic upheavals and present a united face to their subjects. "They must hang together or they will hang separately," warned one leading Jordan-watcher.

Already Abdullah has demonstrated that he has inherited some of his father's sharp political instincts, showing an acute sensitivity to the need for family unity — in public, at least.

On his few public appearances since taking on the mantle of heir, he has been surrounded by members of his immediate and extended family.

This was intended to send a message to both the fiercely loyal Bedouin tribes and the less-predictable Palestinian communities that, despite the recent turbulence, the Hashemite family has united behind his leadership.

In the coming days and weeks, however, his authority will be tested by Syria, which has a long record of attempting to subvert the Hashemite throne through its own agents and through its influence within some Palestinian factions. And it will be tested by Iraq's Saddam Hussein, for whom Jordan remains an essential conduit to the outside world.

The stakes are high and only one thing is certain in this dynamic region where the young prince finds himself in virtual power: Abdullah does not have much time to learn the skills that are necessary to finesse the various forces at work in and around the Hashemite kingdom.

His success, and the survival of the Hashemites in Jordan, will depend on restoring a measure of family harmony and the swift acquisition of diplomatic skills.

It is a tall order, and Abdullah does not have the luxury of a period of reflection and introspection.

According to Jordanian analyst Salameh Ni'imat: "Jordan has always had, and continues to have, only two choices: to be a key player in the region, or to be a playing field for others."



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JEWISH WORLD

Alleged camp guard released

Jewish groups are denouncing the Croatian government for releasing a woman accused of having been a concentration camp guard during World War II. Croatia said it could find no evidence that Nadia Sakic had been a guard at Jasenovac. The trial of Sakic's husband, Dinko, who was allegedly a commander at the Jasenovac camp, is expected to start in March.

Jewish scholars gather in Russia

Dozens of scholars and university students from across the former Soviet Union and abroad gathered in Moscow for a three-day Jewish studies conference.

The conference is a hallmark of the post-Communist revival of Jewish studies, which are currently being taught to some 2,500 students in more than 70 universities in the former Soviet Union.

Neo-Nazis mar Russian meeting

A group of youths chanting Stalin's name and making Nazi salutes disrupted a liberal party's convention in Moscow over the weekend.

The outburst erupted when the leader of the Democratic Choice of Russia, former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, spoke out against recent displays of anti-Semitism among the Communist Party's leadership.

Some delegates attending the meeting helped to forcibly remove the youths from the hall. A television report showed Alexander Osovtsov, a party activist who is also the executive vice president of the Russian Jewish Congress, fighting with the youths.

South African attack condemned

South Africa's deputy president recently condemned anti-Semitism and political violence.

Thabo Mbeki made his comments at a Union of Orthodox Synagogues benefit dinner in Cape Town last week in the wake of a flurry of violence, including a December terrorist attack on a synagogue in Cape Town.

"It is important that we deal firmly with the abuse of any religious faith and the efforts to hide behind any religious fundamentalism to pursue objectives that threaten any of our communities," said Mbeki.

Malaysia bans 'Prince of Egypt'

Malaysian censors banned the film "The Prince of Egypt" without explaining their decision.

The move against the animated depiction of the life of Moses comes five years after Malaysia refused to show the Holocaust film "Schindler's List" because filmmaker Steven Spielberg, who also made "The Prince of Egypt," refused to make the cuts requested by the country's censors.

Police restrain Orthodox Jews as U.S. delegation prays at wall

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The gap separating the various streams of Judaism has again become all too apparent.

In a scene reminiscent of similar incidents at the Western Wall during the past few years, Israeli police restrained fervently Orthodox demonstrators Monday as a delegation of American Reform rabbis held a mixed prayer service there.

Dozens of the demonstrators scuffled with police and heckled the worshipers as the service took place in a cordoned-off area of the Western Wall Plaza.

One member of the delegation — Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, the executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America — said religious intolerance had made it necessary for his group to pray under police protection.

"This is a disgrace, that a group of Reform rabbis is penned up in this cage," he said. "This area does not belong to them," he added, referring to the protesters.

A day before the prayer service was held, a coalition of American Orthodox Jews known as Am Echad, or One Nation, issued a statement decrying what it described as the "confrontation" created by the Reform delegation.

And in an ad appearing in Sunday's New York Times, Am Echad charged that U.S. Reform and Conservative leaders "want you to believe that Israel's Orthodox parties don't want to recognize American Jews as Jews."

"Far from undermining Jewish unity, Israel's Orthodox parties are trying to maintain it," the ad continued. "Let's cool the rhetoric and present our points of view with honesty and respect."

The Reform delegation's visit came a week after the Knesset passed legislation aimed at blocking the appointment of Reform and Conservative representatives to local religious councils. During their visit, the delegation plans to meet with Israeli political leaders, including the centrist party's candidate for prime minister, Yitzhak Mordechai, who was criticized by liberal politicians after voting in favor of the religious councils legislation last week.

In a related development, fervently Orthodox leaders are raising money to cover penalties that the High Court of Justice is imposing on the heads of some local religious councils. The court is imposing the fines on those council leaders who ignore a recent court ruling ordering them to allow Conservative and Reform representatives to attend council meetings.

Last week, the court fined the head of the Jerusalem council some \$7,300 for failing to abide by the ruling. □

Chess legend spews anti-Semitic tirade

BUDAPEST (JTA) — Chess legend Bobby Fischer has come out of hiding.

In retrospect, maybe he shouldn't have.

Fischer launched into an anti-Semitic rant during a rare live interview on Hungarian national public radio, prompting station officials to pull the plug.

During last week's interview, Fischer, 55, began waving around photocopies of checks and said, "Those damn Jews are persecuting me. They are ripping me off all the time."

Ignoring the interviewer's questions about chess, Fischer also claimed that Jews had invented the Holocaust to make money. When the interviewer asked why he was saying such things, noting that Fischer is himself Jewish, the former chess champion said, "Shall we go to the toilets and prove it?"

When the interview was later repeated, Fischer's anti-Semitic comments were omitted.

Fischer has long been regarded as an eccentric genius. One of the world's greatest chess players, he wrested the world chess championship away from the Soviet Union's Boris Spassky in a 1972 match. But he lost the title when he refused to show up to defend his title three years later. □

Russian anti-Semitism spurs increasing international probe

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — As the international community continues to probe Russian extremism, the issue of anti-Semitism among Russia's political leaders — and how the country's government should respond to it — is flaring up again.

Responding to accusations that his party is anti-Semitic, the leader of the Communist Party took a thinly veiled swipe at Jews and other minorities once again this week. Speaking to journalists in Paris, Gennady Zyuganov said people with "non-Russian-sounding last names" are undermining Russia's "distinctive character."

Zyuganov also condemned "those forces that are consciously stirring up ethnic conflicts" in Russia and again blamed Russia's troubles on ethnic non-Russians in previous governments.

Zyuganov's comments came just before the U.N. commissioner for human rights announced he is launching a probe into anti-Semitic remarks recently made by members of the Russian Communist Party. The commissioner plans to issue a report on the matter in March, according to the World Jewish Congress.

They also came as U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made a two-day visit to Moscow. During her trip, she said anti-Semitism is one of the critical issues facing Russia as it confronts its ongoing economic crisis.

Albright offered this assessment during a meeting with lawmakers, religious leaders and representatives of human rights groups. She also said the United States is looking closely at how Russia handles the issues of religious freedom and political extremism. Jewish leaders and human rights groups in Russia and the United States applauded Albright's effort to raise the issue during her visit.

Albright's "forceful and principled defense of human rights and civil society as central to Russia's development does great honor to our entire nation," said Yosef Abramowitz, president of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews.

Jewish groups are speaking out with increased urgency on anti-Semitism in Russia, which has increased since Russia's economy went into a tailspin in the middle of last year.

The Anti-Defamation League and the National Conference on Soviet Jewry recently presented Albright with a "White Paper" in which they detailed the rise of anti-Semitism, as well as the steps, including the passage of a strong hate crimes law, they believe the Russian government should take. Russia has hate crimes legislation on the books, but it is vague and has not been applied.

For its part, the American Jewish Committee recently released a report, "Russian Jewish Elites and Anti-Semitism," detailing the resurgence of anti-Semitism in light of the ascendancy of many Jewish business and political figures in Russia.

Given the prominence of some Jews in the previous administrations of Russian President Boris Yeltsin, it is difficult to imagine that Zyuganov was excluding Jews from his attack.

The Communist leader has several times referred to the disproportionately high percentage of Jews in Russia's government and has condemned Zionism, which he said is part of a global conspiracy.

As Russia attempts to cope with its gravest economic crisis since the fall of Communism in 1991, Zyuganov is not the only

lawmaker to make anti-Semitic slurs.

Two hard-line Communist lawmakers created controversy last fall when they each made anti-Semitic comments blaming the economic crisis on Jews.

The lawmakers, Viktor Ilyukhin and Albert Makashov, recently announced that they would split from the Communists in parliamentary elections that are slated for December.

Deputies said they would campaign under the banner of the Movement in Support of the Army, which Ilyukhin now heads. Ironically, the movement was created by Lev Rokhlin, a Russian Jewish general. Rokhlin, who emerged as a hero during Russia's war with Chechnya and later became known as a bitter critic of Yeltsin, was shot dead last summer.

Ilyukhin has said his group would pursue a common program with the Communists.

Meanwhile, scant progress has been reported in the Kremlin's campaign against political extremism and anti-Semitism. Last fall, Russian leaders, including Yeltsin, promised to curb hate crimes in the wake of an outcry that began after the Communist Party, the largest bloc in Parliament, blocked a motion in the Duma, the body's lower house to censure Makashov for his anti-Semitic comments.

This week, Russian prosecutors opened a criminal investigation of Makashov. The move came after prosecutors said a commission of experts appointed by the Federal Security Service, the successor to the KGB, found no evidence to support charges of anti-Semitism against the lawmaker.

Meanwhile, Nikolai Bordyuzha, secretary of the Security Council, called on the leaders of the Russian mass media to play a more responsible role in the dissemination of information on political extremism.

Last week, Russian authorities launched an inspection in some areas of the country to confiscate printed, audio and video materials aimed at "propagating fascism, inciting social, racial, ethnic and religious discord."

And earlier this month, the Russian Cabinet approved a draft bill that would outlaw statements that fuel ethnic strife.

The new bill seeks to make political parties responsible for members who make extremist statements. According to Justice Minister Pavel Krashenninikov, a party must either disavow such statements made by its members or face an official ban.

Experts say, however, that the bill has little chance of passing Parliament in its current form. The Communist-dominated Duma is expected to oppose the bill, which is seen by Communist lawmakers as being targeted mainly against their party.

Despite all the grim news, the results of a recent opinion poll suggest that a large-scale media campaign against extremism and ultranationalism is yielding some results.

According to the nationwide poll of 1,500 Russians, 36 percent of the respondents said fascists — a term used in the Russian media that encompasses ultranationalists and anti-Semites — provoke their greatest outrage and irritation. A similar poll in 1997 showed that 24 percent of Russians were outraged by fascists. Four percent of the respondents showed intolerance to Jews, compared with 3 percent in 1997.

The poll was conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, a leading Moscow polling firm. No margin of error was reported.

In an attempt to shed more light on the situation, the ADL is conducting its own poll of anti-Semitic attitudes in Russia. Results are expected to be released within a few months. □