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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Netanyahu's allies fare poorly

Allies of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fared worse than expected in the Likud Party's primaries, prompting some Likud officials to call the results a slap in the face to the premier.

Defense Minister Moshe Arens, whom Netanyahu had described prior to the primary as part of his "leading team," ranked 26th in the party's list of Knesset candidates. Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon dropped several slots to eighth place. [Page 3]

Clinton, Assad meet at funeral

President Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad held a brief meeting at the funeral of Jordan's King Hussein. When Clinton asked him to support Jordan in the wake of the monarch's death, Assad "sort of said yes," according to Clinton's national security adviser, Sandy Berger.

Meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright warned Iraq not to intimidate Jordan now that it has a new, untested leader on the throne. "We have made it clear to Saddam Hussein that were he to threaten any of his neighbors it would be a great mistake," Albright told the Associated Press. "And that goes for Jordan."

War criminal given house arrest

Convicted Nazi war criminal Erich Priebke was given the right to serve out the rest of his life sentence under house arrest. A Rome court cited his poor health in its decision allowing him to leave a military prison in the Italian capital.

Priebke was convicted for his role in the March 1944 massacre of 335 Romans, including about 75 Jews, at the Ardeatine Caves south of Rome. Another former SS official, Karl Haas, was granted house arrest last year after being convicted on the same charges.

Holocaust film gets Oscar nods

A tragicomedy about the Holocaust became the first film in 30 years to receive Oscar nominations for both best picture and best foreign film.

Roberto Benigni, the driving force behind "Life is Beautiful," also received nominations for best director, best actor and best screenplay.

A film on the Holocaust in Hungary, "The Longest Days," received a nomination in the documentary category.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Rabbi pledges Christian funds to bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Up to \$2 million donated by evangelical Christians will redeem the Jews of Kwara, Ethiopia, and bring them to Israel.

The sum has been promised by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, founder and president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews.

His offer has been accepted by the government of Israel, an official confirmed.

Eckstein's offer came with two conditions: that all the Kwara Jews — believed to number between 2,500 and 3,000 — be brought to Israel within six months, and that the source of the money be publicly acknowledged.

Between 1984 and today, an estimated 45,000 Ethiopians have arrived in Israel, including some 14,000 during Israel's dramatic Operation Solomon in 1991.

But those from the remote northern region of Kwara were left off official Operation Solomon lists because of a long-standing feud among Jewish religious leaders in Ethiopia.

The following year, some 3,500 Jews from Upper Kwara made their way to the Jewish state.

However, the 3,000 or so in neighboring Lower Kwara were essentially forgotten. After an article in The Jerusalem Report last summer brought their plight to public attention, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quickly pledged to bring them to Israel.

Unlike the estimated 15,000 Falash Mura, who also seek entry to Israel but whose Jewishness is in question, the Kwara Jews are recognized by the Israeli government as Jewish.

But little has happened to bring them to the Jewish state, say those involved with the issue.

Fewer than 200 have been given permission to go to Israel from Lower Kwara, and an estimated 1,000 Jews from that region are living in squalor just outside of the northern Ethiopian city of Gondar, say some who have visited the area in recent months.

The rest remain in Lower Kwara, though more have begun to sell their farmland and huts to neighbors and stream toward Gondar, said Eckstein, a Chicago-based Orthodox rabbi whose longtime work in interfaith affairs led to his involvement with the evangelical community.

Last October, Eckstein quietly approached representatives of the Jewish Agency for Israel with his offer.

The agency, which flies Jews to Israel once they are granted permission for entry to Israel — and then helps absorb them — has called on the government to expedite the process.

The agency is "committed to bring them home to Israel at the fastest possible speed," said an agency spokeswoman.

Israel's Interior Ministry, whose staff evaluates and processes applicants for aliyah, had estimated that it would take 18 months to bring the remaining Kwara Jews to Israel, according to Avi Granot, minister of public affairs for the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

Insufficient staff — particularly the fact that a single clerk at the Interior Ministry in Jerusalem has been evaluating and processing the applications — was to blame, said Granot, who served as Israel's ambassador to Ethiopia from 1995 to 1998.

The 18-month plan was too long for Eckstein, whose 16-year-old organization

MIDEAST FOCUS

Premier promises peace effort

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised to "energize and accelerate" efforts for peace with the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon in response to the death of Jordan's King Hussein.

Speaking on NBC's "Today Show" after Hussein's funeral, the premier said after the Israeli elections in May he and Syrian President Hafez Assad, who almost came face-to-face at the funeral, would "sit together, one way or another, in the same tent."

Haredim slam Israel's high court

Fervently Orthodox leaders in Israel lashed out at the Supreme Court for issuing a series of recent rulings that they feel undermine their way of life. Former Knesset member Moshe Gafni of the United Torah Judaism bloc criticized Chief Justice Aharon Barak for his "judicial dictatorship."

Palestinians recapture fugitive

Palestinian police said they had recaptured a Hamas fugitive who had killed a Jewish settler last October near the West Bank town of Hebron. Jamil Jadallah Khalifeh had escaped from a Nablus prison last December after he was convicted in the slaying.

Israel mints King Hussein medal

Israeli officials minted a commemorative medal to honor Jordan's King Hussein. The front of the 14-karat gold medal bears a portrait of the king. The reverse side shows the Israeli and Jordanian flags, with the inscription, "Peace for the Children of Abraham."

Settlers move into Golan outpost

Jewish settlers moved into an abandoned army post on the Golan Heights. Israel's Defense Ministry said that while it had plans to turn the base near the Syrian border into a civilian community, it had given no formal approval for a new settlement.



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builds Christian support for Israel and promotes greater understanding between Jews and Christians.

"It's unconscionable that these Beta Israel should be languishing in Kwara and Gondar," Eckstein said in a phone interview last week.

"There are people dying almost daily from diseases which can be cured in Israel," he said.

He said he told the Jewish Agency, "If finances are an issue, then the Christian community will take care of it."

Eckstein's offer was not unprecedented.

In 1998 the International Fellowship donated \$7 million to the United Jewish Appeal — funds slated specifically to underwrite the cost of flying Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel.

It has given a total of about \$17 million to UJA for that cause over the last several years.

At first, Eckstein said, he got no definitive response to his offer to help the Ethiopians.

"Everyone was dodging it and no one could get a handle on where the problem was," Eckstein said.

Finally, in early February, Eckstein got his answer.

Part of the reason for the delay, Eckstein believes, was reluctance on the part of Israeli officials to accept dollars from evangelical Christians.

"A couple of individuals in Israel's government are not enthralled with the idea of accepting funds from Christians for aliyah, though these funds are given unconditionally, without any strings attached," he said.

Granot denied that such an attitude existed.

"There was no ambivalence about accepting it in Israel. There were practical questions about whether the government can hire people and get the money for it from an outside source," Granot said.

"In any case it was not viewed as a private donation, but one to the UJA campaign. This is not the first time that money has been given to Israel, to aliyah purposes, from non-Jewish sources," he said.

The International Fellowship's contribution "is significant and is very welcome," Granot said.

Barbara Ribakove Gordon, executive director of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, a humanitarian aid group operating in Ethiopia, said she is comfortable with the idea of accepting the money as long as there is no Christian proselytizing involved.

Still, she said, "it's a sad state of affairs when the Jewish community can't afford to rescue its own people."

Granot disagreed, noting that the government of Israel and the Jewish Agency, with support from Jewish donations abroad, funded years of aliyah from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union.

In addition, he said, Israel and the Jews have "for years taken care of tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews and hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews" in the Jewish state.

In any case, getting the Jews out of the area has taken on new urgency as tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, a country to Ethiopia's north, again flare up.

Gondar is about 180 miles south of the Eritrean border and transportation between the northern city and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, from which flights leave twice weekly for Israel, is being cut as the military commandeers the airport, Ribakove Gordon said.

What's more, she said, once the rainy season begins in May, Kwara becomes totally inaccessible for several months.

Getting the Kwara Jews to Israel "will get more difficult if action isn't taken very, very fast."

For his part, Eckstein said that although he hasn't yet solicited specific donations for the redemption of Kwara Jews, he is confident that his constituents would pay for it as part of their "biblical mandate" to be a blessing to the Jewish people.

"I'm going on blind faith," Eckstein said. "My kishkes tell me that the Christian community will come through for this." □

JEWISH WORLD

U.S. Jews visit Moscow

A delegation of 43 professionals from U.S. Jewish communities is visiting Moscow to develop professional ties with Russian Jewish organizations.

The group, the first major Jewish American delegation to be visiting Russia since the August 1998 economic crisis, is meeting with organizations involved in school and youth activities, welfare programs and emigration services. The participants in the mission were also scheduled to meet with members of the Russian Parliament to learn about the nation's current political and financial climate.

Russia arrests neo-Nazis

Russian police briefly arrested 19 individuals for wearing the swastika-like armbands of the neo-Nazi Russian National Unity group.

It is unlikely any of the individuals arrested will face trials because of the country's vague hate crimes legislation. Meanwhile, the neo-Nazi group began publishing an ultranationalist Russian-language newspaper in the Latvian capital of Riga.

Jews blast Australian justice

The commander of a police battalion involved in Nazi atrocities in Lithuania is residing in the southeastern city of Adelaide, according to an Australian newspaper.

The report prompted the leader of Australian Jewry's umbrella organization to reiterate charges that the nation's officials are unwilling to prosecute alleged Nazi war criminals living in their midst. "Alleged war criminals continue to reside here, untroubled and unaccountable for crimes against humanity," said Nina Bassat, president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

German prince threatens suit

A German prince said he will sue a German newspaper for alleging that his family had close ties to the Nazis. Prince Ernst August of Hanover made the comment after the Bild newspaper reported that his grandfather may have profited from the forced sale of a Jewish-owned bank in 1938. The prince, who was recently married to Princess Caroline of Monaco, countered that his grandfather was "well known as being anti-Nazi."

Chabad focuses on Spanish youth

The recently arrived Chabad Lubavitch emissary in Barcelona is reaching out to the city's youth in an effort to revive Jewish life in the city, which was once a flourishing center during the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. Rabbi David Libersohn is setting up Bar and Bat Mitzvah classes among the 5,000-member community as part of the revival drive.

Netanyahu allies fare poorly as Likud Party holds primaries

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The results of the Likud primary for the party's Knesset roster held more than a few surprises — many of them unpleasant for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Some 2,370 members of the Likud Central Committee took part in Monday's primary, which was held amid reported attempts to keep the premier's critics off the party's Knesset slate of candidates for the May elections. But those efforts may have backfired, as several Netanyahu allies fared worse than expected, prompting some Likud officials to call the results a slap in the face to the premier.

Defense Minister Moshe Arens, whom Netanyahu had described prior to the primary as part of his "leading team," ranked 26th in the party's list of Knesset candidates, leaving it open to question whether he will win a place in the next Knesset.

Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon dropped several slots to eighth place.

Along with Arens, several other Netanyahu allies did not make it into the first 10 spots: Minister Without Portfolio Shaul Amor placed 21st, and Health Minister Yehoshua Matza took the 15th slot.

At the same time, two Likud members who have been outspoken against the premier — Communications Minister Limor Livnat and Science Minister Silvan Shalom — won places in the first five slots.

As the party's leader, Netanyahu won the top position. □

Branches of American banks implicated in wartime looting

By Lee Yanowitch

PARIS (JTA) — American banks are figuring prominently in a report on the looting of Jewish property in Nazi-occupied France.

The report has also prompted French Jewish leaders to call for prompt restitution to Holocaust victims.

The report, issued last week by a commission of experts named by the French government to investigate the looting, indicates that the Paris branches of American banks willingly handed lists of Jewish account-holders over to the Vichy regime and the Nazis long before U.S. involvement in World War II deprived them of the right to refuse.

The commission leveled the accusations as it submitted its second intermediary report to Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. The 300-page report detailed the findings it had reached during the past year on dozens of issues, including the wartime activities of French banks and insurance companies.

The report also detailed the seizure of property from Jews arriving at the Drancy transit camp outside Paris, their last stop before Auschwitz.

Some 76,000 Jews — about a quarter of the country's Jewish population — were deported from France to Nazi death camps. Only 2,500 returned.

The Matteoli Commission, which will deliver its final report before the end of the year with recommendations on how to return or make compensation for the stolen property, evaluated the total amount of looted Jewish assets held by financial institutions at \$900 million.

The sum does not include the value of confiscated businesses, real estate, furniture, jewels and paintings.

Regarding furniture looted from Jewish homes, the commission said 44,000 train cars filled with the booty were taken to Germany during the war.

CRIF, France's umbrella group for Jewish organizations, praised the commission's work. But it said in a statement that the Jewish accounts and stocks turned over during the Occupation to the state savings institution, the Caisse des Depots et Consignations, should be quickly returned to their rightful owners. □

German companies move closer to creating fund for slave laborers

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — German companies and Jewish officials took a step this week toward creating a fund that could top \$1 billion to compensate Holocaust survivors used as forced laborers during World War II.

The Jewish officials, representing an umbrella group responsible for negotiating Holocaust-era claims with Germany, accepted "in principle" a German proposal presented at a meeting here Monday.

"We have a possible breakthrough," said Israel Singer, the secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress, who led the Jewish delegation at the talks.

The sides agreed to open formal negotiations to create a fund to compensate slave laborers and those who were forced to sell property in Germany at bargain prices during the Nazi era.

In return, German negotiators, representing the government and German companies, want to end the class-action lawsuits brought by Holocaust survivors seeking some \$18 billion from such companies as Volkswagen, Siemens and Daimler-Benz, which recently merged with Chrysler.

Money for the fund would come from an estimated 20 German companies, including Volkswagen and Siemens, as well as the Deutsche and Dresdner banks.

These lawsuits, along with threats to oppose a buyout by Deutsche Bank, Germany's largest bank, of the U.S.-based Bankers Trust are widely credited with bringing German industry to the negotiating table.

The recent flurry of activity also comes less than one week after Deutsche Bank revealed it had funded the construction of Auschwitz and other Nazi projects.

In the early 1980s, a top Deutsche Bank official was barred from entering the United States because of his ties with the Nazi government.

The deal could be thwarted by lawyers involved in the class-action suits, several of whom say they will oppose any effort to end the lawsuits.

They say the umbrella group negotiating the settlement, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, does not best represent the interests of individual Holocaust survivors and vow to continue the suits.

Although no money was discussed at this week's Washington meetings, which included representatives of the U.S. and Israeli governments, sources indicated that they expect the German funds to match or exceed the \$1.25 billion Swiss settlement negotiated last year.

However, the actual amount of the settlement will be determined by the number of slave laborers, Germany's previous reparations programs and the value of property sold, sources explained.

In many respects, the attempt to settle the claims against German companies and banks mirrors the standoff between Jewish officials and Swiss banks accused of hoarding Holocaust victims' wealth.

But German institutions seem intent on avoiding the sort of quagmire that enveloped Switzerland and its banks in recent years

by pledging cooperation before tensions mount and trust dissolves.

However, the Germans made clear that the size of a settlement would depend on the level of risk facing the companies from parties outside a settlement deal.

Negotiations are expected to resume next week in Germany, with a goal set by the German side to begin dispensing checks by September, the 60th anniversary of the beginning of World War II.

A presumed settlement would include contributions from a host of German companies and banks and would be open to Jews and non-Jews around the world.

In Washington this week, Bodo Hombach, minister of the German chancellery, presented an initiative aimed at establishing two remembrance funds.

The proposal was presented on behalf of German companies and banks.

One would "respond to the moral obligations of German enterprises arising from the Second World War," giving payments directly to victims.

The other would provide "an appropriate endowment for the future," funding projects agreed to by a future board, according to a translation of the proposal provided to JTA by the German negotiators.

In addition to seeking an end to class-action suits, the German proposal wants the Jewish community to "scotch any plans for a boycott" of German banks.

The World Jewish Congress reportedly had threatened to "impose a kind of divestment campaign," similar to that imposed against South Africa during its apartheid rule.

As for Deutsche Bank's plans to buy Bankers Trust this spring, Alan Hevesi, New York City's comptroller, said in a news conference Tuesday in New York that he was "encouraged" by the progress of the talks.

But Hevesi, who took a lead role in threatening a boycott that led Swiss banks to reach a restitution settlement, said he would not yet reverse his recommendation against the bank's buyout plan.

Following three hours of talks with senior German officials and the chairman of Deutsche Bank, the sides "are on the right road" to negotiate an agreement that meets the "moral, historical as well as financial responsibility" of the German companies, said Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress.

One of the major points to be negotiated is a goal of the German side for "political, moral as well as legal closure," said Steinberg, who participated in Monday's negotiating session.

The tone of the negotiations marks a sharp difference from those with Swiss banks and government officials, according to both Jewish and German participants.

The Germans say they are specifically looking for a better atmosphere — both in the talks and among their citizens.

"The last thing we want is the public attitude of Switzerland," Hombach said, according to a participant at a Jewish-sponsored luncheon with the German government and bank officials.

The German side is trying to put together a "cooperative, non-confrontational, fair and very expeditious, swift and speedy" solution, Hombach said at the American Jewish Committee luncheon.

We're trying to avoid the "bull-in-the-china-shop effect," he said. □

(JTA Staff Writer Julia Goldman in New York contributed to this report.)