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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israelis head to shelters

Residents of northern Israel, fearful of retaliatory Katyusha attacks for Israeli strikes on Hezbollah targets deep inside Lebanon, sought refuge in bomb shelters and canceled Purim parties.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright urged all sides to avoid an escalation of hostilities.

Israeli security officials said there would be no further escalation of the air strikes, which followed the killings of four Israelis in a roadside bombing Sunday, if Hezbollah refrains from firing Katyushas at the Jewish state.

New Sheinbein ruling sought

Israel's attorney general asked the Supreme Court to reconsider its refusal last week to extradite an 18-year-old youth to the United States to face a murder charge.

Elyakim Rubinstein argued that the ruling in the case of Samuel Sheinbein went against the spirit of Israel's citizenship law, which he said was intended to avoid prosecutions motivated by anti-Semitism or politics. The teen-ager, who was living in Maryland when the crime was committed, had sought to avoid extradition by claiming Israeli citizenship through his father, who was born in pre-state Israel and left the country as a child.

Conservatives to press petition

Officials with the Conservative movement in Israel said they will continue to seek legal recognition of their conversions, although all the adopted children mentioned in a petition currently before the Supreme Court have since undergone Orthodox conversions.

Their comments came after the last adopted child whose parents had filed the petition was converted by an Orthodox rabbi last week. [Page 2]

Gore catches Purim spirit

U.S. Vice President Al Gore brought down the house at a Philadelphia fund-raiser when he shook a noisemaker after hearing the name of Haman, the villain in the Purim story.

Gore initiated the Purim chicanery after asking Jewish White House staffers if it would be appropriate. During the American Jewish Congress fund-raiser, Gore received a restored Megillah that had come from Poland.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Croatia to revisit wartime past as camp commander stands trial

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Croatia's determination to confront its fascist past will be tested this week, when the trial of a commander of the country's largest World War II concentration camp begins.

On Thursday, Dinko Sakic, a commander at Jasenovac— known as the "Auschwitz of the Balkans" — will be indicted on charges of mistreating, killing and ordering the killing of inmates.

Sakic, 76, faces 20 years in prison, the maximum sentence under Croatian law.

There are no precise statistics for the number of people who perished in Jasenovac, which lies 70 miles southeast of the Croatian capital of Zagreb.

The camp did not maintain either the sophisticated killing machine or the systematic documentation of its counterparts in Poland. Moreover, the camp, along with many of its records, was destroyed at the end of the war.

But in just four years, from 1941 to 1945, the Encyclopedia of the Holocaust estimates that some 600,000 Jews, gypsies, Serbs and dissident Croats perished at Jasenovac, which was known for its particular brutality. Some Croatian historians, anxious to downplay the number of victims, put the death toll at around 35,000.

Sakic, who was extradited from Argentina in July 1998, had been living there since 1947 with his wife, Nadia, who was allegedly a guard at Croatia's Stara Gradiska camp.

Croatia recently dropped war crimes charges against Nadia Sakic, saying it did not have sufficient evidence to try her.

Although international law allows Dinko Sakic to be charged with genocide, the Croatian authorities chose a lesser offense.

"If you condemn Sakic for genocide, then you have to speak" about the Ustashe, Croatia's wartime Nazi-puppet regime, "whose first aim was to achieve a clean ethnic state," says Cedo Prodanovic, a former Zagreb prosecutor who is representing the family of one of Sakic's victims at the trial.

The Ustashe "enacted race laws that were very firm and perhaps more successful than those in Nazi Germany. But a lot of people from that time, and their followers, are now very close" to those now holding power in Croatia, Prodanovic said. "Some are even members of Parliament."

Many Croatian nationalists, including President Franjo Tudjman, are deeply ambivalent about the trial and have sought to downplay the brutality of the Ustashe regime, which they present as the legitimate forerunner of the modern Croatian state.

Indeed, Sakic claims that the president shook his hand warmly during a visit to Argentina — a claim Tudjman has denied.

With Croatia seeking to integrate itself into modern Europe, Tudjman chose to comply with international demands for the extradition and trial of Sakic.

A former partisan who rose to become a general under Yugoslavia's Communist President Josip Broz Tito, Tudjman evolved into a staunch Croatian nationalist after Tito's death. He now concedes that the Ustashe ran a fascist state, but says the regime was pursuing the 1,000-year dream of Croatian independence, which he maintains that he has finally realized. Tudjman has infuriated Serbs and Jews by glossing over the Jasenovac slaughter, suggesting that the number of deaths could be as low as 20,000.

Tudjman has provoked an outcry by suggesting that Jasenovac become a memorial for all of the "victims" of the war — a move that would have memorialized the mostly

MIDEAST FOCUS

Jewish legislator meets Assad

Syria wants the Golan Heights back from Israel but is not certain what it is willing to give Israel in return, according to the senior Democrat on the House International Relations Committee.

U.S. Rep. Sam Gejdenson (D-Conn.) made the comment in Israel after meeting in Damascus with Syrian President Hafez Assad.

Gejdenson, who visited the Middle East on a trip sponsored by the Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation, became one of only a few Jewish members of Congress ever to meet with the Syrian leader.

Defense secretary to visit Israel

U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen will visit Israel and Jordan next week during an eight-day trip to the Middle East, the Pentagon announced. Cohen is scheduled to meet with Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens and Jordan's King Abdullah.

Turkey echoes Israeli denials

Turkey's ambassador to the United States echoed Israel's repeated denials that Jerusalem had nothing to do with Turkey's recent capture of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan. Turkey's "excellent" relations with Israel are in no way related to the capture of Ocalan, Ambassador Baki Ilkin told reporters in Washington.

"That is something beyond the scope of our bilateral relations with Israel," he said.

Haredim suspected in vandalism

Israeli police suspect fervently Orthodox Jews are responsible for scrawling graffiti outside a Conservative synagogue in Jerusalem's Ramot neighborhood. Leaders of the Ya'ar Ramot Synagogue said the vandalism may have been prompted by the fact that a former yeshiva student recently became active in the congregation.

Jewish and Serbian victims alongside their Ustashe killers.

The atrocities committed by both Croats and Serbs during the Yugoslavian civil war that ended in 1995 were in part fueled by the passions aroused by the Ustashe brutality at Jasenovac.

Croatian authorities, under intense international pressure, launched the criminal investigation that led to the extradition of Sakic and his wife after Sakic gave an interview to Argentine television in April 1998 in which he acknowledged that he was the commander of Jasenovac. In the interview, Sakic denied he had been involved in brutality: "Nothing happened in Jasenovac," he said. "It was a work camp where the Jews managed themselves.

"We never put a hand on any of the prisoners in the camp. The people died of natural death. There was a typhus epidemic, for example, but there were no cremation ovens that killed anybody."

Sakic has more recently suggested that wartime Croatia left its task incomplete.

"I regret that we had not done all that is imputed to us," he told a Zagreb newspaper.

"If we had done that, Croatia would not have problems today. There would not have been people to write lies. I am proud of all I did. If I were offered the same duty today, I would accept it." □

Conservatives pursue legal battle despite last Orthodox conversion

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Conservative movement in Israel says its effort to gain legal recognition of its conversions is still relevant — even though all the adopted children involved in a case on the issue currently before the High Court of Justice have undergone Orthodox conversions.

The last adopted child whose parents had filed the petition was converted by an Orthodox rabbi last week.

The families of 14 children adopted abroad first filed the petition three years ago, seeking recognition of the Conservative conversions their children had undergone.

The families had turned to the Conservative movement after refusing what they considered to be unreasonable conditions for conversions set forth by the Orthodox establishment, including one calling on the families to live a religiously observant life.

Since then, however, the families obtained conversions from Orthodox rabbis who adopted a more flexible stance.

The lawyer for the families acknowledged that with this last conversion, the argument before the high court is now mostly theoretical. But Hila Keren, who described the case as a "hot potato," said the principle was still of vital significance.

She acknowledged that the motivation for issuing a ruling soon could diminish, given the changed situation for the children.

The High Court of Justice gave its first hearing of the petition last month, after repeatedly postponing such a move in the hope that the matter would be resolved through a compromise among the various religious streams.

The court still has a number of pending cases regarding the conversion issue, including an appeal of a recent district court ruling ordering the Interior Ministry to recognize 30 individuals who underwent Reform and Conservative conversions as Jewish.

Each side accused the other of dragging out the Orthodox conversion performed last week. The director of the Orthodox rabbinic court, Rabbi Eli Ben-Dahan, accused the petitioners' attorney of preventing the child's conversion in order to propel the legal battle.

But Rabbi Ehud Bandel of the Conservative movement accused the rabbinic court of refusing to convert the child over the course of six years, despite the fact that he studied at a religious school.

Bandel charged that the High Court petition motivated the rabbinate to change its view and conduct what he called a "quicke conversion." □



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Caryn Rosen Adelman, *President*
Mark J. Joffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*
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Lenore A. Silverstein, *Business Manager*

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JEWISH WORLD

Reform leader named to panel

The director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism was named to serve on a new U.S. commission to monitor religious freedom abroad.

The House Minority leader, Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), said he had selected Rabbi David Saperstein because of his "vast knowledge and experience as a religious leader, attorney and advocate on behalf of both domestic and international religious liberties." The nine-member presidential commission, established by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, includes one other Jewish member, Elliot Abrams, president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Court approves City Hall display

A U.S. appeals court upheld the constitutionality of a City Hall holiday display in Jersey City, N.J., that included a menorah, nativity scene, Kwanza symbols, as well as figures of Santa and Frosty the Snowman. The Orthodox Union welcomed the decision, saying that a holiday display with diverse religious symbols is sufficiently inclusive to be constitutional.

Russian neo-Nazis to defy courts

Russia's leading neo-Nazi group said it will hold its national convention in Moscow "regardless of the decisions" of the courts. Earlier this year, a Moscow court approved a ban on gatherings of the Russian National Unity movement that had been issued by Moscow's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov.

A Moscow police spokesman said the authorities may resort to "forceful methods" to prevent the April convention, which organizers say will attract some 10,000 participants.

Ukrainian Jews form new group

Three Ukrainian Jewish groups broke away from the umbrella organization representing the country's half million Jews. The three groups said they would form a new alliance, the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine. They charged the current umbrella group, the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, with failing to respond to the needs of the many Jews who require financial assistance. Congress officials in turn charged that the three groups had failed to cooperate in meeting the community's needs.

Hungarian Jews slam sentences

Six neo-Nazis were given two-year suspended sentences by a Budapest court after they clashed with Hungarian police earlier this month. Another was given probation, and an eighth member of the group was set free for lack of evidence. Hungarian Jewish leaders criticized the sentences as too mild and called for stricter laws to prevent neo-Nazi gatherings.

Thousands rally in New York City in solidarity with Israeli Orthodox

By Nehama Miller

NEW YORK (JTA) — Amid a heavy downpour of rain — and an even heavier downpour of controversy — an estimated 40,000 American Orthodox Jews gathered in New York City this weekend to express their concern over the future of Jewish tradition in the Jewish state.

For 90 minutes, one could see huge clusters of black hats and modestly dressed women from the New York area and beyond as the sounds of prayer filled the streets of a 12-bloc radius in lower Manhattan.

With prayer books and umbrellas in hand, the crowd, which included individuals from all streams of Orthodoxy, rallied, in the words of the event's planners, with "no speeches, no dais, no organizational sponsorship, just Jews coming together to pray and express solidarity with their brothers and sisters in the Holy Land."

"They are not praying for politicians to do a particular thing. It's just Jews gathering to pray en masse," said Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesman for the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America and one of the organizers of the events.

"There are no speeches at this gathering and no references to what happened in Israel."

Although the situation in Israel was not spoken of at the prayer vigil itself, Sunday's gathering was reminiscent of a similar event in Jerusalem two weeks ago, when 250,000 Orthodox Jews came together in the wake of Israeli court decisions that many Orthodox fear could change the nature of the Jewish state.

The fervently Orthodox, or haredi, leaders in Israel called for a demonstration after the high court issued an order to allow Conservative and Reform representatives to serve on local religious councils.

The haredi leaders also were stung by court rulings that canceled a decades-old arrangement under which yeshiva students are entitled to army draft exemptions and a separate decision allowing a kibbutz to maintain business operations on the Sabbath.

The debate over religious pluralism in Israel has often reverberated among American Jews, with Reform and Conservative Jews expressing outrage at the lack of official recognition for their movements in Israel.

For their part, many Orthodox Jews here have voiced their concern about altering the status quo in Israel, which grants the Orthodox sole authority on religious matters.

The fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel last year launched a \$2 million campaign explaining its opposition to the introduction of pluralism in Israel.

Am Echad, which is independent but is led by some involved with Agudah, has placed ads in The New York Times, charging 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."

In the wake of Sunday's gathering, the Reform and Conservative movements criticized the Orthodox for not acknowledging the religious diversity in Israel.

"If they are praying for the unity of Israel, they should demonstrate a way of bringing people together by allowing one to believe however one wants to believe," said Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

"Prayer is important, but not sufficient. They have to resolve and change their attitude."

Meanwhile, Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, president of the centrist Orthodox Union, opted not to participate in Sunday's gathering, but applauded the effort.

"They are doing a credible job, and they are representing their issues properly," he said of the event's organizers.

Although the rain persisted, the organizers of the rally were overjoyed at the turnout of people coming to pray and recite psalms.

Participants said they felt a similar joy at the intensity of the vigil.

"It is because of segregation between Jews that we are out here," said Chani Friedman, a New York-based writer. "This is all about love. Not much else can get us out in the rain." □

Kurdish leader calls on Jews to push Turkey for settlement

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — A senior Kurdish political source with close ties to the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party is calling on Jewish leaders throughout the world to pressure Turkey to seek a political settlement with the separatists.

The call comes after three supporters of the PKK, as the Kurdish party is known, were killed by Israeli security guards when they attempted to storm the Israeli Consulate in Berlin earlier this month.

A fourth died of his injuries over the weekend.

The Feb. 18 attack on the consulate came in the wake of reports that Israel had helped Turkey capture PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in Kenya.

Ocalan is now in Turkey, where he faces charges of treason stemming from the 14-year-old Kurdish separatist struggle against Turkey.

In an interview with JTA in London, the source conceded that it had been a mistake to target the Israeli consulate.

But he said there was no doubt in the minds of PKK followers that Israel was implicated in Ocalan's capture — despite repeated denials from Israeli officials.

The source said there had been a marked increase in Turkey's actions against the secessionist PKK during the past two years, which he linked directly to the close military cooperation that has developed between Jerusalem and Ankara during that period.

In Washington this week, Turkey's ambassador to the United States echoed Israel's denials of involvement.

Turkey's "excellent" relations with Israel are in no way related to the capture of Ocalan, Baki Ilkin told reporters in Washington. "That is something beyond the scope of our bilateral relations with Israel."

The Kurdish source said PKK leaders "will understand it has made a mistake by making an enemy of Israel," he said.

They "will soon realize it is not in their interests to open a new front."

The source acknowledged that the PKK — which Turkish officials claim has been responsible for some 37,000 deaths since the early 1980s — cannot continue fighting against the world.

"In the very short term, this feeling against Israel will cool down and the PKK will once again focus on the right target — Turkey."

Just the same, he said, "the PKK has expectations of the Israeli state.

"It will expect Israel and Jewish leaders throughout the world to put political pressure on Turkey to reach a political settlement with the PKK.

"Israel could present itself as a model to Turkey of how a state comes to negotiate with 'terrorists,'" he added, in an apparent reference to Israel's willingness in 1993 to begin talks with PLO leader Yasser Arafat.

In a related development, Turkey is praising Syria for ensuring that its embassy in Damascus was not attacked during demonstrations protesting Ocalan's abduction from Kenya.

Last October, Turkey threatened military action against Syria unless Syrian President Hafez Assad clamped down on PKK

terrorists operating against Turkey from Syrian soil.

Ankara had also demanded that Syria expel Ocalan, who had found a safe haven at the time in Damascus.

Speaking after a meeting in Damascus last week of the Syrian-Turkish security committee, which was set up in the aftermath of the October crisis, Turkish sources said their delegation had expressed "satisfaction" with the way Syria handled the situation.

The sources said the talks constituted a "step in the direction of promoting [bilateral] ties and cooperation."

Syria is still reportedly refusing to hand over PKK fighters held in Syrian jails, despite demands for their extradition by the Turkish delegation. □

Premier's remarks on Jordan dominate parley with new king

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was dogged by controversy this week, when he held his first working meeting in Amman with Jordan's King Abdullah.

After Sunday's meeting, which also included Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon, Netanyahu said relations between the two nations remain strong.

Just the same, the meeting was overshadowed by remarks Netanyahu made last week in which he was quoted as saying that Jordan might renege on its 1994 peace treaty with Israel and side in the future with Iraq against the Jewish state.

In an effort to squelch the furor that subsequently erupted in Jordan, Israeli officials distributed copies of the premier's remarks, saying he had been misquoted.

Sunday's talks were intended to serve as a get-acquainted session between Netanyahu and the new Jordanian monarch, who met briefly during the Feb. 8 funeral of Abdullah's father, King Hussein.

But before discussions could turn to matters of advancing economic relations and cementing the countries' peace accord, Jordanian officials requested a clarification of the remarks Netanyahu made last week.

In the address at Bar-Ilan University, Netanyahu recalled that Jordan had aligned itself with Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War.

The Israeli premier was quoted as hinting at the implications for the Jewish state of any possible future coalition between Iraq and Jordan.

Jordan's King Hussein sided with Baghdad in 1991 "because Iraq was strong.

And Iraq of 1991 was a small grain compared to what it will be if it arms itself with nuclear weapons," Netanyahu was quoted by the Israeli media as saying.

"We would find ourselves with an Iraqi threat on the banks of the Jordan River."

Before the visit, Netanyahu tried to defuse the situation. He said he believed the peace between Israel and Jordan was stable and that Abdullah would continue in his father's path.

At a joint news conference with Netanyahu following Sunday's talks, Jordan's Prime Minister Fayez Tarawneh said he was satisfied with the answers he received from Netanyahu.

"I think we cleared up the whole thing," Tarawneh said. □