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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

State Dept. denies aid reports

The State Department denied reports that the United States is threatening to delay Israel's share of supplemental funds earmarked for implementing the Wye peace accord.

News reports had quoted U.S. Undersecretary of State Stuart Eizenstat as telling Israel it might withhold up to \$1.2 billion in new aid if the peace deal is not implemented. But the State Department said it expects the funds will be approved by Congress.

Lebanon pressures Israel

Lebanon will not discuss any security arrangements or guarantees for an Israeli withdrawal from the southern part of the country, according to the Lebanese prime minister.

"Our position is firm and will not change," said Selim al-Hoss. [Page 3]

Terrorists suspected in attacks

Terrorist motives may have been behind three attacks on Israelis over the weekend, Israeli police believe. A guard for a private security company was listed in serious condition after being shot Saturday at a West Bank construction site.

Also on Saturday, an 18-year-old soldier sustained light injuries when he was stabbed at a crowded Jerusalem bus stop. On Friday, a 49-year-old Orthodox Jewish man was in serious condition after being stabbed in Old Jerusalem.

In a fourth incident, a Palestinian woman was prevented from stabbing an Israeli security guard in eastern Jerusalem on Sunday.

Broadcaster said to issue threat

Israeli politician Yossi Sarid received security protection after a broadcaster on a pirate radio station allegedly called for the murder of the leader of the secularist Meretz Party. [Page 3]

Yeltsin fires Jewish tycoon

A Russian tycoon who is regarded as the country's most influential Jew was removed from a key political post. In a sudden move, Russian President Boris Yeltsin fired Boris Berezovsky from his post as executive secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States, a loose body that unites 12 of the former Soviet republics. [Page 2]

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Dutch probe into El Al crash fuels rumors — and backlash

By Elise Friedmann

AMSTERDAM (JTA) — When a Dutch parliamentary committee began investigating a 1992 El Al Airlines cargo crash in late January, many thought the lingering questions about the crash would be answered.

So far, however, the inquiry into the Oct. 4, 1992, disaster — which killed 39 residents and 4 crew members when it crashed into two densely populated apartment blocks on the outskirts of the Dutch capital — has only increased suspicion and helped fuel an anti-Israel backlash that some believe borders on anti-Semitism.

The inquiry's hearings are being broadcast live on television three days a week and Internet "disaster sites" are swamped with outraged viewers.

Amid the intense scrutiny, El Al is being subjected to "routine customs checks" at Schiphol airport, resulting in a delay of planes.

One flight, refused permission to change its landing place, recently skidded off a slippery, snow-covered runway.

Three Dutch ministries are reviewing the "special status" of El Al, which is the airport's third largest cargo carrier, and El Al's director testified last month that the airline's offices here have been receiving hostile phone calls.

Against this backdrop, Dutch TV recently broadcast images of rabbis taking a Torah from the ark at a synagogue, with the following superimposed newspaper headlines: "Cover-up of toxic cargo in El Al disaster plane"; "Mystery men in white at disaster site"; "El Al messed with maintenance"; "Israeli pilots fear cancer."

The report appeared to forge a link between Dutch Jews engaged in ritual and an Israeli airline accused of secretiveness.

The Dutch Parliament had several reasons to institute an inquiry into the disaster and its aftermath.

The plane crashed into a low-income neighborhood riddled with petty crime and populated mainly by immigrants who feel neglected by the authorities.

More than 800 inhabitants and rescuers are suffering from health problems — never investigated by the Dutch Health Ministry — that they believe were caused by hazardous substances emitted when the plane crashed.

And conspiracy theories about the crash were fueled when the cargo, first said to be harmless, was found to include military equipment as well as ingredients that can be used to make sarin nerve gas.

Salvage operations failed to turn up part of the plane's "black box" as well as depleted uranium used as a counterbalance in the plane. Some residents of the area and others fear they inhaled fine particles released from the blocks of uranium during the blaze that followed the crash. At the same time, rumors about mysterious Israeli "men in white" removing evidence from the site went unchecked.

For its part, El Al says it has turned over all surviving documents to the Dutch authorities, and Israel has sent several delegations to speak to the committee.

At the start of the hearings, the chairman of the parliamentary inquiry, Theo Meijer, warned witnesses: "For six years people could say what they liked. We aim to find the truth and I remind you of your oath."

But after more than a month of contradictory testimony, the public is more bewildered than ever, and the Jewish community is wondering why the anger is targeted at El Al, rather than at the Dutch authorities. "They looked for a scapegoat and found

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israeli security council approved

Israel's Cabinet approved the creation of a National Security Council that will focus on the threat of non-conventional weapons and ballistic missiles.

David Ivry, a former director general of the Defense Ministry, will head the council.

Israel defends record on piracy

Israel defended its efforts to crack down on software and compact disc piracy in the face of U.S. criticism of Israel's moves to safeguard intellectual property rights. U.S. Undersecretary of State Stuart Eizenstat told Israeli Industry and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky during a visit to Israel he is disappointed with Israel's record on the issue.

The United States put Israel on its "priority watch" list last year and has given Israel until next month to approve stronger laws and enforcement of copyright protection; otherwise it will face trade sanctions.

Jordan to work with Sharon

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Jordan's King Abdullah agreed that new Jordanian Prime Minister Abdul-Waouf Rawabdeh will coordinate ties between the two nations.

The Israeli government said Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon would maintain contacts with Rawabdeh.

Female officer to lead delegation

The highest-ranking female officer in the Israel Defense Force is heading the Israeli delegation to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women.

Brig. Gen. Orit Adato and seven women leaders from the fields of business, medicine and social work will share their expertise at the 43rd annual meeting of the advisory commission to the U.N. General Assembly. During the meetings, which end March 19, Adato will speak to U.N. committees concerning gender roles in the military.



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El Al," says Orthodox Rabbi Raph Evers. Some 80 percent of the Netherlands' prewar Jewish population of 130,000 died during World War II, and Evers' congregation consists of survivors and their children.

There are currently an estimated 25,000 Jews living in the Netherlands.

Two weeks ago, Israeli Transportation Minister Shaul Yahalom warned against an anti-Semitism that "might lead to pogroms."

Rabbi Awram Soetendorp, of the Liberal movement, finds Yahalom's warning "wildly exaggerated" in view of the "unique ties between Holland and Israel."

But in a recent opinion poll, 52 percent of those questioned said they saw "no justification for special ties between Holland and Israel" and 26 percent weren't sure.

Media experts say El Al's initial failure to show public compassion for the victims, talk to the media and refute rumors are partly to blame for the problem.

"El Al's reaction was typical of Israeli ethnocentrism," said former El Al public relations adviser Hans Knoop. "Everything is reduced to the question: 'Is it good or bad for Israel?'"

"El Al fueled old stereotypes about 'mysterious Jews' by being secretive about the cargo," said one pundit. "By now everyone believes the plane carried an atom bomb."

Several weeks ago, El Al launched a media offensive to counter these rumors.

But, says Dutch media expert Melcher de Wind: "The very fact that El Al is threatened by terrorism reminds the Dutch of latent guilt feelings against the Jews. These have been festering since World War II, and they don't like El Al for reminding them. This inquiry finally provided a reason to say: 'Why should we be so considerate to Israel anyway?'"

The parliamentary committee investigating the matter is expected to release its findings later this month. □

Yeltsin fires Jewish tycoon known as modern-day Rasputin

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A Russian tycoon who is regarded as the country's most influential Jew has been removed from a key political post.

In a sudden move, Russian President Boris Yeltsin fired Boris Berezovsky from his position as executive secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States, a loose body that unites 12 of the former Soviet republics.

Berezovsky was sacked March 4 for "exceeding the limits of his authority" and failing to fulfill Yeltsin's orders, according to the president's press office.

Many Russian Jews have often expressed concern about Berezovsky's presence in the governing elite, saying his taste for power has damaged the reputation of the entire Jewish community.

In the eyes of many Russians — Jewish and non-Jewish alike — he has become a symbol of Jewish prominence in Russian business and politics.

Never shy about his Jewish origin, Berezovsky has often been the target of anti-Semitic attacks. Last year, Berezovsky cited anti-Semitism as the main obstacle preventing him from running for the Russian presidency next year.

While Berezovsky takes almost no part in organized Jewish life, he has often spoken out on issues of concern to the Jewish community.

Most recently, he initiated calls for a ban of the Communist Party following a series of anti-Semitic statements by prominent party members.

The founder of Russia's first capitalist car dealerships, Berezovsky, 53, is widely reported to own or control large stakes in oil companies, airlines, a national television company and other media outlets.

Often referred to as a modern-day Rasputin — a Russian priest who wielded enormous power over the family of Russia's last czar — Berezovsky helped bankroll Yeltsin's come-from-behind re-election campaign in 1996 and is believed by his growing number of political enemies to have assumed undue influence over Kremlin officials, particularly Yeltsin and his family. □

JEWISH WORLD

Poles protest Auschwitz plan

Hundreds of Poles demonstrated against government plans to turn the area around the former Auschwitz death camp into a protected zone in which no unauthorized projects could be built.

The plan to create the zone came after Jewish groups protested the erection of hundreds of crosses last year near Auschwitz.

Austrian extremist poised for win

An extremist Austrian politician who has praised Hitler appears headed to victory in a provincial election.

Jorg Haider, head of the xenophobic Freedom Party, could win around 40 percent of the vote in Austria's southern state of Carinthia, according to exit polls.

Wiesenthal Center seeks trials

The Simon Wiesenthal Center asked the Lithuanian government to extradite or try in absentia three Lithuanian Nazi war criminals living in Australia, Great Britain and the United States.

The center recently turned over files on Antanas Gudelis of Adelaide, Australia; Antanas Gecas of Edinburgh, Scotland; and Kazys Ciurinskas of Crown Point, Ind.

The center said all of them served in Lithuanian police battalions during the war that actively participated in the persecution and murder of thousands of Jews.

Romanian Torah scroll stolen

Thieves stole a Torah scroll from a synagogue in northeastern Romania.

The scroll is 200 years old and has an estimated value of \$60,000.

Israeli envoy travels to Texas

Israel's U.S. ambassador, Zalman Shoval, met with Texas Gov. George W. Bush to discuss the peace process and shared U.S.-Israeli interests in missile defense.

Shoval traveled to Texas to meet with the early Republican presidential favorite at the governor's invitation.

Swiss to probe charges

Swiss officials said they would investigate allegations that Nazi SS accounts worth as much as \$700,000 were transferred to banks in Switzerland during World War II.

The vow came after the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center publicized a wartime document about the money, which it said should be given to Holocaust victims.

Lebanon calls on Israel to make unconditional withdrawal of army

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Lebanese government is pressuring Israel to make an unconditional withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

According to the Lebanese prime minister, Lebanon will not discuss any security arrangements or guarantees for an Israeli withdrawal from the Jewish state's security zone in southern Lebanon.

"Our position is firm and will not change," Selim al-Hoss said Saturday.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly stated that he would seek such security arrangements in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal.

There have been growing calls in Israel for a withdrawal, particularly after seven Israelis — including an army general — were killed during the past two weeks in the security zone.

On Sunday, Netanyahu dismissed suggestions that he planned to propose to the Lebanese government that the two sides hold direct negotiations on the matter.

Netanyahu was responding to a report in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz that he intended to issue a public call this week to Hoss to hold talks without Syria, the leading power broker in Lebanon.

In an interview with the BBC last Friday, Hoss said that if Israel were willing to pull back to the international border, the terms of a 1949 armistice agreement would be reactivated.

That accord barred attacks by military or paramilitary groups on either side of the border against military or civilian targets.

After the BBC interview, the Lebanese premier said he was referring to an unconditional Israeli withdrawal. Just the same, Netanyahu said Sunday that he believes "there is room for discreet inquiries" about Hoss' comments.

At the same time, Netanyahu reaffirmed his position that any withdrawal must be accompanied by safety guarantees for Israel's northern settlements.

"We will get out only when I know that Hezbollah will not be able to get inside the border," he said. □

Broadcaster allegedly called for murder

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Religious-secular tensions in Israel found a new battle front after a broadcaster on a pirate radio station allegedly called for killing the leader of the secularist Meretz Party.

Knesset member Yossi Sarid received security protection after the broadcaster, Yisrael Bondak, allegedly made the remarks on the Jerusalem-area station Kol Hamizrach, or Voice of the East, which identifies with the fervently Orthodox Shas movement. The incident also reignited debate over whether the Knesset should legalize pirate radio stations.

Bondak, who was summoned for police questioning Sunday for allegedly inciting to murder, told reporters that his statements had been taken out of context and that he was only making a Purim joke.

His attorney, Reuven Yehoshua, accused the mainstream Israeli media of blowing the incident out of proportion.

Police officials raided the studios of Kol Hamizrach in a Jerusalem neighborhood Sunday, confiscating microphones, antennae and a small transmitter.

During a broadcast last Friday, Bondak allegedly said he was going to kill Sarid because the lawmaker loved the Supreme Court, but not religion.

Bondak's alleged remarks touched on the tensions between the fervently Orthodox community and the Supreme Court over recent court rulings favoring the liberal streams of Judaism.

Jerusalem's police chief, Yair Yitzhaki, said that after listening to a recording of Bondak's broadcast, he believes there "are grounds" to the allegations against him. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Lautenberg's retirement seen as 'great loss' for Jews***By Robin Friedman**New Jersey Jewish News*

WHIPPANY, N.J. (JTA) — For the last year, Frank Lautenberg has been dropping clues, but not answering the Big Question: Would he run for a fourth term in the U.S. Senate?

In November, while Lautenberg was on a visit to Poland, New Jersey newspapers reported that he was, in fact, running again, a message the senator also conveyed to several wealthy supporters who met him a few days later in Jerusalem during the General Assembly of the UJA-Federations of North America.

But when January 1999 passed and he didn't make calls to top Jewish Democratic fund raisers in the state, insiders concluded that the 75-year-old Lautenberg was set to retire. Best known to the rest of the world as the senior U.S. senator from New Jersey, Lautenberg is a Jewish activist who came up through the ranks of — and maintained his ties with — the Jewish community.

Lautenberg, who announced his Senate retirement last month, actively embraced Judaism and Jewish causes late in life.

He was 40 when he joined a synagogue, 43 when he made his first contribution to the United Jewish Appeal and 45 when he first visited Israel. But Lautenberg has managed to compress an extraordinary amount of service to the Jewish community — as an activist and a senator — into the later years of his life.

Once he got started, Lautenberg took to Jewish causes with zeal, taking the lead, for example, in writing and pushing through a 1990 bill that requires immigration officials to take into account historical context when judging an applicant's refugee status. The result — the Lautenberg Amendment — has allowed a larger number of Jews from the former Soviet Union to gain entry into the United States.

"The Lautenberg Amendment will be one of his most enduring legacies," says Leonard Glickman, executive vice president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. "It is a critical piece of legislation that will help facilitate the adjudication of Jewish and other refugees from the former Soviet Union and elsewhere.

Calling Lautenberg's retirement "a huge loss for human rights," Mark Talisman, former director of the Council of Jewish Federations' Washington Action Office, says Lautenberg played a major role in Soviet Jewish immigration beyond the Lautenberg Amendment.

"He's not a guy to brag about this, but in regard to the immigration of Soviet Jewry and oppressed minorities, he was one of the central players in the Senate," says Talisman, who is now a Washington consultant.

Lautenberg was not only one of the first Jews elected to the Senate with such strong local community ties, he was the first Jew ever elected statewide in New Jersey.

Lautenberg, who has never had a Bar Mitzvah, became interested in Jewish life for several reasons, including his parents' immigrant roots. He married Lois Levinson in 1957 and has four children. Levinson wanted to rear the family in a Jewish home, and Lautenberg, too, became concerned about imparting Jewish values and culture to his children.

In 1969, he visited Israel for the first time and was deeply

moved by the life-and-death struggles of the Jewish state.

When the family moved from Wayne to Montclair in the late 1960s, Lautenberg began organizing the uninvolved Jews of his town.

He and his wife divorced last year.

In 1971, Lautenberg was selected as one of three co-chairs of the advanced gifts division of UJA of Essex County. He rose quickly through the ranks of the Jewish communal world.

In 1974, at the age of 50, he became general chair of national UJA, the youngest person ever to hold the title. He assumed the office right after the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Lautenberg told the New Jersey Jewish News recently that concern for Israel fueled his desire to lead UJA. "It wasn't an office I sought. I accepted it because I cared so much about Israel."

At various times, Lautenberg served on the national board of the American Jewish Committee, was a member of the board of governors of Hebrew University and president of the American Friends of the Hebrew University. He also was a member of the executive committee of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

In between all the philanthropy and community activism, Lautenberg found time to build a business with two boyhood friends, Henry and Joe Taub. The three founded Automated Data Processing in 1961. The company made Lautenberg a millionaire.

Using his own funds, Lautenberg came from behind to win a Senate seat in 1982, at the age of 58, against popular Republican congresswoman Millicent Fenwick, who was 72 at the time.

The 1982 victory sealed Lautenberg's ascension as a kind of de facto leader of New Jersey Jewry.

"That he could run and be elected was very gratifying for me," recalls Hyman Bookbinder, retired Washington representative for the AJCommittee. "At that time there were not many Jewish senators. Now there are 11 in the Senate. So even if he leaves, we still have a minyan."

"It's the end of an era, a changing of the guard," says Ira Forman, director of the Washington-based National Jewish Democratic Council. When Lautenberg and Howard Metzenbaum — who served for many years as a U.S. senator from Ohio — were elected, it represented a "sea change," Forman recalls.

Unlike other Jews already in the Senate, Lautenberg and Metzenbaum "came out of Jewish communal life." What surprised Forman at the time, he remembers, is that this fact "never hurt them. It represented a shift. Frank represented the maturing of American Jewry and its acceptance in society."

In Washington, Lautenberg learned quickly, gaining a reputation as a doer. Members of Jewish groups who worked with him say he was always responsive to their concerns.

For Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Lautenberg "represented the best of Jewish values." One project Saperstein worked on directly with Lautenberg was a 1986 piece of legislation permitting observant Jewish soldiers in the American military to wear kippot.

Lautenberg has also been a strong supporter of Israel and the peace process.

Last October, in a letter to President Clinton, he urged him to support victims of terrorist attacks by allowing them to seek financial damages in the United States. He cited the case of Stephen and Roz Flatow of West Orange, N.J., whose daughter Alisa was killed in a 1995 terrorist bus bombing while she was studying in Israel. □