



# Daily News Bulletin

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82<sup>nd</sup> Year

## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### Israeli hospital stays in Balkans

An Israeli army field hospital operating in Macedonia postponed its return to Israel from Monday to Thursday.

Staffers at the hospital, which was set up in the Brazde refugee camp on April 6 to provide medical services for ethnic Albanians fleeing Kosovo, said they want to remain at the site until replacement teams arrived from other countries.

In a related development, Israeli officials are organizing activities for young refugees at the Brazde refugee camp. The officials plan to offer movie screenings and deliver toys for children at the camp.

### Belarus synagogue attacked

Vandals attacked a synagogue in Minsk on April 12, according to Jewish leaders in the capital of the former Soviet republic of Belarus.

In the attack, which coincided with the Orthodox Christian Easter, the arsonists set fire to the entrance of the Dauman Street synagogue and the slogan "Bash the Yids, Save Russia" was spray-painted on the synagogue's wall.

No one was injured in the incident, but the synagogue's door was destroyed.

Meanwhile, authorities in the Russian town of Borovichi banned neo-Nazi activities, granted a public space to the local Jewish community and initiated a seminar to counter anti-Semitic and hate propaganda among the town's youth.

The moves followed an international campaign launched by U.S. Jewish groups after the tiny Jewish community of 200 in Borovichi, a town of 90,000 people about 300 miles northwest of Moscow, reported a dramatic increase in the activities of the neo-Nazi Russian National Unity movement.

### Palestinians seek U.S. assurance

Palestinian officials are seeking assurances from the United States that it will pressure Israel to implement already signed accords in exchange for a Palestinian promise to delay a unilateral declaration next month of a Palestinian state.

The officials, led by Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's deputy, are currently in Washington to discuss the issue.

The officials are also seeking U.S. commitments concerning the suspension of Israeli settlement activity.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

### Israeli officials caught in middle as controversy erupts in Nazareth

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Eight months before the start of a new Christian millennium, Israel finds itself squarely in the middle of a Christian-Muslim conflict centered on the town traditionally believed to be the birthplace of Jesus.

The conflict in Nazareth, if left unresolved, could have worldwide repercussions, not the least of which would be the cancellation of Pope John Paul II's planned trip to the Holy Land next year to take part in millennium celebrations.

As Israeli officials attempt to cope with the conflict, both Christian and Muslim officials on both sides of the divide are charging that Israel is favoring the other side — which leaves the Jewish state in the unenviable position of satisfying no one.

Indeed, even after a committee of Israeli ministers appeared to side this week with the Nazareth Muslims, Islamic leaders there rejected the ministerial decision.

At least 4 million Christian pilgrims are expected to visit Israel next year to mark the new millennium — but recent events in Nazareth may well threaten those celebrations.

Because of biblical tradition, Nazareth — the biggest Arab town in Israel, with a population of 65,000 — has the image of a Christian city.

But only 40 percent of its inhabitants are Christian, a distinct minority among a Muslim majority.

The conflict originally erupted over a municipal plan to build a large plaza in time for the millennium celebrations near the Church of the Annunciation, where, according to Christian tradition, the Archangel Gabriel told Mary that she was to give birth to Jesus.

The town's Muslim population objected to the construction plan, saying it would damage the tomb of Shihab a-Din.

He is the nephew of Saladin, the Muslim warrior who ousted the Crusaders from the Holy Land in the 12th century.

The town's Muslim residents, who have set up a protest tent at the planned construction site, want to build a mosque there.

Neither side appears ready to back down.

Islamic political leaders made the controversy their main issue when Nazareth's municipal elections were held last fall.

Islamic candidates won 10 of the 19 seats on the town council. But a Christian candidate, Ramez Jeraisi, was re-elected mayor.

Because of their conflicting political agendas, the municipality has been virtually paralyzed since the elections.

Frustrated that they were unable to take control of Israel's largest Arab town, Islamic politicians stepped up their involvement in the controversy surrounding the site near the church.

Two weeks ago, the dispute turned violent. At least seven people were injured during confrontations between Christians and Muslims that coincided with the Easter holiday.

Israeli riot police were called in as youths from each side threatened to escalate the violence.

"It was shocking," said one Israeli police official. "Muslim youths attacked every vehicle whose driver they believed to be Christian, adding that 'it was a real intifada,'"

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### Israel worried about annexation

Any move by Israel to annex portions of the West Bank would be rejected by most of the world as a violation of international law, legal advisers in the Israeli Foreign Ministry said last Friday.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has threatened to annex the territory if Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat unilaterally declares a Palestinian state on May 4, when the interim period of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking ends under the terms of the Oslo accords.

### Report: Premier, Deri meet

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with the leader of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party to secure his backing in the upcoming elections, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported Sunday.

The meeting took place after Aryeh Deri was sentenced last week to four years in prison for taking bribes while holding several positions in the Interior Ministry during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

### Israel expands security zone

Israel retook the southern Lebanese village of Arnoun overnight April 15, effectively expanding its border security zone.

The city was taken by Israel in February but Lebanese civilians tore down barricades.

Israel has accused the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement of launching raids from the village.

### Pig-plotter sentenced to jail

An Israeli court handed down a 42-month prison sentence to an Israeli settler convicted of plotting to throw a pig's head with the Koran stuffed into its mouth into the Al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem.

Chaim Pakovitch said he planned the 1997 incident to spark Palestinian unrest and destroy the peace process.

referring to the 1987-1993 Palestinian uprising against Israel.

The violence immediately sparked warnings about the upcoming millennium festivities.

Officials in Nazareth and in the Israeli government have already invested millions of dollars in development projects — including the renewal of the ancient market, paving new roads and rehabilitating old buildings — in preparation for the influx of tourists expected to arrive from all over the world to mark the millennium.

But as things stand now, even the regular stream of tourists, mostly Israelis who visit the town on weekends, has dwindled.

"If the conflict continues," said Amir Orly, a tourist guide, "the pilgrims will not come — neither to Nazareth, nor to the Sea of Galilee.

"Nor will they come at all."

Ami Ayalon, head of the Shin Bet domestic security service, has warned that the controversy could spill over to other Arab population centers in Israel.

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat sent emissaries who tried, unsuccessfully, to mediate the dispute.

Unable to reach an agreement among themselves, Christians and Muslims in Nazareth tossed the ball into the hands of the Israeli government.

Mayor Jeraisi said it was only fitting that Israel intervene because the land in dispute is state land — that is, it is up to Israel to decide how it should be used.

Islamic politicians countered that the land is under the control of the wakf, the Muslim body responsible for overseeing Islamic holy sites.

At first, Israeli Interior Minister Eli Suissa threw his support behind the Islamic cause.

Suissa's move drew a sharp reaction from the Christian world.

Senior church delegates, among them the Latin Patriarch, Michel Sabah, and the custodian of holy sites on behalf of the Vatican, Giovanni Batistelli, wrote a sharply worded letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warning that "whoever gives in to extortionists today will give in to terrorism tomorrow."

The church leaders also warned that the pope would cancel his trip to the Holy Land if Israel sided with the Muslims.

Last week, the director general of Israel's Religious Affairs Ministry, Avi Blustein, was fired after he claimed that Christian representatives threatened to shut down their churches for the millennium year if the mosque were built near the Church of the Annunciation.

A church representative said Blustein's claim was an attempt by Israel to dodge its own responsibility for the conflict.

On Sunday, an Israeli ministerial committee reached a decision in the controversy, allowing Nazareth's Muslim community to build the mosque — provided they removed the protest tent they had erected at the site.

Salman Abu-Ahmad, an Islamic leader in Nazareth, rejected the decision.

"The decision is not serious," he told JTA. "It does not meet our minimum demands."

Abu-Ahmad called on the Israeli government to recognize that the land in dispute belongs to the wakf.

He added that only once such recognition is given will Muslim leaders be willing to discuss the size of the mosque.

Abu-Ahmad charged that the Israeli government was giving in to international pressure — meaning the church.

For their part, church officials expressed the hope that the ministerial decision would help restore calm to Nazareth.

Just the same, however, these officials described that decision as a "victory for the Muslims."

Even were the decision to win the approval of both sides — which appears unlikely, given the initial reactions — it may be subject to change after Israel holds its elections next month.

Once a new government is formed, leaders of the Jewish state may once again have to take a stab at working out a compromise that is acceptable to both Islamic and church officials. □



## Daily News Bulletin

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## JEWISH WORLD

### Bill would restore benefits

U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) introduced legislation to restore certain benefits to legal immigrants that were cut as a result of the 1996 welfare reform bill.

The bill would permit states to provide Medicaid coverage for impoverished pregnant women and children who are legal immigrants; restore coverage to certain legal immigrants in nursing homes; and restore food stamp eligibility to all legal immigrants who were in the United States prior to the 1996 enactment of the welfare law.

### Chasidic leader admits crime

A leader of the Satmar Chasidic community admitted channeling more than \$6 million illegally from the New York City school system to a private Jewish girls school in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

Rabbi Hertz Frankel pleaded guilty on April 9 to felony charges of conspiracy after he admitted placing as many as 80 Jewish housewives in no-show jobs on the district payroll and diverting their paychecks for use at the Beis Rachel School, where he was principal. Frankel was sentenced to three years' probation and ordered to pay \$1 million in restitution.

### Shoah moneys may not be taxed

U.S. Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (R-Ill.) introduced legislation last week that would exempt from federal taxation any legal settlement or compensation paid to Holocaust survivors.

Fitzgerald said it would be wrong to penalize Holocaust survivors "by taxing assets that are rightfully theirs in the first place."

A similar measure has been introduced in the House of Representatives.

### Group to buy clinic for refugees

The Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center announced plans to purchase a mobile medical clinic capable of providing aid to 54,000 Kosovo refugees during the next two months. The clinic will be stationed wherever the need is greatest, officials said.

### Torah crown returned to Israel

The U.S. Customs Service returned to the Israeli government last Friday an antique Torah crown stolen from Israel and recovered in New York. The U.S. attorney's office, working on a lead from Israeli police, located the crown, valued at \$50,000, at an antique jewelry store in midtown Manhattan.

The dealer said a tourist had given him the gold-and-diamond crown, which was among several items stolen during a 1998 burglary at a museum connected to the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem.

## Report: Israeli agencies dispute threat posed by Egyptian military

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Alarm bells are ringing in some quarters in Jerusalem over the buildup of the Egyptian army, which has more than doubled in size since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, according to sources in London.

The massive accumulation of weapons has also sparked an intense debate between two Israeli intelligence agencies about the threat posed by Egypt's bulging arsenals, say the sources. Indeed, U.S. officials were reported to have been astonished when their Israeli counterparts placed Egypt ahead of Iran on the agenda of the recent U.S.-Israeli semiannual strategic talks.

On one side of the debate in Jerusalem is Aman, Israel's military intelligence branch, which has reportedly warned of a possible deterioration in Israeli-Egyptian relations and the consequent significance of Cairo's arsenal for Israel's security.

Military intelligence analysts are concerned that Egypt has not only become America's second-largest arms customer, after Saudi Arabia, but also that its army is now a modern, efficient fighting force, equipped with top-of-the-line American weaponry. On the other side is the Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence agency, which is reportedly trying to portray Egyptian-Israeli relations as stable and secure.

The London sources say Egypt has more than doubled the size of its armored corps, replacing outdated Soviet T-62s with modern American tanks, including the M1-A1. At the same time, the Egyptian Air Force now boasts more than 200 modern U.S.-made F-16 jet fighters.

Of even greater concern to Israel, which has only a small navy, is the fact that Egypt is now in the process of completely revamping its significantly larger naval fleet.

The dispute between Aman and the Mossad centers around the extent to which Egypt poses a short-term threat to Israel, despite the two countries' 20-year-old peace treaty. Aman contends that the peace is fragile and that almost any crisis, including a confrontation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, could trigger a resumption of hostilities between the two countries.

As a result of this perception, the Israeli army routinely includes the possibility of Egyptian "intervention" in most of its war games.

The Mossad reportedly takes a more sanguine view, contending that Cairo's peace with Israel, however cool, forms the strategic underpinning of Egypt's Middle East vision. Nothing short of a direct Israeli attack on Cairo, or an outright massacre of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, they say, could cause Egypt to change course and engage Israel in a new war.

Mossad officers also claim that Israeli lobbying on Capitol Hill against the arming of Egypt is well known to Egyptian leaders and is regarded in Cairo as a hostile move.

The Mossad is also said to be concerned that Aman's position could cause the Israeli leadership to miscalculate in a crisis and overreact to Egyptian tactical moves.

Indeed, Mossad officials are said to be concerned that Aman's projections may turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy — especially since Aman is currently considered the "national assessor" of strategic threats to Israel and has the ear of Israeli leaders. □

## Russian Jews slam report on anti-Semitism

MOSCOW (JTA) — Russian Jewish leaders are criticizing a Justice Ministry report that absolves the Communist Party from responsibility for anti-Semitic remarks made late last year by some of its legislators.

The report, issued last week, concluded that those remarks were isolated episodes. Two months ago, the Justice Ministry announced it would investigate the party following virulent anti-Semitic remarks by some of its prominent party members, including legislators Albert Makashov and Viktor Ilyukhin.

Moscow's chief rabbi, Pinchas Goldschmidt, said he was particularly outraged that the report ignored a recent article by Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov in which he alleged that "Zionists" are behind a plot to dominate the world. □

## Ukraine's Jews confront schism as two umbrella groups compete

By Lev Krichevsky

KIEV, Ukraine (JTA) — The turmoil currently taking place in Ukraine's organized Jewish community centers around a controversial tycoon.

Last week, some of Ukraine's leading Jewish groups summoned about 300 activists to Kiev to announce the founding of the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine.

The move took place one week after another Jewish umbrella group, the United Jewish Community of Ukraine, held its initial meeting here in the capital of this former Soviet republic.

While Ukrainian Jews appear to be divided over which of the two groups to support, the international Jewish community has already thrown its weight behind the confederation.

The communal schism comes as rival Jewish magnates are attempting to position themselves to deliver the Jewish vote in the country's presidential elections, scheduled for Oct. 31.

The conflict embroiling this 600,000-member Jewish community revolves around Vadim Rabinovich, one of the wealthiest and most influential businessmen in this nation of 53 million.

Rabinovich, a Ukrainian native who had given up his citizenship for an Israeli passport, took no part in Jewish life until 1997, when he surprised many long-time activists by founding the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress. The group, which sought to unite Ukrainian Jews, raised its money from the emerging Jewish business community.

But two years later, Rabinovich, whose empire includes holdings in finance, trade and the mass media, found himself under fire from critics who charged that the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress was not responding to the needs of the many impoverished Jews in this aging community.

The tycoon's goal, these critics say, was to win international and domestic recognition for himself as the pre-eminent Jewish leader of Ukraine in a bid to gain more influence with the pro-reform president of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma.

Rabinovich, in turn, charges that other Jewish leaders failed to cooperate in meeting the community's needs.

Only last year, Rabinovich said his group distributed several hundred thousand dollars to various Jewish communal projects.

Critics charge that the actual sum was far less than the figure usually cited by Rabinovich and that most of the funds were coming from other magnates and not from Rabinovich himself, as he claims.

Along with their questions about the way Rabinovich has operated the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, Jewish leaders cite other reasons for their decision to form a new group.

For years, Rabinovich has been dogged by rumors about alleged connections to shady businesses, including some involved in arms and nuclear materials trade with countries such as Iran and North Korea.

Rabinovich says he has never been involved in illegal business dealings, but the allegations led the United States to revoke his visa a few years ago, and he reportedly has been denied visas to Britain and Austria in the past few years for the same reason.

As a result of his increasingly tarnished reputation, Rabinovich was eventually driven out of Kuchma's inner circle.

Against this background, several influential Jewish groups, including the Ukrainian Va'ad, left the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress in February and announced their plan to form a rival group. But before they could hold their convention last week to form the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine, Rabinovich stole their thunder by dissolving the congress and bringing some 1,600 Jews to Kiev who unanimously elected him leader of the newly formed United Jewish Community of Ukraine.

Though Rabinovich's meeting attracted five times more delegates, the subsequent gathering of the confederation upstaged its rival conference in international representation and the recognition it received from Ukrainian leaders and foreign Jewish organizations. Chief rabbis from most European nations attended the event last week, and the leaders of the European Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress have already recognized the confederation as representing all Ukrainian Jews.

President Kuchma sent a welcoming letter to the confederation, and his predecessor, Leonid Kravchuk, the first leader of post-Communist Ukraine, addressed its gathering with a highly emotional speech peppered with remarks sympathetic to Jews.

Wary of losing financial support from either group, dozens of organizations representing Ukraine's Jewish community sent representatives to both of the founding conventions.

One of Rabinovich's rivals, politician Grigori Surkis, a wealthy businessman who controls Ukraine's most popular soccer club, reportedly turned down an offer to head the confederation.

At least one Jewish leader applauded Surkis' decision.

The confederation "is not a union around one individual. It's a union built on the idea of joint activities for the good of the entire Jewish community," said Ya'akov Bleich, the chief rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine.

Surkis and Rabinovich are vying to be Kuchma's chief Jewish backer in the October elections.

Rabinovich's group, the United Jewish Community of Ukraine, said it would stress the establishment of Western-style Jewish community centers across Ukraine aimed at helping individual communities.

For its part, Jewish Confederation of Ukraine has established priorities that include social, educational and youth activities, the preservation of Jewish heritage sites, and pushing for the large-scale restitution of former Jewish communal property that could eventually allow the community to become self-sufficient. Money from Jewish organizations in the West currently help the Jewish community operate.

Earlier this year, Ukrainian leaders promised to declare a moratorium on the privatization of all such disputed property.

Meanwhile, the creation of the two umbrella groups has generated widely divergent reactions among Jewish leaders here.

Ordinary Jews may eventually benefit from the schism, said Moisey Sheinkman, the leader of the Ukrainian branch of B'nai B'rith, who was elected one of the vice presidents of Rabinovich's new organization but also attended the confederation's founding convention.

"Two influential groups will court local organizations and eventually" the grass-roots community will benefit, he said.

Another Jewish activist who attended both meetings disagreed.

"It's a tragedy," Rudolf Mirsky said of the split. Noting the similarities between the two groups' platforms, Mirsky added, "People are lost. They don't understand what's going on." □