



Daily News Bulletin

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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli team returns home

Medical staff from an Israeli army field hospital in Macedonia returned to Israel on Thursday, following a 17-day humanitarian mission at the Brazde refugee camp near the country's border with Kosovo.

During their mission, the staff treated some 1,500 ethnic Albanian refugees, of which 140 were hospitalized.

Twelve babies were born at the hospital during this period.

Joining the staff on the return flight to Israel were two refugees from Kosovo who had received permission to join a group of 111 ethnic Albanian refugees who arrived in Israel last week.

Dutch panel clears El Al

A Dutch parliamentary inquiry into the 1992 crash of an El Al cargo jet over Amsterdam that killed at least 43 people concluded that no toxic materials had been on the plane.

The 350-page report, issued following a six-month inquiry, also dismissed any links between the plane's cargo and health problems subsequently reported by people living near the crash site.

Following the crash, rumors surfaced that the plane had been transporting toxic materials that could be used for making chemical weapons.

Israeli Transportation Minister Shaul Yahalom and El Al officials applauded the report's findings.

Russian arson may be backlash

Days after authorities in the Russian town of Borovichi granted a public space to the local Jewish community, which numbers 200 of the town's 90,000 members, it was seriously damaged in what local Jews believe was an anti-Semitic arson. [Page 2]

Israel seeks Orient House closure

Israel called Thursday for the closure of the Palestinian Authority's de facto headquarters in eastern Jerusalem.

The closure order against Orient House was issued by the Security Cabinet after the top Palestinian official in Jerusalem, Faisal Hussein, hosted some 30 diplomats there a day earlier.

The order may take some time to implement through the proper legal channels, an Israeli security official said.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Kosovo war could influence Israel's future link with NATO

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — More than 1,500 delegates from 43 countries descended on Washington this week for what should have been a weekend of partying to mark the 50th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

But the festivities will be tempered by foreboding over an increasingly contentious, albeit humanitarian, war — the first in NATO's history — that was intended to ease suffering and halt the program of ethnic cleansing by Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

Few will watch the current conflict and its fallout more closely than Israel, which, while not itself a NATO member, has a stake in the alliance through its membership in a five-year-old NATO initiative, the Mediterranean Dialogue, which is aimed at enhancing stability and security in the region.

But the future of the Mediterranean Dialogue could be affected by events in the Balkans. Israel, like NATO, has much to lose if a decent exit is not found out of the conflict in Kosovo.

At the same time, NATO's current experience could prompt NATO leaders to further emphasize dialogue as a way to prevent future military action.

While NATO is carefully incorporating states of the former Soviet bloc into an enlarged structure — Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic were admitted last month — the organization is also examining potential post-Soviet-era threats to Europe. The Mediterranean rim has been identified as a prime source of such threats.

NATO's urgent desire to accelerate cooperation with and within the Mediterranean region is therefore not hard to fathom.

It is possible, say strategic analysts and military planners, that within 10 years every European capital — certainly every southern European capital — will be within range of ballistic missiles based on Europe's periphery.

At that point, it will no longer be possible to divide European security from Middle East security. The world, note the analysts, is moving away from neat divisions based on regional geography. The buzzword of the future, they say, is interdependence.

It is against this backdrop that the Mediterranean Dialogue was established. It now includes five nations in addition to Israel: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania and Jordan. Others may follow.

The threat to Europe is not perceived in solely military terms, but is likely to be spawned by factors such as nationalism, fundamentalism, socioeconomic crises and demography. One analyst notes, for example, that within the next 25 years, the population of North Africa will grow from its present 63 million to an estimated 142 million, with far-reaching implications for employment, housing, food, water, sanitation, transport and communications in the region.

Trade with the Mediterranean region is also an important issue because the area provides substantial portions of Western Europe's energy needs in the form of oil and natural gas.

NATO is now planning to move from such issues, which it defines as "soft" security, to the "hard" security issues, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery.

The contours of the Mediterranean Dialogue were designed by a team at the California-based Rand think-tank that created a two-track structure. On the bilateral

MIDEAST FOCUS

Russian minister visits Israel

Improved Israeli-Russian relations would serve the interests of both countries, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said upon arriving Thursday in Israel.

Closer bilateral ties have become a hot issue in Israel's election campaign, prompting some critics to suggest that Ivanov's visit is calculated to win votes for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Ivanov is also slated to visit the Palestinian self-rule areas, Egypt and Syria.

Report: Golan stance changed

Israel is ready to resume negotiations with Syria over the Golan Heights at the point from which they broke off in 1996 under the previous Labor-led government, an Israeli newspaper reported Thursday.

The report in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz would indicate a major shift in the position of the Israeli government, which has repeatedly stated that the negotiations should be held without preconditions.

The Prime Minister's Office denied the report, and Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon called it a "total lie."

Water dispute resolved

Israel and Jordan resolved a water dispute that recently had raised tensions between the two countries and had spurred Amman to suggest that Israel was attempting to avoid its obligations under the two countries' 1994 peace treaty.

No specific figures were announced regarding the amount of water Israel agreed to supply Jordan, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported Thursday.

One liver used for 2 transplants

Doctors in Israel transplanted a single liver into two patients this week. The procedure was described as a "breakthrough" by a surgeon who conducted one of the transplants, noting the "serious shortage" of donor organs in Israel.

level, a regular political dialogue is conducted between ambassadors of each of the dialogue states and NATO officials.

On the multilateral level, participating Mediterranean states are engaged in a broad range of NATO-initiated activities, including cooperation in the field of civil emergencies, joint search-and-rescue operations, environmental issues and scientific advances. In addition, dialogue states also send representatives to observe NATO land, sea and air exercises, and to participate in seminars and workshops with their NATO counterparts in Europe.

The intention is not only to develop a cooperative regional approach to problem-solving, but also to expose the regional group to NATO's security perceptions and to immerse them in the culture of the organization.

Exchanges extend beyond military officials of the six Mediterranean nations to include politicians, academics, journalists and other opinion-making elites.

"We want to ensure that we reach out," a senior NATO official told JTA, "and explain our objectives more widely."

Israel, the most developed and most powerful of the six, is playing an active and enthusiastic role in advancing the NATO agenda through the Mediterranean Dialogue, added the official. But the advancement of the dialogue hinges, in part, upon the outcome in Kosovo, where NATO is in a desperate struggle — if not for survival, then at least for credibility.

The war, it is now clear, is likely to be more protracted and ultimately more divisive — politically, militarily and, not least, financially — than any of NATO's 19 member-states had anticipated at the outset.

Against the backdrop of burning villages and terrified refugees, the free world has been given a humbling lesson in the limits of power.

When NATO officials sat down to plan the 50th anniversary celebration in Washington, the focus of the festivities was to have been on the unequivocal triumph of the most successful alliance in history, whose deterrent ability had won the Cold War without a shot being fired. Instead, organizers are frantically recasting the "festival of peace" as a council of war: a triumphal fly-by of NATO planes has been canceled; the White House champagne banquet has been downgraded to a working dinner; and the "black-tie" instruction on invitations has been replaced by "lounge suits." Even the issuing of a commemorative stamp has been put on hold.

Two months ago, NATO's deputy secretary-general, Sergio Balanzino, confidently told delegates at a meeting of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish American Organizations in Brussels: "We're moving from an era of competition to cooperation, from collective defense to collective security."

And just this month, when the U.S.-led NATO war against Yugoslavia was barely one week old, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was able to declare optimistically: "This is a test of the NATO of the 21st century,"

For many observers, these brave words have acquired an unusually bitter taste as NATO political and military leaders struggle with an unpredictable war in a corner of the Balkans. □

Arson suspected at Russian Jewish center

MOSCOW (JTA) — Days after authorities in the Russian town of Borovichi granted a public space to the local Jewish community, it was seriously damaged in what local Jews believe was an anti-Semitic arson attack.

According to Edward Alexeev, leader of the small Jewish community in the town of 90,000 located about 300 miles northwest of Moscow, the fire earlier this week totally destroyed the roof of the building. No one was injured in the incident, which firefighters said was an arson.

Alexeev said the attack could have been an anti-Semitic backlash against town authorities' granting the space to Jews, banning neo-Nazi activities and initiating 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 reported a dramatic increase in neo-Nazi activities. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Insurance panel may face 'crisis'

Jewish organizations and the Israeli delegation to the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims are warning that the commission is headed for crisis if progress is not made in negotiations with European insurance groups.

The commission, which is headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, was established last year to hammer out a settlement on Holocaust-era insurance policies.

The commission is scheduled to meet May 6 in London.

The commission is deadlocked over several issues, including the method to be used for evaluating policies and the issue of disclosure of names of policy-holders.

Swiss clear way for foundation

Swiss voters this week approved a new constitution which eliminates the requirement that the country's currency be backed by gold.

The vote clears the way for the Swiss government to sell some of its gold reserves to create a \$5 billion foundation to help victims of genocide, war and natural disasters.

The foundation was first proposed in 1997, when the Alpine nation was confronting charges of engaging in financial complicity with Nazi Germany, but it is now unclear whether any of the foundation's moneys will be used to help Holocaust victims.

S.S. St. Louis exhibit opens

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington opened an exhibit commemorating the 60th anniversary of the voyage of the S.S. St. Louis.

The exhibit, which runs through September, chronicles the ill-fated odyssey of the more than 900 Jewish passengers who fled Nazi Germany aboard the luxury liner, only to be turned away from American shores and forced to return to Europe, where many of the passengers perished in the Holocaust.

Baroness Rothschild dies at 84

Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild, a patron of Israeli dance, died this week in her home following a long illness.

She was 84 years old.

Born in Paris, de Rothschild moved to the United States with her family following the outbreak of World War II and immigrated to Israel in 1962. Two years later, she founded the Batsheva Dance Company.

Through her ties with noted choreographers, including Martha Graham, she helped the troupe attain international standing. In 1967, de Rothschild founded the Batdor Ballet Academy, and remained active in its management until the weeks preceding her death.

Murder case involving U.S. teen spurs change of extradition law

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Knesset has passed a law making it easier to extradite Israeli citizens charged with committing crimes abroad.

Those who hold Israeli citizenship but are not residents of the country will be extradited, while residents will be tried in the Jewish state.

The law was spurred by, but is not expected to affect, the case of Samuel Sheinbein, a Maryland teen-ager accused of murder who fought extradition to the United States by claiming Israeli citizenship through his father.

Meeting in special session Monday, the Knesset approved the amendment to Israel's extradition law, which had prohibited the extradition of all Israeli citizens to stand trial in another country — creating a situation that critics said contravened extradition agreements with other countries and turned Israel into a haven for criminals seeking shelter from the law.

Israel's attorney general, Elyakim Rubinstein, was among the previous law's critics, saying few countries would be willing to invest the financial resources needed to transfer an investigation and criminal case to an Israeli court.

The Sheinbein case has been a source of tension between Israel and the United States, which sought his extradition.

After a protracted legal process, Israel's Supreme Court ruled last month against hearing an appeal of its earlier decision not to allow the extradition of the U.S. teen-ager.

Sheinbein's trial for premeditated murder is due to begin here May 16.

Sheinbein, 18, fled to Israel three days after the mutilated corpse of his former friend, 19-year-old Alfred Tello, was found in September 1997.

Another suspect in the murder, Aaron Benjamin Needle, 18, hanged himself in his jail cell following his arrest.

Needle and Sheinbein were classmates at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in suburban Washington. □

High court calls on Israel to explain residency policy

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The High Court of Justice has given the government three months to explain its policy regarding the residency rights of Palestinians living in eastern Jerusalem.

Thursday's move by the high court came after several hundred such Palestinians, accusing the Interior Ministry of discrimination, petitioned the court against Israel's cancellation of their identity cards and residency status after they spent lengthy periods abroad.

The directive came after the court heard arguments from human rights groups that said the Interior Ministry had altered its policy in order to discriminate against the Palestinians.

They argued that 700 Palestinian Arabs from eastern Jerusalem had had their identity cards canceled during the past year.

The state's lawyers countered that there had been no policy change and that individuals who left Jerusalem for an extended time were not permanent residents of the city.

An affidavit submitted to the court by a former adviser on Arab affairs to the mayor of Jerusalem claimed that there had been a shift in policy.

"I think that, without a doubt, Palestinians who leave Jerusalem for the West Bank, Jordan or abroad for good reasons, such as lack of housing, difficulty finding employment or for studies" do not view their lives "abroad as the center of their lives," Amir Cheshin told Israel Radio. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Macedonia's Jews worry a wider war would create another exodus***By Michael J. Jordan*

SKOPJE, Macedonia (JTA) — The country implodes due to economic crisis or ethnic conflict and Jews are torn between staying and going. Many leave, and the community, still struggling to recover from the Holocaust and communism, suffers irreparable damage.

It is, by now, a familiar pattern of Jewish life in the Balkans, and Macedonia's Jews wonder if they are next.

As NATO bombs punish Yugoslavia for abusing ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, the odds are growing that Macedonia will either be dragged into a wider Balkan war or erupt in a civil war of its own. So, just as some 300 Yugoslav Jews have taken refuge in neighboring Hungary, Macedonia's Jews may one day find shelter with the Jews in next-door Bulgaria. For now, however, the 190 or so Macedonian Jews say they are staying put. Their leaders say they expect the crisis to be resolved soon.

"We have always shared the fate of the people of this country," Viktor Mizrahi, president of the Jewish Community of Macedonia, said in an interview with JTA. "So we will continue to protect both the interests of the country and of the Jewish community. But we are also following the situation closely and are prepared to react as the political circumstances dictate."

Macedonian Jews, like the Jews of Yugoslavia, must walk a diplomatic tightrope. Open talk of a possible Jewish exodus out of Macedonia, they worry, may stir resentment among the neighbors they would leave behind. That could impede their return home in the future. Similarly, criticizing the government may make them appear unpatriotic.

So, despite traditionally warm relations with their countrymen, Macedonian Jews select their words carefully.

"I'd have to explain the Balkans to you," said Zdravko Sami, former vice president and now "coordinator" of the Jewish community. "Everything here is construed as a political act, gesture or statement."

Mizrahi has joined Yugoslav Jewish leaders in denouncing the NATO airstrikes. The air campaign has crippled both countries economically. Seventy percent of Macedonian trade is with Yugoslavia and the destruction of bridges over the Danube River effectively cuts off Macedonia from the rest of Europe.

Like Yugoslavia, Macedonia has a restive ethnic Albanian minority, constituting one-quarter to one-third of the overall population of 2 million. They have grievances of their own, but their protests have been mostly peaceful. However, the monthlong NATO campaign has saddled the state with approximately 127,500 Albanian refugees, according to figures from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. The longer they stay, it's presumed, the angrier all Albanians will become.

Macedonia's elite wants full integration with the West, including membership in NATO and the European Union. So they have tolerated NATO's use of Macedonian air space and various U.N. and NATO military missions on their soil.

But they adamantly oppose the possibility of NATO ground troops invading Yugoslavia through Macedonia, where the masses sympathize with their Slavic, Orthodox Christian brethren in

Serbia. Macedonia is home to a significant Serb minority.

Macedonians fear that the NATO onslaught is forcing them into open conflict with Yugoslavia and will poison future relations between the two countries.

Macedonian Jews, meanwhile, preach against intolerance. They speak from experience. During the Holocaust, the Jewish community was nearly obliterated. Roughly 7,300 died at the hands of Bulgarian fascists.

"Jews are not a part of this conflict, so we can stand aside as impartial observers," Sami said. "With our historical example, we can explain the need for ethnic and religious tolerance. Because, basically, there is no reason or logic to these conflicts."

Israel is also a moral voice during the crisis, backing its words with actions. The Israelis built the first field hospital for Albanian refugees, contributed \$100,000 worth of medicine to the Macedonian relief effort and have taken in more than 100 refugees.

Israel's relief efforts have boosted the pride and image of Macedonian Jewry.

"The Jewish community enjoys high respect within Macedonian society," said Mizrahi, a 50-year-old economist. "The humanitarian aid by Israel has been accepted with open arms and was one more confirmation of our reputation."

But there is also concern here that the U.S.-led assault on Yugoslavia will trigger anti-Semitism — not directed at local Jews, but Jews in general. Indeed, at a recent rally in Australia, a Serbian speaker blamed the air strikes on "talmudic Jews" who "run the White House."

Such talk resonates with certain segments of Macedonian society, Sami said.

"As war makes this country poorer, there will be a need to accuse somebody," he said. "And when you look at the names propagated around the world as the 'aggressors' — Albright, Cohen, Holbrooke, Berger, Rubin — it's inevitable that Jews will be used as a scapegoat."

The Macedonian Jewish community traces its roots back more than 2,000 years. But, as Sami said, after 98 percent of the Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, "it has taken 50 years for us to become something again." The 190 members include 52 families, though Sami estimates there are some 200 to 300 unaffiliated Jews elsewhere in Macedonia.

Those in the community continue to live their lives in normalcy. The rabbi from Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital, visits once a month. The Jewish center has been renovated, with plans to build a synagogue on the top floor. Classes in Jewish folk dance are held regularly.

But the potential emigration of many young Jews is threatening the Jewish revival. Seven teens, aged 16-18, will head to Israel this summer to learn Hebrew. They will likely stay on and continue their studies. More are expected to follow in the coming years, Sami said.

Meanwhile, the rest of the community watches and waits. As the situation here worsens, a flight to safety looms as an ever greater possibility. Although there's no telling whether Macedonian Jewry could recover once again, Mizrahi tries to remain optimistic.

"Jews have lived through everything," he said. "If we didn't have this spirit of survival, we wouldn't have survived 2,000 years in the Diaspora. So even if there are five people left, there will certainly be a Jewish community in Macedonia." □