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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Shul arson prompts search

More than 100 U.S. federal agents are searching for clues in last Friday's arson attacks on three Sacramento-area synagogues. The attacks are considered one of the worst anti-Semitic hate crimes of the past 20 years. [Page 1]

Israelis ordered to shelters

Israel ordered residents of northern communities to go to bomb shelters Sunday, fearing a new wave of Hezbollah-launched Katyusha rocket attacks.

Israel expected retaliation after two Lebanese women and a girl were wounded by a missile that struck their home in Lebanon. The Israeli army said it had fired at Hezbollah gunmen in its security zone, but denied that its missiles had hit civilians.

Iran said to seek talks with Israel

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami wants to open secret talks with Israel, the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* reported Sunday. Khatami suggested a series of confidence-building steps between the two countries "to try to break the current circle of distrust and suspicion," the newspaper added.

Vatican weighs in on arrests

The Vatican called the recent arrest of 13 Iranian Jews a "matter of concern" to all those committed to human rights. In a letter to the World Jewish Congress, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, the Vatican official on Jewish affairs, said Pope John Paul II is following the situation carefully.

Meanwhile, an influential Iranian cleric said last week that the 13 deserve to be hanged. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, secretary of the council that serves as a constitutional advisory body to Iran's leader, also dismissed any suggestion that Western governments might work out a deal for the release of the suspects.

Clinton blocks embassy move

President Clinton last Friday blocked the move of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. As expected, Clinton invoked his authority to stop the move based on the "national security" interests of the United States.

A group of senators plans to introduce legislation to revoke Clinton's ability to renew the waiver when it expires in six months.

Federal agents comb for clues in arson attacks on 3 synagogues

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — More than 100 federal agents are searching for clues in last Friday's arson attacks on three Sacramento-area synagogues, considered one of the worst anti-Semitic hate crimes of the past 20 years.

The predawn attacks targeted Congregation B'nai Israel and Congregation Beth Shalom, both Reform temples, and the Keneset Israel Torah Center, an Orthodox synagogue. Total damage was estimated at close to \$1 million.

At two of the sites, arsonists left leaflets that blamed the "International Jew World Order" and the "International Jewsmedia" for the war in Kosovo.

"We are Slavs, we will never allow the International Jew World Order to take our Land," read one flier. "We fight to keep Serbia free forever."

Hardest hit was B'nai Israel in downtown Sacramento, whose gutted library lost 5,000 books, some hundreds of years old. Also destroyed were 300 videotapes on Jewish history, which the congregation had been collecting for its 150th anniversary celebration in October. Damages were estimated at \$800,000.

B'nai Israel is believed to be the oldest American synagogue west of the Mississippi River.

Congregants defiantly held Friday evening services in a community theater and applauded Rabbi Brad Bloom's injunction, "Do not be afraid."

At Beth Shalom, vandals broke in through a side window and started a fire on the bimah, causing \$100,000 in damage. Earlier this year, the temple's walls had been defaced by painted swastikas. Beth Shalom congregants held services Saturday morning at a nearby Conservative synagogue.

At Keneset Israel, it appeared that a Molotov cocktail was lobbed through a sliding glass door. Smoke damage was estimated at \$30,000. Congregants attended services Friday evening in a private home.

The synagogue attacks, at locations up to 10 miles apart, occurred within a 35-minute time span, leading officials to assume that more than one person must have been involved.

Seventy agents from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and 30 from the FBI are leading the investigation. The ATF sent its National Response Team, a mobile investigative unit of chemists, structural engineers and police dogs dispatched for major incidents, such as the bombings in Oklahoma City and at the World Trade Center in New York.

"These are our cream of the crop of investigators when it comes to fire and explosives investigations," ATF spokeswoman Sheree Mixell told the *Sacramento Bee*.

California Gov. Gray Davis ordered all law enforcement officials in the state capital to assist the federal efforts and called the "despicable hate crimes" an "offense to all decent people."

Members of B'nai Israel reacted to the incident with both concern and defiance.

"It's incidents like these that remind Jewish people and other ethnic minorities how vulnerable they can be, even in safe communities like Sacramento," said attorney Steve Merksamer.

Judie Panneton, a daughter of Holocaust survivors, said the attacks "tell you that anti-Semitism is still alive and not a thing of the past. But we are a strong people. We have been through hell and back before, and we'll survive this."

At Friday evening services in the theater, B'nai Israel librarian Poshi Mikalson held

MIDEAST FOCUS

Baker sees Israeli-Syrian peace

Israel and Syria have a "window of opportunity" to reach peace, former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker said during a visit Saturday to Damascus.

Baker, who held separate meetings with President Hafez Assad and Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa, warned that it is unclear how long the opportunity will remain. Baker said he was visiting Syria as a private citizen.

Deri foes called 'evil ones'

Israeli politicians who forced the resignation of Shas political leader Aryeh Deri are "evil ones," the spiritual leader of the fervently Orthodox party said Saturday.

The comment by Rabbi Ovadia Yosef sparked demands for a clarification from Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak's One Israel bloc, because Barak himself had demanded Deri's resignation as a condition for holding coalition talks with Shas.

A Shas official said Sunday that Yosef was referring to the leftist Meretz Party. Meretz leader Yossi Sarid later said he was proud to be an "evil one" if being righteous meant siding with Deri, who was convicted in March on bribery charges.

World leaders call for peace

Leaders of the top seven industrialized nations and Russia called on Israel and the Palestinian Authority to redouble efforts to reach a final peace settlement.

In a statement issued after the end of a two-day summit in Cologne, Germany, the Group of Eight urged the two sides "to implement fully and promptly the Wye River Memorandum, to combat terror, to fight violence and incitement to violence and to refrain from all activities that prejudice the outcome of the Permanent Status negotiations." The statement also urged a resumption of talks involving Israel, Syria and Lebanon.



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up a charred book. "I promise you, from these ashes we will rise again," she promised as congregants cheered.

There have been 39 arson attacks against synagogues and Jewish institutions in the past five years, according to Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "This is one of the worst attacks since we began keeping records 20 years ago," he said.

"What is so distressing is the resiliency of anti-Semitism," Foxman added. "Nazism is gone, fascism is gone, communism is gone and yet anti-Semitism is still here. It's been around for 2,000 years and it continues to pollute our environment."

ADL, which has been monitoring hate groups in the Sacramento area for the past few months, found them using similar propaganda themes to those used in the attacks, blaming Jews for the NATO bombings of "Serbian Christians."

The flier left behind at Keneset Israel denounced the "North Atlantic Terrorist Organization," adding that "the fake Albanian refugee crisis was manufactured by the International Jewsmidia to justify the terrorizing, the bestial bombing of our Yugoslavia back into the dark ages."

The text was accompanied by a cartoon of bombs raining down on President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

The Rev. Dobrivoje Milunovic, pastor of Sacramento's Serbian Orthodox Church of the Assumption, said the 250 families in his church had "nothing to do with this act of terror, this act of hate."

"Our prayers and thoughts are with the members of the Jewish congregations whose temples have been burned."

In San Francisco, Rabbi Doug Kahn, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, said he had contacted the Hate Crime Unit of the San Francisco police department to request an appropriate level of heightened alert for Bay Area synagogues over the weekend.

B'nai Israel was previously targeted in 1993, when the temple was damaged in a spate of fire bombings that also struck the offices of African American and Japanese organizations, and the home of a Chinese city councilman. An 18-year-old white supremacist was convicted in the case and sentenced to 17 years in prison.

On Sunday, the Sacramento Bee reported that two private citizens have posted a total of \$35,000 in reward money for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the arsonists. Sacramento bounty-hunter Leonard Padilla is offering \$25,000 and Michael Swebner, an Israeli-born businessman, is offering \$10,000.

Federal authorities are asking anybody with information on the arsons to call 800-435-7883 or 888-ATF-FIRE. □

USSR leader reportedly had Jewish roots

MOSCOW (JTA) — Former Soviet leader Yuri Andropov had Jewish roots, according to recent reports in the Russian press.

Andropov, who was in charge of the KGB for 15 years and then headed the USSR from November 1982 until his death in February 1984, concealed his Jewish background after he entered the Communist Party, according to the reports.

Andropov's mother, Yevgeniya Faynshtein, was a music teacher in southern Russia.

The fate of Andropov's father remains a mystery. His mother later remarried a Russian Greek named Andropulo. His adopted son later changed this last name to a more Russian-sounding one.

Unlike many other Soviet leaders, Andropov never wrote his memoirs, which in part can be explained by his roots, say the reports.

Andropov's role in Soviet history is still open to debate 15 years after his death.

Between 1967 and 1982, when he served as head of the KGB, the Soviet secret service, he was responsible for persecuting dissidents, including members of the underground Jewish movement.

Yet some credit him for exiling some of the prominent dissidents rather than jailing them — as well as for partially opening the doors for Jewish emigration to Israel in the 1970s. □

JEWISH WORLD

Jewish groups laud Poland

Poland should be commended for passing legislation to create protective zones around former Nazi concentration camps in the country, a coalition of international Jewish groups agreed during a June 17 meeting.

The coalition — which includes groups from the United States, Israel and Europe — also agreed to resume discussion with the Polish government concerning the preservation of the site of the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps.

In a separate development, 11 Holocaust survivors filed a class-action lawsuit against the Polish government last Friday seeking to recover property their families owned before the Holocaust, lawyers for the plaintiffs said.

The suit seeks to represent tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors and their heirs worldwide, the lawyers added.

Swiss lawmakers reject fund

The Swiss Parliament last week defeated a constitutional amendment designed to help finance a humanitarian foundation with gold sales.

But the Swiss government and central bank said plans to sell 1,300 tons of excess gold would nonetheless proceed as early as next spring.

Vowing that its moneys would be used to help Holocaust victims, the Swiss government proposed creation of the humanitarian foundation in 1997 amid allegations that it profited from its wartime dealings with Nazi Germany.

Neo-Nazis likely to avoid jail

Two Russian neo-Nazis suspected of setting a Moscow synagogue ablaze last year will most likely be sent to a psychiatric hospital, according to Moscow prosecutors.

Last week, prosecutors charged the two with inciting ethnic and religious hatred and inflicting property damage in the May 1998 attack — for which they could face up to five years in prison.

But a panel of doctors has decided that the two former members of ultranationalist organizations are mentally ill and not responsible for their actions. If a court agrees with the doctors' conclusion, the two will undergo treatment.

Jews active in Mbeki ceremony

Two Jews played a prominent part in last week's inauguration of South African President Thabo Mbeki.

The president of the Constitutional Court, Judge Arthur Chaskalson, administered the oath of office to Mbeki, while Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris was one of five religious leaders to offer a prayer at the June 16 inauguration.

Ben-Gurion's archives give a full picture of Israel's founding father

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Three years ago, the BBC decided to make a television documentary marking the 40th anniversary of the 1956 Sinai campaign, which pitted Israeli, British and French troops against the forces of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The filmmakers were soon stymied in their search for one top secret document: The Protocol of Sevres, in which leaders of the three temporary allies coordinated their plans to seize the Suez Canal, five days before the actual attack on Oct. 29, 1956.

One copy of the protocol went to each of the three participating countries. The BBC first tried to get the British copy, but was told that the document had been burned almost as soon as it was signed.

Next, the French said their copy had been "misplaced" and could not be found.

Finally, the BBC researchers turned to the Ben-Gurion Archives, and within hours the staff produced a photocopy of the original protocol.

It was all in a day's work for Tuvia Friling, director of the Ben-Gurion Research Center and Archives, located on the Sde Boker campus of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

At the archives' core are David Ben-Gurion's diaries, meticulously kept throughout the 60 years of his public career.

"Ben-Gurion was a historian's dream," Friling says of Israel's first prime minister. He made notes on every meeting he ever held, however insignificant, chronicled his decisions and reactions, and even kept carbon copies of the huge number of letters he wrote.

At the time of his death in 1973, Ben-Gurion left behind 750,000 papers. The archives now hold 5 million documents, including holdings from foreign archives bearing on the history of the nascent Jewish state from 1917 to 1967, as well as on Israel's relations with other countries and Diaspora communities.

The mass of material, largely computerized and partially accessible on the Internet in Hebrew and English, yields a fascinating picture of the man at the center of Israel's creation.

For instance, on May 14, 1948, when Ben-Gurion declared Israel a sovereign nation, Jews cheered and danced in the streets of Tel Aviv. But the architect of independence recorded in his diary a profound sense of sadness.

Ben-Gurion knew full well that the Arab states would invade Israel. Until the last minute, Washington was exerting pressure to postpone statehood. And his army chief of staff, Yigal Yadin, reported that Israel had only a 50-50 chance of survival.

"Ben-Gurion, better than anyone else, knew what a heavy price Israel would have to pay in the coming battles," says Friling, 45, a historian and authority on Ben-Gurion's still-controversial role in rescue efforts of European Jewry during the Holocaust.

"What made Ben-Gurion such a great leader is that he could foresee future consequences of today's decision 30 years down the road," Friling says. "He understood that the price of victory would be Israel's rule over other people," which in the long run would divide the nation.

Friling, who also heads the Heritage Institute, and his staff have created a whole range of multimedia and interactive teaching tools, calibrated from kindergarten age to teachers and overseas students, to teach the basics of historical methodology and to role-play the major decisions that confronted Ben-Gurion.

In one game, for instance, players representing all political views in Jewish Palestine, as well as those of Diaspora, Arab, American and Soviet leaders, must decide whether Israel is to declare its independence in 1948.

The research center and the Heritage Institute have traditionally transmitted their ideas and findings through scholarly journals and books. Now, Friling is producing CD-ROMs and an Internet site at www.bgu.ac.il/Ben-Gurion/center.htm □

(JTA Correspondent Tom Tugend recently participated in a press tour at Ben-Gurion University.)

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Sephardim gauge moneys lost during exodus from Arab lands***By Daniel Kurtzman*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — More than 50 years after Islamic countries began expelling Sephardi Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, Jewish officials are mounting a massive campaign to document financial losses that could total billions of dollars worth of property and seized assets.

The politically contentious effort, which could carry important ramifications for the Middle East peace process, comes on the heels of successes in recent years in recovering missing Holocaust-era assets from European countries.

But unlike that undertaking, which is likely to yield Holocaust survivors billions of dollars in coming years, winning restitution from the Arab world is not the overriding goal.

In fact, officials with the American Sephardi Federation and the World Jewish Congress, which are cooperating on the campaign, doubt any significant amount of money can realistically be recovered.

What is more important, officials say, is drawing attention to the total destruction of Jewish life in Arab countries and preserving the rapidly fading history of Jewish cultures that thrived in that part of the world for 2,500 years.

In the years following Israel's independence in 1948, nearly 1 million Sephardi Jews left Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Morocco.

The massive Jewish exodus occurred "if not by the barrel of a gun, then certainly by social pressures," said Marc Mishaan, co-chairman of an international restitution committee working on the issue.

"This effort will go beyond a simple inventory of what was taken and will energize the Jewish world as a whole to look at our history from that part of the world," said Elan Steinberg, executive director of the WJC.

The group has been at the forefront of the drive to seek restitution for Holocaust survivors.

On a more practical level, though, the information will be used in final-status talks with the Palestinians, who are expected to provide a detailed accounting of Palestinian property they claim was expropriated by Israel.

By quantifying Jewish losses, Israel would hope to counter, if not blunt, Palestinian claims to property now within Israel's borders, arguing that the Palestinians and Arab countries bear joint responsibility for Jewish material losses.

"We have lost much more than we've gained in terms of physical presence in the Middle East.

"Billions of dollars were taken — businesses, homes, synagogues, culture and a way of life. You can't put a sum on that," Mishaan said.

Mishaan added that \$100 billion would be a conservative estimate.

Compared to the losses Palestinians suffered, "it's just such an outrageous difference, and the world doesn't talk about it," he added.

Leon Levy, president of the American Sephardi Federation and former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major

American Jewish Organizations, said the Palestinians "are way ahead of the Israelis in quantifying their losses.

"They've been going house to house in east Jerusalem with telephone books from before 1948, identifying exact locations of where Arabs lived."

For Amram Attias, who said he was forced to flee his native Morocco in 1963, the drive for recognition and restitution from the Arab world evokes painful, even shameful, memories.

"We were kept for 1,300 years in virtual slavery," said Attias, chairman of the International Committee of Jews From Arab Lands and one of the leaders of the campaign.

"We were destitute, our houses and synagogues were burned, they raped our children, they forced us in many cases to embrace Islam or to die, we were deprived of all human rights.

"After 50 years of rebuilding ourselves from nothing, it's time to reclaim what is rightfully ours."

Seeking to document Jewish losses as accurately as possible, the American Sephardi Federation has already distributed nearly 75,000 questionnaires to Sephardi Jews living in Israel and the United States.

The group hopes to contact thousands more Sephardi Jews around the world by the end of the summer.

Although the campaign is in its nascent stages, Jewish officials are holding out the possibility of eventually pursuing the issue through many of the channels used in the Holocaust restitution battle, including class-action lawsuits, congressional hearings and diplomatic efforts.

The WJC executive committee is slated to discuss the issue with Israeli officials when it meets in Jerusalem on June 24 and is expected to adopt a resolution formally sanctioning the recovery effort.

Israel has taken a deliberately low profile on the issue, although one Jewish official said the effort was launched earlier this year at the behest of the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

A spokesman at the Israeli Embassy in Washington declined to say whether the government had authorized the campaign, saying only that financial compensation should be considered for Jews alongside any claims made by Palestinians in final-status talks.

While officials acknowledge there are no real prospects of recovering the lost assets — most Arab nations do not share the worries of countries like Switzerland and Germany about Western opinion — some said there might be a possibility of gaining restitution from a country such as Egypt.

As a recipient of more than \$2 billion in U.S. foreign aid each year, Egypt is "obviously attuned to the way the West feels about how they deal with questions of justice and history," Steinberg of the WJC said.

Depending on how the effort progresses, the U.S. Congress could decide to condition foreign aid on Cairo's handling of the issue.

Meanwhile, a decidedly different mentality persists elsewhere in the Arab world, with leaders such as Libya's Muammar Gadhafi unlikely to pay credence to Jewish demands.

Still, Jewish officials are determined to press forward in the interests of confronting the Arab world with an aspect of their history that would just as soon be forgotten.

Otherwise, Mishaan said, "Thirty years from now, Arabs born in Syria will not know that a Jew ever lived there." □