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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel denies arms-for-Jews deal with Ethiopian government

JTA Staff Report

LONDON (JTA) — Israel is dismissing as “nonsense” a report that it traded arms for the release of thousands of Jews from Ethiopia.

The report from London says that the group of 76 Jews from the Kwara region in the north of the country who arrived in Israel on Tuesday came as part of an operation linked to Israel’s delivery of a military package to Ethiopia.

An outline of the arms-for-Jews deal was slated to be published in the June 24 issue of the weekly newsletter *Foreign Report*, which is published in London.

Avi Granot, the minister of information at the Israeli Embassy in Washington who served as ambassador to Ethiopia from 1995 to 1998, called the report’s allegations “much nonsense.” He flatly denied that Israel is engaged in any arms deal with Ethiopia, which is in the midst of a war with neighboring Eritrea.

“There is no justification” for the report because in recent years, the Jews have “never been blocked by the government of Ethiopia,” he told JTA.

“The problem with Kwara Jews has never been with the Ethiopian government, but with the slowness of the [Israeli] Ministry of the Interior processing of their requests,” Granot said, adding that additional staff have been assigned to Ethiopia to expedite their emigration.

This month the outgoing Netanyahu government announced that it would step up the immigration of Kwara Jews after months of stalling on the issue. The estimated population of 3,800 Kwara Jews is expected to leave by the end of the year.

Advocates for Ethiopian Jews who have closely followed their progress say they have never heard any indication that Israel had to pay a price for allowing the Jewish emigration. Some of these activists speculated that it was possible that Israel would engage in military deals with Ethiopia, but they said that a Jews-for-arms trade was “highly unlikely,” given Ethiopia’s policy of free emigration.

Indeed, a huge airlift of 14,000 Ethiopian Jews was brought to Israel in 1991 as part of Operation Solomon. Since 1992, a trickle of Ethiopian Jews and Falash Mura — who claim Jewish heritage, but whose Jewishness is not recognized by the Israeli government — have been leaving for Israel.

The Kwara Jews were left behind during Operation Solomon due to internal leadership struggles. While 3,500 Jews from Upper Kwara managed to make aliyah soon after, the Jews from Lower Kwara remained.

In November 1998, a group of American advocates for Ethiopian Jews met with Israeli government officials to implore them to expedite the processing of immigration applicants who had made their way to the urban centers of Gondar and Addis Ababa. They also called for immediate immigration of the Kwara Jews.

At that time, the Israeli government stated its commitment to bring the Kwara Jews out, a pledge that was reiterated periodically until this month, when Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon called for an airlift and the acting chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, Sallai Meridor, called upon the Netanyahu government to act.

The idea of an airlift was rejected out of sensitivity to the Ethiopian government, officials say, and now emigrants are being flown to Israel on regular commuter flights to Tel Aviv.

Records kept by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry indicate that the total immigration to Israel from Ethiopia from November 1998 to April 1999 was 444 people, only 158 of whom were Kwara Jews. The rest were Falash Mura approved

Coalition talks near completion

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak asked his coalition partners on Wednesday not to travel abroad this weekend.

The request, signaling that the negotiations are nearing their conclusion, came amid word that he will announce his government early next week.

Arson investigators optimistic

U.S. federal investigators announced Wednesday that they have recovered a large amount of “high-quality evidence” in last Friday’s arson attacks on three synagogues in the Sacramento area.

“We are all optimistic that this investigation will be done quickly and we will identify those responsible and bring them to justice,” said James Maddock, the FBI special agent in charge in Sacramento.

In a related development, California Gov. Gray Davis, after inspecting the arson sites, promised state financial support to erect a museum of tolerance in the state capital.

California state Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg said he will introduce a bill to provide \$500,000 in state money for the initial museum planning.

Bank may block loan to Iran

The World Bank reportedly put on hold preparations to provide \$200 million in loans to Iran to protest Tehran’s arrest of 13 Jews on espionage charges.

World Bank officials postponed indefinitely a trip to Tehran to discuss the loans for sewer and health care projects, *The Washington Post* reported Wednesday, citing unidentified bank officials.

Last year the World Bank approved some \$720 million in loans to Iran.

In a related development, the U.S. Senate decided Tuesday to add to the State Department authorization bill a measure calling on Iran to free the 13 Jews. The Senate is expected to vote on the entire bill later this week.

Arab delegates shun Israel

Arab delegates refused to sit down with Israel on Monday at a U.N. meeting on the Y2K computer problem. The meeting was part of two days of sessions attended by representatives from more than 170 countries seeking to avoid potential problems associated with the millennium computer bug.

MIDEAST FOCUS

Assad: Barak is 'strong, honest'

The leaders of Israel and Syria made favorable comments about each other in interviews published in the Arab-language newspaper Al Hayat.

Syrian President Hafez Assad described Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak as "strong and honest," while Barak said of Assad, "his legacy is a strong, independent, self-confident Syria."

The comments were seen as signals that they are ready to revive peace talks. Assad's biographer, journalist Patrick Seale, shuttled between Damascus and Tel Aviv to get the comments.

Palestinians ponder challenges

Palestinian officials attended a conference Tuesday in the West Bank town of Ramallah to discuss the challenges posed by their hoped-for state.

Participants agreed that the current self-rule government lacks basic democratic norms and institutions.

Israel balks at closing mission

Israel is refusing to close its trade mission in Qatar despite the threat of violence.

The refusal came after a lawyer for the building where the mission is located threatened to use force if Israel did not obey a court ruling ordering them to leave the building. The ruling was issued after the owner of the building said it had been sublet to Israel without his knowledge.

Roseanne visits Jerusalem

Talk-show host Roseanne inaugurated the Jerusalem branch of a Los Angeles Jewish mysticism school where she studies Kabbalah.

During a tour of Jerusalem on Tuesday, Roseanne, whose interest in the Kabbalah is well known, momentarily cried. When asked to explain her tears, she responded, "Because for 46 years, I've said, 'Next year in Jerusalem.'"



Daily News Bulletin

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for immigration. According to the sources, anywhere between one-quarter and one-half of the recent transport of 76 people were Falash Mura, many of whom have relatives in Israel. A Jewish Agency official, however, said as far as he knew there were no Falash Mura on the flight.

According to Foreign Report, "It was only in November 1998, after pressure from the Jewish community in the United States, that the Israeli government started to negotiate with Ethiopia about the Kwara Jews."

The negotiations were reportedly conducted in Ethiopia by senior Israeli Defense Ministry and Mossad officials after the Ethiopian government had initially rejected appeals from Israel and the United States to allow the Kwara Jews to emigrate.

The result of the negotiations, the report said, was an agreement that would allow the Kwara Jews to leave in exchange for an Israeli commitment to deliver ammunition and missiles, as well as to upgrade Ethiopian Air Force MiG fighter planes, many of which are currently grounded.

The report said the deal would have a decisive influence on the outcome of the current border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which has already cost tens of thousands of lives. It is also expected to impact heavily on Israel's strategic posture in the Middle East.

Eritrea, a strategic ally of Israel in the Horn of Africa, currently allows Israel to maintain a presence on the Dahlak islands in the Red Sea, apparently to serve and supply Israel's naval fleet, including submarines, in the area.

The fleet is said to be nuclear-armed and to constitute Israel's second strike force.

Granot countered, however, that "because Israel is a friend of both Ethiopia and Eritrea it has expressed its hope that the conflict will be resolved quickly, but has clarified that in no way will it intervene in any way, shape or form against any of the sides." □

(JTA Correspondent Douglas Davis in London, Staff Writer Julia Goldman in New York and Washington Bureau Chief Matthew Dorf contributed to this report.)

Clinton rejects Yeltsin's request to repeal Jackson-Vanik Amendment

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Clinton has rejected an appeal by Russian President Boris Yeltsin to repeal a law that conditions U.S.-Russian trade relations on the freedom of Jews and others to leave the country.

Responding to Yeltsin's request during a meeting in Cologne, Germany, over the weekend, Clinton said the law, known as Jackson-Vanik, still applies due to the "rise of anti-Semitic statements and rhetoric, particularly from the nationalists and particularly from Yeltsin's opponents and enemies," according to Sandy Berger, Clinton's national security adviser, who attended the meeting.

"Yeltsin was very firm" in his response to Clinton, Berger told reporters.

"Provide me with all of the material you have, and I will really sit on them," Yeltsin said, referring to those engaged in anti-Semitic rhetoric, according to Berger.

Congress has suspended the sanctions imposed by the Jackson-Vanik amendment but has not formally "graduated" Russia from the measure, which over the years has been expanded to include other countries.

Mark Levin, executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, praised Clinton for taking a tough stand with Yeltsin and said the gravity of the Russian premier's response is noteworthy.

"It's important to acknowledge the seriousness with which the United States views the issue of anti-Semitism," Levin said. Yeltsin "did not slouch it off," Levin said.

The exchange came as the American Jewish Committee reprinted in full-page ads in The New York Times and Los Angeles Times a letter to Yeltsin from all but one of the 100 members of the U.S. Senate threatening to end economic and political support for Russia unless Yeltsin confronts the rise in anti-Semitic rhetoric.

"The United States predicates its support for democratic institutions in Russia upon unwavering opposition to anti-Semitism at any level," the senators wrote. □

JEWISH WORLD

Committee passes religion bill

The House Judiciary Committee passed the Religious Liberty Protection Act by a voice vote Wednesday.

The bill would force state and local governments to show a "compelling interest" before passing laws that burden religious practice.

In the Senate, the Orthodox Union's Washington representative gave testimony for the first time since the group opened its office in the nation's capital earlier this year. Nathan Diamant urged members of the Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday to support the same bill.

Rabbi said safe in Afghanistan

A rabbi believed to be the last Jew living in Afghanistan is reportedly safe at home after being jailed for 45 days by the country's Taliban rulers.

Yitzhak Levi said Tuesday he was turned in to the authorities by a Jewish man from the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan, Aaron Simantov, after Levi accused him of trying to steal a Torah scroll.

Released earlier this month after he was accused by Simantov of practicing magic, Levi said he would remain in Afghanistan despite offers from Jewish groups around the world to fly him out. The Torah scroll was taken by the Taliban, Levi added.

Court rules on suit against rabbis

Rabbis who speak out publicly on religious matters, including in support of women denied Jewish divorces, cannot be sued in civil court, a U.S. district judge in New Jersey ruled.

The June 14 ruling concerned a man publicly criticized by rabbis for denying his wife a Jewish divorce and then remarrying.

ZOA activists lobby Congress

Some 150 Zionist Organization of America activists lobbied Congress on Wednesday against aid to the Palestinians and in favor of moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem during the group's first-ever Washington lobbying conference.

The group also planned to lobby members of Congress to oppose humanitarian aid to Iran until 13 Jews arrested on espionage charges are freed.

Holocaust panel meets

An international commission on Holocaust-era insurance policies is meeting in Jerusalem in an effort to resolve claims that could total billions of dollars.

The commission, headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, includes Israeli and Jewish organizations, insurance regulators from the United States and Europe, and the insurers against whom the claims are being made.

Russian Jew describes torture at hands of Chechen kidnappers

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A Jewish officer in the Russian army who was kidnapped last year in the breakaway republic of Chechnya has been freed in a prisoner swap.

After his June 16 release, Lt. Sergei Fishman, 25, told JTA that his kidnappers in Chechnya had tortured him, singling him out for especially harsh treatment because of his Jewish roots.

"They kept saying that Jews were to blame for the war" between Russia and Chechnya, said Fishman, who was kidnapped last December just outside his garrison near the Chechen border, to which he had been dispatched a few months earlier after graduating from a military college.

According to previous Russian news reports, Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov has repeatedly alleged that his region was the victim of an international conspiracy in which Israel played a crucial role. The kidnappers had demanded a ransom of \$50,000 for Fishman, but they received no money, according to the Russian Interior Ministry, which provided no further details about the means used to secure his release.

Fishman, who has scars on his face and head, also told JTA that his kidnappers had sold him four times to other gangs in Chechnya.

After being held in dank basements and mountain guerrilla bases for six months, Fishman requires medical treatment and rehabilitation — services that will be provided by the Jewish community, according to Pavel Feldblum, executive vice president of the Moscow Jewish community.

Jewish leaders in the Russian capital had pressed Russian officials to seek the release of Fishman, a native of a small town in southeastern Russia's Altai Region.

Chechnya has seen a wave of kidnappings after the end of its 21-month war against Moscow in 1996.

Until its war with Russia, Chechnya had a sizeable Jewish community. But most Jews there were evacuated to Israel during a Jewish Agency for Israel rescue mission in 1996. □

Attack on Jews for NATO bombing reflects growing sentiment in Balkans

By Jean Cohen

ATHENS (JTA) — Jews were responsible for the NATO shelling of Yugoslavia, according to a statement circulated among theology students in the northern Greek city of Salonika.

The accusation — which is periodically surfacing in the Balkans, making reference to the Jewish background of leading figures in the Clinton administration — has prompted the concern of Yugoslav Jews, who fear they may become the target of a backlash. At the University of Salonika, the accusation was attributed to the school's Socialist Student Movement, which is a part of the governing Socialist Party's nationwide youth organization.

It contained some slurs that have been made against Jews for centuries, including the charge that "Jewish Zionists are controlling world developments through the Masonic lodges and associations they have created around the world."

It also charged U.S. Jews used the Monica Lewinsky scandal to blackmail President Clinton into taking action against Yugoslavia.

The accusations, which surfaced earlier this month, drew swift condemnation from the Central Jewish Board of Greece, an umbrella organization representing all Greek Jews.

On June 3, the board sent a letter of protest to the secretary-general of the ruling Socialist Party, Kostas Skandalidis demanding that it be retracted.

This week, the Socialist Youth Movement issued a statement that the accusations were the work of a "single individual who acted wrongly and unacceptably." □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Barak brings Likud back to table in an attempt at a broad coalition*By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As the deadline draws ever closer for Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak to present his government for Knesset approval, his coalition negotiations are taking some surprising turns.

In the latest twist, Barak has resumed talks with a potential partner that for several weeks now has appeared destined to be left out in the political cold — the Likud Party.

In a surprise move, Barak held a series of private discussions this week with Likud's acting chairman, outgoing Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon, who was Barak's army mentor years ago.

And in another development, Barak on Wednesday asked his coalition partners not to travel abroad this weekend. The request, signaling that the negotiations are nearing their conclusion, came amid word that he will announce his government early next week.

The talks with Sharon came after Barak — who has until July 8 to present his government to the Knesset — encountered trouble wooing the fervently Orthodox Shas Party into the government he is forming.

Sharon sounded a determinedly hopeful note Tuesday, telling reporters he believed there could be "real partnership" in policymaking between Barak and himself. But other Likud figures were more circumspect, and outside observers cautioned against any premature conclusion that a deal was in the offing.

Officials with the leftist Meretz Party, previously signaling that they were ready to sign a coalition agreement with Barak, are now pulling back, not wishing to be a "fifth wheel" — as party leader Yossi Sarid put it — in a Barak government that includes Sharon.

The other four wheels would "all be pulling in different directions," Sarid added sourly.

What was Barak's sudden sea change all about? Why, after close to a month of silence between them, are Barak's One Israel bloc and the Likud talking again?

It had seemed, after all, that both sides were reconciled to the imminent formation of a Barak-led government without Likud.

If Barak were more of a wheeler-dealer, and less of a straight-shooting military type, the answer would be self-apparent.

He was bringing Likud back into the loop, one would naturally assume, in order to bring pressure to bear on his other, likelier coalition partners — chief among them Shas.

But this is unlikely. During the past several weeks of slow, frustrating and largely empty negotiations, even Barak's critics have had to admit that he is not a run-of-the-mill, jaded political operator, not one to make high-profile overtures just for the psychological or tactical impact they may have on a third party.

If Barak is talking with Sharon, say those who know him, he means what he says. He intends to make Likud a serious offer, they say, whether or not he eventually can bring Shas around and create around the One Israel-Shas-Meretz axis a numerically impressive coalition including some 77 of the Knesset's 120 legislators.

Why, specifically, is Barak wooing Sharon?

Barak's pledge after the May 17 election to be "everyone's prime minister" still resounds, at least in his own ears. He genu-

inely wants the broadest-based government possible, believing that given the dimensions of his own victory in the race for prime minister, his voice in all matters of high policy will not effectively be challenged.

And on the issue of peace, Barak believes a broad-based government will make the best deals with Syria and the Palestinians and will carry any agreements easily through the referendums he has promised to hold before each of those treaties is ratified.

But what of Sharon? What does he hope to gain?

In Sarid's mind, at any rate, Sharon's intentions can only spell mischief.

For One Israel peaceniks, too, Sharon's participation in the government spells ongoing attempts to undermine, derail or at least slow the peace process.

But there may be another reading, and, if the One Israel-Likud talks move forward positively, Barak will be trying to persuade his key supporters that it is tenable — despite Sharon's long record as a hard-liner and an opponent of the Oslo peace process.

Sharon, by this theory, has come to terms with Barak's victory. The course of the coalition negotiations, though slow and stuttering, is leading inexorably to the creation of a government committed to bringing Oslo to full fruition and to signing a land-for-peace deal with the Syrians that would include an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

Barak's red-carpet reception earlier this month for Syrian President Hafez Assad's biographer, British journalist Patrick Seale, was a transparent signal — and intended as such — that the new government is ready to resume serious negotiations with Damascus.

All this being the case, Sharon's position now is that it is better for Likud to be in the government — where it can affect policymaking as much as it can — rather than watch, impotent and frustrated, from the sidelines.

The third alternative, toppling Barak, simply does not exist and will not be available during the next crucial year or two.

Sharon may well want to make a contribution during the process of shaping the final borders of the state.

Cynics within and outside Likud will link this pragmatic attitude on the part of Sharon to his candidacy in the Likud leadership primaries, due to be held in the fall.

As a senior minister in the new government, Sharon would undoubtedly have the advantage over his main rival, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert.

This is especially the case in view of Olmert's central campaign theme: that he is the party's moderate candidate for the future while Sharon is the unreconstructed hard-liner.

But such internal party considerations aside, Sharon may well want to make a contribution during the process of shaping the final borders of the state.

At 71, and with a long trail of controversy behind him, Sharon, similar to Moshe Dayan a generation ago, may want to end his career as a peacemaker. A seat in the Barak Cabinet, he may feel, is the only practical way to achieve that.

But can Sharon bring the rest of his much reduced party along with him, if this is indeed his frame of mind as the talks with Barak resume? Can Barak, for his part, quiet the mounting concerns and doubts among his own doves?

The coming two weeks will provide the answers to these intriguing questions. □