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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Shooting suspect called 'martyr'

The man suspected of carrying out a racist shooting spree over the weekend in Illinois and Indiana was a "martyr for free speech," said the leader of the white supremacist movement to which the suspect belonged.

The shooting attacks began last Friday night, when Benjamin Nathaniel Smith allegedly wounded six Orthodox Jews returning from Shabbat services in a Chicago suburb. [Page 1]

Barak to assume office

Ehud Barak will officially become Israel's prime minister Tuesday, when he is expected to present his Cabinet to the Knesset. Barak has spent the last seven weeks forging a coalition made up of 75 of the Knesset's 120 members.

On Monday, Barak handed out Cabinet portfolios to members of his One Israel bloc. Among the appointments were David Levy as foreign minister; Avraham Shochat, finance minister; Yossi Beilin, justice minister; Shlomo Ben-Ami, public security minister; and Dalia Itzik, environment minister.

Kosovar Jews confront threats

The leader of Kosovar Albanians issued a written promise to safeguard Kosovar Jews and their property. Hashim Thaci met twice in recent days with a special envoy of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, to whom he issued a letter ordering "the entire Kosovo Liberation Army under my control to respect and protect all the Jews of Kosovo."

But members of the tiny Jewish community remain under threat of revenge attacks from Kosovar Albanians. Over the weekend, three Jews were evacuated to Macedonia from Kosovo, where there are believed to be about 40 Jews remaining.

Clinton remark prompts concerns

U.S. officials reassured Israel that President Clinton did not signal a policy shift when he said last week that he "would like it if the Palestinian people felt free and were free to live wherever they like."

An American Jewish Congress leader called the president's statement regrettable but said he had been assured Clinton "remains committed to the proposition" that the fate of Palestinians be "left to final-status negotiations." [Page 3]

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Chicago's Jewish community shaken after shooting rampage

By Sid Singer
JUF News

CHICAGO (JTA) — A weekend shooting spree that left two men dead and six Jews wounded is sending shock waves through the Jewish community here.

The shootings, which police said were carried out by Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, a 21-year-old man who belonged to a white supremacist group, ended late Sunday night with the alleged gunman's suicide.

The initial attacks took place last Friday evening within an eight-block radius in West Rogers Park, home to the Chicago area's largest population of Orthodox Jews. Many Jewish residents were walking the streets at the time, on their way to and from their synagogues.

The injured Jews were Hillel Goldstein, 34; Eric Yates, 31; Dean Bell, 31; Gidon Sapir, 34, an Israeli; Ian Hupert, 31; and Ephraim Wolfe, 15.

That none of the six was killed is "nothing short of miraculous," said Rabbi Zev Cohen, of Congregation Adas Yeshurun, where several of the wounded were members.

The shooting spree began at approximately 8:20 p.m. last Friday, when the gunman shot Goldstein in the stomach.

Two minutes later he shot Yates in the upper leg, landed four bullets in Bell, and hit Sapir in the lower back, all within one block of each other.

He then drove a few blocks south and west, where he shot at two people but missed both.

Then, moving the wrong way down a one-way street, he hit his next victim, Hupert, and finally ended his attack in the area with Wolfe, whom he shot in the leg.

"It's a bit ironic," Sapir was quoted as saying in the Chicago Sun-Times. "I'm a captain in the Israeli infantry and after spending time in Lebanon and the West Bank, I get shot in Chicago."

Smith was a member of the World Church of the Creator, a white supremacist group based in Peoria, Ill.

He had been arrested several times, most recently in north suburban Chicago in April, for distributing anti-Semitic and anti-minority literature produced by that organization.

The Anti-Defamation League has long been tracking the group's hate materials.

"The entire community is thankful that this streak of violence has come to an end," said Michael Kotzin, executive vice president of the Jewish Federation/Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago.

"At the same time, the horrifying events of this July 4th weekend will continue to reverberate in the Jewish community and in the community at large."

While Orthodox Jews don't listen to the radio or watch TV on Shabbat, word had spread throughout the community by Saturday morning.

A buzz could be heard at West Rogers Park synagogues, as congregants who hadn't seen the story in the morning papers shared developments with each other.

Cohen said he told his congregants that anyone who could give police information should do so, even on Shabbat.

The local media had implied that the investigation had been slowed because Orthodox Jews would not talk to police on Shabbat.

But Cohen and Chicago Police Commander David Boggs said the police had

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak, Arafat hold first talk

Israeli-Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak telephoned Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat last Friday, initiating their first talk since Barak was elected in May.

Barak told Arafat he would follow in the footsteps of slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to bring peace to the region. The two leaders agreed to meet soon after Barak's government is sworn in.

Sheinbein pleads innocent

A Maryland teen-ager facing murder charges in Israel pleaded innocent to the main charge stemming from the 1997 killing.

At a hearing Monday, Samuel Sheinbein pleaded guilty only to helping an alleged accomplice dispose of the dismembered body of fellow Maryland teen Alfred Tello.

Haredim protest Sabbath traffic

Fervently Orthodox demonstrators threw garbage at secular Israelis who drove through their Jerusalem neighborhood on the Sabbath. One man was arrested when he and fellow demonstrators tried to block traffic. There were no injuries or damage reported.

Assad seeking Russian arms

Syrian President Hafez Assad is visiting Moscow this week for talks about upgrading his military with Russian-made weapons. Assad is reportedly seeking to buy fighter jets, tanks and anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons.

Bin-Laden has new hideout

Saudi billionaire Osama bin-Laden has been traced to a new secret hideout in eastern Afghanistan, according to The Observer, a London-based Sunday newspaper. Bin-Laden is believed to have master-minded last August's terror bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.



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received "the best cooperation" from the Jewish community.

Cohen said the Orthodox community is being supported by the entire Chicago-area Jewish community, along with all the citizens of Chicago and Illinois.

"We're all together. We're all grieving, we're all mourning, we're all shaken, and no matter how we differ in the incidentals of our daily lives, if we come together when tragedy strikes, we're a family," Cohen said Sunday at a news conference, where he was joined by Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), state Sen. Ira Silverstein, who is a member of Cohen's synagogue; state Sen. Art Berman; and Kotzin and Boggs.

Also at the news conference were the Israeli consul general, Tzipora Rimon, and more than a dozen Orthodox rabbis from the neighborhood.

"We are one community as we are one people," Kotzin said. "We stand together not to be intimidated, to go on with our daily lives."

Following the Rogers Park attack, the gunman headed to Skokie, a suburb just north of Chicago, where he shot and killed an African-American man who was taking a stroll with two of his three children. The victim, Ricky Byrdson, 43, was a former Northwestern University basketball coach and well-known in the area.

According to police, the shooter then drove north to Northbrook, about 10 miles north of Skokie, where he shot at an Asian-American couple in their car. They were not wounded.

Two more shootings took place Saturday night in downstate Illinois, in Springfield and Urbana, injuring one. A third shooting Sunday morning in Bloomington, Ind., killed a male Korean American who was leaving Sunday church services.

On Sunday night, the FBI announced that the suspect shot and killed himself after police pursued him in rural southern Illinois.

Bloomington police said two guns found with the body were consistent with those used in shootings in Bloomington and Chicago. Police also found a light blue Ford Taurus, which matched the description of the car at many of the shootings. The FBI said the body had the words "Sabbath breaker" tattooed on the chest.

While individuals attempted to grasp what transpired over Shabbat, the organized Jewish community mobilized to provide several types of assistance.

The Jewish Federation worked to aid police in getting the word out to Rogers Park residents, and assembled several of its agencies and other community organizations to put together a plan for social services to the neighborhood.

By Sunday morning, the Jewish Children's Bureau and Jewish Family and Community Service had coordinated a plan to provide counseling for individuals and families in need. Also by Sunday, agency staff provided counseling to the wounded in the hospital and to those who had witnessed the violence.

Meetings with directors of the "backyard camps," small summer day camps found in the neighborhood, were planned for later in the week, said Robert Bloom, executive director of the children's bureau.

"We want to encourage people to get back to life as normal as soon as possible," Bloom said.

"The message has to go to the parents. If the parents feel reassured, they'll communicate it to the kids," said Natalie Ross, acting director of Jewish Family and Community Service, who worked closely with Bloom to coordinate a support plan.

"Kids have to have the opportunity to say 'I'm scared.' As adults, we have to say, 'Yes, it's scary, but it's very rare.'"

Jewish Federation agencies have also offered their support services to the Byrdson family. □

Israel's ambassador to Baltics to leave post

MOSCOW (JTA) — Israel's ambassador to the Baltics has announced he will leave his post in a few weeks.

Oded Ben Hur's announcement last week came just days after he triggered a scandal by accusing Lithuania of a poor record in prosecuting suspected Nazi war criminals. But Ben Hur, who serves as Israel's envoy to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, says he is leaving the post because his contract has expired. He has served as Israel's diplomatic envoy to the Baltics since the fall of 1996. □

JEWISH WORLD

Legislators seek nominee's probe

Members of the U.S. Congress are urging the FBI to conduct an extensive background check on a controversial American Muslim leader appointed by House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) to serve on a counterterrorism commission.

Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) and six other lawmakers sent a letter to FBI Director Louis Freeh asking him to examine statements made by Salam Al-Marayati before giving him security clearance.

Jewish groups say that Al-Marayati, who heads the Los Angeles-based Muslim Public Affairs Council, has made statements justifying terrorism against Israel and the United States.

Panel slams Geneva meeting

A U.S. congressional committee adopted a resolution urging the State Department to oppose the U.N. General Assembly's plan to reconvene the parties to the Geneva Conventions on July 15.

Arguing that the sole purpose of the gathering is to condemn Israel's housing construction in Jerusalem and the West Bank, the House International Relations Committee called on U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan not to help convene the conference.

Portugal denies liability

Portugal did not knowingly handle looted Nazi gold and therefore owes no compensation to Holocaust survivors, a government panel said last week.

The panel spent more than a year sifting through wartime records after the United States issued a report in 1998 charging that Nazi Germany paid for much of its trade with Portugal using gold that had been taken from Holocaust victims or looted from the central banks of the countries it had overrun.

Argentina plans expulsion

Argentina plans to expel a retired college professor after postwar documents were found providing evidence that he was a Croatian concentration camp commander during World War II.

The Argentine Jewish group DAIA discovered the 1946 documents implicating Mirko Eterovic, and 60 other Croatian Nazis who found haven in Argentina after the war, in the murders of some 800,000 people in camps run by Croatia's Ustashe puppet regime.

Claims office opens in Vienna

Austria's Jewish community recently opened an office in Vienna to help survivors regain money and property looted during the Nazi era.

The office will help victims or their descendants with claims to accounts, real estate and art objects, as well as help with claims against companies that used slave labor during World War II.

Pro-Israel lobby protests comment by Clinton on Palestinian refugees

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Clinton tripped a few land mines last week when he said the Palestinians should be "free to live wherever they like."

His comments during a joint news conference with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Thursday left Israeli and Jewish officials wondering whether he was signaling support for the right of Palestinian refugees to reclaim homes they left behind following the creation of Israel in 1948.

Administration officials quickly provided assurances that Clinton's remarks did not indicate a shift in U.S. policy.

State Department spokesman James Foley said last Friday that U.S. policy on the return of Palestinian refugees "is what it's always been."

He added that "resolution of this aspect of the peace process will depend upon the shape of the final agreement.

"It's a long-standing U.S. view that the issue of Palestinian refugees is a matter that has been reserved for permanent status negotiations," Foley said, adding that, like all permanent status negotiations, "it needs to be dealt with and resolved by the parties themselves."

Clinton, responding to a reporter's question about whether he would work as hard to return Palestinian refugees to their homes as he did to send ethnic Albanians back to Kosovo, said, "I would like it if the Palestinian people felt free and were free to live wherever they like.

"It will also depend on what the nature of the settlement is, how much land will the Palestinians have, where will it be, how does it correspond to where people lived before," Clinton said.

Nabil Abu Rdainah, adviser to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, called Clinton's remarks "promising."

The statement prompted an immediate wave of protest from Israeli and Jewish officials, as well as numerous phone calls from pro-Israel activists to Jewish organizations.

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak, who is expected to meet with Clinton in Washington in coming weeks, said in a statement that Clinton's remarks were "not acceptable."

"This is apparently a misunderstanding, and the (Clinton) administration should clarify its position and correct it," the statement said.

Following the clarification, an Israeli official in Washington said the administration had taken a positive step that "helped to clear the issue."

Zalman Shoval, Israeli Ambassador to the United States, offered no direct comment, but he said the only way to deal with the problem of Palestinian refugees was "through integration and absorption in the Arab countries in which they live, as Israelis have solved the problem of the much larger number of Jewish refugees from Arab countries."

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee said it was "pleased that the administration responded so quickly.

"We are also pleased that they have reiterated that the issue of Palestinian refugees is a final status issue that can only be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinian authority."

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, meanwhile, called on Clinton himself to publicly clarify his remarks.

In a letter to Clinton, it warned that introducing the so-called "right of return" issue at this time, "even in a qualified way, will undermine Israel's future negotiating position, as well as imply a bias on the part of this administration on a vital and fundamental security issue.

"The way your comments are perceived, even though unintended, will raise Palestinian expectations and undermine the confidence in the people of Israel," the letter added. □

Assad may drop Hezbollah to make way for Israel peace

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Syrian President Hafez Assad may be preparing to abandon his support for the Shi'ite Hezbollah movement in Lebanon just as he abandoned Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan, according to the editor of a leading London-based Arabic daily.

Writing in al-Quds al-Arabi last week, Abdelbari Atwan said Assad's failure to condemn the recent air strikes Israel launched on Beirut and his public flirtation with Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak reflect "internal political travails" that have produced diplomatic paralysis in Damascus.

It is difficult, Atwan wrote, to understand Syria's response to the Israeli air strikes — or its "premature" courting of Barak, as reflected in an interview last week with British journalist Patrick Seale in which Assad described the new Israeli premier as "strong and honest."

Commenting on Assad's possible thinking, Atwan wrote, "Over the past 30 years, we have been accustomed to Syria being more meticulous and cautious in formulating definitive positions in times of crises.

"It is noteworthy," he continued, "that while Lebanese Prime Minister Selim Hoss held Barak fully responsible for the aggression, the Syrian government was exculpating him.

"It might be no exaggeration to say that Hezbollah will meet more or less the same fate as Ocalan," he added.

Ocalan, who led the neo-Marxist Kurdish Workers Party in a protracted war of secession against Turkey, was ordered to leave his safe haven in Damascus last October after Turkey threatened military action against Syria.

He was eventually captured by a Turkish commando team in Kenya and flown back to Turkey, where he was sentenced to death last week. "The question is whether the Syrian government is suffering from fatigue and has therefore decided to drop its steadfast positions in order to enter into peace agreements with Israel, which would enable it to recover lost territory and concentrate on building the homefront."

Such questions, Atwan wrote, are prompted by the "very significant signals" emerging from Damascus — such as its refusal to participate in a proposed five-way Arab summit to discuss peace moves in the wake of Barak's election, its ambivalence toward Iraq, its lukewarm attitude to other Arab countries and its willingness to negotiate with Israel via media and business channels.

"Syrian diplomacy is paralyzed," Atwan wrote, "otherwise, it would not have relied on British journalist Patrick Seale to carry complimentary messages to Barak, which no Arab leader has had the privilege of receiving" from Damascus.

Syria is currently going through "difficult internal travails" as Assad seeks to settle the succession in favor of his son, Bashar.

"This issue is taking precedence over all others and determines — perhaps explains — all other Syrian moves," wrote Atwan, citing dismissals from the armed forces, the postponement of the appointment of ambassadors and the attempt to complete the peace process as quickly as possible.

A "new Syria" is in the making, he wrote, adding, "It is too early to pass final judgment or to predict whether the change will

be for the better or the worse because Syria's makeup, standing and location make it different from any other Arab state.

"All that can be said is that the Israeli blitz on Beirut ushers in a new era in Lebanon and Syria, one in which there might be no room for the Islamic Resistance, or any other resistance." □

Claimants for Swiss fund begin application process

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Ten months after Swiss banks agreed to pay \$1.25 billion to settle Holocaust-era charges against them, beneficiaries are beginning to stake their claims for compensation.

Holocaust survivors around the world began responding this week to a media campaign designed to notify hundreds of thousands of possible claimants about how to apply for payments from the settlement.

Full-page ads appeared in some 500 newspapers in 40 countries, providing an application form and a toll-free number for people to call for information.

Jewish organizations are also planning to send out claims packages to as many as 400,000 survivors.

The notification process began as officials convened in Washington on Wednesday to continue the search for looted assets that made their way to the United States.

A 20-member presidential commission, chaired by World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman, is searching for gold, art, cultural property and other assets that were turned over to state governments following World War II.

The commission unveiled a map of all World War II-era federal agencies that might have possessed or controlled assets of Holocaust victims, providing a blueprint for the investigative work that lies ahead.

House and Senate lawmakers sitting on the commission announced legislation to extend the commission's mandate for another year, making a final report to the president due at the end of next year.

Payments from the Swiss fund, meanwhile, are not expected to start reaching Holocaust survivors until the second half of next year, although Jewish officials and lawyers involved in the settlement are urging Swiss banks to immediately start making interim payments to elderly survivors.

Unlike a humanitarian fund of nearly \$200 million set up by Switzerland in 1997 that has provided payments to needy Holocaust survivors, the \$1.25 billion settlement is intended as restitution for those who lost assets in the Holocaust.

Eligible recipients include:

- Survivors who deposited assets in Swiss banks or have claims to any looted assets that made their way to Switzerland;
- Slave laborers exploited by Swiss entities; and
- Refugees who sought entry into Switzerland to avoid Nazi persecution and were mistreated.

There are no estimates yet as to how many people will be eligible and how large the payments might be. Individuals who believe they are eligible for compensation may either call 888-635-5483 or visit the Web site at www.swissbankclaims.com.

Applications must be submitted by Oct. 22. □