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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Outrage over Yom Kippur closure

Jewish groups harshly criticized a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union that seeks to block a suburban Cincinnati school district from observing Jewish holidays as days off. [Page 3]

Arafat: Agreement on withdrawal

Yasser Arafat said Israel and the Palestinians have reached tentative agreement on a timetable for Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank, according to Rep. Gene Green (D-Texas), a member of a congressional delegation that met Thursday with the Palestinian leader. [Page 2]

Burger King cancels franchisee

Burger King pulled its name from a franchise in the West Bank town of Ma'aleh Adumim.

The company said in a statement that its decision was based on commercial concerns, but the move comes one month before the Arab League was set to vote on whether to declare a boycott against the fast food company.

The company, which in addition to other outlets in Israel, has restaurants in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, claimed the franchisee had falsely said the outlet would be located in Israel.

"They can argue that" they made the decision "only because of that technical reason," said Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

"That's not how it will be perceived." People will "believe that it is a concession to blackmail and the threat of a boycott."

Christians to recruit in Rochester

All 300,000 residents of an upstate New York county, including Jews, may receive a Christmas gift from a coalition of about 20 local churches: a video about Jesus.

The Greater Rochester Association of Evangelicals is trying to raise \$760,000 to mail the tapes made by the Campus Crusade for Christ, an evangelical group co-founded by the Rev. Billy Graham.

Representatives of the Jewish Community Federation of Greater Rochester say that while they see the mailing as "inconsiderate," they are not planning any organized response.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Palestinians with 'blood on hands' are bargaining chips in negotiations

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — For five years, Ahmad Soub-Laban sat in Israeli jails. Soub-Laban had killed a neighbor he suspected of having collaborated with the Israelis and had thrown gasoline bombs at Israeli policemen.

Even now, he doesn't regret a thing.

"It was all in the service of our people," said Soub-Laban, 28, now chairman of the Jerusalem chapter of the Prisoners Club, a nationwide organization whose primary goal is to help the families of Palestinian security prisoners.

The issue of the release of Palestinian prisoners is still a major stumbling block in implementing the Wye accord. The two parties are at odds over how many, and which, prisoners should be released.

According to reports, the sides agreed Thursday that Israel would withdraw in January from an additional 11 percent of West Bank land, which was called for under the Wye agreement. But the prisoner issue is still unresolved.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised to release 750 prisoners, but let only 250 go — 150 common criminals and 100 security prisoners.

The Palestinians now insist that Israel should release another group of 650 security prisoners.

Last week, the Cabinet of Israel's current prime minister, Ehud Barak, confirmed the principle that had guided the previous government — not to release prisoners "with blood on their hands."

The Cabinet also reaffirmed the policy that only members of organizations that had stopped supporting terrorism — and only those who were arrested before the signing of the 1993 Oslo accord — would be considered for amnesty.

These stipulations ruled out members of Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and other organizations that reject the peace process.

According to Cabinet minister Haim Ramon, out of 1,894 security prisoners now being held in Israeli jails, only 75 "have no blood on their hands." This is a far cry from the 650 that the Palestinians hope to see released.

In an effort to dismantle this human — and political — mine, Palestinian minister Hisham Abdul Razek this week visited Palestinian prisoners in the Negev Desert and in Ashkelon. The Palestinians were trying to come up with a list of prisoners they believe could be accepted by the Israelis as eligible for release.

It all seemed too familiar to Soub-Laban.

"Four years ago I was there, in the same situation," he recalled.

Soub-Laban, a member of Yasser Arafat's Fatah Party, said he had received an order to beat up one of his neighbors, suspected of having collaborated with the Israelis.

He carried out his mission with total devotion. The man died of his wounds, and Soub-Laban was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

He served only five because he was one of the prisoners "with blood on their hands" who was freed by the government of Yitzhak Rabin.

Six of his eight brothers have served jail time at one time or another. His younger brother, Aiman, 20, was sentenced a month and a half ago to two years in jail for having thrown gasoline bombs at policemen.

"We are no exception," Soub-Laban said. "You will hardly find a Palestinian family which is not connected to the intifada one way or another," referring to the 1987-

MIDEAST FOCUS

Bloc threatens to bolt coalition

The United Torah Judaism bloc threatened to pull out of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's government if a part for a power plant was transferred on the Sabbath. But sources close to Barak said he was not fazed by the threat.

Syria: Israel not clear on peace

Syria said Israel has yet to give a clear commitment to resume peace talks.

Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa made the comments at a joint news conference in Damascus with his Norwegian counterpart, Joziias Van Aartsen.

Lebanon sentences 29 soldiers

A Lebanese court sentenced 29 former members of the South Lebanon Army to prison terms ranging from six months to two years for "collaboration with the enemy."

The sentences bring to 83 the number of members of the Israel-allied militia who have been convicted since Israel withdrew from the Jezzine enclave in June.

Intellectual defends himself

A Palestinian intellectual denied that he had misrepresented his past.

Edward Said, responding to charges made by an Israeli researcher in the September issue of *Commentary* magazine, told *The New York Times*, "I have never said I am a refugee." But Said did not address charges that he had lied when he said that he had lived in Jerusalem for several years.

Huge mall opens in Haifa

A mall that is being touted as the largest shopping center in the Middle East opened in the Israeli city of Haifa on Tuesday.

The Grand Canyon shopping center houses 170 stores and has parking for 3,000 cars.

1993 Palestinian uprising. His prison mate was Mohammad Abu-Saleh, who was sentenced for having thrown a hand grenade at policemen near his residence at the Shuafat refugee camp in northern Jerusalem.

"The policemen were protecting workers on a new road to the new Jewish neighborhood of Pisgat Ze'ev," said Abu-Saleh, 35.

"I did it because the Israelis behave as if this entire country belongs to them. I did not want to hurt Israelis as a target, but rather as a way of telling the authorities: 'Let us live in peace.'"

Abu-Saleh, who served seven years in jail, claims that his "belligerent act" has proved fruitful.

"We succeeded in that we convinced Rabin, the man who had boasted that he had broken down the intifada, that the Palestinian people are entitled to receive their rights."

Abu-Saleh claims that it is in Israel's best interest to release the security prisoners.

"Their release will strengthen the position of our leadership. In the absence of their release, critics of the Authority will say that it had betrayed the Palestinian people and had reached a cheap agreement with the Israelis."

"The prisoners' issue is a test case for our relations," Soub-Laban warned. "It is a time bomb. Unless it is defused, it will blow up and cause a new intifada." □

Reports: Israelis, Palestinians reach compromise on withdrawals

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat has delayed talks with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Washington amid reports that Israel and the Palestinians had agreed to a timetable for further Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank.

According to reports, the sides agreed that Israel would complete in January withdrawals totaling an additional 11 percent of West Bank land, which was called for under the Wye agreement.

The Palestinians had initially demanded completion sooner, but agreed instead to a larger initial handover of 7 percent.

Publicly, however, Israeli and Palestinian officials denied that an overall agreement had been reached, saying that the sides still differed over a key aspect of the U.S.-brokered Wye accord, the release of Palestinian prisoners.

The Washington meeting was rescheduled for Friday.

Albright is due in the Middle East on Sept. 1 for a five-day mission designed to boost Israeli-Arab peacemaking efforts. According to a Reuters report, Israeli and Palestinian officials are prepared to hold a signing ceremony in Egypt during Albright's visit.

The government of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu transferred 2 percent of West Bank land to the Palestinians last year before freezing implementation of Wye, citing Palestinian violations of the agreement.

Reports said implementation would begin in September, when Israel would hand over 7 percent of the territory. The final phase of 4 percent would be completed in January, a month earlier than the initial date sought by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Israel Radio said.

The further redeployment would leave the Palestinians with control over about 40 percent of the West Bank.

The reported agreement represents a compromise for both sides. The Palestinians had initially demanded Israeli adherence to the original Wye timetable, which called for the withdrawals to be completed by November. Israel had sought to stretch out the further withdrawals, in order to incorporate the last phase into the final-status talks.

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat said this week he believes Israel and the Palestinians could wrap up peace accords by May 4, 2000.

The original date for completing the final status talks passed on May 4, 1999, when Arafat had threatened to declare an independent state. But he subsequently heeded international appeals, and agreed to delay the declaration by one year. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Houston teen bows out of prayers

A Houston-area teen-ager is refusing to lead prayers before high school football games because she fears the move would get her expelled.

Despite a strong tradition of pre-game prayer in Texas, a federal court ruled earlier this year that prayers could be said before solemn ceremonies such as graduations, but not at school sporting events.

The local school district, with the support of Texas Gov. George W. Bush and officials with seven other states, has filed a petition for the Supreme Court to review the case.

Mitterand griped about Jews

The late French President Francois Mitterand complained about "the powerful and noxious influence of the Jewish lobby in France," according to a French author.

Mitterand's daughter and some of his fellow socialists, including Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, denied the anti-Semitic implications made in Jean d'Ormesson's latest book "The Gabriel Report," although other sources close to Mitterand confirmed that he spoke of the "Zionist lobby" and that he was known to make anti-Semitic remarks.

Group asks Schroeder for help

The World Jewish Congress is urging German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder to break the impasse in talks regarding a German compensation fund for Nazi-era slave laborers.

The call came as ongoing negotiations to set up the fund were deadlocked over its amount.

The next round of talks regarding the fund is scheduled to begin Oct. 6 in Washington.

Hate mail sent in Switzerland

The Israeli Embassy in Switzerland has received several hate letters in the past week. One letter said: "The Mafia Bronfman has stolen billions of Swiss francs from the people of Switzerland," referring to the campaign led by World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman to force Swiss banks to come to terms with their involvement in Nazi gold.

The letters came in the wake of a recent attack in which an Israeli tourist was seriously injured.

The Swiss Parliament condemned the attack and Swiss President Ruth Dreifuss wrote a personal letter of support to the victim.

Danish rescuer dies at 88

A Danish woman who helped thousands of Jews escape the Nazis by smuggling them into Sweden died in Los Angeles on Aug. 21. Tove Hansen, who received Israel's highest civilian medal for her heroic acts, died at the age of 88.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Ousted Holocaust museum leader says he feels vindicated by report

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The former director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is speaking out in the wake of a highly critical report that concluded the museum has been hindered by problems in governance and management.

Walter Reich, who has remained largely silent in the year and a half since he resigned as director, said he feels vindicated by the report, which concluded that the museum's governing council has entangled itself too much in daily operations and encroached on the authority of the director. Reich was ousted last year in the wake of a controversy surrounding an on-again, off-again invitation to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to tour the museum.

Reich said the invitation was made by Miles Lerman, chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, without his knowledge and that he resigned over the principle of using the museum and the Holocaust for political purposes.

Members of the museum's council cited long-standing concerns about Reich's managerial skills in ousting him, but Reich maintains that the issue of management was only raised to deflect attention from the issue of principle over which he resigned. His supporters, moreover, charged that he was made a scapegoat for the Arafat debacle.

The report, ordered by Congress after the Arafat episode and conducted by an outside panel of administrative experts, concluded that the six-year-old institution has been stifled by "excessive involvement" of the museum's governing council in day-to-day operations and by what it called Lerman's tendency to act unilaterally.

The study recommended that the legislation governing the museum be changed to strengthen its administration, scale back the role of the council and give the director of the museum more of the powers of a chief executive officer.

Reich said that if the recommendations had been made three years ago, "it would have been easier to run the museum without spending most of my time trying to put out fires by those who were supposed to govern rather than manage, and especially in politically sensitive realms."

Reich also said he felt vindicated by the report's conclusion about Lerman's tendency "to make important decisions and enter into agreements without adequate consultation or sharing of information with the council or museum."

It was that problem, he said, which was at the heart of the Arafat controversy.

Lerman declined to comment on Reich's remarks, saying he would not engage himself or the museum in a debate over the issue.

Reich, who is the Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Professor of International Affairs, Ethics and Human Behavior at George Washington University, said the report also supports the concerns he raised about the politicization of the institution and what he called "the use of the museum by the State Department in the service of tactical diplomatic ends."

He was referring to two U.S. State Department officials, Dennis Ross, the special Middle East coordinator, and his deputy, Aaron Miller, who serve on the museum's council and who last year urged Lerman to invite Arafat to tour the museum. □

Sparks fly over school closure on Yom Kippur

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish groups are harshly criticizing a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union that seeks to block a suburban Cincinnati school district from observing Jewish holidays as days off in its calendar.

The ACLU said the Sycamore Community School District's decision to grant Yom Kippur, which falls on Sept. 20 this year, as a day off violates the constitutional prohibition of establishing one religion above others.

Nathan Diament, director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs called the lawsuit "clearly misguided," and said the district's decision appeared to be an "appropriate accommodation of the students' religious needs." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Dagestan's Jews fear rebels fighting Moscow and 'Zionists'***By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — After several weeks of bloody clashes with Russian forces, Muslim insurgents in Dagestan have declared they are moving to the next stage in their struggle to impose Islamic rule in the area — the fight against “Zionist” domination.

In a statement posted on the Islamic rebels' Web site, insurgent leader Shamil Basaev announced that his men would purge Dagestan of leaders influenced by Zionists and by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who is a “faithful servant of Zionist capital,” the Moscow Times reported.

Dagestan, located on the Caspian Sea in the Caucasus region, is a part of Russia. The region borders the breakaway republic of Chechnya, whose drive for independence led to the 20-month war with Russia in 1994-96.

Although Chechen officials say they are not involved in the latest crisis, the Dagestani rebels are led by Chechen warlords whose influence is based on military experience gained during the war with Moscow.

According to news reports, Chechen warlords and leaders, including President Aslan Maskhadov, have repeatedly alleged that the region is the victim of an international conspiracy in which “Zionists” and Israel play a crucial role. Earlier this month, the rebels in Dagestan declared a jihad, or holy war, on Russia and seized several isolated mountain villages in Dagestan.

Russian commanders this week said that their military operations had been successful and that Chechen warlords had withdrawn their fighters from the last villages they had occupied. But officials in Moscow are reluctant to declare victory because of the danger still posed by Islamic militants.

Because most of Dagestan's 5,000 Jews live in a different part of the republic, they have not been affected directly by the fighting.

Yet members of the Jewish community have expressed fear for their safety and there has been a rise in Jewish emigration.

According to Alla Levy, the Moscow-based director of the Jewish Agency for Israel's Russian office, emigration to Israel from Dagestan has increased this year.

During the first half of this year, between 60 and 70 Jews left for Israel each month. Levy said the figures will increase dramatically as a result of the current crisis.

“We are not panicking, but the situation is very serious,” a Jewish leader, who did not want his name to be published, said in a phone interview from the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala.

He said the rise of Islamic fundamentalism has not affected Jewish life yet, but fears it may ultimately threaten Jewish existence in the area.

“Today all this talk about jihad has nothing to do with us, but who can tell what will happen tomorrow?”

The rebels' Web site says that non-Muslims would be allowed to live in a Dagestan ruled by Islamic law. However, Christians and Jews would have to pay a special tax. Almost 95 percent of the Dagestan's 2 million people are Muslims. Most Russian-speaking Slavs have left the republic in recent years.

Dagestan has one of the oldest Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union, tracing its history back at least 12 centuries.

But recent years have seen a wave of aliyah because of economic hardships and a steep rise in crime. Almost 90 percent of Dagestan's Jewish population has left since the fall of the Soviet Union. □

Jewish groups repair, manage once-abandoned Kosovo schools*By Douglas Davis*

LONDON (JTA) — Children are again learning in two Kosovo schools that were abandoned during the recent Balkan war, thanks to the efforts of two Jewish organizations.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the World ORT Union, the worldwide educational and training network, got the two schools functioning again. A total of 2,500 children, aged 6 to 14, are attending classes along with 1,200 adults who have registered for English courses.

As a result of the groups' success in reopening the schools, Kosovar authorities have asked ORT to take over the management of all of its 14 schools in Pristina. The success of the project is the result of hard work by Eli Eliezri, who represents both the JDC and ORT and has been in Kosovo since late June identifying projects to support the returning refugees.

“I didn't know what to expect,” he says, “but when I arrived, I found children hanging around the streets with no activities because no schools were operating.”

Eliezri soon found an empty school that had been closed for the past seven months and had not allowed Albanian children to attend for the past 10 years.

The windows were broken, and the building was dilapidated.

The head of Kosovo's civil administration, Hashim Tachi, approved of the idea of ORT and JDC taking over the school, located just outside Pristina, and within days the former teachers were reappointed.

Eliezri also met with the administrator and teachers from another school in the southern Kosovar town of Prizrem, where the Serbs had evicted the teachers from the school. Once the buildings are repaired, ORT plans to equip each of the schools with computer laboratories and provide teacher training.

In addition to computer studies, English will be taught using EnglishSpace, an ORT-developed multimedia program for teaching English as a foreign language.

The next phase will involve the deployment of ORT mobile training laboratories, with each self-contained unit equipped with a generator to enable students from remote villages to access computer classes and acquire vocational skills. □

L.A. victim in hospital for 2 weeks

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — The youngest and most gravely wounded of the five victims shot at the Los Angeles Jewish community center earlier this month will remain in the hospital for at least another two weeks, longer than doctors had estimated.

Bullets from alleged gunman Buford O'Neal Furrow Jr. shattered 5-year-old Benjamin Kadish's thighbone and pierced his stomach. During the next few weeks, Kadish will learn how to use a wheelchair and walk with crutches, but his overall outlook is positive. □