



Daily News Bulletin

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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Dagestani Jews come to Israel

The Jewish Agency for Israel brought 77 new immigrants from the Russian autonomous republic of Dagestan one day after Rosh Hashanah.

The agency, which this year has brought a total of 550 Dagestani Jews to Israel, is preparing for an increase in immigration from the republic as a result of the fighting in the region between Russian troops and Islamic militants.

Barak visits Ma'aleh Adumim

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak visited the largest Jewish settlement in the West Bank and vowed that it would remain part of the Jewish state.

"Every house that you have built here is part of the State of Israel. Forever. Period," he said during a tour Tuesday of Ma'aleh Adumim in what was his first visit to a Jewish settlement since taking office.

The premier's comments came one day after the launch of final-status talks with the Palestinians, during which the future status of settlements will be determined.

House OKs non-proliferation bill

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee hailed the U.S. House of Representative's passage of legislation to sanction Russia if it helps Iran develop weapons of mass destruction.

The Iran Nonproliferation Act, approved unanimously on Tuesday, would withhold \$590 million in U.S. assistance to Russia's ailing space program if it is determined that Russia is spreading dangerous technologies to Iran.

The Senate has not yet approved the bill. The White House has threatened a veto.

Bubis honored in Germany

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was among the hundreds of people who turned out Tuesday at a memorial service for the nation's Jewish leader.

Ignatz Bubis was "a moral authority, a lawyer for minorities and persecuted people, which won him respect not only in Germany, but also in Israel and around the world," Schroeder said at the service at Frankfurt's West End Synagogue. Bubis, a Holocaust survivor who lost his father and siblings in concentration camps, died Aug. 13 at 72.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

New Israeli ambassador to U.N. hopes to accentuate the positive

By Julia Goldman

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Israelis plan to accentuate the positive this year at the United Nations when the General Assembly's 54th session begins next week.

The Sept. 20 opening comes two weeks after Israel and the Palestinians signed the latest peace accord, following nearly a year of stalled negotiations.

Israel's incoming U.N. ambassador, Yehuda Lankri — who replaces Dore Gold in November — has already called for Israel to take a more open, less defensive approach to diplomacy at the world body, reflecting the progress on the peace front.

The Palestinians, too, recognize the "positive atmosphere" created by recent developments as a reason to abate hostility toward Israel at the international forum, according to their U.N. representative.

Moreover, the United States, under newly appointed Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, has renewed its commitment to strengthen Israel's beleaguered position at the world body. Still, coming on the heels of what was seen as a brutally anti-Israel year in the General Assembly, there is no guarantee that the United Nations will eliminate the negative when it comes to Israel.

Tension mounted at last year's opening when Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat addressed the General Assembly for the first time since 1974.

He was expected to announce plans to declare a Palestinian state on May 4, 1999 — when the five-year interim period of the Oslo peace accords ended — but stopped short due to international pressure.

The lowest point of last year's proceedings came in July, when — at the request of the majority of the General Assembly's 185 member-states — a historic international conference convened in Geneva to discuss Israel's management of the "occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem."

This year, Israel is anticipating being confronted with what has become an annual list of "anti-Israel" resolutions, among them calls for:

- an end to the annexation of eastern Jerusalem;
- Israel to withdraw to 1967 borders on the Golan Heights;
- granting Palestinian refugees the rights to their property in Israel;
- Israel's denuclearization;
- renewing the mandate of the committees and of initiatives designed to keep the "Question of Palestine" in the forefront of U.N. concerns.

Israel is also preparing to defend itself against a challenge to its credentials by a bloc of over 100 U.N. member-states. Though in the past the effort, spearheaded by Arab countries, challenged Israel itself, last year it shifted its strategy to question Israel's right to represent Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Although the developments on the peace front have not cleared this year's U.N. agenda of the resolutions targeting Israel, the Palestinian observer to the United Nations said the current "positive atmosphere" in the peace process may lead to less confrontational language. Dr. Nasser al-Kidwa also said in an interview that a resolution voicing support for the Middle East peace process might return to its original language.

Such a resolution passed each year from 1993 until 1996. In 1997 and 1998, a similar resolution failed because Israel and the United States objected to the insertion of what they saw as inflammatory language about Israel.

Despite more positive wording, however, the essence of the annual resolutions will

MIDEAST FOCUS

Sheinbein case sparks talks

U.S. Justice Department officials arrived in Israel on Tuesday for talks with their Israeli counterparts regarding the two countries' extradition treaties.

The discussions come after U.S. legal officials were angered by the plea bargain Israeli prosecutors struck in August with Samuel Sheinbein, an American teen-ager who fled to Israel to avoid facing trial in the United States for the brutal 1997 murder of a Maryland teen.

Sheinbein received a 24-year prison sentence, considered mild by American standards.

IDF mulls giving settlers duties

The Israel Defense Force is considering transferring security responsibilities for Jewish settlements from the army to the settlers themselves, the IDF chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, said this week.

Netanyahu questioned by police

Israeli police summoned former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for questioning Wednesday regarding work done in his home by a Jerusalem contractor.

Police are probing charges of bribe-taking because the contractor, Avner Ademi, allegedly did not charge Netanyahu for the work while the premier was in office. Following Netanyahu's electoral defeat, Ademi presented the prime minister's office with a bill for more than \$100,000.

Elderly woman smuggled drugs

An 84-year-old Israeli woman admitted to attempting to smuggle cocaine into the country. As a result of her plea bargain, Tova Kirshnovitz was sentenced to six months' community service and a fine of some \$1,200.

Kirshnovitz said she regretted having agreed to help her son instead of trying to dissuade him from such activities.

not change, al-Kidwa said, until the peace process is put into effect on the ground.

"I don't think, where we stand now would cause miracles at the U.N. at this stage." Statehood and full U.N. membership remain the Palestinians' "central goals," he said, but the Palestinians would not "take further steps in this regard" until September 2000, when a final agreement is expected to be signed.

Israel and the Palestinians launched talks regarding a final settlement on Monday. Now the Israelis are calling for both parties to the peace negotiations to adhere to "a code of conduct" at the United Nations that would ensure the resolution of outstanding issues through bilateral negotiations, as prescribed by the peace agreements.

Last year's conference of parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention was unquestionably a triumph for the Palestinians on the question of Israeli settlements.

The Israelis, however, saw it as an example of the Palestinians' working outside the peace talks to sway international opinion.

The meeting request came out of an "emergency special session" of the General Assembly — the first such session to be held in 15 years — convened to discuss Israeli settlement activity since 1997, when Israel decided to start construction in the Har Homa neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem.

The conference, held on July 15 in Geneva and lasting less than an hour, was the first meeting since the inception of the Fourth Geneva Convention in 1949. The treaty covers the treatment of civilians during wartime. Israel, the United States, Canada and Australia did not attend.

A statement issued from the meeting, unanimously approved, said that the Fourth Geneva Convention is applicable to settlements in the West Bank. The signatories in attendance also agreed to reconvene within six months.

Despite these shadows, Israel is planning to take a new, less defensive approach to U.N. business from now on.

Lankri, Israel's incoming ambassador, told Israel Radio in August that to build upon Israel's improved standing in the region, it should "move from a defensive approach to one of more openness toward the family of nations."

Lankri, a former Knesset member and ambassador to France, said Israel should focus on "advancing central issues and not get bogged down in marginal ones."

Still, many Jews have taken offense at the General Assembly's decision to open its formal debate this year on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

Ambassador Gold, as well as leaders of some Jewish organizations, protested the U.N.'s scheduling decision. The U.N. is closed on major Christian and Muslim holidays.

Replying to Gold, the General Assembly's current president, Didier Operti of Uruguay, said the date would not be changed.

Because of the conflict with Yom Kippur, President Clinton has refused to deliver the opening address for the assembly's two-week general debate, as the leader of the host country would normally do. He is scheduled to speak instead on Sept. 21.

Israel is counting on America's friendship during the session through the person of Holbrooke, a former assistant secretary of state, known for his role in negotiating the Bosnian peace accords in Dayton, Ohio.

"Holbrooke represents a new U.S. commitment to ratchet up American activism on Israel's behalf in the U.N., especially with respect to the anomaly that Israel is not a member of a regional group," Gold said in an interview.

Such membership is essential for eligibility to participate in important committees, including the Security Council. Israel is the only U.N. member state excluded from membership in the groups.

The United States is often Israel's sole supporter in important votes, but many observers believe that America's influence at the U.N. is being crippled by its delinquency in paying hundreds of millions of dollars in U.N. dues.

That "obviously affects America's ability to repair Israel's unequal standing in the U.N.," said David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

The world body, he added, "whatever its faults and flaws, remains essential to American and global policy. We cannot have it both ways as a nation: failing to pay our arrears and at the same time expecting to wield undiminished clout."

Still, Gold sees Holbrooke — who paid one of his first courtesy visits to Gold at home — as a crucial ally in Washington and at the United Nations.

"It's good to know we have a friend here," Gold said. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Jewish heirs suing Austria

Heirs of a Jewish art collector are suing Austria over its refusal to return five paintings they say were stolen by the Nazis. The heirs' lawyer said Tuesday that the works should be returned to the heirs of Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, who fled Austria in 1938, leaving most of his art collection behind.

The paintings by Gustav Klimt, now valued at \$160 million, are in a state-run museum. The Austrian government maintains that the paintings were given to the museum through Bloch-Bauer's wife before the Nazis seized power in 1939.

Swiss charge Israeli agent

Switzerland charged an Israeli agent caught in a bungled spying operation with espionage and illegal acts for a foreign government.

The agent was one of five people caught last year while trying to install bugging equipment in an apartment building near the Swiss capital of Bern.

Austria to vote on Simchat Torah

Observant Austrian Jews may have to go abroad to vote in the upcoming parliamentary election because the polling date falls on Simchat Torah.

Interior Ministry officials have suggested that Jews could go to the nearby Slovakian capital of Bratislava and vote at the Austrian Embassy there on Oct. 2, two days before the elections, as all Austrians abroad are entitled to do. Austria's 7,500-member Jewish community regards this as unacceptable, according to community President Ariel Muzicant.

Jewish center opens in Ukraine

A Jewish social services center opened recently in Ukraine with funds provided by a Pittsburgh family.

The Posner family donated the money to renovate a public space for the Hesed Emuna center in the town of Yinnitsa, one of 90 such centers that have been established in the past few years to serve elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union. The centers are being funded primarily by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Grant to create internships

A grant from a Los Angeles Jewish foundation will provide for internships for 12 Conservative rabbinical students.

The Jewish Community Foundation, a major charitable gift-planning agency in Los Angeles, provided the money for the yearlong internships for students at the Conservative movement's Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. The rabbis-in-training will be placed in synagogues and other Jewish organizations throughout Southern California.

Congressman again introduces defeated school-prayer amendment

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Church-state watchdogs were caught off guard and somewhat baffled by the reintroduction this week of a school prayer amendment to the Constitution.

Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.), who has tried unsuccessfully over the past several years to win passage of the controversial proposal, said on Wednesday he believes there is now "widespread momentum" behind the so-called Religious Freedom Amendment.

The measure, defeated by the House of Representatives last year by a vote of 224 for and 203 against — well short of the two-thirds majority necessary for passage — would allow for government-sponsored prayer in schools, religious displays or symbols on public property and taxpayer subsidization of religious schools.

It remains to be seen whether Istook can muster any additional support this time around.

But most political observers agree with the assessment of Rep. Chet Edwards (D-Tex.), the bill's leading opponent in the House, who said, "I will say with absolute certainty, the Istook amendment has zero chance of becoming law in the 106th Congress."

Passage of a constitutional amendment requires a two-thirds vote by both the House and Senate and approval by three-quarters of the states.

The reintroduction of the bill comes as lawmakers continue to advance a variety of legislative remedies pegged to the scourge of violence in schools.

Earlier this year, the House adopted legislation that permits states to allow the display of the Ten Commandments in schools and other public places — a move that some lawmakers said was aimed at instilling children with traditional values.

But on a broader level, religious conservatives have advanced the Istook amendment as a way to reverse 30 years of what they see as wrongheaded court decisions they claim have distorted and restricted constitutional protections of religious freedom.

"We wouldn't need a constitutional amendment, except that un-elected judges have changed the Constitution for us, bypassing the public and its elected representatives," Istook said.

"This is our only way to change it back; it's our peaceful answer to the religious intolerance shown by activists who constantly sue to suppress religious expression," he added.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, derided the effort as "unnecessary, divisive and disingenuous."

He said current law adequately addresses the religious liberty concerns cited by the bill's supporters and pointed to a recent controversy in Mississippi — where school officials told a Jewish student he could not display a Star of David symbol and then reversed the decision — as an example of resolving religious liberty violations without altering the Constitution.

"Congress governs worst when it tries to solve a problem that does not exist," added Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State.

"All this amendment does is subvert over 200 years of respect for the value of keeping a decent distance between the institutions of government and those of religion," he said.

The proposed amendment would add the following language to the Constitution:

"To secure the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience: Neither the United States nor any State shall establish any official religion, but the people's right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage, or traditions on public property, including schools, shall not be infringed. Neither the United States nor any State shall require any person to join in prayer or other religious activity, prescribe school prayers, discriminate against religion, or deny equal access to a benefit on account of religion." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Russian Jews greet new year amid heavy security, heavy hearts***By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — Russian Jewry ushered in the Jewish new year amid heavy security and an aura of fear that has gripped the country in the wake of several terrorist attacks.

In Rosh Hashanah greetings sent to Russia's chief rabbi, President Boris Yeltsin stressed the importance of interethnic and interfaith peace and condemned ultranationalism and extremism.

His message came amid new concerns that the terrorist incidents, which have left scores dead, could lead to a rise of xenophobia and ultranationalism.

"There should be no room on our soil for fascism and anti-Semitism," Yeltsin wrote to the Jewish community.

The other top politician in Russia who extended holiday greetings to the Jewish community was the leader of Russia's Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov. In the past, he has made thinly veiled racist and anti-Semitic statements. He placed second in the 1996 presidential elections and is expected to run again in elections slated for June 2000.

Presidential politics aside, however, this year's holiday events were marked by an unprecedented level of security measures at Jewish institutions. The hundreds who attended services at the Moscow Choral Synagogue passed through an airport-style security system installed there earlier this year following a series of anti-Semitic attacks in Moscow.

And the recent bomb attacks that rocked Moscow and southern Russia marred the festive mood.

The Jewish Agency in Russia had to cancel one of the largest holiday events in Moscow. The agency's annual Rosh Hashanah reception, which usually brings together hundreds of Jewish leaders, was canceled Monday after Yeltsin declared a day of national mourning Monday for the victims of two terrorist attacks.

On that very day, another powerful blast razed an apartment block in southern Moscow, killing more than 100 people. At least 150 people were killed in the two earlier blasts — one in Moscow on Sept. 9 and another earlier in the month in southern Russia.

While no one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, Russian leaders have described them as deliberate terrorist attacks. Officials have blamed the blasts on Islamic militants fighting Russian rule in the North Caucasus.

Russian federal forces have been battling to crush an armed Islamist revolt in its southern region of Dagestan since early August. The rebels are reportedly led by warlords from southern Russia's breakaway republic of Chechnya.

These conclusions have led some politicians to make remarks that could incite racial hysteria in Russian society.

Moscow's popular mayor and a likely presidential candidate, Yuri Luzhkov, promised that city officials would take decisive measures against "guests" of the Russian capital — an expression that is commonly related to dark-skinned people from the Caucasus area. Luzhkov was quoted as saying that Moscow would set up special security measures that would include special checks of non-Muscovites who are currently residing in the capital.

Some experts believe that such measures could lead to "ethnic cleansing" of the Russian capital.

According to public opinion surveys conducted in recent years, people from the Caucasus — usually referred to here as Caucasians — top the list of most-hated ethnic groups in Russia.

Some politicians and observers warned against hasty conclusions that could fan racial and ethnic hysteria.

Some Jewish leaders also expressed concern over a possible rise of ultranationalism. One of them said the issue alarms Jews.

"There is no secret that many Russians tend to blame all wrongs on either Jews or Caucasians," said Pavel Feldblum, executive vice president of the Moscow Jewish Community. "At different times, one of these two groups comes out on top in the public consciousness. Jews do not have reasons to be happy when ethnic hatred is aimed against a different minority group." □

Slave-labor suits dismissed, lawyers vow to launch appeals*By Toby Axelrod*

BERLIN (JTA) — A series of U.S. court rulings denying the claims of Nazi-era slave laborers has been met with frustration by survivors' advocates in Germany. But lawyers for the survivors, far from being bowed by the court judgments, are vowing to appeal — as far as the U.S. Supreme Court, if necessary.

The reactions came swiftly after two U.S. federal judges, ruling Monday in two separate cases in Newark, dismissed lawsuits brought on behalf of slave laborers against Ford — whose German subsidiary used such labor during the war — and against two German firms, electronics giant Siemens and chemicals manufacturer Degussa.

In the case involving Ford, the judge ruled that the claims were filed after the expiration of time limits imposed under U.S. and German law.

That ruling came hours after another judge threw out an \$18 million class-action lawsuit against Siemens and Degussa, citing a 1921 treaty stating that such claims are a matter for governments, not courts, to decide. The courts have "allowed the government to neglect the rights of citizens," said Lothar Evers, director of the Nazi Victim Support Center, a German advocacy group that represents survivors of all backgrounds.

Michael Wittl, a Munich lawyer who is planning an appeal together with U.S. lawyer Ed Fagan on behalf of the slave workers, is meanwhile vowing to appeal.

Degussa and Siemens were the founders of an initiative to create a fund for the former slave laborers. Sixteen German firms are currently involved with the initiative and are involved in ongoing negotiations, co-sponsored by Germany and the United States, to determine the size of the fund.

In earlier talks, the German firms reportedly offered to create a fund of some \$1.8 billion. The former laborers, however, are calling for a settlement totaling some \$38 billion.

During the negotiations, which are slated to resume next month, the firms have demanded assurances that, once they create the fund, they will be protected from further lawsuits.

Gideon Taylor, executive director of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, a participant in the negotiations, said Monday's rulings would not hinder "the process of finding just resolution for slave laborers."

"This question is one of morality," he added. □