



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 77, No. 202

Friday, October 29, 1999

82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Conversion panel delays petition

A new Israeli government committee aimed at resolving the conflict over conversions in Israel angered the Conservative movement.

The committee had asked the High Court of Justice to delay a Conservative petition against an Interior Ministry decision not to register as Jews children who were adopted and converted by non-Orthodox rabbis in Israel.

The first meeting of the committee Wednesday was attended by only three of the 11 ministers on the committee, including Rabbi Michael Melchior, minister of Diaspora affairs.

In addressing the conversion issue, Melchior said that more than half of the 65,000 who immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union last year were not Jewish. He called the issue "a ticking time bomb."

Israel, Mauritania forge ties

Israel and Mauritania established full diplomatic ties Thursday. The Arab League nation becomes the third Arab country, after Egypt and Jordan, to agree to send ambassadors to the Jewish state.

Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy said the move sends a message to other Arab states "that the time has come to shake hands."

Meanwhile, the Persian Gulf state of Bahrain denied an Israeli newspaper report that it is holding secret contacts with Israel on establishing diplomatic ties. The Israeli daily Yediot Achronot reported Thursday that both Yemen and Bahrain are holding secret talks with Israeli and U.S. officials.

Clinton to address ADL

President Clinton was expected to call on Congress to pass hate crimes legislation during an address to the Anti-Defamation League's national commission meeting in Atlanta on Friday. [Page 4]

Senate holds hearings on envoy

The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee held confirmation hearings Thursday on President Clinton's nominations of Martin Indyk to be ambassador to Israel and Edward Walker to be assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs.

The hearings were attended by two senators who said there was no opposition to the appointments.

If the two are confirmed, they would swap jobs.

Jewish centers offer safety net for elderly in former Soviet Union

By Lev Krichevsky

YEKATERINBURG, Russia (JTA) — Evgeniya Fridman pours into a glass jar some of the free soup she's just received at a soup kitchen here.

"These lunches give us life," says Fridman, as she adds more food to the jar.

The leftovers will serve as her dinner, she explains. "I will have it at home."

The 78-year-old former schoolteacher is one of 63 elderly and needy Jews who receive free hot lunches daily at two locations in this city in the Ural Mountains, 900 miles east of Moscow.

Another woman says the free lunches she eats here are the only hot meals she has had for several months.

Some 30 percent to 35 percent of an estimated 1.5 million Jews in the former Soviet Union are elderly, and of this number, anywhere between one-half to two-thirds require at least some social services.

For example, in St. Petersburg, which has Russia's second-largest Jewish population, some 30,000 of the estimated 100,000 Jews are listed in the database of the local Jewish charity center.

Many elderly Jews at the soup kitchen, located in a restaurant, say they never thought they would have to survive on charity.

When these people retired, during the days of the Soviet Union — having worked for decades as engineers, teachers or doctors — their pensions seemed more than adequate.

However oppressive the Communist regime was, it allowed people to survive on retirement or disability payments and provided the needy population with a safety net of free social services.

But post-Communist Russia's economic hardships and the collapse of the state-run welfare system have thrown the most vulnerable populations below the poverty line and left many without hope.

Most elderly in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union receive pensions of less than \$20 a month, far below what is necessary to make ends meet.

In some places in Russia, such as Yekaterinburg, even such meager payments are made several months behind schedule.

The situation turned even worse last August, when Russia devalued the ruble. As a result, prices skyrocketed, but pensions remained the same.

As Ada Katz, director of the Hesed Menorah welfare center in Yekaterinburg, simply puts it: "After the onset of the crisis, the standard of living of our elderly declined sharply."

To cope with the worsening crisis, an increasing number of poor and elderly Jews are turning to the welfare centers that the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee operates throughout the former Soviet Union.

Created in the past five years in partnership with local communities, the centers, known as Heseds, run both community-based and home-based services — food, medical assistance, home repairs and home care — for clients with different degrees of impairments.

Last year, 23 new Heseds were established throughout the former Soviet Union, bringing their number to 88 spread across 10 time zones.

According to official statistics, the prices of 25 basic foodstuffs rose between 30

Ten Years After the Wall Part of a Series

MIDEAST FOCUS

Rally planned for Ethiopians

Thousands of demonstrators are expected to gather in Jerusalem on Sunday to urge Israel to bring some 18,000 immigrant hopefuls from Ethiopia and to allow for greater humanitarian relief to the group while they wait for their applications to be processed.

Avraham Neguise, the director of the group organizing the event, South Wing to Zion, said the rally would mark the beginning of a hunger strike "in solidarity with the families who are starving."

Israel does not recognize that these Ethiopians, known as Falash Mura, are Jews.

Israel deporting millennialists

Israel said it will deport in the coming days 21 members of Christian millennial groups.

The 21, most of whom are American citizens, were detained during a midnight sweep earlier in the week for what police said were plans to disrupt public order. The detainees had filed an appeal against the move Wednesday.

Teens call for peace agreement

A group of Israeli and Arab teen-agers meeting in Jerusalem called on their leaders to stop bickering and make peace. The teens, who had gathered for a reunion, are graduates of Seeds of Peace, a camp in Maine that promotes peace and understanding.

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross, in the region for a peacekeeping mission, told the teens, "You are an inspiration to us because you are a reminder of what we are supposed to be doing."

Shin Bet blocks Barak speech

Israeli security officials are refusing to let Prime Minister Ehud Barak speak at the Tel Aviv square where Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. Saying it could not guarantee the premier's safety, the Shin Bet balked at his appearing at a rally marking the fourth anniversary of the assassination.



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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percent and 115 percent after the onset of the economic crisis last summer.

The price of utilities jumped 60 percent and the price of medicines also climbed steeply.

The skyrocketing prices have left many elderly with the option of choosing between medicine and a diet that consists mainly of bread, hot cereal and the cheapest vegetables — potatoes and cabbage.

Leonid Kolton, the director of St. Petersburg's Hesed Avraham, Russia's oldest and largest Jewish welfare center, says food programs are again becoming a major focus of charitable activities — similar to the early 1990s, when, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Jewish welfare services in Russia were re-established.

Jewish welfare workers now say their clients' most urgent need is medicine.

In the Soviet Union, the pharmaceutical trade was a state monopoly and included state-subsidized or free medicines for veterans and the disabled population.

Today, this system is almost nonexistent. Medicines are sold at prices that usually correspond to those found on the world market.

Medicines that are distributed free or at reduced prices are almost unavailable, as most supplies go to commercial pharmacies.

According to a recent survey of the Jewish elderly, 65 percent say they don't have enough money to buy even the most necessary medicines — and among the most poignant cases are those people who have chronic diseases such as diabetes.

Homebound Eva Vinokur of St. Petersburg says she spends most of her \$11 pension on medicine, including insulin.

"Medicines are the most critical problem for our clients," says Katz of the Hesed center in Yekaterinburg.

Jewish welfare workers say community centers now have to look for additional funds to implement medication programs, which could be the most expensive part of the aid they provide.

Understandably, the material deprivation has placed the elderly under great strain.

"People are living under continuous psychological stress," says Benjamin Haller, director of the JDC's William Rosenwald Institute for Communal and Welfare Workers in St. Petersburg, which trains Jewish social workers and conducts sociological research on the Jewish elderly in the former Soviet Union.

"Everything is available in stores but people cannot afford it, and they are not quite used to seeing this situation."

The demographic profile of the Jewish population in the former Soviet Union makes the need for such centers especially acute.

According to a recent sociological survey, the Jewish elderly population is distinguished from the overall elderly population in the former Soviet Union by larger proportions of singles and small families

As a result of the Holocaust, mass aliyah to Israel and Jewish emigration to other countries, more Jewish pensioners live alone than do those among the general population.

About 5 percent of needy Jewish pensioners are bedridden and require a full range of services, from home care to meals-on-wheels.

Government institutions provide the services of social workers for only half of those who need them.

In many cases, social workers' visits are irregular even for those elderly who live alone and are homebound.

The situation on the periphery of Russia is worse than in the big central cities, where people generally receive more services.

"In the provinces, people more often die of malnutrition, or simply because they had been forgotten," says Haller.

For many Jewish poor and elderly, the JDC's Heseds are a godsend.

Lyubov Aleksandrovskaia, 78, a Jewish woman living in St. Petersburg, says it would be nearly impossible to survive on her \$12-a-month pension.

Aleksandrovskaia says free lunches, hairdressers' and laundry services she receives from the Jewish community allow her not only to avoid hunger, but "to remain a human being."

"These services are like a life buoy to me," she says. □

JEWISH WORLD

Chirac discusses 13 detainees

French President Jacques Chirac brought up the fate of 13 Iranian Jews arrested earlier this year on charges of spying for Israel when he met Wednesday with his Iranian counterpart.

French officials later said Mohammad Khatami had told them that some earlier statements emanating from Tehran about the 13 had been made by hard-liners who are not fully aware of the case.

French Jews protested during Khatami's visit to Paris, denouncing Tehran's imprisonment of the 13.

Meanwhile, Israel's education minister called on Khatami to release the 13.

Speaking at the 30th session of the United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization's General Conference, Yossi Sarid said, "I declare that these Jews have never worked for Israel and did not spy for it."

Gore weighs in on vouchers

Vice President Al Gore said Wednesday that he does not support providing money to parents who send their children to private or parochial schools.

During a nationally televised New Hampshire town meeting, Gore said he and former Sen. Bill Bradley, his opponent for the Democratic presidential nomination, disagreed on the school voucher issue during their years in the Senate.

Bradley, who did not address the issue during the town meeting appearance with Gore, did support experimental voucher programs while in the Senate, but has since said he no longer supports them.

Bill seeks to help terror victims

Sens. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and Connie Mack (R-Fla.) introduced legislation Wednesday to help victims of terrorism recover court judgments from the frozen assets of terrorist countries.

The Clinton administration opposes the bill, saying it would hamper officials in conducting foreign policy.

Stephen Flatow, whose daughter Alisa was killed in a 1995 Gaza Strip bus bombing, criticized the administration at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing for continuing to block his efforts to collect a \$247 million judgment against Iran, which was implicated in the attack.

Armenian killings prompt fears

Armenian Jews are expressing concern after Wednesday's assassination of the former Soviet state's prime minister.

They are worried that the slaying may bring to an end an era of stability for the local Jewish community, during which the government sought to strengthen ties with Israel and the Diaspora.

Argentine Jews urge new president to solve bombings and protect rights

By Nicolas Penchaszadeh

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Argentine Jews have given their support to President-elect Fernando de la Rúa, but they expect him to live up to his campaign promise to protect the rights of all segments of society.

First and foremost, Argentine Jews called on de la Rúa to find those responsible for the March 1992 car bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and the July 1994 bombing of the Jewish community center there.

"We hope the promises of justice that were made during the electoral campaign become a reality," said a participant at a rally Monday sponsored by Memoria Activa, a group of relatives of the victims of the 1994 bombing.

At the rally — which is held every week outside the Justice Ministry — a crowd of about 150 people heard speeches calling for a reform of the judicial system, which Jewish leaders here and abroad accuse of blocking the investigations of the two bombings.

Speakers at the rally, quoting de la Rúa's own election promise, called on him to carry out his "commitment to life, dignity and justice."

The lack of progress in the investigations — surrounded by charges of police wrongdoing and a lack of political resolve on the part of those in charge of the probes — have, in the eyes of the community, blemished the tenure of outgoing President Carlos Menem, whose conservative Peronist Party has governed Argentina for the past 10 years. De la Rúa has stated that one of the priorities of his new government will be to tackle an overhaul of the justice system.

Prosecutors have linked the terrorist bombings to extreme-right elements within or close to the police department of the Buenos Aires province, which has been under the administration of Governor Eduardo Duhalde.

De la Rúa, of the opposition Alliance bloc, won Sunday's presidential elections by a wide margin, defeating Peronist candidate Duhalde by more than 10 percentage points.

"De la Rúa has expressed his commitment many times to the demands, objectives and interests of the Jewish community," said Jacob Kovadloff, Latin American affairs consultant for the American Jewish Committee.

The Jewish community's relationship with the president-elect dates back to the 1980s.

"De la Rúa was instrumental as a senator, when he sponsored the anti-discrimination law in 1988 that marked a turning point" in Argentina's dealings with human rights issues, said Rogelio Cichowolsky, president of DAIA, an umbrella group of Jewish organizations in Argentina.

Kovadloff noted that the law helped prosecute neo-Nazis in Argentina.

De la Rúa does not have an easy road ahead of him.

Voters in Argentina's fourth presidential election since the country was ruled by a military dictatorship also elected Peronist provincial governors and gave the Peronists control of the Senate — creating potential power struggles between de la Rúa and his political rivals.

In Sunday's vote for the governorship of Buenos Aires province, current Peronist Vice President Carlos Ruckauf defeated Alliance candidate Graciela Fernandez Meijide — proving opinion and exit polls wrong.

"It's very bad news that he won," said Diana Malamud, a member of Memoria Activa, referring to Ruckauf.

As another of its prime concerns, the local Jewish community will be eyeing Argentina's relations with Israel under the new government.

When Menem offered his unconditional support to the United States early in his administration, he also created a very favorable relationship between Argentina and Israel.

"De la Rúa has yet to define himself in terms of Argentina's relations with Israel," Kovadloff said. "We are waiting to see who become the next" foreign minister. □

Jewish groups, hate victims push Congress to pass new law

By Michael Shapiro

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish groups, civil rights organizations and lawmakers are calling on Congress to pass tougher hate crimes provisions before it adjourns later this fall.

Rabbi Brad Bloom, whose Sacramento, Calif., synagogue was torched in June, and Alan Stepakoff, whose 6-year old son was shot during an August attack at a Los Angeles Jewish community center, joined activists and lawmakers at a Capitol Hill news conference on Wednesday to press their case.

The Hate Crimes Prevention Act would give federal prosecutors new authority to prosecute hate crimes against women, the disabled, and gays and lesbians. It would also make it easier for the federal government to investigate and prosecute hate crimes.

On Monday, Clinton vetoed the bill funding the Commerce, Justice and State departments because Republican leaders took the hate crimes provisions out of the legislation. Activists are lobbying for the provisions to be included a revamped version of the spending bill or in a catch-all spending bill that would emerge from negotiations between Congress and the White House.

Clinton was also expected to press Congress to pass the provisions when he speaks Friday at the Anti-Defamation League's national commission meeting in Atlanta.

Under current law, the Justice Department's authority is limited to crimes that occur in conjunction with a federally protected activity, such as voting or going to school. The proposed bill would eliminate that limitation, making it easier for the federal government to prosecute cases like the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum, killed during the 1991 Crown Heights riots in New York.

A spate of high-profile hate crimes, including several targeting Jews, had generated new momentum for the legislation, which Jewish groups have been urging Congress to enact since 1997.

The measure was passed in the Senate in July as part of the appropriations bill funding, but it was not included in the House version. When House and Senate negotiators met to iron out differences in the two bills, Republican leaders stripped the provisions from the bill. Republican lawmakers dropped the measure in part because they say it designates special classes of citizens, particularly gays and lesbians, who are already protected under existing state laws against violence. Current federal law applies only to crimes motivated by race, color, religion or national origin.

With the 2000 elections in mind, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) challenged congressional Republicans, who are strongly backing Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush, to pass the legislation. The Texas governor is running on the slogan of "compassionate conservatism."

"You cannot just talk about being compassionate and then say that it's OK to beat up someone, or deface someone's property because of their race, or their creed or color or their sexual orientation," Schumer said. "You cannot wink at the bigots."

Stepakoff, whose son Joshua was shot by a white supremacist during the Aug. 10 attack at the North Valley Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, Calif., said, "You can't outlaw hate, but legislative support will send a clear message that our society is too mature, our country is too great to tolerate these kinds of crimes, no matter where in the United States people live or travel." □

Economic ties can bridge black-Jewish gap, Jackson says

By Julia Goldman

NEW YORK (JTA) — A leading voice for civil rights says blacks and Jews need to build on their "coalition of conscience" to establish economic ties between the two communities.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, speaking at Yeshiva University in New York on Wednesday, reflected on a history of shared struggles for civil rights, women's rights and workers' rights. Jackson said the "overwhelming challenge before us" is to ensure that all Americans have equal economic opportunities.

As a first step in that direction, an interethnic task force will be formed to explore ways to form business relationships to benefit both communities in New York.

"This is not just a black-Jewish issue," but, similar to the joint legal victories of the past, an issue on which blacks and Jews can "work together for the national interest," he said.

Jackson delivered the keynote address at "African Americans & Jews: Economic Cooperation for the 21st Century," the third annual conference exploring the future of black-Jewish relations in the United States. It was organized by the New York-based Foundation for Ethnic Understanding and co-sponsored by Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work and the World Jewish Congress.

Jackson's appearance comes at a time when relations between the African American and the Jewish American communities are, in his view, "better than ever." He noted the legal victories of the past and the political power both groups have gained during the last few decades.

"Our relationship is solid, but we still have unfinished business," Jackson said before an audience of about 200 people, including community leaders and students.

His positive prognosis runs counter to the image of conflict between blacks and Jews often portrayed in the media. But his optimism is supported by the foundation's findings in its third annual report, which indicates that blacks and Jews are interacting more on a grass-roots level.

"The time has come to elevate the struggle from one of civil rights to one of economic rights," said Rabbi Marc Schneier, who established the foundation in 1989 with the late New York theater impresario Joseph Papp.

Schneier announced that the black-Jewish task force, made up of 10 individuals, will over the next two months identify corporations, businesses and community leaders to assist in developing mentoring programs, economic initiatives and peer support networks. Jackson invited the task force to participate in a January conference organized by Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition aimed at broadening the base of cooperation with Wall Street.

In his remarks, Jackson said African Americans "don't want to be kept, we want to be allies. We don't want to be consumers, we want to be partners and investors."

On an international level, Jackson earlier this year took a leading role in advocating for the release of 13 Iranian Jews who have been in custody in Iran since their arrest in March on charges of spying for Israel. At Yeshiva University, Jackson said he feared that the Iranians would execute the prisoners if such attempts fail.

Iran has rebuffed Jackson's attempts to procure a visa. □