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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak's bloc fined \$3.2 million

Israel's state comptroller fined Ehud Barak's One Israel bloc \$3.2 million as the country's attorney general opened a criminal investigation into its campaign finance practices.

The investigation into nonprofit organizations that allegedly funneled money illegally from institutions abroad for Barak's bloc during last year's elections, is expected to include other political parties as well. [Page 3]

Liberation of Auschwitz marked

Germany marked its Holocaust remembrance day with a dedication of the site for the country's long-debated national Holocaust memorial.

At Thursday's ceremony, Nobel Prize-winner and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel called on members of Germany's Parliament to "ask the Jewish people to forgive the German people for what the Third Reich has done in Germany's name."

The commemoration is held on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in 1945.

Meanwhile, European leaders marked the liberation of Auschwitz by calling for action to keep racists and neo-Nazis off the Internet.

The comments by the leaders came during an international Holocaust conference in Sweden, a country that has recently seen an increase in neo-Nazi activity.

Clinton, Arafat to meet

President Clinton is expected to meet with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat at an economic forum in Switzerland this weekend, the White House said.

There had been speculation about a possible three-way meeting involving the U.S. president, Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at the World Economic Forum, but Barak is not expected to attend the conference.

Revisionist denies gas chambers

A leading Holocaust revisionist who is suing a U.S. historian for libel dismissed eyewitness accounts, drawings and photographs of Auschwitz gas chambers. David Irving is suing Emory University Jewish studies professor Deborah Lipstadt and British publisher Penguin Books for libel. [Page 4]

Umbrella group reviews criteria as Meretz appeals its recent rejection

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — A left-wing Jewish group, Meretz USA, is appealing a decision by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations to reject its application for membership.

Believed to be the first organization to appeal such a rejection, the action by Meretz comes as the Conference of Presidents is reviewing its more than 50 member organizations to ensure that they still meet the group's criteria for membership.

The Conference of Presidents, though not widely known by many American Jews, is often seen by the U.S. and other governments as the central address of the U.S. Jewish community on issues related to Israel and foreign policy.

The group describes as its mandate "to strengthen all aspects of the U.S.-Israel relationship and to protect and enhance the security and dignity of Jews abroad."

The central question at stake is ultimately a very subjective one: What constitutes a major Jewish organization?

A sore point for Meretz and another recently rejected left-leaning group, American Friends of Givat Haviva, is the inclusion in the Presidents Conference of American Friends of Likud, which is ideologically aligned with Israel's Likud Party. The groups believe that American Friends of Likud, a member of the Presidents Conference for more than 10 years, is smaller and less active than they are.

The president of American Friends of Likud, Philip Rosen, said his organization has almost 3,000 members and a budget of "hundreds of thousands of dollars" spent on meetings, presentations, written materials, speeches, articles submitted to periodicals and other activities.

"We're one of the more active organizations in the Conference of Presidents," he said.

Meretz USA claims to have 9,000 members and an operating budget of \$250,000 — a sizable increase over the past few years due to a merger with another left-wing organization, Americans for a Progressive Israel.

Meretz applied for membership in the Presidents Conference in 1998 and was notified in a phone call this past fall that its budget and membership were too small to qualify for membership.

The New York-based Meretz USA is ideologically aligned with Israel's leftist Meretz Party, but is not a fund-raising arm for the party, according to the group's executive director, Charney Bromberg.

In the 1997 World Zionist Congress elections for American representatives to the international body, Meretz USA received 4,500 votes, far fewer than the religious movements, but more than any other organization aligned with an Israeli party.

American Friends of Givat Haviva claims 4,000 supporters and fund-raising revenues of just over \$1 million, most of which goes to fund Jewish-Arab coexistence projects in Israel.

Two other groups also were recently rejected, according to Presidents Conference officials.

But the groups have not publicized their rejection and the Presidents Conference said it would not disclose the names to avoid embarrassing the applicants.

They did say that one group was right wing and the other nonpolitical.

Leaders from both Meretz USA and American Friends of Givat Haviva are accusing the Presidents Conference of not being representative of American Jewish

MIDEAST FOCUS

Armey: Israeli-Syrian aid 'difficult'

U.S. House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.) said that it will be "difficult" to convince Congress to provide aid to support a peace deal between Israel and Syria.

"There is a lot of hesitation about that, and it will be a difficult time getting Congress to accept the responsibility to underwrite that agreement," especially for the Syrians, Armey said Thursday on C-SPAN's "Washington Journal."

Students build robot fireman

Israeli and Palestinian students are working together to build a firefighting robot.

The robot, part of a program to foster Israeli-Palestinian coexistence through education, is expected to be able to locate a fire in an apartment building and extinguish it.

El Al delays airplane purchase

Israel's national airline delayed its decision to make a \$460 million purchase of four Airbus airplanes. El Al announced its decision to make its first-ever Airbus purchase back in October.

Newspaper publisher dies at 64

A former publisher of the Jerusalem Post, Yehuda Levy, died Wednesday at 64. Levy, who served in the Israeli army for more than 25 years, was president and publisher of the newspaper from 1989 to 1997. Levy also served in both professional and lay capacities for the Jewish National Fund.

Snows hits Jerusalem

A rare snowfall that hit Jerusalem is prompting city officials to advise residents not to operate their cars. Snow also fell in Israel's northern region, including the mystical city of Safed. The storm has helped replenish Israel's drinking water supply, which had been dangerously low.



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opinion. "We feel there's a lack of balance in the membership," said Bromberg.

"I told the Conference it's a greater loss to you than us," said Henry Ostberg, president of American Friends of Givat Haviva, which is not appealing its rejection.

"You'll go out saying you represent the Jewish community, and we'll say you do not."

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Presidents Conference, dismissed those allegations, noting that groups representing a broad spectrum of opinion — including the left-wing Americans for Peace Now and the Labor Zionist Alliance — are members of the Conference of Presidents.

"I'm proud that organizations fight to get in, but there also have to be some standards or else every meeting would be a convention, and it would be too diluted," he said.

He also said the Presidents Conference has never admitted organizations that are simply fund-raising arms for Israeli organizations.

"It's never political, and there are certainly not ideological or religious criteria," he said of the admissions process, adding that the membership committee represents a broad spectrum of political and religious groups.

However, he acknowledged that there are no hard and fast rules on membership or budget numbers.

"You can have an organization with a huge budget that is not major," he said. "Also, rabbinic organizations are small in membership but important."

Stephen Wolnek, the president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, who serves as the chair of the Presidents Conference membership committee, said of the process, "There are value judgments that have to be made. You can't punch the data into a computer and have it say yes or no."

Published membership criteria are vague, stipulating only that membership is available to "those major national Jewish organizations whose primary purpose is to serve the interests of the American Jewish community and whose activities are consistent with the goals and objectives of the Conference of Presidents."

If beliefs about its size and inactivity are true, American Friends of Likud — and potentially other organizations as well — may be affected by the Presidents Conference's new plan to review current members to ensure that they continue to meet the criteria.

The umbrella group has sent questionnaires to current members, requesting updated information about size, budget and activities.

"There are those that would like the Conference to be all-inclusive as an umbrella organization, but to the extent that we're the Conference of Major American Jewish Organizations we'd like to assure ourselves that each organization is major and is a Jewish organization," said Wolnek.

But it is unclear what will happen to member organizations no longer deemed major — whether they will be thrown out, made adjunct members or simply grandfathered in.

"If members are no longer eligible, we'll discuss it with them and maybe they could have adjunct membership or could challenge the finding," Hoenlein said.

The timetable, described by officials simply as "ongoing," is also not clear.

"It's not a rush to judgment," said Wolnek. "We'll take the time that's necessary; we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. No final decisions have been made about existing members."

Organizations contacted said they supported the new review process and doubted it would result in a major shake-up in membership.

"I don't think they'll find any surprises," said Daniel Mann, of the Labor Zionist Alliance, which is loosely tied to Israel's Labor Party. "I'm hard-pressed to think of an organization that doesn't fulfill the criteria."

Although he said he would like to see Meretz USA accepted into the Presidents Conference so that it could be "as inclusive as possible," Mann said he thinks the membership is relatively balanced.

He said that despite efforts by more right-wing members, the Presidents Conference has not interfered with the Clinton administration's efforts to push the Middle East peace process forward.

"All the rest is commentary," he said. □

JEWISH WORLD

Lebanon tries to block Hadassah

The United Nations postponed a decision to allow the largest Jewish organization in the United States to be one of hundreds of nongovernmental organizations to consult with the U.N. Economic and Social Council. The Lebanese representative introduced a resolution Wednesday preventing Hadassah: The Women's Zionist Organization of America from working with the council.

In a separate development at the world body, the Jewish peace group Americans for Peace Now is now entitled to have its representatives receive access to U.N. headquarters and to all open meetings of U.N. bodies, which they can attend as observers.

Hadassah already has these privileges.

More firms pressed on slave labor

A U.S. Jewish group released a list of 149 companies that used slave labor under the Nazi regime, urging them to contribute to a \$5 billion compensation fund for such laborers.

The American Jewish Committee released a similar list of 257 firms last December, of which more than 50 have already joined the fund organized by the German government.

The committee also called on Germany to create a central data bank for information on slave laborers.

Russian peacenik's release urged

A group that monitors human rights in the former Soviet Union is calling for the release of a Jewish man they say has been imprisoned for requesting to substitute civilian service for mandatory military duty.

The Union of Councils for Soviet Jews said Thursday that Dmitry Neverovsky, 27, a member of the Antimilitary Radical Association, has been abused by prison guards and placed in an unheated cell.

Latvia vows to probe war crimes

Latvia's president promised to investigate the cases of 41 alleged Latvian war criminals suspected of participating in the murder of thousands of Jews during World War II.

The promise by Vaira Vike-Freiberga came in a meeting with the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Efraim Zuroff in Stockholm, where are both attending an international Holocaust educational conference.

Canadian Jews help Venezuela

The Canadian Jewish Congress gave \$5,000 to Venezuela to help the Latin American country rebuild after last month's devastating floods.

The donation follows a similar donation by the CJC in November for relief in earthquake-ravaged Turkey.

Barak's One Israel targeted for campaign finance violations

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's attorney general has ordered a criminal probe into campaign financing operations by Prime Minister Ehud Barak's One Israel bloc.

Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein did not rule out the possibility that Barak himself might be questioned, increasing speculation over whether the inquiry would hobble Israeli-Arab peacemaking efforts.

Rubinstein ordered the probe following the release Thursday of a scathing report by the comptroller, Justice Eliezer Goldberg, on the activities of political parties during the last elections.

While the state comptroller found allegations of widespread campaign financing violations in several parties, Goldberg singled out One Israel and its political leader, Barak, for the severest of the suspected violations.

The state comptroller fined One Israel some \$3.2 million, the Center Party, \$700,000, and the Likud Party \$125,000 for their activities.

According to the report, Barak's One Israel bloc set up nonprofit organizations to funnel donations for Barak's prime ministerial campaign against Likud incumbent Benjamin Netanyahu. Among the alleged violations of these organizations, Goldberg said, was channeling money from abroad, in violation of campaign financing laws.

The report warned that wanton and unsupervised funneling of funds to political campaigns threatened the very core of the governmental system and could be exploited by criminal elements.

Goldberg said that as head of One Israel and its prime ministerial candidate, Barak bore ultimate responsibility for the election campaign. The state comptroller said Barak should have been aware of the organizations, and that the scope of their activities should have set off a "red warning light." At the same time, Goldberg left it up to the attorney general to decide whether to pursue a criminal investigation.

"I did not take any position in the criminal area," he said, but added, "I stated clearly in the report, that the law was broken and this is what now must be before the public to judge."

Barak countered the state comptroller's claim by saying he was too busy with the political campaign to be involved in every detail of its operations.

"I hold the state comptroller and the report he has compiled in highest esteem. At the same time, I disagree with it," Barak said at a news conference Thursday convened to respond to the report. "I was not familiar with these groups. I was not involved in the fund raising. I was not updated on the details. I was not specifically involved in any of the activities detailed in the report."

Barak stressed that he had told campaign managers to act in accordance with the law. But he and his supporters have noted that the rules for campaign financing have been unclear since the law for the direct election of the prime minister took effect in 1996. He said he did not "turn away" from the need to address the issues in the report, as well as the need for legislation "to prevent the repetition of such phenomena."

In addition to One Israel, the attorney general has ordered criminal investigations for alleged campaign financing violations by four other political parties — the Likud, Center, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah and the United Torah Judaism parties.

But the attorney general said he would also probe allegations that One Israel sought to conceal the activities of the groups during the election campaign and later to the state comptroller.

The opposition Likud Party seized upon the report as affirmation of allegations members raised close to and immediately following the elections.

Likud leader Ariel Sharon accused Barak of knowing exactly the system used to raise the funds for the election.

"The prime minister promised during the election campaign trustworthy leadership and changing of the national priorities. He broke his promises," Sharon said.

But members of One Israel stressed that the state comptroller had explicitly refrained from saying the prime minister had committed a criminal offense. □

Holocaust revisionist dismisses evidence about the gas chambers

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — A Holocaust revisionist who is suing a U.S. historian for libel has dismissed eyewitness accounts, drawings and photographs of Auschwitz gas chambers that showed vents in the roof through which lethal gases were introduced.

David Irving, who is suing Deborah Lipstadt, a professor of Jewish studies, and Penguin Books for libel, insisted at his trial this week that there were no vents for gas.

He also insisted that their absence "totally demolished" evidence that the gas chambers were used to kill inmates at Auschwitz.

Irving, a British historian, asserted that the Nazis used the Auschwitz gas chambers solely for the purpose of delousing corpses and their clothing.

The comments by Irving, who is representing himself, came in the course of cross-examining Auschwitz historian Robert Van Pelt.

Irving claims to have been professionally ruined after being described as a Holocaust denier and a distorter of historical data to conform with his own ideological disposition in Lipstadt's 1994 book "Denying The Holocaust: The Growing Assault On Truth And Memory."

Van Pelt, a Dutch historian who works at the University of Waterloo in Canada, served as adviser to the Auschwitz authorities on the reconstruction of the site.

The site was demolished by the Germans in late 1944 and early 1945.

Van Pelt referred to an SS photograph taken in February 1943 that showed openings on the roof of Crematorium II at Auschwitz through which lethal Zyklon-B pellets were introduced into the gas chambers.

But Irving, who is defending himself, claimed that the picture was taken during construction in December 1942 and that the objects on the roof were drums of sealant.

Van Pelt also produced an aerial photograph taken by the Americans in the summer of 1944 that showed "four dots" — which he described as "introduction devices" — on the roof of Crematorium II.

But Irving questioned the authenticity of the photograph and said that the dots were too big for such a purpose.

Irving also said the testimony of Henryk Tauber, a Jewish inmate forced to work in Crematorium II, stretched "a reasonable historian's credibility."

He dismissed as "lurid" Tauber's eyewitness accounts of how he saw the SS set one Jew on fire and throw another into a pit of boiling human fat — and he rejected Tauber's description of how he had helped to incinerate the corpses of up to 2,500 Greek, French and Dutch Jews a day in Crematorium II.

Irving also rejected Tauber's contention that he had seen cyanide pellets poured into the gas chambers through small "chimneys."

He was unmoved, too, by an account of a "field of ashes" from human remains, some of which was spread on icy roads to assist the passage of vehicles.

According to Irving, a number of revisionist researchers had

entered the ruins of Crematorium II, where historians who study the Holocaust have determined that 500,000 people were slaughtered.

The revisionists, said Irving, photographed the collapsed underside of the roof but found no vents, which, he contended, "blows holes in the whole gas chambers story."

"I do not accept that the Nazis, in the last frantic days of the camp, when they were in a blue funk, would have gone around with buckets of cement filling the holes that they were going to dynamite," he told the High Court in London.

Irving has denied that the gas chambers at Auschwitz were used for human extermination, and he has insisted that fewer than 100,000 Jews died — mostly of natural causes — at Auschwitz, which he has sought to portray as only a particularly brutal labor camp.

But Van Pelt told the court there was "a massive amount of evidence" that 1 million Jews were systematically exterminated in the death camp by the Nazis.

Van Pelt said the accumulated evidence and corroborating testimony that had emerged since World War II made it a "moral certainty" that the gas chambers were the main instruments of murder at Auschwitz between the summer of 1942 and the fall of 1944.

"It will be clear that, by early 1947, there was a massive amount of evidence of the use of the camp as a site for mass extermination," said Van Pelt.

"This evidence had become slowly available during the war as the result of reports by escaped inmates," he said.

"It had become more substantial through the eyewitness accounts by former Auschwitz inmates immediately after their liberation, and was confirmed in the Polish forensic investigations undertaken in 1945 and 1946.

"Finally," he said, "this evidence was corroborated by confessions of leading German personnel employed at Auschwitz during its years of operation."

Confessions given by leading German personnel at the camp included that of SS officer Pery Broad, who testified to gassings and burning of corpses, and former camp commandant Rudolf Hoess.

The court also learned that there was additional evidence from the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, documentary evidence of the construction of the camp, including workers' time sheets, plans, photographs and scientific studies of cyanide compounds in the walls of the gas chambers.

"In short," Van Pelt said, "it has become possible to assert as moral certainty the statement that Auschwitz was an extermination camp where the Germans killed around 1 million people with the help of gas chambers."

Questioned by the British-born Irving, Van Pelt said he had been "more than deeply moved" by his experience of visiting Auschwitz.

"I was frightened," he said. "I don't believe in ghosts. I have never seen any at Auschwitz."

"But it is an awesome place and an awesome responsibility as an historian."

Asked by Irving about the dangers of conducting historical work at the site of the former death camp, Van Pelt responded, "One's duty is to be unemotional and objective but to remain human in the exercise." □