



# Daily News Bulletin

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## TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

### Pact near for Israeli survivors

Israeli survivor groups and the government are close to sealing a deal for the long-overdue disbursement of \$59 million from a Swiss humanitarian fund for needy Holocaust survivors.

Many months of infighting between Israeli bureaucrats and the survivor groups had slowed the process. [Page 1]

### Cabinet OKs targeting civilians

Israel's Cabinet authorized Prime Minister Ehud Barak to order strikes in Lebanon, including civilian targets, to retaliate for any attacks on Israeli soldiers in the region.

The ministers reached the decision because they said Hezbollah has been launching strikes from civilian areas on Israeli troops.

U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin criticized the decision, while Syria responded that Israel has issued "a declaration of war" on Lebanon.

### Olmert: Giuliani a 'better friend'

New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is a better friend of Jerusalem than Hillary Clinton, the mayor of Israel's capital said.

Speaking Thursday in New York, Ehud Olmert said he was "not going to make any political endorsements" in the New York race for U.S. Senate. But he said he has "the right, the authority and maybe even the obligation to say who is the best friend of Jerusalem." He called the first lady's conduct during her recent visit to Israel "hurting and insulting."

### Bush reluctant to deploy troops

Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush said he would be reluctant to deploy U.S. troops on the Golan Heights to monitor a peace deal between Israel and Syria.

Appearing on PBS' "Newshour with Jim Lehrer," the Texas governor said he would have to see the terms of the deal first but stressed that "I would hope that we'd be able to achieve an agreement without the use of troops."

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, Feb. 21.

## FOCUS ON ISSUES

### Israeli survivors may finally get funds after months of delay

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli survivor groups and the government are close to sealing a deal for the long-overdue disbursement of \$59 million from a Swiss humanitarian fund for needy Holocaust survivors.

But even though Israeli survivors may soon receive the money, many months of infighting between Israeli bureaucrats and survivors groups have slowed the process.

Speed is crucial, since many survivors are very old.

Moreover, the delay raises questions about the ability of Israel to handle the distribution of a \$1.25 billion settlement that Switzerland's leading banks agreed to in 1998. Payments from the Swiss humanitarian fund "must not be delayed any longer," said Sallai Meridor, chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel and a co-chairman of the World Jewish Restitution Organization.

"I hope that we can immediately start distributing the money, and I hope that our experience will allow us to avoid delays in the future."

Totaling nearly \$200 million, the Holocaust Memorial Fund was established in February 1997 by Switzerland's three largest banks amid allegations that the banks were hoarding the wealth of Holocaust victims. Distributions from that fund have already been paid in Russia, Eastern Europe and the United States, where some 60,000 people received one-time payments of between \$500 and \$1,000 each. In all of those countries, only nongovernmental bodies were involved.

In Israel the process has been mired in a dispute over whether and how the government should be involved.

Holocaust survivors charge that the government of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thought it could reap some political capital by distributing the funds.

Survivors' representatives had warned that government involvement could slow down the entire process. In addition they said it could create a legal quagmire since applicants who were rejected could sue the government. If the distribution committee was not governmental, it would not be liable to any lawsuits since the fund is an *ex gratia* body, meaning it has no legal obligation to pay anyone.

"We knew that if the government got involved there would be trouble," said Noah Flug, secretary-general of the Umbrella Organization of Holocaust Survivors in Israel.

Representatives of the WJRO, Holocaust survivors groups and the Finance ministry all expect to sign a final agreement on the distribution process within days.

After officials in Switzerland overseeing the fund approve the distribution process, payments will begin.

"I can finally make a positive statement," said Flug, head of the survivors group. "The vast majority of applicants should receive payment before Passover."

The previous government said the Jewish state had a moral obligation to be involved in the restitution process.

In addition the government said it felt that leaving the process open to the scrutiny of the state comptroller and the Supreme Court was the right thing to do.

"The general feeling was that this was an honest attempt to build in the kind of protection that would make the system transparent and make it work," said Bobby Brown, the former adviser to Netanyahu on Diaspora affairs who is now serving as an adviser to Meridor on Holocaust restitution issues. "Nobody ever thought that the government should do it alone," Brown said. "The idea was that the survivors would

## MIDEAST FOCUS

### 'Summer time' sparks debate

Orthodox lawmakers in Israel vowed to block plans by the interior minister to extend daylight savings time by several weeks. Rescinding a tradition of accommodating the prayer schedule of religious Jews, Natan Sharansky said Wednesday that "summer time" would be extended by 37 days this year.

Secular Israelis applauded the move, which Sharansky took in an effort to cut down on auto accidents caused when rush hour occurs after sundown.

### U.S. aid sought to relocate troops

Israel is seeking U.S. help for constructing bases for a reserve armored division in Israel, Pentagon officials said.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would provide planning, design, acquisition and construction oversight for the work, which would cost \$200 million, the officials said. The new facilities would be for military units relocated from portions of the West Bank.

### Pope urged on Shabbat mass

Fervently Orthodox leaders in Israel called on the pope not to hold a Saturday mass when he visits the region next month because it would force Israeli security officials to work on the Sabbath. The pope has been planning a large mass March 25 in Nazareth.

### Bank expected to cut rates

The Bank of Israel is expected to cut interest rates next week for the fourth month in a row. Analysts point to a drop in January consumer prices, declining inflation expectations for 2000 and a strong shekel.

### Was Goliath the underdog?

David may not have been the underdog during his fight with Goliath. An Israeli neurologist, who based his findings on the biblical account, said he believes Goliath suffered from a hormonal disease known as acromegaly that blurred his vision.



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act as a watchdog on the government and the government would act as a watchdog on the survivors." The problem was that once the government decided to get involved, they had to choose an office to handle the issue.

Israel's National Insurance Institute, the equivalent of the United States' Social Security Administration, seemed like the right place — but officials there wanted nothing to do with it. Next came the Ministry of Finance, but the powerful budget division insisted on keeping away from the matter.

"The Finance Ministry is made up of many fiefdoms, and everybody knows that the budget division has excessive power," said one source close to the Swiss fund negotiations. "Why should it be any different in this case?"

Last April after months of haggling, and with mediation by the WJRO, the issue was handed over to a Finance Ministry department known as the Office for Rehabilitation of Disabled Survivors of Nazi Persecution.

"Since then, we have not stopped pushing the process forward even though there is no agreement between the organizations," said Rafi Pinto, director of the office.

By the middle of last October, Pinto's department had received nearly 150,000 applications for compensation. About 70,000 were missing information and had to be checked. Of the total, about 15,000 will be immediately disqualified and 35,000 will be examined more closely.

Survivors will be eligible only if they can prove they earn less than \$875 a month. In the United States, survivors only had to declare themselves to be needy.

"This was a very long and complicated process," said Pinto. "But I estimate that there are nearly 100,000 people who we can pay as soon as tomorrow."

However, even though problems have been solved regarding the Swiss fund, the big question is whether the government and survivors groups will have to go through months of negotiations again to set up yet another mechanism for distributing future funds from Swiss banks.

"Now that all of these problems have been solved, I think it will be much easier to distribute future funds," said Avraham Hirschson, a Likud Knesset member and chairman of a parliamentary subcommittee on restitution.

Brown takes a more sober view, saying the jury is still out on whether things will move more quickly next time around. □

## Assad and Arafat's differences said to block Arab peace summit

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Egypt is believed anxious to convene an emergency Arab summit to discuss the faltering peace process.

But a senior Egyptian analyst believes such a meeting is impossible because of the antagonism between Syrian President Hafez Assad and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. Ibrahim Nafei, editor of the semiofficial Egyptian daily Al-Ahram, made the call for an emergency summit last weekend.

Despite all the high hopes that were vested in the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, wrote Nafei, it has come perilously close to torpedoing the peace process. Apparently reflecting the Egyptian government's line, Nafei accused Barak of causing a deadlock in the recent negotiations with Syria by refusing to commit to an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

The Arab world has a duty to rid Barak of the delusion that he can impose his terms with brute force, he wrote, adding, "The first step in doing this is to call for an Arab summit conference." But Egyptian analyst Wahid Abdelmeguid believes there is virtually no chance for convening such a summit.

Writing in the London-based Arabic daily Al-Hayat, he said inter-Arab differences over how to deal with the peace process are now the primary obstacle.

"The Syrian leadership views the Palestinian leadership as though it has become a tool in the hands of Israel and America, while the Palestinian leadership believes that if Syria had found a way of doing a deal with Israel on its own, it would not have waited for anybody." □

## JEWISH WORLD

### Albright helping victims' families

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said she is exploring ways to help victims of state-sponsored terrorism identify foreign assets in the United States from which court-ordered damages could be collected.

Although the Clinton administration has cited national security concerns in delaying further action on cases, Albright told a congressional committee that the administration is prepared to take action. In many cases, such as that of Alisa Flatow, an American college student killed in a terrorist bus bombing in Israel, the families of victims have yet to receive any money from their court awards.

### Citizenship sought for Syrians

Some 2,000 Jews who fled Syria in the 1980s have not been able to obtain U.S. citizenship because of a technicality, according to a Sephardi rights group. Noting that the refugees came to the United States on tourist visas because that was the only way that Syrian President Hafez Assad would allow them to leave, the Sephardic Voters League called on Congress to pass a bill that would grant them citizenship.

### Literacy bill sparks debate

A U.S. congressional committee approved changes to a federal literacy program that allows religious groups to leave sacred images on display and only hire staff that adhere to their religious beliefs.

Backers of the bill, the latest in a series of charitable choice measures, say that as a result of the change religious organizations wouldn't have to fear being sued by program sponsors and wouldn't have to hire staff of other faiths to get funding. Opponents say the bill permits religious discrimination in hiring and gives the groups undue influence.

### Little progress in slave talks

Negotiators made little progress during talks in Berlin on how to distribute a \$5.2 billion fund for Holocaust-era slave laborers. "One of the problems is that there are just too many people at the table," said one participant at the talks, which include delegations from the United States, Israel, Russia, Germany, Central and Eastern Europe, as well as teams of lawyers. Another round of talks is slated for March 7-8 in Washington.

### Publisher of Swiss paper dies

The publisher of the Swiss weekly *Judische Rundschau*, or *Jewish Review*, died Feb. 9 at 79 after a long, unspecified illness, according to his newspaper. Heinrich Ungar escaped from Austria two months after the Nazis took control of the country in 1938. He began working for the paper, then called *Maccabi*, after the war.

## Far-right Austrian visits Montreal, but he cannot tour Shoah museum

By Bram D. Eisenthal

MONTREAL (JTA) — A Chasidic community's apparent wedding invitation to an Austrian far-right leader has started a chain reaction that resulted in slammed doors at Montreal's Holocaust museum.

Jewish leaders, outraged that the small Tash Chasidic community apparently sent Jorg Haider letters inviting him to Quebec, barred him from visiting the museum.

The appearance of Haider, whose xenophobic Freedom Party is a junior partner in Austria's governing coalition, came after he received a letter in the name of Rabbi Israel Lowen, an official with the Tash Chasidic community, located in a town about 30 miles outside Montreal.

The letter congratulated Haider on his 50th birthday and also distanced the Tash Chasidim from mainstream Jewry, which has been strongly critical of Haider.

Haider's presence was initially revealed by the Canadian Jewish Congress at a hastily convened news conference.

The chairman of the Quebec region of the CJC, Dorothy Zalzman-Howard, confirmed that the executive director of the CJC's Quebec region, David Birnbaum, spoke with Rabbi Lowen, cited as the signatory of the letter to Haider, and that he confirmed the note's contents. A member of the Tash Chasidim said it was a forged letter and came from an individual, not the group.

Haider told local media yesterday that he was here at the invitation of the Tash community for the purpose of attending a wedding outside Montreal. He said he had close ties to the Tash community, as well as to another Chasidic community in Brooklyn.

Zalzman-Howard also said the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Center was contacted by "a third party," whom she would not identify, requesting that Haider be permitted to visit the center. The request was denied. Haider "is not welcome here, at the seat of the Jewish community," said Zalzman-Howard. "We don't want to give credence to his views." She added that she believes the request was nothing but a public relations ploy. "It is, in my view, pure exploitation," she said.

Meanwhile, an Austrian news agency reported that Haider's office was denying that the far-right leader ever intended to visit the Montreal museum.

Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy stressed that Haider's visit was not in an official capacity. Quebec's International Relations Minister Louise Beaudoin said that "as far as I'm concerned," Haider's "not welcome here."

The CJC has actively denounced Haider's views in recent weeks, going as far as organizing rallies in Montreal and Toronto.

Even though several entertainers have canceled plans to tour Austria because of Haider's election, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra announced Wednesday that it would not boycott Austria during its upcoming European tour.

In a change from its planned program, the symphony intends to open its Vienna concerts with Leonard Bernstein's *Meditation No. 1 From His Mass*, which it characterizes as "a universal expression of thoughtful humanity." As well, it intends to insert a statement in the Vienna programs, reflecting the concerns of the musicians.

Haider was accompanied on his journey by two Jews: Peter Sichrovsky, a Freedom Party legislator and a member of the European Parliament, and Israeli businessman Gasit Muehlstine.

Although Haider reportedly checked out of his Montreal hotel late last night, apparently on his way to Toronto, he did manage to make another overture to world Jewry while in Quebec. He visited a memorial to Raoul Wallenberg in downtown Montreal, accompanied by its designer, Paul Lancz.

Haider also met with the editorial board of the *Montreal Gazette* daily newspaper, which gave the visit extensive coverage and included a lengthy question-and-answer session with the foreign leader.

As for the Tash wedding? Haider, in the end, skipped the simcha. □

(JTA correspondent Bill Gladstone in Toronto contributed to this report.)

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**South African Jews help disaster-stricken township***By Suzanne Belling*

JOHANNESBURG (JTA) — A Jewish group has spear-headed efforts to deliver aid to a black township near here that was devastated by torrential rains and floods.

For more than two weeks, rains described as the heaviest in some 50 years lashed the Johannesburg area, leaving hundreds homeless as a result of flooding in the black township of Alexandra, a pocket of poverty in the heart of the city's affluent northern suburbs.

With a group of students taking the lead, Tikkun, the South African Jewish community's umbrella project for helping the disadvantaged, delivered carloads of blankets, food and clothing to the residents of Alexandra.

The Jukskei River, which runs through the township, burst its banks during the rains, reducing houses built of bricks and makeshift shanties to rubble. All the residents' possessions were destroyed in the floods.

Tikkun's young adult group, in a joint effort with the South Africa Jewish Board of Deputies, came to the rescue despite fears for their own safety.

The township has one of the highest crime rates in Greater Johannesburg, particularly carjackings.

"Several people expressed anxiety at our decision to deliver the collection to those in need," said Ann Harris, Tikkun's coordinator of resources and wife of the organization's co-chairman, Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris.

"Despite the fact that we met literally hundreds of people during our two-hour visit to see the devastating conditions in which they were living, none of us felt intimidated," she said.

Tikkun's aid convoy was escorted by a leading figure in Alexandra, Linda Twala, who runs a church and community center for the aged in the township.

Twala met the convoy of vehicles in a van sporting the slogan "Thou shalt not hijack."

The initiative for assisting the flood victims came from "an outstanding group of young people" who started a campaign drive among several Jewish schools, Harris said.

The group was led by three siblings — Craig Hummel, a student at Yeshiva College in the predominantly Jewish suburb of Glenhazel; his twin sister, Adina; and his brother Joshua.

"They motivated the wonderful response from their contacts" at the King David Schools, Yeshiva College, Bnei Akiva, Betar, Habonim and the South Africa Union of Jewish Students, Harris said. Hummel, 18, was responsible for starting a child care center last year in the impoverished squatter camp of Diepsloot, outside Johannesburg.

He said the center is now being used as a temporary shelter for many left homeless by the floods.

"I elicited support from the Jewish day schools," he said. "Within 48 hours of embarking on the project, six tons of food, clothes and blankets were donated, as well as anonymous monetary contributions," he said.

Leonard Bilchitz, a representative of the South Africa Union of Jewish Students, told JTA it was essential that the Jewish

community — "especially students" — work for the betterment of others.

"We come from privileged backgrounds, and Jewish law says you should treat your neighbor as yourself. We can make a difference," he said.

Elizabeth Gezane took many of Alexandra's homeless into her own house, erected temporary shelters on her property and encouraged her neighbors to follow her example.

"People are suffering. It is our duty to house and cook for them. We are really grateful that, through this project, we are able to do so," she said.

Meanwhile, Herby Rosenberg, Tikkun's chief executive officer, announced this week that South Africa's former president, Nelson Mandela, has agreed to become the organization's patron in chief. □

**Canadian Jewish groups angry over funding of Catholic schools***By Bill Gladstone*

TORONTO (JTA) — Canadian Jewish officials are disappointed after their government shrugged off a U.N. ruling which found that the exclusive funding of Roman Catholic schools violates an international treaty.

In November the United Nations' 18-member Human Rights Committee decided that Ontario's practice of funding the private schools of only one religious denomination — while other religious schools, such as Jewish day schools, go unfunded — is unfair and "cannot be considered reasonable and objective."

In a response released Feb. 3 in Geneva, Canada acknowledged its responsibilities under the 1976 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but explained that education was a provincial matter over which it has little influence.

Canada's liberal government explained that it sought the cooperation of the province of Ontario's conservative government, but to little avail.

The Ontario government, meanwhile, has declared that it "intends to adhere fully to its constitutional obligation to fund Roman Catholic schools" and public schools that are open to all.

It also said it "has no plans to extend funding" to other private religious schools.

"Canada has abrogated its responsibility in the fields of human rights and religious tolerance," said Keith Landy, a lawyer and chair of the Ontario Region of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

"Fair-minded Ontarians recognize that funding one religious denomination to the exclusion of others, while sanctioned by the Canadian Charter of Rights, is really an historical anomaly and should not be permitted to continue," Landy said.

Anne Bayefsky, a Toronto-area lawyer who brought the case to the United Nations on behalf of a parent with two children enrolled in Jewish private schools, said Canada's failure to comply with the U.N. ruling is "an embarrassment" to the country and may cause it to lose its credibility on the international stage.

An interfaith rally to protest the federal government's position attracted more than 2,000 people to a Toronto-area conference center last weekend. Parents of children in Jewish schools are being encouraged to sign petitions and send letters to Ottawa in favor of equal funding for Jewish day schools in Ontario. □