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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli Cabinet OKs withdrawal

Israel's Cabinet approved the transfer of an additional 6.1 percent of the West Bank to Palestinian control.

The Prime Minister's Office said the redeployment, originally slated to be carried out in January, would likely take place Tuesday, the same day that Israeli and Palestinian negotiators are scheduled to meet at a Washington military base. [Page 4]

U.S. move on Iran criticized

As a goodwill gesture toward newly elected reformers in Iran's government, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced a lifting of a ban on imports of Iranian pistachios, caviar and carpets.

She also said U.S. officials would closely watch the upcoming trial of 13 Iranian Jews accused of espionage as "one of the barometers of U.S.-Iran relations." However, advocates for the 13 criticized the move, saying the U.S. should not make any concessions until the Jews are released.

Charges made in shul bombings

Two brothers previously accused of murdering a gay couple were charged with setting fire to three synagogues and an abortion clinic in California last year. The latest charges against Benjamin Matthew Williams and James Tyler Williams, filed last Friday, could lead to a 235-year sentence.

Jesuit says he didn't blame Jews

A high-ranking Jesuit official who was quoted as saying Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus said his comments were taken out of context.

Rev. Peter Gumpel, whom the Vatican appointed to lead the beatification effort for the controversial wartime pope, Pius XII, says that while he told Canadian journalists that Jewish leaders urged Pontius Pilate to crucify Jesus, he did not say that the Jews were responsible for Jesus' death.

Argentina embassy blast marked

On the eighth anniversary of a 1992 bombing at the Israeli Embassy that killed at least 20 people and injured hundreds, Argentina's president vowed that his government would do everything to find those responsible for the blast. [Page 2]

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Fearful of crime and chaos, Russian Jews move to Putin

By Lev Gorodetsky

MOSCOW, (JTA) — Zisya Weisman says he is going to vote for the incumbent and almost-guaranteed winner, Vladimir Putin, in the upcoming Russian presidential elections.

"First of all, there is no choice. Others have no chance," says the 55-year-old retired Jewish army major from the city of Samara. Weisman said he admires Putin's experience in the Soviet-era KGB.

Plus, he says, Putin "promised to crack down on anti-Semitism."

But Stas Mogilevsky, 25, is going to vote for "none of the above," hoping to bring about a second round of elections, which would be held if no candidate receives at least 50 percent of the vote in the March 26 ballot.

"Many Jewish people around me think that Putin has totalitarian inclinations and is going to crack down on human rights and basic liberties and introduce a compulsory draft of students," says Mogilevsky, a student of psychology at Moscow State University. He added that some of his friends prefer Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov.

The presidential election comes after Putin's Unity bloc won the most seats in December's parliamentary elections. After that vote, Jewish observers here and abroad were unsure whether he would support the Jewish community's long-standing desire for the government to crack down on anti-Semitism and bolster human rights. This uncertainty was heightened after Putin entered an alliance with the Communists soon after the election.

In the December ballot, Jewish voters, in a sharp contrast to the broader Russian electorate, overwhelmingly supported the Union of Right Forces, headed by former Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko and Boris Nemtsov and backed by Anatoly Chubais, all reformers with Jewish roots. But this time around, Jews, particularly those living outside Moscow and St. Petersburg, appear to be joining with the majority of their countrymen in a desire for Putin's "strong hand" to crack down on crime, corruption and economic chaos.

More than 50 percent of Jews outside these two major cities are expected to vote for Putin, according to Jewish sources.

But in St. Petersburg and Moscow, where more than half of Russia's roughly 600,000 Jews live, Jewish voters on the whole appear to be less supportive of Putin.

A sizeable percentage of the Jewish intelligentsia — and especially Jewish students in Moscow and St. Petersburg — not only dislike Putin but are scared by his background in the KGB. Many are going to vote for liberal Grigory Yavlinsky, who shares their pro-Western outlook. Alexander Lvov, 35, a teacher from St. Petersburg, will likely vote for Yavlinsky because he is the "only one with a human face."

Major Jewish organizations in Russia are expressing a "cautious optimism" or maintaining silence on Putin's apparently inevitable victory.

Representatives of the Russian Jewish Congress, whose leader, media mogul Vladimir Goussinsky, is battling with Putin and his team, refused to state a position, saying the RJC is a nonpolitical organization. Just the same, Putin's early overtures to Jewish leaders appear to be paying off.

In November, Putin promised the leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch dominated Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia to assist the Jewish community in

MIDEAST FOCUS

Syrian predicts talks will resume

Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas predicted that peace talks involving Syria, Lebanon and Israel will resume within weeks as a result of President Clinton's efforts.

The U.S. State Department would only say it was working to clarify the positions of Israel and Syria and is in regular touch with the parties.

Pope's helicopter pad vandalized

Activists linked to the outlawed extremist Jewish group Kach are believed to have vandalized a helicopter pad in Jerusalem due to be used by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Israel this week.

The pope is due to arrive in Israel from Jordan on Tuesday for a six-day visit.

Barak worried over pullback plan

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak reportedly expressed reservations over Israel Defense Force plans to leave some operating outposts in southern Lebanon following a possible troop withdrawal.

IDF officials last Friday presented Barak with the army plans for a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, code-named Morning Twilight.

Japan arrests Red Army terrorists

Japan arrested four members of a terrorist group who took part in a 1972 attack at an Israeli airport that killed 24 people.

The four members of the Japanese Red Army were deported from Lebanon over the weekend.

Former minister may be charged

A former public security minister in the government of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the latest Israeli political figure to face possible criminal charges. Israeli police have recommended that Avigdor Kahalani be indicted for obstruction of justice.

combating anti-Semitism, building schools and reclaiming former synagogue buildings for Jewish communities.

He also told the group's leaders that he acted personally to help rebuild Jewish life in St. Petersburg in the early 1990s, when he was head of the KGB branch there.

Baruch Gorin, speaking for the federation, says, "Our contacts with Putin show that the Yeltsin-era status quo in relations between the Jewish community and the authorities will be kept. And this status quo was not bad for the Jews."

In a further effort to bolster support, Putin said last week in a letter to U.S. legislators that Russian authorities are firmly committed to battling anti-Semitism.

"Any signs of anti-Semitism are considered an inadmissible display of aggressive nationalism incompatible with civilized society in Russia," the letter said, according to Putin's press service. The letter came in response to a recent letter sent by 92 members of the House of Representatives and 98 senators who voiced concern about anti-Semitism and religious persecution in Russia.

Polls of the general electorate show that Putin appears to be a shoo-in, with 52 percent to 55 percent of the vote. Zyuganov is expected to receive between 16 percent and 20 percent, according to the polls, with other candidates, including ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Yavlinsky, trailing far behind.

If Putin earns more than 50 percent, he will avoid a second-round runoff.

Putin received an added boost when the Union of Right Forces, known as SPS, announced last week that it would support Putin, apparently to prevent a runoff.

Putin appears to be particularly popular among the Jews of the North Caucasus, who want him to put down the Muslim insurgency there and combat anti-Semitism among Chechen gangs who have carried out a wave of kidnappings, whose targets include Jews, and recently beat a Jewish hostage to death.

"Putin means stability. I think that the level of crime in Russia and the situation around Chechnya demand tough handling," says Roman Levayev of Nalchik, which is located in a republic bordering Chechnya. □

Argentine embassy blast marked, but the bombing remains unsolved

By Nicolas Penchaszadeh

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Eight years after a terrorist bomb destroyed the Israeli Embassy here, Argentine officials are again vowing to find the perpetrators and bring them to justice.

"This is an open wound for all Argentines," Argentine President Fernando de la Rúa said at a ceremony last Friday that marked the anniversary and inaugurated a public square where the embassy once stood.

With hundreds of people witnessing the inauguration, de la Rúa and his entire Cabinet were present along with other government officials to show their solidarity with the victims. While this represents somewhat of a change from the days of former President Carlos Menem, who never attended such ceremonies, members of the local Jewish community were critical of Argentine officials for stalling the investigation.

Among the harshest critics was outgoing Israeli Ambassador Itzhak Aviran, who has repeatedly lashed out at Argentina's failure to find those responsible for either the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing or the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish center — attacks that killed more than 100 people and left hundreds of others wounded.

"There has been a lack of commitment and interest in the investigation" of the embassy attack, Aviran said during his speech at the ceremony.

"So much evidence disappeared. There were so many attempts to close the case. I wonder if all of our efforts have been in vain."

Aviran, who has charged that Hezbollah operatives were behind both the embassy and AMIA bombings, said last Friday that the courts should investigate local people who could have participated in the embassy attack, which he attributed to anti-Semitism prevalent in Argentine society.

After years of delay, Argentina recently announced plans to try 20 people for the AMIA bombing. □



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JEWISH WORLD

FOCUS ON ISSUES

When it comes to Jewish study, women learning more than men

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — At the burgeoning international network of a two-year Jewish study program, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-Schools, Jewish women comprise about 60 percent of the pupils.

Women also are approximately 60 percent at Me'ah, another long-term course involving Jewish history, texts and values that is offered in a growing number of communities around North America.

Clear away your stereotypes of Jewish men poring over religious texts while the women stay home for the cooking, child-rearing and candlelighting aspects of Jewish life.

In what researchers are heralding as a profound cultural reversal, a new study released last week at a Brandeis University conference reveals that women are more likely than men to be engaged in adult Jewish learning.

The study, based on a national sample of 1,302 adults, is part of a larger research project on Jewish adult education being conducted by Hebrew University sociologist Steven Cohen and Aryeh Davidson, dean of the education school at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary.

The gender gap is most dramatic among Jews who are religiously observant, but not Orthodox. When ranked according to level of ritual observance, 57 percent of women who are very highly affiliated Jews study a moderate amount, compared with 45 percent of men. Among highly affiliated Jews, 48 percent of women study a moderate amount, compared with 36 percent of men.

There are few gender differences, however, among Orthodox Jews and Jews with low levels of affiliation, according to the study. Orthodox men and women both study Jewish topics a great deal (37 percent of men and 39 percent of women report high levels of Jewish study) while unaffiliated Jewish men and women both study Jewish topics very little (86 percent of men and 87 percent of women report low levels of Jewish study).

Indicating how women may influence the burgeoning field of adult Jewish education, the study also finds that women and men have different interests and motivation for enrolling in Jewish studies courses.

For example women tend to be more interested than men in learning about Jewish spirituality, ritual observance, Jewish values and Jewish art, while men express a greater interest in learning Talmud and Jewish history.

According to Sylvia Barack Fishman, co-director of one of the study's sponsors, the Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women, women are not only more likely to engage in Jewish study but have also played a key role in the revival of adult Jewish learning.

Women's excitement about text study was "the galvanizing force in creating this whole sea change," said Fishman, who is a professor of contemporary Jewish life at Brandeis.

"It's now cool to do adult study. Twenty years ago it wasn't. What made it cool was women being excited about having access" and "they've changed the culture," she said, noting that synagogues that have brought in the Me'ah program often do so at the urging of female congregants.

While Me'ah and the Melton Mini-Schools nationally report a 60-40 ratio of women to men, in at least one community, women make up an even greater majority of adult learners. And they are inspiring a women's day of learning and a spring semester focusing on women's studies.

"All our classes are geared toward or about women," said Nancy Lipsey, who coordinates educational programs at the Atlanta Jewish Community Center, where more than 75 percent of participants in the Melton Mini-School — and the majority of students in the JCC's other courses and book discussion groups — are women.

"We know who our audience is," she added. □

Young Jewish leaders meet

Pledging to join in tikkun olam and declaring "I'm Jewish and I love it," more than 3,000 Jewish leaders from 39 states gathered in Washington at the United Jewish Communities' Youth Leadership conference.

Conference delegates will meet for three days and lobby Congress on issues that include aid to Israel and the Middle East peace process, and hate crimes legislation.

In her keynote address at the conference, Coretta Scott King said the historic coalition between African Americans and Jews must be strengthened and the Jewish community must continue its work for social and economic justice.

"Not everyone can be a Martin Luther King Jr. or an Abraham Joshua Heschel," the widow of the slain civil rights leader said Sunday. "But everyone can make an important contribution."

Met admits to looted painting

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York admitted that it has a Nazi-looted painting in its collection.

Museum officials said the Nazis likely looted "Guardroom With the Deliverance of Saint Peter," by the 17th-century Flemish painter David Teniers the Younger, in Vienna in 1938.

Zyuganov wins nationality battle

Russian Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov won the right to declare his nationality on campaign posters that will hang in polling stations during the March 26 presidential elections, according to Radio Liberty.

Zyuganov's victory over Russia's Central Election Commission comes amid extensive use of nationalist rhetoric in the campaign by Zyuganov and another presidential contender, ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

Balkan Jews form umbrella group

Jews from half a dozen Balkan states formed an umbrella group.

"There are very few Jews in the Balkans," said Viktor Mizrach, the president of the 200-member Jewish community of Macedonia. "Each can love his own country, but we have to form a fist or we will disappear."

German cemetery defaced

Vandals defaced gravestones in a Jewish cemetery near Berlin with anti-Semitic slogans.

The damage at the cemetery in Guben, the target of previous extremist violence, was discovered last Friday.

Israeli Cabinet backs withdrawal; Palestinians nab Hamas activists

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After a month of deadlock and mutual recriminations, the Israeli-Palestinian track is again showing distinct signs of life.

Days before the scheduled resumption of talks in the United States, Israel's Cabinet approved the transfer of an additional 6.1 percent of the West Bank to Palestinian control.

The Cabinet decision took place amid repeated indications that the Palestinian Authority is cooperating with Israel to clamp down on terrorism.

Over the weekend, Palestinian security officials detained several Hamas activists in the Gaza Strip who were suspected of planning to carry out terror attacks against Israel.

The officials also uncovered some 70 pounds of explosives hidden in a kindergarten in a Gaza refugee camp.

One of two Hamas activists Palestinian security forces detained last week near the West Bank town of Nablus led these forces to the explosives. The two suspects are believed to have headed a Hamas terrorist cell that Israeli security forces uncovered earlier this month in the Israeli Arab town of Taibe.

Sunday's 16-6 Cabinet vote came after the Inner Security Cabinet, a smaller group of ministers that focuses on security issues, last week approved the withdrawal map specifying the 6.1 percent land transfer.

The ministers who voted Sunday against the move included members of the pro-settler National Religious Party, the fervently Orthodox Shas Party and the Russian immigrant Yisrael Ba'Aliyah Party.

The Prime Minister's Office said the redeployment, originally slated to be carried out in January, would likely take place Tuesday — the same day that Israeli and Palestinian negotiators were scheduled to meet at a Washington military base.

Under the withdrawal plan, 5.1 percent of the West Bank, now under Palestinian civilian control and Israeli security control, will be handed over to full Palestinian control. An additional 1 percent will go from full Israeli control to full Palestinian control.

The withdrawal will include three Arab villages near Jerusalem — Zatarah, Beitunia and Ubeidiya. It will also include areas near the West Bank towns of Jericho, Jenin, Bethlehem and Hebron, bringing the Palestinians one step closer to achieving the territorial contiguity they want in a future state.

Prior to the Cabinet vote, Jewish settlers lined a highway near Jerusalem to protest the redeployment.

The Palestinian Authority had rejected the redeployment maps that Israel originally submitted, claiming that they did not include any densely populated Arab areas.

The Palestinians were particularly interested in areas near Jerusalem, where they want to establish the capital of a future state.

This demand triggered vigorous opposition from hawks in both the opposition and within Barak's governing coalition, on the grounds it would endanger Jewish areas and lead to the division of the city.

Such pressure was attributed to Barak's decision last week to reverse himself and not include Anata, a West Bank village on Jerusalem's fringes, in the latest redeployment. □

Shas leader widely criticized for comparing minister to Haman

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The spiritual leader of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party may face charges of incitement for calling on his followers to lay a curse on a Cabinet member.

Israel's attorney general held discussions Sunday on whether to file the charges after Shas spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef compared Education Minister Yossi Sarid to Haman, the figure from the Book of Esther who seeks the destruction of the Jewish people.

In his weekly broadcast to followers, Yosef condemned Sarid, saying he should be obliterated from the Jewish people and that God would surely wipe his name out.

Yosef said that when the Book of Esther is read this week during the holiday of Purim, Jews should say, "Cursed is wicked Haman, cursed is wicked Yossi Sarid."

Prime Minister Ehud Barak joined Israeli legislators from across the political spectrum in denouncing Yosef's comments.

The rabbi is a "spiritual leader whose words have great effect," Barak was quoted as telling the Cabinet on Sunday.

In an apparent reference to the atmosphere of incitement that prevailed before the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Barak said, "We have seen the effect of unwarranted hatred, not only in previous eras but in recent times."

Yosef's remarks came amid an ongoing dispute between Sarid and Shas over the religious party's financially troubled educational system. Under a deal recently worked out with the government, Sarid agreed to transfer funds to the debt-ridden school system on the condition Shas officials streamline its administration and meet certain educational criteria.

Shas has accused Sarid of acting in an abusive manner toward the schools, which serve working-class members of Israel's Sephardi population, who in turn provide the main pillar of support for the party. Shas is the second-largest party in Barak's governing coalition, and the premier counts on its support for his peace moves. However, Shas' disputes with the government over funding its school system have jeopardized that support.

In a preliminary vote recently in the Knesset, Shas legislators backed an opposition-sponsored bill that would make it nearly impossible for Barak to win a planned referendum on withdrawing from the Golan Heights as part of a peace deal with Syria.

Though Shas said at the time it was voting out of concern for the Golan, observers suggested their vote was intended as a warning to Barak that he must heed the party's demands.

Sarid refused Sunday to comment directly on Yosef's remarks, but he told a news conference that even though Shas has "still not presented a budget for the year 2000, funds continue to be transferred in an orderly fashion" to help maintain the schools.

Shas Cabinet members accused Sarid of misleading the public about the situation with the school system and defended Yosef's remarks. Health Minister Shlomo Benizri said the remarks were made when Yosef was in an emotional state after hearing from officials in the Shas school system about its dire economic situation.

"He certainly did not intend to prompt anyone to take any kind of action as a result of his words," Benizri told Israel Radio. □