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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak downplays Syrian threats

Israel downplayed Lebanese threats that Syria would send its army into southern Lebanon if Israel withdraws from the area.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak told his Cabinet on Sunday that the threat, issued by Lebanon's defense minister, is unrealistic. Barak also said he is not optimistic that Israeli-Syrian negotiations will resume soon.

Reform move on gays criticized

Orthodox groups are condemning a decision by Reform rabbis affirming their right to officiate at gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies.

"Conferring legitimacy upon relationships which our Torah and tradition specifically prohibit is beyond the pale of acceptable Jewish teaching and practice," said a statement from the Rabbinical Council of America.

A spokesman for the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America speculated that in the future Reform Jews, whom he accused of adopting an "anything goes" attitude, might allow incest.

Report: German neo-Nazism up

Neo-Nazism is rising sharply in Germany, according to a soon-to-be published German government report.

A German newspaper reported Saturday that more than 53,000 people belonged to far-right groups in 1999, and that 8,200 said they are ready to commit violent crimes, up 9 percent.

Meanwhile, German leaders across the political spectrum criticized as racist the campaign of a former government minister running for regional office who is using the slogan "More Training Instead of More Immigration."

Tycoons compared to bacteria

An aide to Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin described two Jewish-born media tycoons as "bacteria who live in disintegrating bodies but have to die when the body starts to recover."

The comments about Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Goussinsky came amid rumors about a possible crackdown on the two. Meanwhile, Putin gave his go-ahead to a program aimed at increasing tolerance and combating extremism in Russia.

Hackers sign on in Israel, say they can save the Net

By Avi Machlis

TEL AVIV (JTA) — It is hard to take seriously a conference that provides free pizza and Coca-Cola to participants wearing tags with names like Nothingmuch, Cyphunk and Blacktiger.

But for more than 350 computer geeks who came out of the cybershadows last week to participate in Y2hacK, an international hackers conference in Tel Aviv, this gathering was no laughing matter.

"Hackers are very important for the Internet community as a whole, because they are the ones that will be buttoning up holes in the system," said John Draper, also known as Cap'n Crunch, a 57-year-old hacker guru from California.

"Governments should be a little more tolerant to what is going on and hackers should be willing to contact a company and say, 'I found bugs in your system.'"

Draper holds a place of honor in the hackers hall of fame for his discovery in the 1970s that a toy whistle from a Cap'n Crunch cereal box could be used to break into telephone networks.

He has since reformed his ways and used the conference as a platform to condemn destructive hacker activities, such as assaults that briefly crippled leading Web sites like Yahoo! and eBay in February.

It was these attacks that lured the media spotlight to Tel Aviv's exhibition grounds last week.

Although hackers regularly stage conventions in the United States and Europe, it was the first such gathering in Israel aimed at galvanizing local hackers — and the first since the recent string of highly publicized attacks.

Indeed, Michael Eitan, a Likud Party Knesset member and former science minister, appeared at the convention and told the hackers to make sure they do not put their talents to illegal use.

Many participants said it is time for authorities to stop hunting them down and to start listening to what they have to say. The conference was sponsored by People and Computers, an Israeli technology magazine, and Netvision, a leading Israeli Internet service provider.

It was organized by Neora, a veteran Israeli hacker and software programmer. In 1993 — way before the Internet reached the masses — she published a novel about an online Israeli-Palestinian love affair. Neora today lectures about cyberculture at Tel Aviv University.

Y2hacK provided a rare glimpse into the secretive and somewhat anarchic world of people who are seen as the archenemies of the new world order of dotcoms and e-commerce.

Participants were challenged to break into certain sites offered by companies who wanted to prove their cyberdefenses were sound.

And all eyes were peeled for camouflaged agents believed to be milling about, in a lively offline game of "Spot the Fed," borrowed from U.S. hacker conferences.

At this hackers gathering, some participants wore yarmulkas, but the hacking scene — complete with an afternoon break for meditation — seemed to be void of the religious-secular tensions that are commonplace in Israeli society.

"I'm a wannabe hacker," said Inbal, a 16-year-old high school student from Ra'anana who, like many participants, only gave her first name or screen alias.

Inbal, who attends a religious youth group, was knitting a kipah while listening to

MIDEAST FOCUS

Report: Barak wants China deal

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak reportedly wants to move ahead with a multimillion-dollar military contract with China despite strong American objections.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz quoted government sources as saying that Israel will proceed with a deal to outfit Chinese cargo planes with advanced radar systems because it has an interest in maintaining good ties with China.

The United States opposes the deal, saying it would upset the balance of power with Taiwan.

U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen is expected to raise the issue with Barak when he visits Israel on Monday.

Yemen backtracks on Israel

The president of Yemen said his country would establish diplomatic relations with Israel once a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement is achieved.

Speaking in New York, Ali Abdullah Saleh also said Israeli and other Jewish tourists are welcome to visit Yemen.

But Yemen's U.N. ambassador later clarified that only Israelis of Yemeni descent would be welcome at this time, and that those carrying Israeli passports would not be allowed to visit.

The statements came after officials in Yemen, which does not have diplomatic relations with Israel, denied that a group of Yemeni Israelis who visited Yemen last week used Israeli passports.

Police probe helps Netanyahu

A police recommendation that Benjamin Netanyahu be indicted appears to be helping the former prime minister's popularity.

Netanyahu is now in a statistical dead heat with current Prime Minister Ehud Barak, according to a Gallup poll published last Friday.

lectures given by veteran hackers. "I once broke into a system by mistake, and the company offered to pay me so I could tell them how I got in," she said.

"I thought that was really cool. But I think the people who cause damage are stupid — they are just showing off."

Even before the Israel event, the Jewish people have a prominent representative on the international hacking scene in the form of Kevin Mitnick, who spoke to the convention via teleconference.

Mitnick, 36, spent nearly five years in prison for breaking into the Web sites of leading companies. During his sentence, he asked to be transferred because the facility he was in did not serve kosher food.

The best-selling books "Cyberpunk" and "Takedown" and a forthcoming Hollywood movie are based on his story.

Mitnick was released from a California federal prison in January and recently testified in Congress about the need to beef up cybersecurity. He is banned from touching a computer keyboard or using a cellular phone.

Hackers at the conference tried hard to explain that there is a difference between constructive "white hat" hackers who can help improve security on the Internet and destructive "black hat" crackers, the word for those who want to wreak havoc on the Web.

For example, conference organizers used their skills to conduct a survey of Israeli Web security.

Even though some big Israeli companies warned them not to publish the results, they discovered that 28 percent of the Israeli Internet is vulnerable.

Neora was kind enough to leave her telephone number wherever she broke in so systems administrators could contact her for details.

Nothingmuch, a 14-year-old from Beersheba with a blond ponytail, considers himself to be a good guy even though he shares the anti-establishment sentiments of the crackers.

"I'm an anti-monopoly type of guy," he said.

"I hate any major company. One of the ways I work against them is by using a Mac instead of a PC.

"Hackers are people who make systems do what they want to do, and it does not matter whether it's a computer or a calculator," he said.

"Most Israeli hackers are 'packet monkeys' who just cause damage, and I hate that," he added, using a term for destructive hackers.

Indeed, Israelis hackers have a bad reputation, said Gilad Raz, a 26-year-old software programmer and "white hat" hacker who did not attend the conference.

"Israelis are among the best creators of viruses in the world," he said. "They are also good at writing anti-virus programs, too."

Raz, who is setting up a start-up company, said the army often scouts for hackers to use their abilities in intelligence units.

Often, the army helps hackers reform themselves, and they refocus their skills in positive directions upon their return to civilian life.

But, said 501, a hacker who recently moved from the United States to Israel, once a hacker, always a hacker.

"Most of us have had some fun," he said.

501 works as a software programmer, yet he sometimes cannot resist the urge to peek into other people's computers.

Once he even intercepted a colleague's resume en route to potential employers and inserted some unflattering comments of his own.

Behind the fun and games and 14-year-old computer whizzes, 501 conceded that few people realize just how vulnerable the Internet is, nor do most surfers realize to what extent hackers pose a threat.

"There are a few people who can take down the entire Internet in a matter of minutes and it will take the world two days to figure out what is going on," he said.

Even Cap'n Crunch admitted that the generation of hackers he inspired may have gotten a bit out of control.

"Hacking is all about the challenge," he said. "But unfortunately today hackers have gotten a little more bold and are doing more damaging things — which kinda sucks, really." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Jewish captive freed in Caucasus

Russian police freed a Jewish man and 15 others who had been held captive for seven months in a remote mountain village in Dagestan, a Russian republic that borders Chechnya.

Yakov Ayzen, 60, was released after a special police squad raided the village last week.

Jews join Swiss protest

Jewish groups joined a demonstration in front of the Swiss Parliament to protest the official visit there by Austria's chancellor.

"Shame on You, Switzerland," read one protest banner.

Switzerland, which is not a member of the European Union, has refused to abide by E.U. diplomatic sanctions imposed after the xenophobic Freedom Party became a member of the Austrian government.

Rabbis want equal rights in Israel

The Israeli government should pass laws that would grant equal rights to all branches of Judaism in the Jewish state, said U.S. Conservative rabbis.

The call was issued last week at the Rabbinical Assembly's 100th anniversary conference in Philadelphia.

"What is at stake here is the democracy" of Israel, said Rabbi Ehud Bandel, the leader of the Conservative movement in Israel.

Group urges veto on religion bill

A U.S. Jewish group is calling on Kentucky's governor to veto a resolution that would require public schools to teach about the Christian influence on America and allow for the display of the Ten Commandments on public grounds.

The American Jewish Committee's call came after a Jewish legislator was asked whether she believed in Jesus during discussion of the bill.

Mexican kidnapper captured

A kidnapper who over the past 15 months targeted wealthy Mexico City Jews, and sometimes sliced off their fingers, was captured.

Marcos Tinoco, 41, is suspected of kidnapping at least 11 people, 10 of whom are Jewish, and holding them for ransoms ranging from \$38,000 to \$650,000.

Yiddish groups of the world unite

Two top institutions of Yiddish culture entered into a partnership to reprint Yiddish children's classics.

Under the agreement signed between the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the National Yiddish Book Center, the books will be digitized from microfiche and also made available in reprint editions.

Israeli women's rights law passes after female lawmaker gives up post

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Knesset has passed a landmark law granting equal rights to women in every sphere of Israeli life — after the bill's sponsor gave up her committee seat to a male colleague.

Along with granting women equality in the workplace, the military and in other spheres of society, the new law also lays out the rights of women over their bodies and protects women from violence and sexual exploitation.

Women's rights groups in Israel hailed the Knesset action.

Rina Bar-Tal, chair of the Women's Network, called the law a milestone.

Hedva Almog, chair of the Na'amat woman's organization, said the law has "historic meaning" and that in the absence of a constitution, it codifies the principle of equality for women.

The legislation passed March 29 is an amendment to a law passed in 1951 that set out in general terms the principle of equality in Israeli society.

After adamantly opposing the bill for a year, the fervently Orthodox Shas Party withdrew its threat to sabotage the legislation after Knesset member Yael Dayan, the bill's chief sponsor, gave up her place on the influential Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee to a Shas legislator.

"For two years I have been trying to get this law through," Dayan was quoted as saying.

"I spoke for an entire year with rabbis. They demanded revisions. Shas officials told me all the time, 'It will never be passed.'

"If I knew it was possible to resolve the matter this way, I would have done it a long time ago."

The bill was slated to be brought before the Knesset last month, on International Women's Day.

But, at the urging of Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Dayan pulled the bill from the agenda at the last minute after Shas threatened to turn the vote into a no-confidence motion in the government.

Barak came to the Knesset to participate in the 49-2 vote.

The bill was backed by all the parties in the Knesset, with the exception of the fervently Orthodox United Torah Judaism bloc.

Knesset member Moshe Gafni, a member of UTJ, said the concept of equal rights for the sexes is inherently wrong.

"There are certain roles for a woman and for a man," Gafni said. "There is also concern the Supreme Court can take this declaration and use it in a manner that goes against the outlook of the majority of the residents of the country."

Dayan said the "deal" that removed the final obstacle to the bill's passage was launched in a casual conversation in the Knesset corridors in which she joked that she was ready to do anything, even give up her position on the committee.

Shas, however, denied any agreement had been reached.

Shas legislator Yair Peretz, who is to assume Dayan's seat on the committee, said Dayan had asked that Shas withdraw its threat to submit a no-confidence motion if the legislation were presented for a vote. "I consulted with the rabbis and told her we won't oppose" the bill, Peretz said. □

Czech officials disband skinhead group

PRAGUE (JTA) — The Czech Interior Ministry has disbanded a skinhead group whose leader last year publicly denied the existence of Nazi gas chambers.

Interior Minister Vaclav Grulich said last Friday that the National Alliance had failed to heed a warning that they were breaking Czech laws.

In February, the group's leader, Vladimir Skoupy, was charged with promoting fascism by wearing Nazi-like symbols at a demonstration attended by extremist groups in Prague. Skoupy remains in custody. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**Compromise will preserve old Prague Jewish burial site***By Magnus Bennett*

PRAGUE (JTA)— Jewish community leaders have welcomed a Czech government decision to preserve one of Europe's oldest Jewish burial sites.

The decision, announced March 29 by Czech Culture Minister Pavel Dostal, ended months of speculation over the fate of the burial site, which was unearthed two years ago by a construction crew building an underground garage in central Prague.

During that time, both Czech officials and Jewish representatives came under fire from Orthodox Jewish groups abroad who were opposed to any interference in the 750-year-old cemetery.

As a result of the decision, the remains of several hundred Jews will stay undisturbed near an office building being built by a Czech insurance company, Ceska pojistovna.

The remains are to be surrounded by concrete covering an area about 40 yards in length, 10 yards wide and 1 yard high. Construction work that was halted several months ago will be permitted to continue around the site, which forms part of a cemetery relinquished by the local Jewish community in the late 15th century.

Given the possibility that the burial site is part of a larger cemetery, the Czech government will also declare a large area around the new building a national heritage site, which will block any further construction in the area.

The burial site is not Prague's famous Old Jewish Cemetery, a separate site that lies within the walls of the city's Jewish Quarter.

Dostal told reporters at a news conference that the government had sought a compromise solution that took into account "the cultural and religious rights of the Jewish community" while also recognizing the fact that the insurance company had received permission to erect the building.

He said the government would pay up to \$1.2 million toward the cost of modifying the building project and suggested that international Jewish organizations may also be approached to contribute toward the costs, whose total has not yet been determined.

The Czech government had considered several options for the site, including declaring the whole area a protected monument and halting all construction work — a move that would have forced them to pay up to \$14 million in compensation to the insurance company.

Czech Jewish officials, who proposed the option that was ultimately adopted, had been anxious to resolve the issue in the face of protests from Orthodox groups outside Czech embassies earlier this month.

Tomas Kraus, chairman of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic, said the decision was satisfactory because the burial site would not be moved and would remain intact. "I very much appreciate how all the parties behaved on this issue and I was also pleased by the way the media reacted to it in a very supportive way."

The president of the North American Boards of Rabbis, Marc Schneier, who discussed the issue with the Czech culture minister during a recent visit to Prague, also welcomed the decision.

"I want to congratulate the Czech authorities and the Czech people for recognizing sacred interests over economic interests," said Schneier.

In a clear reference to the activity of international Jewish groups who have vociferously protested against any compromise on the fate of the cemetery, Schneier added: "I hope that elements of the Jewish community outside of the Czech Republic will recognize the jurisdiction of the Prague Jewish community." □

Amid current flak over extremism, Hitler's town plans to address past*By Douglas Davis*

LONDON (JTA) — Officials in the Austrian town where Hitler was born want to turn his birthplace into a "center of international understanding."

Joined by many residents of Braunau am Inn, the officials said their move is prompted by international criticism over the recent inclusion of the xenophobic Freedom Party in Austria's government.

Residents of the picture-postcard town have debated the fate of the building in which Hitler was born on April 20, 1889, since the end of World War II.

The only current indication that the Nazi leader spent his first two years in an apartment on the first floor of 15 Salzburger Vorstadt is a large stone on the pavement outside.

The stone contains the inscription, "For peace, freedom and democracy. Never again fascism. Millions of dead serve as a warning."

An attached note indicates that the stone came from the nearby Mauthausen death camp.

From 1939 to 1944, the Nazis used the house as an art gallery, and it has since accommodated a school, a bank and a library. The house currently serves as a workshop for the disabled.

The aim of Braunau's residents, supported by all of Austria's political parties, is to demonstrate that Braunau and Austria are prepared to confront their past and participate in the fight against fascism.

Florian Kotanko, principal of Braunau's main secondary school and initiator of the project, conceded that some villagers are opposed to the plan.

"One person suggested that it should be blown up," he said, "and a few say it should be left as it is and forgotten about."

Another hurdle to be overcome is acquiring the property from the family that has owned it since 1920.

Even if the owner agrees to sell, the village will not be able to afford to purchase it without help from the government or the European Union.

There is also concern that the project may backfire because it will emphasize Braunau's links with Hitler and attract neo-Nazis.

In 1989, a group of neo-Nazis placed flowers outside the building to mark the 100th anniversary of Hitler's birth, and only last month a bank in Braunau discovered that a right-wing German extremist party had set up an account at its branch. The account was closed. Compounding the concern over the reputation of the town is the fact that Susanne Reiss-Passer, who recently succeeded Jorg Haider as leader of the Freedom Party, was also born in Braunau. □