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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Aid for Golan withdrawal delayed

American plans to fund an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights have slowed because of the freeze in Israeli-Syrian talks, U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen said.

During a news conference with Cohen, who is visiting Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak refused to say that a China arms deal, under which Israel would to outfit Chinese cargo planes with advanced radar systems, would not proceed.

Meanwhile, a State Department official indicated that the United States has some "serious concerns" about the arms sales.

But he added that it would not be linked to any American aid to Israel that would accompany a Golan Heights withdrawal.

"It's fair to say that if Israel were not to respond to our concerns, that it would have some effect," a spokesman said.

Birthright plans summer trips

The Birthright Israel program plans to send 2,000 young Jews on free 10-day trips to Israel this summer after sending 6,000 during the winter.

The trips, which will take place from mid-May through mid-June, will primarily target people who were on the waiting list for the winter trip or who were unable to participate because of conflicts with their college schedules.

FBI probes theft of temple funds

The FBI joined in an investigation of alleged embezzlement from a Philadelphia-area synagogue.

According to officials at Temple Sinai in Dresher, Pa., at least \$700,000 was taken from the synagogue during a seven-year period and diverted to an account reportedly controlled by Barry Wilf, who, until the alleged scheme came to light, was the synagogue's longtime executive director.

The synagogue's bookkeeper, Betty Shusterman, was also fired in connection with the alleged embezzlement.

Jewish center opens in Rio

A new Jewish center opened in Rio de Janeiro.

The center, run by the Lubavitch movement, includes two synagogues, a library and separate mikvahs for men and women. [Page 4]

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Patrilineal descent more divisive than Reform's vote on gay unions

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — It's bad for Jewish unity, but not as bad as the decision to recognize the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as Jews.

That's how Orthodox and Conservative rabbis are viewing the Reform movement's decision last week to affirm the right of its rabbis to officiate at gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies.

But even though the leaders of Judaism's more traditional movements say the Reform rabbis' decision is less divisive than the 1984 move on patrilineal descent, Orthodox leaders are harshly condemning the vote.

The criticism of Conservative leaders is more subdued.

Also, those active in promoting Reform Judaism in Israel insist that because the resolution recognizes the diversity of views on same-sex unions and does not use the words "marriage" or "wedding," it will not pose a serious obstacle to attracting Israelis to the movement. The Israeli Reform movement has generally taken a more cautious approach to controversial issues because it does not want to give the Orthodox establishment ammunition. Not surprisingly, leaders in the Reconstructionist movement — which recognizes patrilineal descent and in 1993 supported same-sex commitment ceremonies — backed the Reform decision.

Other movements, though, predict it will undermine Jewish unity. While the Reform resolution means the movement will now develop and circulate ketubot — or Jewish marriage contracts — and liturgy for same-sex ceremonies to its 1,700 rabbis, the resolution does not require rabbis to officiate at same-sex unions. Many Reform rabbis had officiated at same-sex ceremonies even before the resolution passed.

Rabbi Richard Hirsh, executive director of the 200-member Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, speculated that the resolution's passage will encourage Reform rabbis who do not yet officiate at same-sex unions to consider doing so.

He said his movement's 1993 resolution "started what became a significant shift in Reconstructionist rabbis." Public discussion of the issue "made it less possible for individual rabbis to avoid the issue," said Hirsh, who began officiating at gay and lesbian ceremonies after 1993. "Having support of the rabbinic group makes it easier for you to make a stand in your own congregation," he said.

The executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, which represents 1,500 Conservative rabbis, said that while his movement supports civil rights for gays, it does not approve of its rabbis officiating at same-sex ceremonies.

Rabbi Joel Meyers acknowledged that despite this position, some Conservative rabbis officiate at same-sex ceremonies and — unlike Conservative rabbis who officiate at intermarriages — they are allowed to remain in the Rabbinical Assembly.

Meyers does not expect Reform's move to strain Conservative-Reform relations, and he predicted it would have less of an impact than the patrilineal descent issue, which he said "goes to the heart of defining who's Jewish and who's not and that's a more serious question."

The Rabbinical Council of America, the organization representing 1,100 Orthodox rabbis, issued a statement that said, "Conferring legitimacy upon relationships which our Torah and tradition specifically prohibit is beyond the pale of acceptable Jewish teaching and practice."

"It's another step of fragmentation and disunification of the Jewish community,"

MIDEAST FOCUS

Libya invites Israeli official

The secretary of Israel's Labor Party was invited to visit Libya, which does not have diplomatic ties with Israel. Ra'anana Cohen received the invitation from the head of the Libyan delegation at a conference of legislators from Mediterranean states that met this week in Marseilles, France.

Cohen, who said he is not sure whether he would be able to take up the offer, attributed it to a new openness toward Israel as a result of the peace policies adopted by Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

Barak backs Hebron settlers

Expressing strong support for Jewish settlers in Hebron, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak indicated in a letter that settlers should remain in the West Bank town.

Palestinians and Israeli peace activists reacted with outrage, saying the 450 settlers should leave the city of 130,000 Palestinians as part of a final peace treaty.

Palestinian minister beaten

Six armed Palestinians stormed into the office of the Palestinian Authority's environment minister and beat him.

The assault on Youssef Abu Safieh in the West Bank town of Ramallah on Sunday was believed to be revenge, according to Palestinian officials.

B-ball fans to descend on Greece

Some 3,000 Israeli basketball fans are expected to descend on the Greek city of Salonika for the European final four basketball tournament on April 18-20.

The fans are coming to watch the Maccabi Tel Aviv team, a tournament participant.

The local Jewish community is bracing itself because the games will coincide with Passover, and many of the fans will want to attend seders.

said Rabbi Steven Dworken, the RCA's executive vice president. "First they did it with patrilineal descent, and now this."

Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesman for the fervently Orthodox Agudath Israel of America, was even more outspoken in his criticism, saying it should "convince all Jews that anything goes in Reform leadership.

"Even the prohibition against incest could go," he said. But Shafran did say that unlike the patrilineal descent issue, the new resolution would not "split the Jewish people in two."

Meanwhile, Reform and Conservative leaders say they will continue to work together, despite their differences on the same-sex issue.

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, said he supported the resolution and was particularly happy about its compromise language.

"I imagine there'll be some attacks from various quarters, mostly Orthodox, and I think it will be used from time to time by those who have an ax to grind against us," he said.

However, he noted that he "could care less what the ultra-Orthodox say about us," and is far more concerned about Reform's image among its "target audience — all those people between Orthodox and nothing."

The leader of Israel's Conservative counterpart, Rabbi Ehud Bandel, said he does not agree with the resolution, which he thinks will undermine both movements' efforts in Israel, but said it will not affect his willingness to work with the Reform movement in efforts to gain recognition for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.

"It will make our position hard — we're always associated with Reform, and Israelis don't always differentiate between Masorti and Reform. But I think it will create more understanding to the fact that these are distinct movements." □

Jews in Britain need to adapt to multicultural world, says report

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — British Jews should not look at themselves in strictly religious terms, but as a people tied together culturally, historically and socially as well, according to a London-based Jewish think tank.

"For the purposes of representation, we should adopt an inclusive definition of the Jewish people and present ourselves as an ethnic group," says the report by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, which was published in London last month.

The report also called for the creation of a program aimed at educating female, younger and unaffiliated Jews in how to become leaders of the community "skilled in representation."

According to an institute spokesman, the proposal would represent a "significant" change in a multicultural Britain. It notes the "strain on the historic representational structures of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Chief Rabbinate."

In what is regarded as a reference to the Chief Rabbinate, the leader of the mainstream modern Orthodox movement that represents some 60 percent of the British community and is widely considered as a key voice, the report says a diverse range of voices should represent Jewish interests.

"There is no one best way, nor is one overarching organization or leader able to speak on behalf of the entire community," says the report, which describes British Jewry as a "community of communities."

Professor Margaret Harris, who participated in the study, said that "rather than focusing on the 10 percent of the issues which divide us," the report "lays out the 90 percent of the issues on which we effectively agree."

"Our community," she said, "needs to plan for our objective and practical needs in social welfare, health, education, security and civil rights."

The report notes that current developments in Britain — closer integration into the European Union, devolution and regionalization, changes in local government and reform of the House of Lords — all pose new challenges for Jewish life. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Reward sought for terrorists

Eight New Jersey legislators called on the U.S. State Department to offer rewards for the capture of Palestinian terrorists who killed American citizens abroad.

The legislators, joined by the Zionist Organization of America, want U.S. officials to place ads announcing the rewards in Palestinian newspapers.

The move was timed to the fifth anniversary of the death of Alisa Flatow, a New Jersey native killed April 10, 1995, in a terror bombing in the Gaza Strip.

King legacy to be honored

Black and Jewish members of Congress plan to gather Tuesday to discuss the strengthening of black-Jewish relations in America.

The leaders will commemorate the 32nd anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and recognize King's advocacy for the civil rights of both African Americans and Jews.

Cemetery reopens in China

A Jewish cemetery in the northeastern Chinese city of Harbin has been cleaned up and reopened, state media reported.

The reopening came nine days before Chinese President Jiang Zemin begins a trip to the Middle East that will include a visit to Israel.

At the start of the 20th century, Harbin was home to more than 20,000 Jews, who founded the cemetery in 1903.

Swiss denier goes on trial

A Swiss man who denies the Nazi gas chambers existed went on trial Monday in Lausanne on charges of racial discrimination. Gaston-Armand Amaudruz, 79, faces a maximum sentence of three years in prison.

Wartime code machine stolen

A machine used by the Nazis to send coded messages during World War II was stolen from the London site where the British broke the code.

The typewriter-like Enigma machine is one of only three in the world, according to British police.

Book award winners named

The Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua was among those named as winners of the Koret Jewish Book Awards.

In addition to Yehoshua's "A Journey to the End of the Millennium," awards of \$10,000 each were given to Chava Weissler's "Voices of the Matriarch: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women," Steven Nadler's "Spinoza: A Life" and David Patterson for "Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust Diary."

Israeli-Syrian tensions escalate, but Barak downplays new threats

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel is downplaying threats that it will suffer cross-border attacks once it withdraws its troops from southern Lebanon.

Ever since the Cabinet approved the withdrawal a month ago, there has been speculation that Hezbollah gunmen would attack communities in northern Israel.

This week there was a new threat, issued by Lebanon's defense minister, that Syria would send its army into southern Lebanon if Israel withdraws from the area.

On Monday Prime Minister Ehud Barak discounted the threat from Hezbollah, saying "Israel is the strongest country in the region, and I don't think that any party would dare to come into a confrontation with us."

With the same aura of confidence, he maintained that it would not be necessary to augment the force of U.N. peacekeepers currently serving as a buffer along the Israeli-Lebanese border.

His comments came during a news conference with visiting U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen, who said the United States would not deploy troops in southern Lebanon as part of an international peacekeeping force.

Barak has sought international backing for the planned withdrawal by saying it would take place under the terms of U.N. Security Council Resolution 425, which called in 1978 for the pullback.

He maintains that the withdrawal would be viewed favorably by the international community since it would contribute to world order.

Although successive Israeli governments have ignored the resolution, Barak contends that honoring it would force the international community to guarantee the safety of Israel's northern border.

If there are any cross-border attacks, he also argues, the international community would have to refrain from criticizing any Israeli retaliation.

A day before meeting with Cohen, Barak dismissed the threat made by Lebanon's defense minister.

He told his Cabinet that the threat of Syrian troops is not "realistic." Barak also said he is pessimistic that Israeli-Syrian negotiations would resume soon.

During Sunday's weekly Cabinet meeting, Barak noted that the Lebanese defense minister's remarks reflected the growing concern in Syria and Lebanon over the implications of an Israeli troop withdrawal.

When the Cabinet approved the withdrawal last month, Barak's team of ministers said it would take place by July with or without an accompanying agreement with Syria and Lebanon.

After President Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad failed last week during a summit in Geneva to find a formula for resuming Israeli-Syrian negotiations, it now appears that such a pullback would be unilateral.

Both Syria and Lebanon oppose a unilateral Israeli withdrawal.

Syria has long used Hezbollah gunmen in southern Lebanon as a proxy, giving them the green light to step up attacks on Israeli troops in order to force Israeli concessions — particularly regarding the Golan Heights, whose return Syria wants as part of any peace deal. A unilateral withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon would deprive Assad of this leverage.

After the Cabinet meeting, several ministers lashed out at the possibility that Syria would dispatch troops to the Israeli-Lebanese border.

The move would be "insufferable," said Communications Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer. "It would open a new front by Syria in addition to the front in the Golan."

The issue surfaced after Lebanon's defense minister, Ghazi Zaiter, suggested Saturday that Beirut might ask Damascus to deploy the troops to "put Tel Aviv within range of Syrian rockets." His comments were part of the exchange of heated rhetoric that has erupted since the failure of the Clinton-Assad summit.

Zaiter said his remarks represented his own personal opinion and did not reflect official Lebanese policy. □

Peace train switches tracks again, from Syria back to the Palestinians

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — If at first you don't succeed, try, try to change the subject.

And so, in the up-and-down world of the Middle East peace process, the focus is about to shift again.

After last week's meeting in Geneva between President Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad produced disappointment instead of a dramatic step forward, attention is returning to the latest round of Israeli-Palestinian talks, which are slated to begin their second stage later this week.

These talks have been hidden from the media and public, so their status is largely unknown. Officials continually refer to the discussions as "brainstorming" sessions rather than negotiations with clear-cut goals. But the clock is ticking on a May deadline for a framework of a final agreement on issues like water rights, the status of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlements.

The United States will be eager to see tangible results from the talks, which are scheduled to resume Thursday at Bolling Air Force base near Washington. But another key player, Egypt, will keep a close eye on the United States.

Egypt's role in the peace process has been significant at times, especially during the delicate later stages of negotiations, said Joel Singer, one of the negotiators of the 1993 Oslo peace accord.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak will provide Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat with a level of comfort, Singer said, if he shows that Egypt supports the Palestinian side.

Some complain that Egypt is insincere in its role as peace facilitator because it maintains a cold peace with Israel. Indeed, cynical observers can point to Mubarak's latest overtures just as he was visiting the United States, when he requested changes to Egypt's foreign aid package.

Egypt has asked, as it has in previous years, that its \$2.2 billion in annual U.S. aid be delivered at the start of each fiscal year so that the aid could increase with the interest it earns.

The White House said it supports Egypt's request and is consulting with Congress.

Mubarak met Wednesday with the U.S. House International Relations Committee to discuss aid and other issues. Several committee members voiced their concern about anti-Semitism in the Egyptian press.

Last week, 25 House members wrote Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to complain about two state-owned newspapers, Al-Gomhuriya and Al-Akhbar, which dismissed World War II crematoria as a joke and said Israel has a "clear Nazi basis and carries out a policy of ethnic cleansing."

This kind of anti-Semitism, Rep. Jim Saxton (R-N.J.) said, sets back the peace process.

"As one of the nations at peace with Israel, Egypt's government has an obligation to foment reconciliation, not divisiveness," he said.

It does not seem likely that the anti-Semitic remarks in the press will be a barrier to relations between the United States and Egypt.

Some members of Congress are amenable to the early disbursement of foreign aid money, said a House staffer, and may

even use the change as a signal that the United States is pleased with Egypt's role in the peace process.

But an Egyptian source in Washington said Egyptian involvement in the peace process has never been tied to aid. Each time talks have stalled, Mubarak has stepped in of his own accord because peace is in Egypt's interest, the source said.

Egypt is encouraging both sides now to go beyond the brainstorming phase and enter into substantive negotiations.

In the meantime, while the Syrian track is shifted to the back burner, it is not being abandoned.

The United States says that Israeli-Syrian negotiations are at a difficult stage, but that they have not failed. But the State Department quashed rumors of American shuttle diplomacy to jumpstart the talks.

Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh took a hard line and said that Assad has no genuine interest in achieving peace with Israel.

"It's now very clear that Assad is not interested in agreement, he's interested in dictating his terms to Israel," said Sneh. "It can't work this way."

Clinton has called on Syria to come up with new proposals, while Syria has called on Israel and the United States to take the next step. □

Rio's Jews get new shul for some shade on Shabbat

By Shirley Nigri

RIO DE JANEIRO (JTA) — In a city where most people go to the beach on Saturday mornings, a new center has opened in an effort to connect the local Jewish community with its heritage.

The center, run by the Lubavitch movement, includes two synagogues — one with 400 seats and another for weekday services — a library and separate mikvahs for men and women.

The seven-story center also houses a large ballroom with a kosher kitchen for weddings and Bar Mitzvahs, a youth center and a pre-school.

Local politicians joined Jewish officials for Sunday's inauguration ceremony, held in Leblon, the city's most upscale neighborhood.

Rio, with a Jewish population of 30,000, has synagogues in older neighborhoods, but many are unable to gather a minyan for Shabbat services.

The new center was designed for a Jewish population that has moved from poorer areas of the city to the Leblon district as members of the community grew wealthier.

For the past 10 years, Lubavitch activities were held in a two-story house in Leblon. But as time passed, it became evident that the house was too small to house gatherings — but there was no place to move to.

Help came from Rio Mayor Cesar Maia, who donated a piece of land. Contributions from the community financed the center.

To show its gratitude for the mayor's gesture, the community also collected funds to build a public library in a poor section of town. Next week, the center will host its first simcha for cariocas — as Rio's residents are known — when a wedding is held in its ballroom. □