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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

'Iran 13' to name own lawyers

Iranian officials agreed to allow 13 Jews accused of spying for Israel and the United States to appoint their own lawyers rather than use counsel already appointed by the courts, said an American Jewish leader.

Iran plans to postpone the trial by five days, until April 18, to give the new lawyers time to prepare their cases, added Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. [Page 1]

Brothers arraigned for shul arson

Two brothers previously charged with murdering a gay couple were arraigned on charges of torching three synagogues and a building housing an abortion clinic near Sacramento, Calif. Benjamin Matthew Williams, 31, and James Tyler Williams, 30, pleaded not guilty to last June's arsons, which caused more than \$1 million in damage. [Page 2]

Officials differ on withdrawal

Israeli officials differ on the extent of a planned troop withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh said Israel retains the right to maintain several outposts within Lebanon after the withdrawal.

Justice Minister Yossi Beilin countered that anything less than a full withdrawal would ruin attempts to enlist international support for the move.

Sears loses Shabbat court case

U.S. Jewish groups welcomed a court agreement under which Sears said it would accommodate the religious needs of workers who had objected to working on the Sabbath.

The case was sparked after an Orthodox Jew complained the company refused to hire him because he wouldn't work Saturdays. The Orthodox Union praised the agreement, saying it draws "attention to the lack of religious accommodation in American workplaces."

Librarian of Jewish life dies at 90

Dina Abramowicz, a librarian at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, died Monday at 90. A survivor of the Vilna Ghetto, Abramowicz joined YIVO in 1947 after immigrating to the United States. [Page 4]

Advocates for 'Iran 13' plan high-profile vigils

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — After an appeal by Iran's chief rabbi, the Iranian judiciary has announced it will allow 13 Jews accused of spying for Israel and America to hire their own lawyers, said an American Jewish leader.

The 13 will also get a few extra days to prepare their case, according to Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Previously, the "Iran 13" — who could be sentenced to death — had been represented by lawyers appointed by the Islamic fundamentalist-controlled judiciary. The trial had been scheduled for April 13, but now will likely be held April 18, Hoenlein said Wednesday.

Yet despite the Iranian concessions, Hoenlein said, American Jewish organizations will go ahead with a flurry of high-profile activities aimed at both highlighting the plight of the prisoners and pressuring Tehran to end the entire yearlong ordeal.

"Our goal is their freedom, not just a solution to the lawyer question," Hoenlein said.

Iranian officials have indicated that the trial will be a one-day affair. If that's the case, the Jewish advocates will press Iran to release the prisoners on bail, regardless of the verdict, so they can return to their homes for Passover, which begins the evening of April 19. It's unclear what prompted Tehran's change of mind.

Aside from the international outcry the arrests have provoked, some in the United States suspect that Iran did not want the trial to coincide with the beginning of the Islamic month of Moharram. The month commemorates the martyrdom of the prophets Hossein and Hassan.

Some Shi'ites, to express their grief, take to the streets with chains, knives and machetes, publicly inflicting harm on themselves.

Out of respect, Iranian Jews and Christians generally stay indoors.

Observers suggest the government may have found it in its best interests not to inflame passions on the streets with the trial of alleged "Zionist spies."

Both Israel and the United States vehemently deny the charges against the Iranian Jews, most of them communal or religious leaders from the southern cities of Shiraz and Isfahan.

Now, even with their own lawyers, the prospects for a fair trial seem more remote than ever.

The hard-line clerics who control Iran's courts appear likely to renege on earlier promises to permit media and foreign observers to monitor the court proceedings.

Until now, U.S. advocates have pursued quiet diplomacy, marshaling support from many governments and human rights groups to release the detainees — or at least to ensure a fair trial.

But having seen little progress, the advocates are now taking a more high-profile approach.

On the diplomatic front, Hoenlein said he expects the U.S. Congress to pass a bipartisan resolution that will denounce Iran for its detention of the Jews.

Governments around the world are being asked to pass similar resolutions, he added, while various leaders — including some from Arab and Muslim countries — have indicated they will step up efforts to pressure Tehran. At the grass-roots level, vigils, but not street demonstrations, are being planned at various locations in the United

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israelis press for more security

Residents of a northern Israeli border town clashed with police during a protest for increased protective measures after an Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Members of Moshav Margalioth said defense officials had told them they could not provide a 100 percent guarantee that they would not face danger following the withdrawal.

Student demonstrations erupt

Tensions between Jewish and Arab students erupted during demonstrations at Haifa University and Hebrew University's Mount Scopus campus.

Wednesday's protests followed confrontations a day earlier between Jewish and Arab students at Haifa University. Those clashes occurred after Arab students protested the death of a woman during Land Day observances last week, and after a right-wing Jewish activist claimed an Arab flier contained anti-Israel incitement.

Court blocks settler's release

Israel's Supreme Court temporarily blocked the release from prison of a Jewish settler convicted of murdering a bound Palestinian terrorist.

Wednesday's order was temporary, pending the court's ruling on a petition challenging the release.

Yoram Skolnick was due to go free Friday, after a parole board recently cited his good behavior.

Skolnick has served seven years of a life sentence.

For a hotel room, press 1

Israel's first automated hotel opened its doors, offering weary travelers a place to rest with the swipe of a credit card.

Instead of a reception desk staffed by hotel personnel, the Ataf Hagalil Hotel in northern Israel boasts a counter in its entrance, where guests use credit cards to get room assignments and settle bills.



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States, said Hoenlein. Nationwide, rabbis across the religious spectrum have agreed to recite special prayers this weekend.

In Los Angeles, the Council of Iranian American Jewish Organizations will hold a special commemoration on Sunday to mark the one-year anniversary of the arrests of 10 of the Iran 13.

The Jews were reportedly arrested along with eight Muslim men. But none of the 21 has been formally charged, which also violates Iranian law, says Pooya Dayanim, the council's spokesman, who is a lawyer.

"Basically, these Jews are hostages," said Dayanim. "Iran may feel the longer it delays the trial, the less it will be internationalized and hurt them. Our job is to remind them that the world community still cares about these people."

The Jews are all community or religious leaders — except for a 16-year-old boy who is one of three now out on bail.

Their arrest was believed to be part of a political battle between Iran's hard-line revolutionaries and reformists behind Iranian President Mohammad Khatami.

American observers had hoped that the resounding victory of Iran's reformists in the Feb. 18 parliamentary elections would bode well for the Jewish prisoners.

If anything, however, their situation has worsened, said Hoenlein.

"All the things we'd been promised and thought would come true, just the opposite has happened," he said.

"The mythology of Khatami being a reformer is just that — mythology. So far, he has not shown himself to be any different from the others. If he's in control, the buck stops with him and he's responsible for this situation. If he's not in control, why are we dealing with him and making concessions?"

Hoenlein was referring to the March 17 announcement by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that the United States would lift sanctions on the import of Iranian luxury goods, such as carpets, pistachios and caviar.

Iranian oil remains off-limits.

The move was seen as a reward to Iran's reformists for their parliamentary triumph.

However, Hoenlein says he was encouraged by Albright's comment that how Iran handles the trial will be a "barometer" for future U.S.-Iran relations.

Dayanim also expects Washington to keep the pressure on.

"Sentencing these Jews to long prison sentences would delay the improvement of relations," he said. "We have a lot of friends in Congress." □

Shul arsons added to charges against pair accused in killings

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Two brothers previously charged with murdering a gay couple were arraigned on charges of torching three synagogues and a building housing an abortion clinic near Sacramento, Calif.

Benjamin Matthew Williams, 31, and James Tyler Williams, 30, pleaded not guilty to last June's arson attacks, which caused more than \$1 million in damage.

Government prosecutors have said the two aimed "to intimidate, terrorize and harm Jews, providers of reproductive health services and other groups of persons whom the defendants regarded as inferior or undesirable."

A number of Jewish leaders attended the brothers' arraignment in a U.S. District Court room in Sacramento, among them Rabbis Brad Bloom of B'nai Israel and Matt Friedman of Beth Shalom, two of the synagogues that were set ablaze.

"This is the first time I've seen these guys in person," Friedman told the Sacramento Bee newspaper.

He called Matthew Williams "arrogant," explaining that "he's got this defiant, triumphant tone in his voice. I expect him to request a jury trial. He wants to keep his 15 minutes of fame going."

In a related development, a California State Assembly committee approved a bill that would increase prison sentences for criminals convicted of arson on a house of worship. □

JEWISH WORLD

Wiesel appears at Senate panel

Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel was among those testifying before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which held a hearing on Holocaust-era issues. Wednesday's hearing was wide-ranging, covering such topics as Holocaust denial and the restitution of Jewish property from that era.

Minnesota presses insurers

Minnesota's legislature passed a bill calling on European insurers to make good on Holocaust-era claims. The bill, which needs the governor's signature to become law, is similar to legislation already enacted in the state of Washington and in California.

Czechs ban Iranian exports

The Czech Parliament approved a law banning all exports to a nuclear plant in Iran. Last month, Czech President Vaclav Havel assured U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that the government would stop the exports.

Photo exhibit opens at airport

Israel's ambassador to the United States, David Ivry, plans to unveil the exhibit "Horizons — Israel at 51" on Thursday at the Baltimore-Washington International Airport. The exhibit of aerial photos includes pictures of the Tel Aviv waterfront and snow on Mt. Hermon.

Slovakia to probe wartime looting

Slovakia is creating a commission to provide compensation for property looted from Jews during the Holocaust. The commission, to be set up by the end of the year, will include government officials and Jewish representatives from Slovakia and abroad.

Marine to be named Israeli hero

A U.S. soldier who was the first American volunteer to receive a commendation for bravery during Israel's War for Independence is slated to be named an Israeli war hero Thursday in New York.

Harry Kay, also known as Zvi Ben-Ami Krivitsky, used knowledge gleaned as a U.S. marine to train Israeli military leaders in tank warfare. He received his first commendation from Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion after fighting for more than three days after losing an eye and half of his platoon.

Chilean leader dies unexpectedly

Yaacov Hasson, a Chilean Jewish leader, died suddenly Tuesday of a heart attack. The death of Hasson, who was in his early 60s, came just before a meeting of the Latin American Jewish Congress.

After Hasson's death, the meeting was canceled.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Court takes on divisive issue of non-Orthodox conversions

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Supreme Court is poised to resume deliberations on an issue that has long strained relations among Judaism's religious streams — the recognition of non-Orthodox conversions performed in the Jewish state.

A decision on whether the conversions are legitimate will bring to a head a debate that has for years divided Israel from the Diaspora, where most Jews belong to the liberal Jewish streams. Five months ago, the high court delayed hearings on the issue to allow a government committee time to seek a compromise.

Although the committee, headed by Rabbi Michael Melchior, minister for Israeli society and world Jewish communities, has made some progress, no solution is expected that would pre-empt the April 11 return to court.

The committee has been working toward a "technical" solution under which the nationality clause in Israeli identity cards would be removed.

This would essentially mean that the State of Israel would no longer determine "Who Is a Jew." While Israeli Reform and Conservative rabbis support such a solution in principle, the position of the Orthodox establishment — which controls marriages, divorces and burials in the Jewish state — is less clear.

Members of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party have apparently made little effort to find a compromise solution through the Melchior Commission. Religious Affairs Minister Yitzhak Cohen, Shas' representative on the panel, rarely attends the sessions.

Meanwhile, the liberal streams are not assuming that the commission will reach a compromise and are planning to press ahead with their case in court, where it could take several months before the expanded panel of 11 judges issues what could be a precedent-setting decision.

The scope of the court case has been expanded significantly: Instead of just deciding the fate of two adopted children converted in a Conservative ceremony as babies, the Supreme Court has taken on another 49 cases of Reform converts.

These include cases of people who converted in Israel, as well as some who studied in Israel but converted abroad and were not recognized as Jews, even though Israel is legally bound to recognize conversions performed abroad by any of Judaism's religious streams. "This decision will have ramifications for many more converts," said Sharon Tal, director of the legal department at the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center. "With 11 justices deliberating the case, it will have far-reaching implications."

Nevertheless, some government officials have not yet given up hope for a compromise in the framework of the Melchior Commission.

"Even if it goes back to the courts as scheduled on April 11, this is just the beginning of a discussion that could take a year," said a source close to the committee, speaking on condition of anonymity. "We still hope to find a solution."

Faced with a bitter dispute between his Shas and Meretz coalition partners, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak is also hoping for a solution acceptable to all parties.

JTA has learned that Barak recently asked the Reform movement to consider delaying a return to court.

Itzik Sudri, spokesman for Shas, said his party has not yet decided how it will respond to the resumption of the conversion case.

"But there is no doubt that in a time like this, when religious-secular relations are high up in the headlines, these kind of things just raise tensions," he said. "We certainly do not view positively the intervention of the Supreme Court in such matters."

Rabbi Ehud Bandel, president of the Masorti, or Conservative, movement in Israel, said he would welcome a technical solution but only if there is no subsequent discrimination against non-Orthodox converts. Bandel also said politics could conceivably come into play before the court convenes.

"I hope this will not be the case because everyone has to realize that enough is enough," he said. "We have shown patience for the past five years and willingly agreed to postpone time and time again. Now it is time for justice to be done." □

Sharansky to visit Ethiopia to look into Falash Mura issue

By Ami Eden
Jewish Exponent

PHILADELPHIA (JTA) — Israeli Interior Minister Natan Sharansky is set to visit Ethiopia this weekend in a step that could help determine the future of those waiting there to immigrate to Israel.

Sharansky's ministry is responsible for determining the eligibility of prospective immigrants under the Law of Return. He must deal with the controversial issue of 26,000 Falash Mura — descendants of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity — who wish to come to Israel.

"The purpose of Sharansky's trip is his desire to see the situation on the ground and then to determine, together with" the Jewish Agency for Israel, "what logistics will be necessary to determine the eligibility under the Law of Return of those individuals claiming the right to be brought to Israel," wrote Mike Rosenberg, director general of JAFI's Immigration and Aliyah Department, in an e-mail to the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent.

"I imagine that he will also use the opportunity to learn about the Falash Mura issue," added Rosenberg, who will be traveling to Ethiopia late Saturday night with Sharansky and other ministry officials.

Some 18,000 Falash Mura are living in squalid conditions near compounds in Addis Ababa and Gondar operated by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, an organization that has been pushing Israel to speed up the application process.

Supporters of the Falash Mura complain that officials at the Israeli Embassy in Addis Ababa are refusing to accept and evaluate immigration applications. They also note that many Falash Mura in Ethiopia are practicing traditional Judaism and waiting for a chance to prove they are eligible for aliyah under the Law of Return, which requires applicants to have at least one Jewish grandparent.

Several Knesset members and Ethiopian activists have criticized the Israeli government for implementing what they claim is a discriminatory practice: The only way for Falash Mura to apply for aliyah has been through a relative in Israel.

Israeli officials have maintained that this is the most effective route for determining eligibility, since it is almost impossible for those in Ethiopia to provide documentation proving their eligibility under the Law of Return.

However, late last month, the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the government to provide a schedule for accepting and processing immigration applications in Ethiopia. A subsequent hearing is scheduled to take place later this month. Activists monitoring the situation say that fewer than 200 Falash Mura have been brought to Israel this year.

"I am concerned about the team that Sharansky is taking over," said Kenneth Kaiserman, president of NACOEJ. "We are worried that there might be something of an anti-Falash Mura bias. We would like to make sure that he talks to NACOEJ people while he's there."

As of press time, it was unclear whether Sharansky would meet with NACOEJ officials or Falash Mura leaders during his trip to Ethiopia.

In his e-mail, Rosenberg stated his objection to bringing all of the Falash Mura to Israel, but added his support for speeding up the application process.

This "should be done as soon as possible," he wrote. "I will therefore continue to encourage the Ministry of the Interior to act speedily in making the determination as to who is eligible and who is not." □

OBITUARY

A librarian of Jewish life, Dina Abramowicz, dies at 90

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — Dina Abramowicz, a survivor of the Vilna Ghetto and a longtime librarian at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, died Monday at the age of 90.

A small, slim woman, with a tall intellect, Abramowicz was a "bookworm" supremely dedicated to intellectual pursuits, said David Rogow, a friend.

"Scholars from all around the world would write to her with queries. And she answered everybody," said Rogow, himself a translator and editor at YIVO. Abramowicz was "one of the last of the intelligentsia from Vilna," which was known as a great center of Jewish intellectual life.

Rogow recalled how Abramowicz, known for her prodigious memory, would call him excitedly when a new book or journal arrived on her desk.

Abramowicz was a scholar herself who spoke four languages — Russian, Yiddish, Polish and English — fluently. The most recent of her numerous studies, biographies and book reviews was "Guardians of a Tragic Heritage," a speech in which she recounted her wartime experiences as a librarian in the Vilna Ghetto.

Abramowicz was born in 1909 in a prominent Lithuanian Jewish family that was active in the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment.

Her father, Hirsh, was the director of a Jewish girls school in Vilna who survived World War II because he was in New York when fighting broke out.

After the ghetto was liquidated, she escaped from a deportation train and fought in the Resistance.

In 1946, when she immigrated to the United States, she was reunited with her father.

Abramowicz joined YIVO, which is in New York, in 1947. In 1962, she was named head librarian at YIVO, a library and archive of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, overseeing the library's acquisition of major collections. In 1987, she became the institute's research librarian. In 1999, her father's book, "Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life Before World War II," was published in English.

"The appearance of the book is like a dream come true," she said at the time. "It fills me with joy that something so precious, which seemed to be hopelessly forgotten, has suddenly come back to life."

Abramowicz was a film, theater and opera buff — but it was her commitment to her work that friends and colleagues remember.

"Her work was everything. Even when she was ill, she would come to the library. When she worked here, she was another person," said Rogow. □