



Daily News Bulletin

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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Katyusha rockets fired at Israel

Hezbollah gunmen fired Katyusha rockets into northern Israel.

Several residents of farming villages went into shock when the rockets landed near their homes, according to Israeli officials, but there were no reports of casualties.

Tolerance center to open in N.Y.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center plans to open a \$5 million tolerance training center in New York early next year to help police and teachers better understand the diverse ethnic and religious populations they serve.

In Los Angeles, the Wiesenthal Center has trained some 40,000 law enforcement officers and 20,000 educators since 1995.

Chinese leader ends Israel trip

China's president ended a seven-day trip to Israel.

Jiang Zemin's visit came amid U.S.-Israeli tensions over Israel's plan to sell a \$250 million airborne radar system to Beijing.

Israeli President Ezer Weizman said Tuesday the Jewish state would "find a solution" to those tensions, leaving it unclear whether the radar deal would go through.

Australian Jews praise ruling

Australian Jews reacted positively after an Israeli court convicted five people in the collapse of a bridge at the Maccabiah Games in 1997 that left four Australian athletes dead and scores of others injured.

"Nothing can ever truly compensate those who lost loved ones and have suffered such a tremendous diminishment of their quality of life," said Nina Bassat, president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

"What the verdict affirms is that the tragedy was avoidable and happened because of criminal negligence."

REMINDER: Because of the Passover holiday, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Friday, April 21.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

In Great Neck, Persian rabbi fears for friends standing trial

By Michael J. Jordan

GREAT NECK, N.Y. (JTA)— It's a sunny Sunday afternoon, which is lucky since rabbi and student have been forced outdoors while their small Sephardi shul is being cleaned for Passover.

The rabbi, in the black hat and traditional garb of the fervently Orthodox, opts for a concrete bench nearby. He and his young student resume their reading from a Persian-Hebrew prayer book. The 12-year-old boy is preparing for his Bar Mitzvah. A few yards away, three younger boys in dark velvet kipot and peyos kick up a racket with a dirt bike and a water hose.

Such open expression of Jewish dress, tradition and faith is unthinkable in the rabbi's native Iran, he says. There he would never have worn a full beard and kippah or black hat on the streets. Sure, Jews in Iran are free to practice Judaism, he says, as long as they keep it quiet and behind closed doors.

But the scene on this day is nothing out of the ordinary in Great Neck, N.Y., where the 6,000 to 8,000 Iranian Jews constitute the second-largest such enclave in the United States after Los Angeles.

With the coming of Passover, which commemorates the liberation and exodus of Jewish slaves from the yoke of Egypt's pharaohs, this is a time for the middle-aged rabbi to reflect on his own flight from Iran nine years ago. He was then a leading rabbi and teacher in Shiraz, a city said to be far more conservative religiously for both Muslims and Jews than the capital, Tehran, located 400 miles to the north.

Shiraz is also home to many of the 13 Iranian Jews who now stand accused of spying for Israel and the United States. If convicted, they could be executed.

The trial officially opened April 13 but was quickly delayed until May 1, well after Passover, apparently a public relations move masked as a good-will gesture.

Several of those on trial were close personal friends of the rabbi.

But the rabbi and other Persian Jews here say the only crime committed by the accused was to teach Hebrew and Judaism, hold religious discussions or request that their shops be allowed to close on Saturdays.

"If I were still in Shiraz, I'd be in prison with them," says the rabbi, who, like most interviewed, requested anonymity out of fear it would endanger his relatives still living in Shiraz. "I would have been guilty of the same activities, because I wouldn't have known that speaking about Judaism is illegal."

But the rabbi's comments are tinged with sarcasm. He and other American Jewish observers suspect that politics are the real reason behind the imminent trial of the "Iran 13."

Iran's hard-line, fundamentalist clerics resist all efforts by reformists to liberalize society and thaw relations with the West. The case has spiraled into a highly politicized one that has further soured Iran's relations with the world.

"We have an expression in Persian: Those who are in Iran are like a cooked chicken — they can be eaten very easily," says the bearded, bespectacled rabbi.

"The government can do whatever they want, and there's nothing people there can do about it. Iran is one big prison, for both Jews and Muslims."

In fact, since Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, 17 Jews have been executed on various, allegedly trumped-up charges, including espionage.

All of which raises the question: why would Jews remain in Iran? Persian Jews trace

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel to release detainees

Israel's Security Cabinet said it would abide by a Supreme Court order and free this week 13 Lebanese detainees held without trial as bargaining chips for missing soldiers.

But the Cabinet said two Shi'ite fundamentalist leaders, Sheik Abdel Karim Obeid and Mustafa Dirani, would remain behind bars. The ministers also decided to initiate legislation that would give the government a legal right to hold the two, and other "illegal fighters," as bargaining chips.

Abdullah to make first Israel trip

Jordan's King Abdullah is planning to make his first visit to Israel on Sunday, when he will sail his yacht from Aqaba to nearby Eilat. During his stay, Abdullah will meet with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to discuss the peace process.

France hopes for Syrian pullback

France hopes Syria will follow Israel's lead and withdraw its troops from Lebanon. But the nation's foreign minister, Alain Richard, said in a radio interview that he believes such a move is unlikely.

Golan residents seek help for SLA

Residents of the Golan Heights proposed that a settlement be established for members of the South Lebanon Army and their families following an Israeli troop withdrawal from southern Lebanon. The head of the Golan Heights regional council sought help for Israel's allies in Lebanon in a letter to Prime Minister Ehud Barak, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Israel plans desalination plant

For the first time since the establishment of the state, Israel approved the construction of a desalination plant to alleviate the nation's water shortages. The plant would cost \$150 million and be completed within two years, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

their roots back 2,700 years. By 1979, at the time of the Islamic Revolution, there were roughly 100,000 Jews in Iran. Today the community has shriveled to somewhere between 25,000 to 27,000.

Some suggest that everyone who remains has at least one or two relatives in the United States. However, while those who left generally had the financial means to do so, those who remain are said to be either too poor, too old, too complacent — or simply too stubborn to sever a long tradition.

Many here wax nostalgic and express great fondness for their homeland, although they are not optimistic about Iran's prospects for reform.

Instead, they have gone ahead and recreated certain aspects of their traditional communal life in places like Great Neck and Los Angeles.

One segment of the community, which originally hails from the eastern Iranian city of Mashad, followed the lead of a few prominent families and was transplanted virtually en masse to Great Neck.

A day visit to this affluent peninsula on Long Island, 15 miles east of Manhattan, offers a snapshot of a community that may be among the most prosperous emigre communities in the entire country.

Some are doctors and lawyers, while others work in real estate or retail, selling carpets, garments or jewelry. A number of them reside in palatial homes.

In Great Neck's tree-lined, red-brick downtown, an array of kosher shops — catering to the town's Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews — are doing brisk business on this Sunday before Passover.

All the Persian Jews here follow developments in Iran, some more than others. The older generation is particularly tuned in, receiving its daily dose of news from a Persian-language radio program broadcast from Los Angeles.

Yet, the Great Neck community has been far less vocal about the Iran 13 than the Persian Jews of Los Angeles, who number about 30,000. Great Neck's community is said to be more religious and conservative, and thus, less visible.

Indeed, few of them are willing to be identified by name. Not only are they anxious not to bring additional harm to their brethren back home, there is also a widespread helplessness — typical of a people conditioned within undemocratic, authoritarian regimes — that the Davids stand no chance against the Goliaths of this world.

In the year or so since the Iran 13 were arrested, the Great Neck community has dutifully adhered to the "quiet diplomacy" of various American Jewish groups negotiating for the prisoners' release. At the same time, the handful of Persian congregations here have been praying for their well-being.

It was only on April 12 — well after these same groups had launched a higher profile — that Great Neck's Persian Jews held their first public prayer vigil for the accused. Several hundred people showed up.

"There is a feeling among some in our community that we should let the rest of the Jews make waves, but that Iran would be upset to see Iranian Jews in America making noise," says Edward Nassimi, a Great Neck resident and president of the United Mashadi Jewish Community of America.

"There is also this conspiratorial Old World view that individuals are powerless, and that the powers are making all the decisions behind the scenes."

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, some 1,000 people demonstrated Sunday on behalf of the Iran 13. Only one-quarter of the crowd were believed to be Iranian Jews. The rally ended with some young Persians chanting "Let My People Go!"

Still, many Iranian Jews are uncomfortable with any form of political activism. In fact, an older emigre in Great Neck noted that when living in Iran he had never even bothered to vote, because "it was better for Jews not to be seen as aggressive."

Though the 66-year-old man attended the April 12 vigil, he says he wondered, "Why wake sleeping dogs?"

"The Jews there are like hostages, so we don't need to further antagonize Iran."

Even many in the younger generation are cautious about how best to express their frustration with Tehran's handling of the Iran 13.

"We see on TV here that things get done through protest," says Don, a Persian Orthodox man in his late 20s who emigrated here when he was six. "But this is not a democracy we're dealing with," he says. "What can we say over here that will change their minds over there? All we can do is pray for the prisoners." □



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JEWISH WORLD

NEWS ANALYSIS

Yeshiva draft plan does little to mend secular-religious rift

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The criticism that greeted a plan to allow yeshiva students to decide for themselves whether they will serve in the army underscores the polarization in Israel on synagogue-state issues.

The plan issued by a government-appointed commission drew fire not only from secularists on both ends of the political spectrum. Some haredi, or fervently Orthodox, groups also expressed reservations about the panel's recommendations.

The commission, led by former Supreme Court Justice Zvi Tal, proposed that yeshiva students be given a "trial year" between the ages of 23 and 24 to experience life outside the yeshiva.

Anyone deciding to continue "on the outside" would then be inducted for a short period of military service or other national service, followed by the annual reserve duty that other Israeli citizens are obliged to serve.

When the panel's recommendations were issued last week, Tal said they would enable thousands of haredim to enter the business world after their brief army service, instead of having to remain in a yeshiva until age 40 to maintain their army exemption.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak formed the Tal Commission following a 1998 ruling by the High Court of Justice that canceled a decades-old arrangement under which the yeshiva students are entitled to draft exemptions.

The justices said at the time that the arrangement, which has sparked tensions between secular and fervently Orthodox Israelis, had created a growing sense of inequality in Israeli society. In 1954, when the arrangement was signed, some 400 yeshiva students were granted deferrals.

Now, according to the Tal Commission, that number has reached 30,000. Of these, the report says, some 14,000 are likely never to perform national service. Moreover — and this is the major cause of the mounting public unrest that indirectly led to the commission's creation — that figure is "rapidly rising," according to the report.

After the commission issued its recommendations April 13, criticisms of its report have come from three main quarters:

- Non-Orthodox politicians and commentators, both from the political left and right, who feel the commission failed to redress the fundamental inequity inherent in the yeshiva deferral system;

- The army, which believes the Tal report enshrines the present, inequitable system and that this could erode morale among soldiers; and

- Some sections of the Ashkenazi haredi community, where it is felt that any tampering with the present arrangements could cause wholesale damage to haredi yeshivas.

Army sources, citing the report's finding that 9.2 percent of this year's potential inductees deferred their service, predict that the figure will rise to 15 percent within a relatively few years.

These sources, clearly anxious to persuade the government and the Knesset to reject the report's recommendations, demand that a numerical cap be set on the number of deferments — both on the overall total and on the number granted each year.

The sources also contend that the choice of what form of service the former yeshiva students perform should be in the exclusive domain of the army itself, not in the hands of the individual student after his "test year," as the Tal Commission appears to recommend. If the deferment system became law, it would take on a new legitimacy that it does not deserve, say the critics, who are likewise unimpressed by the commission's suggestion that the legislation contain a five-year review clause.

Knesset opponents of the recommendations said this week they are confident they already have some 50 votes opposing such legislation. They believe that with a vocal public campaign they could cobble together a majority of the Knesset's 120 members.

Given the criticism the report has triggered, the question would seem to be whether Israel is ripe for a "partial and gradual" attempt to heal a long-standing rift. □

Insurers to join slave labor fund

German insurers plan to contribute \$243 million to a \$5 billion fund for Holocaust-era slave and forced laborers, according to the nation's insurance association.

The contribution will settle claims on insurance policies taken out by Holocaust victims that were never paid by the German firms, the group added.

Y.U. faces same-sex suit — again

Yeshiva University's medical school is again facing a lawsuit over its failure to allow same-sex couples to live in its married-student housing.

Although their case was dismissed last year, a gay-lesbian-bisexual student group and two lesbian students at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York are appealing last year's decision and arguing that the school's policy violates state and city laws.

The students, who are backed by the American Civil Liberties Union, were planning to hold an all-night vigil Tuesday night outside the school's married-student apartment complex and present their case in court on Wednesday.

Russian court backs activist

The Washington-based Union of Councils for Soviet Jews is praising a decision by Russia's Supreme Court that upheld an earlier ruling in favor of an environmental whistle-blower who had been charged with treason. The Federal Security Service, the successor to the Soviet-era KGB, had charged Alexander Nikitin for his work in preparing a report on the nuclear contamination of Russia's northern fleet.

In another development, a Russian court released pending his appeal a 26-year-old Jewish computer programmer who was given a two-year jail sentence for refusing to serve in the Russian army.

The case of Dmitry Neverovsky comes amid an increase in draft dodging in Russia among both Jews and non-Jews reluctant to serve in Chechnya. Neverovsky is not allowed to leave his native city of Obninsk until his appeal is heard.

Czechs may help SS prosecution

German authorities asked the Czech Republic to assist in the prosecution of a former SS officer accused of committing atrocities while serving as a guard at Theresienstadt, according to Radio Free Europe.

German prosecutors investigated Anton Malloth, 87, last year, but they reportedly dropped the case due to a lack of evidence. Czech authorities now say they can provide such evidence. Malloth was convicted in absentia after the war by a Czech court and sentenced to death, but the verdict was overturned in 1968.

France's report on assets leaves questions unanswered

By Joshua Schuster

PARIS (JTA) — A just-released report from a government-appointed panel goes further than ever in describing the looting of Jewish assets under the wartime Vichy regime, but some say France still has not come completely clean.

The New York-based World Jewish Congress is not satisfied that the Matteoli Commission provided all the answers from that period — particularly whether French state art museums have admitted they kept paintings looted from Jewish hands.

The commission admitted that France had previously “underestimated” the extent to which Nazi Germany and its French collaborators had looted money and property from Jews living in France.

But while it stated that some \$1.3 billion in assets had been seized from Jews, the panel maintained that more than 90 percent of those assets have since been returned to survivors or their heirs.

Jean Matteoli, a former French resistance fighter and non-Jewish concentration camp survivor who headed the commission, said it was “profoundly revolting” that as early as 1940 the Vichy government took “measures that went beyond what the Nazis demanded.”

“This is something we did not want to hide” in the report, he said.

The 3,000-page report, compiled by French historians and survivors, capped a three-year effort by France to acknowledge its role in Holocaust looting.

The report covered seized bank accounts and insurance policies, confiscated homes, artwork and furniture, as well as the last possessions stripped from Jews as they made their way through French transit centers to Nazi death camps.

Of the 330,000 Jews living in France in 1940, some 76,000 were deported to Nazi death camps. Only 2,500 returned.

As part of its findings, the commission recommended that the French government and French banks contribute some \$350 million to a Holocaust memorial foundation as compensation for unreturned Jewish assets.

The commission also proposed that several works of art with no known heirs be donated to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem as testimony to the Nazi-era looting.

Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said he agreed with the report's findings and promised to begin implementing its recommendations in the coming weeks.

For its part, the WJC cautiously welcomed the report, but said it would *nonetheless continue its own separate investigation.*

In the past, the WJC condemned the Matteoli panel for using “juvenile” statistics. It had also threatened legal action and boycotts against French businesses that failed to make adequate restitution.

Critics of the report are focusing on the extent to which France's National Museums Authority has obstructed or hidden information about certain paintings.

The Matteoli report says that of the tens of thousands of artworks recaptured from the Nazis after the war — some 2,100 of which continue to hang in French museums — only 163 were seized from Jews.

“It is necessary to pose the question in a candid manner: Is it possible that the French museums have been enriched by the pillages of the Nazis?” said Elan Steinberg, the WJC's executive director.

“If these paintings are stolen from individuals, that means they do not belong to the French state. For us, these are the last ‘prisoners of war.’ I believe the time is due for them to be released.”

Steinberg said his group will continue to prod the French government “to take a step further.”

“We want to see the French government accept the principle of restitution for these paintings, before anything else,” he said.

French media are also openly wondering if the report sufficiently acknowledges France's role in keeping Jewish assets.

The daily *Le Monde* said the questions posed by the WJC do indeed have merit, as the National Museums Authority has until recently “consistently silenced or denied” allegations that it possessed looted art.

The French Jewish community, meanwhile, welcomed the commission's report.

Henri Hajdenberg, president of CRIF, the umbrella group of secular French Jewish organizations, called the commission's research “exceptional.”

Just the same, Hajdenberg reportedly questioned the rate the commission used to convert the “old” francs of the 1940s into current francs. The panel used a factor of 1.7, but Hajdenberg was quoted as saying it should be 2.7.

If this factor were used, then the state and banks would have to contribute some \$570 million to the proposed Holocaust memorial foundation, not \$350 million.

Notably absent from the report were the names of banks and companies that were involved in the looting and will be asked to contribute to the Holocaust foundation.

Indeed, the amount the French government itself will pay, as well as the timetable to collect such payments, remains unclear.

Matteoli said such information will be kept private because “it is not the French method or habit to denounce” particular institutions.

The report found that Jewish assets were systematically plundered from 1940 to 1944 by both French officials and the Germans.

The looting was part of a political decision to weaken and isolate Jews in order to “exclude and asphyxiate them” just as the “Final Solution was being decided,” the report said.

The report details how under the Vichy regime more than 50,000 Jewish-owned businesses were “aryanized,” or transferred to non-Jewish owners.

Jews interned at French transit camps were stripped of all personal possessions. Many had to pay for the cost of their own deportation and purchase a ticket on the state-owned train system.

The Nazis emptied some 30,000 Jewish-owned apartments and carried spoils such as 2,000 paintings and 8,000 pianos to Germany.

Confiscating goods and abolishing Jews' means of livelihood “were not only an affair of money but a persecution which had extermination as its goal,” according to the report.

“The most stunning aspect of our findings is the extent of the looting,” historian Annette Wieviorka told the Associated Press. “Every Jew in France was affected, from the poorest tailor to the richest art collector.” □