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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Officials: Iran to back attacks

Israeli security officials are warning that Iran has decided to launch attacks inside Israel's borders, on Israeli diplomatic offices abroad and on El Al airliners following Israel's planned withdrawal from southern Lebanon in July.

Israel's three top daily newspapers quoted security sources as saying that Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed group fighting Israel in southern Lebanon, has already started planning attacks.

Israel sends matzah to Ethiopians

Two Israeli planes carrying food and supplies for famine-stricken areas of Ethiopia landed in Addis Ababa.

On the order of Israel's military rabbinate, the aid includes matzah instead of flour, which could be used to alleviate the hunger of many more people.

Ariel Kerem, Israel's ambassador to Ethiopia, told Israel Radio the decision seemed "a bit odd," since the starving people are not Jews and not required to observe the laws of Passover.

Egypt said to target Israel at U.N.

Israel's deputy defense minister accused Egypt of trying to persuade other nations to condemn Israel at a U.N. conference.

Ephraim Sneh, who called Egypt's position "antagonistic and unfriendly," also said he hoped the United States would protect Israel from any move to condemn its refusal to state publicly whether it has nuclear weapons.

Israel is one of four nations not to have joined the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which is under review at a U.N. meeting in New York.

Florida Jew backs Elian relatives

Elian Gonzalez's Miami relatives are receiving support from a prominent Jewish figure in South Florida.

In a letter to a Miami-based group that is trying to keep Elian from being returned to Cuba, Norman Braman called on area Jews to support the relatives' wishes.

"We Jews must never forget our own struggle for freedom and survival," wrote Braman in a letter he intends to print as a full-page ad in Sunday's Miami Herald.

Israel moves step closer to upgrading status at U.N.

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — After years of lobbying and disappointment, Israel may be on the verge of erasing its status as the only United Nations member shut out of a regional group.

Israel moved one step closer to membership in the Western European and Others Group on Monday, when U.N. ambassadors from the 15 countries that comprise the European Union agreed that Israel should be accepted to WEOG as a full — albeit temporary — member.

Israel's logical place is within the Asian grouping, but Iraq and Iran show no sign of ever welcoming Israel.

Israel sees its next best choice as the 26-member WEOG, which also includes the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Analysts say the group has dragged its feet on admitting Israel because of its concern about increased competition among other members of the group and its fear of angering its allies in the Arab world.

Membership in one of the U.N.'s five regional groupings is more than symbolic. An enhanced status for Israel would mean a stronger voice in U.N. affairs, though exactly how strong a role it could play would depend on any conditions that may be placed on Israel's membership.

The development comes as Israel, which has often felt isolated and unfairly singled out for condemnation in the world body, has expressed concern that it may be a target at the U.N. conference on nuclear nonproliferation, which is taking place this month in New York.

Israel is one of four countries that has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Nor has it officially admitted to having nuclear capabilities.

The other non-signatories are Cuba, India and Pakistan.

The WEOG development also comes in the wake of Israel's formal announcement that it would comply with the 1978 U.N. resolution that calls on it to withdraw from southern Lebanon.

It is not clear whether either of these issues will affect — positively or negatively — WEOG's decision to accept Israel.

But as Portugal's ambassador to the United Nations put it, "Everything is political in these delicate issues.

"The atmosphere is always more favorable in the minds of politicians if positive steps are taken" in the Middle East, said Antonio Monteiro, the ambassador from Portugal, the country that currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union.

As a result of Monday's meeting, the European Union was to recommend Israel's full membership to WEOG on Tuesday, said Monteiro.

"The E.U. now has a unified position," Monteiro told JTA on Tuesday. "We realize we could not delay this anymore.

"Israel naturally belongs to the Asian group, but since conditions do not exist, the principle of exclusion should not prevail."

Israel's membership in WEOG would be temporary, he said, with the ultimate goal of getting Israel accepted by the Asian group.

The momentum clearly favors Israeli membership, but negotiations are far from

MIDEAST FOCUS

Cabinet to see withdrawal plan

Israel's Cabinet is slated to meet Thursday to discuss the specifics of a planned troop withdrawal from southern Lebanon. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak is expected to present his ministers with a detailed withdrawal plan, but it is not clear whether the minister will vote on it during the session or postpone the vote.

In a related development, the special U.N. Middle East envoy, Terje Larsen, arrived in Israel on Tuesday to discuss the withdrawal with senior Israeli officials.

Shin Bet backs prisoner release

Israel's domestic security service recommended the release of some Palestinian prisoners involved in killing Israelis in terror attacks, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

The paper said the Shin Bet suggested freeing prisoners affiliated with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction and other groups that support the peace process.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office had no comment on the report.

King Abdullah reassures Arafat

Jordan's King Abdullah assured Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat that he would back Palestinian aspirations for a state with eastern Jerusalem as its capital, said Jordan's foreign minister.

During a meeting Tuesday between the two in the West Bank town of Ramallah, Abdullah also said he would back all Palestinian demands in ongoing negotiations with Israel.

Archaeologists find gold coins

Israeli archaeologists uncovered a cache of 15 gold coins dating back some 1,500 years.

The excavations were conducted at Ein Gedi, near the Dead Sea, by the Hebrew University's Institute of Archaeology.



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over. The devil will be in the details, say observers, or in this case informing Israel of what WEOG calls "modalities."

Monteiro described them as the various practices and mechanisms designed to avert clashes between WEOG members big and small, Northern and Southern.

Monteiro went to lengths not to refer to modalities as "conditions," but that is exactly how they are viewed by Israeli and American Jewish officials.

Indeed, in light of the fierce competition for appointments to key WEOG and U.N. committees, these officials express concern that Israel may be allowed in only if it agrees to forsake certain posts and other rights entitled to all other members.

But Israel believes such conditions would remain an injustice and continue to violate the U.N. charter, which holds that each U.N. member is equal.

"We have said all along — we do not want to substitute one anomaly for another anomalous situation," said Aaron Jacob, Israel's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations.

"We are willing to accept certain temporary limitations, but we are not willing to accept restrictions that will render our membership meaningless."

Another diplomat close to the negotiations, who requested anonymity, said the modalities may also be an effort to appease the Arab and Muslim states in the United Nations, who constitute a huge, influential bloc.

No European member wants to be seen as "the one that allowed in Israel," said the diplomat, noting that those states could threaten an economic boycott.

"The Europeans may want to water down Israel's membership," he said, "so they can tell the Arab world that we let them in, but not entirely."

Israel was inching toward WEOG membership in the mid-1990s until the November 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

The Europeans were loathe to reward Benjamin Netanyahu with the carrot of WEOG membership because of his perceived intransigence in peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

At the same time, some within WEOG were concerned that opening the door to Israel might encourage others in Europe, like the Baltic and Central European states — now in the Eastern European grouping — to bang on the door for membership in the Western European group.

The European outlook changed with last year's election of Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

Israeli diplomatic efforts have also been bolstered by Richard Holbrooke, the new U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Holbrooke, who was appointed late last summer, has said Israeli membership in WEOG is one of his top priorities.

In October, France dropped its objections to Israeli membership; Spain followed suit in February.

There are two schools of thought regarding the modalities: One says that Israel should hold out for full rights and privileges, with no strings attached.

The other, advocated by groups like the American Jewish Committee, says the Jewish state should seek the best possible terms now and negotiate for the rest once inside WEOG.

"As I see it, Israel is willing to bend initially, but not permanently," said David Harris, executive director of the AJCommittee.

"The best terms does not mean the ideal terms. But having said that, there's still a great deal of room for negotiation."

Despite the momentum, there is still concern among Israelis and their American Jewish backers that some Europeans continue to link Israel's status with progress in the Middle East peace process.

This unfairly holds Israel to a different standard, they say.

After all, they say, many U.N. states are embroiled in regional or neighborly conflicts, but suffer no impact on their grouping membership.

But there is also some resignation that linkage is inevitable.

"Israel should not be an exception," Jacob said. "But I'm aware that in reality, the peace process may affect" negotiations with WEOG. "In principle, though, it should not."

JEWISH WORLD

Clinton to revive hate crimes bill

President Clinton wants to revive hate crimes legislation in the hopes that the Republican-dominated Congress will pass it before the November election.

The bill, which passed the Senate in July but stalled in the House, targets crimes motivated by a victim's sexual orientation, disability or gender.

Federal law already addresses crimes motivated by race, religion, color or national origin.

Seders to focus on union cause

The Jewish Labor Committee is holding three Passover seders bringing together leaders of the labor movement with local Jewish leaders.

The seders in Philadelphia, New Jersey and Seattle use traditional Haggadahs with added quotes from Jewish labor leaders.

The seders draw a parallel between the Jews' Exodus and contemporary union battles. "You have everything from oppressive taskmasters to impossible work quotas," said Avram Lyon, the executive director of the group.

German dogs wear yellow stars

Germany's Jewish leaders are planning to take legal action to stop pitbull owners from tagging their dogs with the same yellow stars the Nazis forced Jews to wear.

The owners of these and other fighting dog breeds, which have been banned by Berlin authorities, are planning a rally next month to protest what they call racist attempts to wipe out their dogs.

Poland honors ghetto fighters

Poland's prime minister paid tribute to the "heroic struggle" of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters who rose up against the Nazis 57 years ago this month in the first instance of mass armed resistance in Nazi-occupied Polish territory.

"They openly defied the butchers of Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmno, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau," Jerzy Buzek said in a statement on the anniversary of the uprising.

"They had no hope of victory. They fought for a dignified death."

War crimes trial reopens

A Lithuanian court reopened the Nazi-era war crimes trial of a former U.S. resident and is expected to rule in the coming days on whether the 92-year-old is mentally fit to stand trial.

Kazys Gimzauskas, who was deputy head of the Vilnius regional security police during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, is accused of assisting Nazi death squads in killing at least five Jews.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

More than a few good men are dodging the Russian draft

By Lev Gorodetsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Dmitry Neverovsky is out of jail, but he is not out of trouble.

A Russian court released the Jewish computer programmer, who was given a two-year jail sentence in November for refusing to serve in Russia's war in Chechnya, pending an appeal. But Neverovsky, 26, is not allowed to leave his native city of Obninsk, located southeast of Moscow, until his appeal is heard.

Neverovsky is not alone in wanting to avoid the bloody Chechen war.

The number of Russians, Jews and non-Jews alike, who are avoiding the draft has skyrocketed since the war broke out last fall in Chechnya with Muslim guerrillas, prompting the chief of the Mobilization Department of Russia's General Staff, Col. Gen. Vladislav Putilin, to complain of a manpower shortage.

Even though all Russian males under the age of 27 must serve in the army, Jews are particularly reluctant to do so — and this is nothing new.

Since the mid-19th-century reign of Czar Nicholas I, whose mandatory 25-year military service for Jews was considered a certain death sentence, Jewish families have, with the exception of World War II, generally tried to avoid having their sons conscripted into the Russian army.

"All Russian Jewish parents are terribly afraid of the army because of the old army tradition of anti-Semitism and because of the war in Chechnya, and try to put their boys in the universities," said Vladimir Shapiro, a Jewish sociologist in Moscow.

Many potential Jewish draftees are ineligible because they receive an exemption by attending university, where they complete some kind of "military instruction course." After graduation, they become part of the reserve corps, which is normally not called up for duty. Other Jewish draftees, as well as their non-Jewish compatriots, try to dodge service by getting a medical deferral, getting a job at a strategically crucial firm — or simply bribing draft board officials.

Jewish high school students can also avoid the draft by enrolling in one of the Jewish Agency for Israel's programs for high school students that send boys and girls to complete their schooling in Israel. After the students complete their schooling, many boys stay in Israel to avoid service in the Russian army.

Jewish Agency offices in Russia and Ukraine have run into problems on this issue with the authorities, who are not happy with this additional drain on potential draftees.

"Normally, I wouldn't have had much against the service. But with the Chechen war and hazing, I am going to use every possible way to avoid the army in Russia, including emigrating to Israel and serving in the Israeli army," said Konstantin, 17, one of whose parents is Jewish. But Neverovsky never used any of these escape routes.

In 1995, Neverovsky dropped out of the Obninsk Institute of Atomic Energy's course in military instruction in protest over the first war in Chechnya, which ended in 1996.

"Dmitry didn't want to have anything to do with the army, which wages war against its own people," said his mother, Tatyana Kotlyar, who is a member of the Obninsk City Council and a campaigner for the right to alternative military service.

When the military tried to draft him after he graduated in 1997, Neverovsky tried to use his constitutional right to alternative civilian service and even sued the draft board for this right, but lost the case. The current situation tests Russian President Vladimir Putin's vow to impose the rule of law.

In 1996, Russia's Constitutional Court ruled that "the right to alternative service should be ensured, regardless of whether the corresponding federal law has been passed or not." But draft boards and judges ignore this ruling. At the same time, many are accusing Putin of a "creeping militarization of schools" after his recent decree to revive military training for 11th-graders in Russian state schools.

"I see this decree as a step back in the democratic process. Military training should be voluntary and the right to alternative military service should exist," said Vyacheslav Leshchiner, director of the state-run Jewish ORT school in Moscow. □

Falwell leads flock toward polls, while Jews are watching warily

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Rev. Jerry Falwell has injected himself into the political arena again.

Heading up a voter registration drive dubbed "People of Faith 2000," Falwell and other Christian leaders say they want to bring moral values back to America and register millions of new voters in time for the elections in November.

"This is purely a campaign that hopefully will bridge all ethnic and religious groups," he said last Friday, as he announced the launch of the Web site peopleoffaith2000.com.

While some Jews and evangelical Christians have formed alliances in recent years, many Jews still regard the influence of the religious right in politics warily. But Jewish groups do not sound overly concerned about Falwell's latest foray into politics.

Jews probably still have "negative vibes" about Falwell, said Marc Stern, the co-director of the American Jewish Congress' legal department. But, he said, the registration drive doesn't seem to be any different from other such drives.

"If the JCC runs a voter registration drive, it's not getting at the public at large, and you know what the demographics of the Jewish community are," Stern said, referring to the overwhelmingly liberal views of a majority of Jews.

Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, said he sees no problem with Falwell's drive — nor does he think Jewish Republicans will react negatively.

There are registration drives among liberal constituencies, Brooks says, and the people who disagree with Falwell's project do so because they disagree with his views, but then sanction similar registration drives for their own purposes.

But Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, a religious liberty watchdog group, charges that Falwell's project is partisan and therefore violates voter registration laws.

Churches and other nonprofit organizations are allowed to conduct voter registration drives provided they are nonpartisan. Americans United has filed a complaint with the Internal Revenue Service and asked it to investigate the registration drive.

The role of religion in politics is always a difficult issue and the role of the religious right in particular is a constant source of debate. For politicians, pandering to the religious right is seen as a political misstep, but ignoring or attacking religious conservatives can be just as dangerous.

A speech at Bob Jones University, a South Carolina school that upheld a campus ban on interracial dating, earlier this year provoked a great deal of criticism against Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush. On the other hand, after assailing the religious right in a campaign speech, former presidential candidate John McCain lost a number of primaries and then dropped out of the race for the presidency.

Last year Falwell caused some friction between Christian conservatives and Jews when he said that the Antichrist, a figure that Christians believe will rise and spread universal evil before the second coming of Jesus, is Jewish.

Falwell said his remarks, which some perceived as anti-Semitic, meant only that the Antichrist must be Jewish because Jesus was a Jew. Falwell later apologized for his "lack of tact and

judgment" in making the statement. Falwell, like many evangelical Christians, is a strong supporter of Israel, and his views have often matched those of Israeli political hawks.

A Falwell project in 1998 attempted to mobilize 200,000 evangelical Christian ministers to lobby Congress in an effort to push the U.S. government not to pressure Israel to cede any more land to the Palestinians.

His support for Israel aside, many of Falwell's domestic political views differ sharply from those of most American Jews. But he is very careful not to put any of his personal views in the People of Faith 2000 campaign.

While Falwell has been eager to criticize Vice President Al Gore and show support for Bush, no mention is made of any particular candidate in the voter registration drive.

With this latest effort, Falwell is treading into the waters of nonpartisan politics. He says he wants to re-energize conservatives, get them informed, register people "right in the pews," and get them to the polls.

"I don't think the religious conservatives have lost power," Falwell said. "I think they've lost their enthusiasm."

Falwell has headed voter registration drives before, but they were during the heyday of the Moral Majority, the conservative group he founded in 1979 that was influential throughout the 1980s.

Rabbi Daniel Lapin, president of the conservative group *Toward Tradition*, is a member of the advisory board for *People of Faith 2000*.

In addition, the Christian Coalition, founded by Pat Robertson, is publishing voter guides. The group is also working to register millions of new Christian voters this year. □

Croatian Jews plan to build center on site of old synagogue

By Vlasta Kovac

ZAGREB, Croatia (JTA) — The Jewish community in Croatia's capital is planning to build a cultural center on the site of a synagogue that was destroyed during World War II.

Plans for the center include a sanctuary, a memorial to Holocaust victims, a Jewish museum, as well as commercial enterprises.

The Jewish community is collecting information about potential investors in the Jewish world who may be interested in the commercial side of the project.

The community also expects to hold an international competition for the best architectural design for the center.

The synagogue was built in central Zagreb in 1867 in the Moorish style, which is known for its use of colors, geometric patterns and distinctive arches.

One of the most beautiful buildings in Zagreb, the synagogue symbolized the Jewish community's cultural and social ascent in the second half of the 19th century.

Croatia had 25,000 Jews before the war, most of them prosperous and largely assimilated. Some 20,000 were killed by the Nazis or Croatia's puppet Ustashe regime.

After the war ended, a shopping center was built on the site of the synagogue, but it burned down in the late 1960s. Since that time, a municipal parking lot has been located there. □