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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli minister warns Iran

An Israeli Cabinet minister warned Iran that the Jewish state would not tolerate persecution of Jews. Israel will never accept that Jews "again become victims just because they're Jews," Michael Melchior, the official in charge of relations with world Jewish communities, was quoted saying as the trial of 13 Iranian Jews resumed.

Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa, has been the lone international voice of support for Iran, according to Iranian news services.

Mandela was quoted as saying that the trial so far "appears fair and just" and that outsiders should not meddle in Iran's internal affairs.

Yom Hashoah marked in Israel

The wail of a two-minute siren brought Israel to a standstill Tuesday, as the nation stood in silent tribute to the 6 million Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

Ceremonies were held at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and the Knesset in Jerusalem.

In Poland, Israeli President Ezer Weizman and his Polish counterpart, Aleksander Kwasniewski, led thousands of young people in the annual March of the Living from Auschwitz to Birkenau. [Page 3]

U.S. blasts Israeli missile tests

U.S. Defense Department officials criticized an unannounced Israeli missile test in the Mediterranean, saying the missiles came too close to American navy ships, The Washington Post reported Tuesday.

The officials claimed the incident marked the third time during the past two years that the Jewish state has conducted a "no-notice" missile launch in the vicinity of a U.S. warship.

Shas minister loses a round

Israel's attorney general said he will not defend Religious Affairs Minister Yitzhak Cohen in a petition brought against him to the Supreme Court by the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center.

The petition filed in March demands the annulment of a committee that Cohen, a member of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, appointed to circumvent a 1998 Supreme Court decision requiring municipal religious councils to accept non-Orthodox delegates. [Page 4]

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Warning to Iran's devout Jews spiraled into a power struggle

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — The case of 13 Iranian Jews accused of spying — which burst into the headlines this week with news of the trial's first "confession" — apparently originated as a power struggle within Iran's Jewish community.

But it wasn't long before the dispute was sucked into the greater drama that has convulsed Iran during the past few years — the pitched battle for supremacy between Iranian hard-liners and their reformist rivals.

And if history serves as a guide, presumably this won't be the last time Iran's 2,700-year-old Jewish community will be a pawn in the country's political struggles.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 — even as Iranian Jewry has shriveled from 100,000 to some 25,000 — 17 Jews have been condemned to death, primarily for being accused spies, according to Jewish groups in the United States. Two Jews were executed in Tehran three years ago.

The next one sentenced to death could be Hamid "Dani" Tefileen.

After facing the Revolutionary Court on Monday, Tefileen, 29, was broadcast on Iranian state television confessing to having been trained in Israel by the Mossad, the foreign intelligence agency of the Jewish state.

But American Jewish observers, human rights groups and foreign diplomats denounced the hearings that began Monday as a political show trial. They assumed Tefileen, who said he had visited Israel, was coerced to confess.

For 16 months he had been in solitary confinement, with human contact limited mostly to his interrogators.

It is unclear whether Tefileen will be the fall guy, or if his confession is a harbinger for the entire group. A conviction could bring anything from six months in prison to a death sentence. Tefileen, a clerk in his father's shoe shop, is said to be a devoutly religious man, as are all the accused.

And that, in part, may have been what landed them in this predicament.

The steady emigration of Iranian Jews since 1979 has left a vacuum in leadership, as many top religious and community figures were among the emigres who headed to Israel and the United States. The Jewish leadership was traditionally based in Tehran, the capital. Jews have generally been allowed to maintain a communal life, as long as it was low key and it was not seen as a threat to the Islamic state.

Appeasing the authorities ensured a modicum of security, said Sam Kermanian, secretary-general of the Los Angeles-based American Iranian Jewish Federation.

However, recent years have seen Jews in the southern city of Shiraz — a bastion of religious conservatism in general — grow more committed and energetic in their religious life, Kermanian said.

Most Iranian Jews are Orthodox, but the Shiraz community appeared to be growing more fervent in its practices, which many young Jews in the region found appealing.

Because of that growing appeal, the Shiraz Jews soon became a source of irritation to the Iranian authorities, who presumably preferred dealing with the leadership in Tehran.

The Shiraz Jews allegedly ignored warnings from both government officials and Jewish leaders in Tehran to tone down and limit their activities, Kermanian said.

The arrests in January and March 1999 of 13 Jews — most of whom are from Shiraz — may have been intended to send a message. Very little is known about the 13,

MIDEAST FOCUS

Ross joins Eilat peace talks

U.S. peace envoy Dennis Ross arrived in the Red Sea resort of Eilat to join Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on a framework for a final peace deal. The discussions were temporarily stopped Tuesday in deference to Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Tower Air strands travelers

Lufthansa Airlines offered to help out travelers stranded at Israel's Ben-Gurion Airport after Tower Air, which filed for bankruptcy several weeks ago, canceled its scheduled flights. Lufthansa offered travelers tickets to New York, Los Angeles and Miami at special prices based on space availability. In New York's Kennedy Airport, some 300 Israel-bound passengers were stranded by Tower's cancellations.

Doctors en route to Ethiopia

Two Israeli doctors are scheduled to travel to Ethiopia on Wednesday to help address the famine and drought.

The delegation was sent in response to a request from the Ethiopian government and U.N. agencies.

Intel to expand chip plant

Intel is seeking to expand its microchip plant in Israel at a cost of between \$2.5 billion and 3.5 billion, Israel's Finance Ministry said.

The expansion of the plant in the southern town of Kiryat Gat would represent the largest single foreign investment in Israel to date, the ministry said.

16 nations in Alzheimer's project

More than 16 countries are participating in a project in which 50 patients in Israel are being treated with a new drug to combat Alzheimer's disease, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

The patients will be treated for six months, with the option of continuing for an additional year, the paper reported.



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but among them are the chief spiritual leader of Shiraz, several part-time Hebrew teachers, a university professor, a cemetery worker, an office clerk, a tailor and a 17-year-old student, according to sources in the United States.

"The Iranians implicitly mentioned that the arrests were related to the warnings," said Kermanian. "They needed to make it clear to the people that they were serious — basically to punish them and scare them off — and that they were going to be released shortly."

Other observers, however, suggest that the hard-liners — vying to maintain a grip on power in the wake of political victories by reformists — had already fingered the Jews as the engine to whip up Islamic fervor and undermine the liberalizing efforts of moderates like Iranian President Mohammad Khatami.

Jews are second only to Iran's Baha'i minority as favorite targets of the authorities to rally the public against a common enemy, according to observers.

The intracommunal dispute "played some role at the beginning, but we shouldn't exaggerate it or exonerate the Iranian authorities for pinning this on the Jews," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

"We heard early on they had targeted" the Jews for political purposes, Hoenlein said. "It fits the periodic pattern. The difference this time is that we found out about it in time and have been able to do something about it."

Once the arrests became public, the situation was apparently exacerbated, say observers, with Iranian hard-liners becoming more adamant about punishing the "Iran 13." The situation prompted debates among advocates about whether public or private diplomacy would be more effective in securing their release.

"We gave the Iranians many opportunities to negotiate and it all came to naught," said Hoenlein, who has been at the forefront of negotiations on the detainees' behalf, working through his network of contacts in Iran, Europe and America.

Before launching the campaign to secure their release, Hoenlein said his organization conducted its own investigation into the spying charges. Consultations with officials from the CIA, the FBI and the Mossad confirmed that the allegations had been fabricated, he said. Without the international intervention, he speculates that some or all of the Iran 13 might have been executed by now.

In addition to the international attention surrounding the current case, the other major difference from previous spying charges against Iranian Jews is the rising tension within Iranian society. Indeed, the handling of the Iran 13 speaks volumes about the current political climate.

The Muslim fundamentalists who control Iran's judiciary are clearly out to sabotage the small steps taken by their reformist rivals to repair relations with the West, say U.S. observers. At this point, anything less than convictions of some or all of the "Zionist spies" would mean losing face among their followers. More significantly, in the past two weeks the hard-liners have jailed six journalists and shut down 16 reform-minded newspapers that have registered support for Khatami. Among the stated reasons for the newspaper closures was their alleged sympathy for the 13 Jews.

In such an atmosphere, some wonder why any Iranian Jew remains wedded to the land. 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.

While flowery reports often emerge from Iran on how happy Jews there are, they are vulnerable to more than spying charges. In December, the dead body of a 44-year-old Tehran Jew was discovered. His Muslim business partner, with whom the victim had had a conflict, had reported him to the authorities the previous day, said Hoenlein.

But espionage remains the most popular accusation to make against perceived enemies.

"We cannot go on the assumption this will not happen again," said Kermanian. "As to why stay, that's the million-dollar question for many Jewish communities around the world. "I guess one answer is that Jews are eternal optimists," he said. "Iranian history has had its ups and downs, and Jews went through it with them. They always survived. I don't think there will ever be a time that Iran will be devoid of Jewish life." □

JEWISH WORLD

Haider successor follows suit

Not all members of the Nazi SS should be blamed for the group's wartime actions, according to the new head of Austria's far-right Freedom Party.

"We have to recognize that there were people who participated in the [SS] without carrying the blame for it," Susanne Riess-Passer, who this week replaced Jorg Haider at the helm of the xenophobic party, told Spain's El Pais newspaper.

Panel: Link human rights, trade

An independent commission on religious freedom recommended that the U.S. Congress upgrade China's trading status only if Beijing makes substantial improvements in religious freedom.

The commission also urged the U.S. to pressure Sudan to end human rights violations and Russia to reverse its decree that all religious groups register with the government or lose their rights.

Charges made in Pittsburgh spree

Pennsylvania prosecutors charged Richard Scott Baumhammers with homicide in the murders of five minorities, including one Jew, in a shooting spree last Friday near Pittsburgh. Baumhammers, who pleaded not guilty to the charges Monday, was also charged with seven counts of ethnic intimidation under Pennsylvania's hate crimes law. Baumhammers' lawyer has indicated he plans to mount an insanity defense.

Arrests made in rebbetzin murder

New Jersey police arrested two men in the 1994 murder-for-hire of the wife of a prominent rabbi.

Leonard Jenoff, 54, and Paul Daniels, 26, were charged with murder and conspiracy to murder Carol Neulander. Her husband, Rabbi Fred Neulander, was indicted in January 1999 on charges of conspiracy to commit murder. He is free on bail awaiting his trial, which is scheduled to begin in June.

Researchers blame hate sites

The Internet is playing a key role in spreading anti-Semitism, according to Israeli researchers.

Professor Dina Porat, whose research team compiled the annual Tel Aviv University report on anti-Semitism, said the Internet has become "an easy, so far legal, cheap, convenient and accessible vehicle" for disseminating anti-Semitism.

Monument to diplomat unveiled

A monument to a Japanese diplomat who saved some 6,000 Jews from the Holocaust was unveiled in Boston.

Sunday's ceremony honored Chiune Sugihara, who issued visas in wartime Lithuania that enabled thousands of Jews to flee Nazi Europe.

Shoah remembrance stresses responsibility to next generation

By Brianne Korn

NEWS YORK (JTA) — If Holocaust Remembrance Day is rooted in the concept of educating younger generations, then the somber day was not lost on Dara Kent Avjian.

"It's just, like, so terrible when I think about it," says the 11-year-old.

If the lessons of Yom Hashoah are to be taught by eyewitnesses to the atrocities of the Holocaust, then Hannah Kent bears that responsibility.

"You push those memories back in order to live and build, and as you get older they come back," says the survivor of the Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps. "You never forget."

Together, granddaughter and grandmother lit a candle Sunday during a ceremony at New York City's Congregation Emanu-El in memory of those who perished and in the hopes of sustaining the bonds that link the future of the Jewish people to its past.

"It is our duty as survivors of the Holocaust to make sure this message is not forgotten," said Benjamin Meed, president of the Warsaw Ghetto Resistance Organization, which helped sponsor the event.

"But I also believe that it is your duty, as the last to hear our stories firsthand, to perpetuate the memory for future generations."

The Manhattan ceremony was one of many observances around the world of Holocaust Remembrance Day, which began at sundown Monday.

In Washington, the steps of the U.S. Capitol hosted a commemorative service Tuesday, sponsored by B'nai B'rith.

Also, members of Congress and Jewish leaders were scheduled to hold a noontime ceremony at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda on Thursday. The annual program was to include a candle-lighting ceremony with participation from Holocaust survivors.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the host of the Capitol Hill ceremony, leads the nation in the annual Days of Remembrance, from April 30 to May 7, honoring the victims of the Holocaust.

In New York, Shmuel Sisso, Israel's consul general, said the series of observances from Passover to Yom Hashoah to Israel's Independence Day, which this year falls on May 10, takes the Jewish people through a journey of "sorrow and rebirth."

In Jerusalem, Israeli President Ezer Weizman, at a torch-lighting ceremony at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial on Monday night, called the existence of the State of Israel the best guarantee that a tragedy like the Holocaust will never happen again.

The annual wail of a two-minute siren brought the Jewish state to a standstill Tuesday, as the nation stood in silent tribute to the victims. Israel's flag was lowered to half-staff and places of entertainment were closed, while Israeli TV altered its regular schedule to air special programs on Holocaust-related topics.

The next day, Weizman was in Poland, where he and his Polish counterpart, Aleksander Kwasniewski, led thousands of young people in the annual March of the Living from Auschwitz to Birkenau.

At Congregation Emanu-El in New York, the day was spent not only in reflection, but was also used as a platform to credit advances in worldwide acknowledgment of the Holocaust and to express concern over anti-Semitic acts over the past year.

Pope John Paul II's recent visit to Israel was described as historic and a pivotal advance in interfaith relations.

Recognition that anti-Semitism has not disappeared, however, was also noted at the New York event. The most recent assault on the memory of those murdered in the Holocaust, the libel trial in London that pitted Holocaust denier David Irving against American scholar Deborah Lipstadt, proved a warning to all that remembering the Holocaust is integral to preventing further anti-Semitism.

"Your lives and your testimony have not been in vain," the chairman of the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, told survivors. □

(JTA correspondents Sharon Samber in Washington and Naomi Segal in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

Report: Mideast terror declined, but Syria, Iran still state sponsors

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The number of terrorist attacks in 1999 went up in every region of the world — except for the Middle East.

There, the number of attacks decreased from 31 to 25.

The primary locus of terrorism is now in South Asia, particularly in Afghanistan, according to the State Department's annual report, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*.

Even though terrorism is no longer concentrated in the Middle East and governments in the region are doing more to prevent terrorist attacks, some of Israel's neighbors continue to be an area of concern. The report cites Iran and Syria as continuing to support regional terrorist groups that want to destroy the Middle East peace process.

The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security reportedly provides training, and financial and political support directly to Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad operatives. These and other terrorist organizations are based in Damascus, and Syria continues to provide a "crucial link" in the terrorist threat from the region, the report charges.

The state sponsors of terrorism listed in this year's report are Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria.

The list is unchanged from recent years but it is "not unchangeable," U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said during Monday's release of the report.

Governments "know what they need to do" to get off the list, she said.

A Middle East peace agreement could lead to Syria's removal from the list, the report noted.

In Egypt, for the first time in years, there were no terrorism-related deaths and there were no major international terrorist attacks in Jordan. U.S. Ambassador Michael Sheehan, the coordinator for counterterrorism, said Jordan had a strong commitment to crack down on terrorism.

The report praised the Palestinian Authority's efforts in counterterrorism, noting that the Palestinians' security forces preempted several terrorist attacks and sought to develop leads about Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad activity.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and government officials have acknowledged the continued improvement in Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation.

While this progress is to be recognized, there are deficits in the Palestinians' counterterrorism program, mainly the inability to uproot the financing and recruitment infrastructure of Hamas, according to David Schenker of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank. Terrorists also routinely escape from Palestinian prisons or elude capture in Palestinian territory, Schenker said.

The report acknowledged that the P.A.'s program "continued to face challenges from the resilient terrorist infrastructure of groups" that oppose peace in the Middle East.

"Important steps have been taken by governments in the Middle East and the Palestinian Authority in counterterrorism activities," said Mark Regev, a spokesman for the Israeli Embassy.

"Unfortunately, the relative quiet we've had over the last year

has also been the result of good fortune," he added, referring to thwarted terrorist attacks in Haifa and Tiberias last September.

Regev says there is much concern about the potential for terrorism as Israel prepares to withdraw from Lebanon in July. External forces could "stir up trouble and attack Israel" following the pullout.

"The terrorism threat has not subsided," he said.

The report says the Lebanese government does not exercise control over the areas where terrorist groups operate, which leaves Lebanon as a safe haven for Hezbollah and Hamas, among others.

The Zionist Organization of America criticized the State Department's report, saying it makes no direct reference to Syria's support for Hezbollah, and that it "whitewashes" the P.A.'s policy of "constantly releasing imprisoned terrorists."

The report does cite Syria's terrorist ties, but the ZOA says that the lack of direct reference to Hezbollah is an "effort to soften Syria's image, as a prelude to removing Syria" from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. □

Non-Orthodox score new victory in struggle over religious councils

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's Reform and Conservative movements have scored another victory in their ongoing struggle to take their seats on Jerusalem's religious council.

State Attorney Elyakim Rubinstein said Tuesday he will not defend Yitzhak Cohen, Israel's minister of religious affairs, in a petition brought against him to the Supreme Court by the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center.

The petition filed in March demands the annulment of a committee that Cohen, of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, appointed to circumvent a 1998 Supreme Court decision.

That decision required municipal religious councils, which administer public funds for religious services, to accept non-Orthodox delegates if appointed by a political party.

Representation on local religious councils has, along with conversion matters, been at the center of the debate over the status of non-Orthodox movements in Israel.

But Orthodox rabbis, including the Chief Rabbinate, instructed their delegates to boycott meetings at the Jerusalem council when Conservative and Reform delegates from the Meretz Party started attending in December 1998.

When the Reform movement complained that the boycotts paralyzed the council, the religious affairs minister created the alternative committee. He excluded the liberal streams and also included some Orthodox members of the original council.

The state attorney's rejection of the Orthodox position could help accelerate a decision on a matter that has lingered for about a decade.

"This helps us in every way," said Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center. "Essentially, the state attorney declared that the religious affairs ministry is violating the law and the Supreme Court rulings. All that is left now is to decide what should be done."

Ilan Elharar, media adviser to Religious Affairs Minister Cohen, said the minister would not yet respond on issues related to the case. □