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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

'Confessions' of 'Iran 13' doubted

A second and third defendant in the trial of 13 Iranian Jews accused of espionage "confessed" to spying for Israel and its foreign intelligence agency, Mossad, "out of love" for the Jewish state.

Despite the statements made by Shahrokh Paknahad and Ramin Nemati, Western observers charged that the confessions were either extracted under duress, with promises of leniency — or both. [Page 4]

Negotiators may miss deadline

This month's deadline for concluding an outline of a final Israeli-Palestinian peace deal may not be met, according to U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross.

After joining negotiations in Eilat on Wednesday, Ross said it may take up to another two months to put the outline together.

Meanwhile, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy said a Security Cabinet vote to transfer three Arab towns on the outskirts of Jerusalem to full Palestinian control will be delayed.

Levy said the governing coalition must first be solidified and the Palestinians must show that they are willing to reach a compromise with Israel. [Page 2]

Victims' families get day in court

A lawsuit filed by the families of two American students killed by a 1996 terrorist bus bombing in Israel went to trial this week in federal court in Washington.

The parents of Sara Duker and Matthew Eisenfeld are suing Iran for damages resulting from the deaths of their children. The lawsuits are permitted under a 1996 law that allows Americans who are victims of terrorist acts abroad to file federal lawsuits against foreign governments.

BRCA mutation could help chemo

A genetic mutation that predisposes Ashkenazi Jewish women to ovarian cancer makes them more responsive to chemotherapy, according to a new study.

Patients with the BRCA mutation lived about two years longer than patients without the gene, according to the study of 189 Jewish women published in this week's edition of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Eighty-eight of the 189 women studied had the mutation.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Barak's money-for-peace scheme with Shas subjects him to ridicule

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Two "down payments" that Ehud Barak offered to make this week have provided political pundits with the raw material for a series of jokes at the expense of the increasingly beleaguered prime minister.

Barak has promised his largest coalition partner, the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, a multimillion-dollar payment in the form of additional state financing for the party's financially troubled education network.

To the Palestinians, Barak has promised to turn over three villages just outside the Jerusalem city limits as an advance on a West Bank withdrawal that Israel is required to make under previously signed agreements. In both cases, the premier hopes the down payments will keep the recipient content, at least for now, and thereby keep his government and his peace policy intact.

The two moves, which are intricately linked, exemplify former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's purported observation that "Israel has no foreign policy — only domestic politics."

In return for the funding, Shas is expected to throw its support behind Barak in upcoming Knesset votes on the peace process, particularly when it comes to handing over control of Abu Dis, Al-Azariya and Sawahara — the villages that comprise Barak's down payments to the Palestinians.

Barak's offers, however, may look better on paper than when put into practice.

Shas, which holds 17 pivotal Knesset seats, has so far not guaranteed that it will indeed support the prime minister's peace moves if it gets the money it is demanding. Moreover, Shas's rival in the coalition, the secular Meretz Party, gave notice that it will secede from the government — though not yet from the coalition — if the Shas schools receive more money.

Meretz leader Yossi Sarid, who heads the Education Ministry, insists that the proposed payment would betray all the government's previous efforts at getting the Shas school system to operate efficiently and with financial transparency.

For their part, the Palestinians are making it clear that the three villages will by no means mitigate their demand that Israel hand over, in the next troop withdrawal, all of the West Bank aside from settlements, eastern Jerusalem and Israeli-specified security locations.

The Palestinians maintain that their demand conforms to the letter with the original Oslo accords. These agreements, they say, call for Israel to hand over some 90 percent of the territory in advance of a final peace agreement, which the two sides hope to conclude by September.

Negotiations on the West Bank withdrawal and on an outline of a final peace accord reopened Sunday in Eilat and were due to stretch into next week with the active participation of U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross. But there was little optimism on either side that these talks could bridge the remaining gaps.

To make Barak's situation even more miserable, the National Religious Party announced that it would quit the government — and the coalition — the moment full control of Abu Dis is transferred to the Palestinian Authority.

To give the villages to the Palestinians now, says the NRP, would be to signal that parts of Jerusalem itself are up for negotiation.

Barak's increasingly precarious condition was well illustrated when he met Monday

MIDEAST FOCUS

12 wounded by air strike

Twelve civilians, including an infant, were wounded in an Israeli air strike on southern Lebanon, according to reports from the region. Rockets landed near the house of a leader of Amal, a Syrian-backed militia.

The air strike followed an exchange of fire between Amal gunmen and the Israeli army.

Lebanese officer defects

The highest ranking officer to defect from the Israel-allied South Lebanon Army surrendered to Lebanese security forces, according to an SLA source.

Maj. Emile Nasr, who commanded SLA forces in Jezzine until they abandoned the area last June, surrendered a few days ago, the source said.

Conversion request rejected

Israel's Interior Ministry recently rejected a request to convert three Ukrainian players on a local volleyball team. Israel Radio said officials were surprised the three women would seek to convert after playing in Israel for a short period and suspected they were interested in a "fictitious" conversion to enable more foreign players to join the team.

Independence boycott planned

Shfaram and a number of other Israeli Arab villages are calling on the nation's Arab population to boycott Israel's Independence Day celebrations next week, Israel Radio reported.

Corporations plan Gaza business

Several multinational corporations, including Pepsi-Cola and Nestle, signed agreements to lease buildings in a planned industrial zone in the Gaza Strip.

Created in the 1998 Wye peace accord, the Gaza zone is slated for completion in August 2001 and is expected to employ 50,000 workers.



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with the right-wing Likud Party leader, Ariel Sharon. The two men, old friends, emerged from their two-hour meeting sour-faced. Sharon later demanded immediate elections. Barak, his perpetual smile looking thin, tried to shrug this off.

That same morning, pundits were vying with each other in speculating what the rare private meeting might portend.

They were convinced that Sharon wanted a place at the Cabinet table, and they wondered if Barak was seriously weighing the idea. Or perhaps, they speculated, Barak was merely using his relationship with Sharon to strengthen his position with Shas and Meretz, as if to signal to his unruly coalition allies that he has another available option — a coalition with Likud.

But given the public exchange of barbs that followed the two leaders' meeting, those same pundits were soon wondering aloud whether Barak does indeed have the option of bringing Likud into his government.

Failing that, his government may be headed toward an early collapse.

This may happen because Barak, though having decided to side with Shas in its ongoing battle with Meretz, may nonetheless find himself in the embarrassing position of being unable to count on Shas' support during the stormy confrontations that inevitably lie ahead. □

Israel, Palestinians probably won't reach a deal framework this month

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Despite a stepped-up U.S. role in Israeli-Palestinian talks, negotiators may have to postpone a deadline for reaching an outline of a final peace accord.

After joining the talks at the Red Sea resort of Eilat on Wednesday, U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross said it may take up to another two months to put the outline together.

"I would say that over the next six to eight weeks, we are going to see if there is a potential and a need to make big decisions to reach a framework agreement," Ross said.

Israel and the Palestinians have so far been unable to achieve any breakthroughs in issues that must be settled for a final peace agreement, including the status of Jerusalem, the right of Palestinians to return to their families' pre-1948 homes, final borders and Jewish settlements on the West Bank. The deadline for finishing a framework to use as the basis for an agreement has already been pushed to the end of May, after the sides failed to meet the original Feb. 13 target date.

Despite the slow progress, they still hope the framework, once achieved, will contain enough substance to enable them to reach a final peace accord by Sept. 13.

Ross arrived in Israel on Tuesday night to join the discussions with the aim of helping the two sides overcome the gaps between their positions.

The United States agreed to play a more active role in the talks following Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's meeting with President Clinton in Washington last month. However, the Palestinians, who until now have pushed for greater U.S. involvement in the talks, reversed themselves this week and voiced reservations about a stepped-up American role.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat was quoted as saying this week that the Palestinians envision the United States as simply assisting the implementation of U.N. resolutions urging Israel to withdraw from lands occupied since the 1967 Six-Day War.

Parallel to the current round of talks, which are scheduled to end next week, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was facing his own domestic political hurdles.

Barak tried this week to secure backing from religious and hawkish coalition members for his proposal to transfer three Arab towns on the outskirts of Jerusalem to full Palestinian control.

But, apparently reflecting Barak's failure to secure that backing, Foreign Minister David Levy said a Security Cabinet vote to transfer the three towns will be delayed.

Levy said the governing coalition must first be solidified and the Palestinians must show they are willing to reach a compromise with Israel. □

JEWISH WORLD

Accused slayer's site changes

A Web site created by the man charged with killing five minorities in last week's shooting spree in Pittsburgh is back on the Internet with a statement denouncing hatred and intolerance and asking visitors to contribute to a fund for victims.

The Pittsburgh-based Computer Comfort also created a new site, www.freemarketparty.com, which features a statement that Richard Scott Baumhammers' original site "does not reflect our views any more than the act of a crank caller represents the philosophy of the telephone company."

Priebke seeks return to homeland

A convicted Nazi war criminal said he hopes to return to Germany from house arrest in Italy to nurse his ailing wife.

"I would so much love to spend the rest of my life with her," said Erich Priebke, a former SS captain who was given a life sentence in 1998 for his role in the March 1944 massacre of 335 Romans, including about 75 Jews, at the Ardeatine Caves south of Rome.

Japanese diplomat gets exhibit

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington will open a special exhibition Thursday to honor a Japanese diplomat who saved some 6,000 Jews from persecution by Nazi Germany.

The exhibition for the late Chiune Sugihara, "Flight and Rescue," will run for two years, museum officials said.

In a related development, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is expected to open a permanent exhibition on the Holocaust at Britain's Imperial War Museum in June, according to museum officials.

The exhibit, which will include original artifacts, photographs and survivors' filmed testimony, will be housed in a new five-story extension.

Canada to ask about religion

Canada's census will follow previous practice and include questions on religion and ethnic background next year. In January, Jewish communal leaders wrote the prime minister, Cabinet members and government officials, requesting that the question be retained because it provides invaluable data about the size, distribution and other demographic characteristics of the Jewish community.

Cooking show up for award

A Jewish cooking show that airs on public television was nominated for a prestigious food award. "Jewish Cooking in America With Joan Nathan" was one of three nominees for best television cooking show in the 2000 James Beard awards. The awards will be announced next Monday.

Tower's abrupt cessation leaves passengers stranded

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — When the Israeli Consulate here sent a team of employees to Kennedy Airport this week, offering funds for Israelis in distress, it was not responding to a natural disaster or act of terrorism.

Instead, the consulate — along with Jewish organizations like Chabad and Hatzalah — was helping those victimized by Tower Air's abrupt cancellation of flights.

The discount airline, which is headquartered at the airport and filed for bankruptcy in February, canceled all passenger flights at 6:30 p.m. on May 1.

It is unclear why the cancellations were made so abruptly and without warning to passengers, with one flight en route from Los Angeles to Tel Aviv even landing for a stopover in New York and never resuming. In New York alone, 400 passengers — 95 percent of them Israeli, according to consulate officials — were stranded on Monday night, and others continue to be stranded around the world.

On Wednesday, no one was answering the telephone at the airline's corporate office. A recorded message on Tower's flight information phone line said, "As of Monday, May 1, we have ceased all flight operations." It advised callers to contact their travel agent or credit card company to obtain a refund.

A Tower Air spokeswoman was quoted by the Associated Press as saying that the majority of the company's employees have been let go, but that the company is still in business. Asked whether flights would ever be resumed, the spokeswoman said, "I can't predict the future."

Some say it is fitting that the airline, so notorious for its poor customer service that it provoked an entire Web site — www.idemandloyalty.com — devoted to lampooning it, would say what appears to be its final farewell by leaving passengers stranded around the world.

Tower was created in 1983, with the New York-Tel Aviv route its most traveled. It also flew to Athens, Los Angeles, Miami, Paris, San Francisco and San Juan.

According to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, Israeli travel agents were not notified about the cancellations.

When they called the Tower's Tel Aviv office, they were told that passengers were to be left to their own devices.

Consulate officials in New York said they were helping passengers arrange other flights — and that El Al, Israel's national carrier, has increased its flights between Israel and the United States and is offering \$400 tickets for people holding Tower tickets.

The consulate provided stranded Israelis at JFK with \$100 for food and hotel, and paid for phone calls home, according to Shmuel Sisso, the consul general in New York. He called the situation "outrageous."

Other organizations helped provide food and arrange housing.

Noach Dear, a New York City Council member who represents a predominantly Jewish constituency in Brooklyn and chairs the council's transportation committee, also called Tower's behavior an "outrage" and called on the federal government Wednesday to step in on behalf of stranded ticket-holders and help them recover the lost airfare.

It is unclear whether Tower ticket holders, particularly those who paid by cash or check and thus do not have credit card insurance, will be able to receive refunds.

Jeff Hoschander, a spokesman for Dear, said the council member was particularly concerned about this matter because people who used Tower were drawn to its discount prices and "aren't the kind of people who have money to scrape together for new flights."

According to David Stempler, president of the Washington-based Air Travelers Association, ticket holders who have not paid by credit card will likely be added to the bankrupt company's list of creditors, but may have difficulty ever collecting the money.

Stempler said he did not know why Tower ended services so abruptly, but speculated that it simply ran out of money.

Its CEO, primary shareholder and co-founder, Morris Nachtomi, worked for Israel's national airline, El Al, for 30 years, according to Tower Air's Web site. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**'Confessions' of Iranian Jews follow pattern predicted at start***By Michael J. Jordan*

NEW YORK (JTA) — While the events unfolding 8,000 miles away in the espionage trial of 13 Iranian Jews have shocked many American Jews, the trial is following a script prepared earlier this year, said a Jewish leader monitoring the events.

On Wednesday, a second and third prisoner "confessed" to spying for Israel and its foreign intelligence agency, Mossad, "out of love" for the Jewish state.

Western observers, however, charge that the confessions were either extracted under duress, with promises of leniency — or both.

"We were told this would happen several months ago — they would not have their own lawyers, the trial would be behind closed doors with no foreign observers let in and there would be confessions," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

"We are expecting a fourth confession, and perhaps statements from other defendants."

Hoenlein, who has spearheaded efforts to secure the release of the "Iran 13," said he receives his intelligence from Iranian sources close to the hard-line authorities who control the court system.

Following Wednesday's proceedings, one of those who "confessed," part-time Hebrew teacher Shahrokh Paknahad, told reporters waiting outside: "We were told by Israeli intelligence that if any of us under any circumstances were arrested, we must deny everything and they would help to get us out by bringing to bear international pressure. But that was just lies."

Paknahad, 23, described by one judiciary official as one of the alleged spy ring's "ideologues," added, "What I can say on behalf of myself and the others is that we are unhappy and sad and repentant."

The third man to "confess" was Ramin Nemati, 23.

Their statements came after the purported confession Monday of the alleged leader, Hamid "Dani" Tefileen. A devoutly religious man from the southern city of Shiraz, Tefileen admitted to visiting Israel in 1994.

Israel, for its part, steadfastly denies the link.

"We don't have anything new to say from what we have said in the past," Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Aviv Sharon told reporters Monday in Israel.

"We don't have any connection with any of those who stand trial now in Iran."

The trial will reconvene May 8 when Famarz Kashi, also a part-time Hebrew teacher, is brought before the Revolutionary Court.

One issue that remains unclear, said Hoenlein, is whether those who "confess" will take the fall for the rest or if the entire group will be punished. The sentence for spying ranges from six months to death.

Three years ago, two Iranian Jews also accused of spying were executed in Tehran.

Lawyers for the accused assert that confessions are not enough to convict — under Iranian law, the state must also prove its case with evidence.

"There may have been confessions, there may have been an intention to spy, there may have been several trips to Israel and

there may have been payments," said one of the defense attorneys, Shirzad Rahmani. "But if information damaging to Iran and beneficial to Israel was not actually exchanged, there can be no charge of espionage." □

Orchestrated arrests rabbis' way of showing solidarity with 'Iran 13'*By Michael J. Jordan*

NEW YORK (JTA) — It's not every day that eight rabbis break the law en masse.

Yet, because quiet diplomacy, public condemnation and prayer vigils have yielded dubious results — the apparent show trial of 13 Iranian Jews accused of spying for Israel entered its third day Wednesday — a group of New York City rabbis felt they needed to take more drastic measures.

Led by the activist Rabbi Avi Weiss, eight rabbis and two lay leaders draped in tefillin plunked themselves down before midday Manhattan traffic on Wednesday.

Within minutes, the protesters, singing and praying, got what they wanted. The two dozen police officers standing by politely whisked them into a large patrol wagon, and traffic moved on.

The site for this act of civil disobedience was chosen because it sits in the shadow of the 11th-floor offices of the Iranian mission to the United Nations.

"It's so different to be arrested here in New York, in a free country," Weiss, president of the Coalition for Jewish Concerns — Amcha, told a crowd of 70 or so supporters before leading his troops into the street. "But in this tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny way, we are expressing our solidarity with our brethren."

For the arrested Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis, this was perhaps the loudest way they could make their frustration heard. "The American Jewish community remained silent during the Holocaust, and that certainly didn't work," Rabbi Mordechai Mordachowitz told the crowd. "We have 6 million reasons to never to be silent again!"

As of Wednesday afternoon, the 10 protesters were still in jail.

This isn't the first time Weiss, 55, has been behind bars.

He said his initiation came in 1969, under very similar circumstances. Nine Jews in Iraq were accused of spying, confessed — presumably under duress — and were hanged.

Last year in Poland, he scaled a fence at the site of the Auschwitz death camp to protest the planting of hundreds of crosses by activist Polish Catholics.

Weiss and New York police are so accustomed to civil disobedience that the whole event was orchestrated ahead of time.

Police were notified of the protest, and the group marched to a prearranged location, safely behind blue police barricades. Weiss and his comrades were also aware of how many hours they may have to serve in jail — anywhere from 12 to 72 hours.

Such protest is obviously not for everyone.

"I don't have the courage to do what these courageous rabbis are doing," said one young rabbi who was among the crowd.

Weiss himself concedes that such action is only "a last resort."

"To me, violating the law is a very serious matter, and is more difficult for me to do the older I get," said Weiss, whose arrest this time was observed by three of his seven young grandchildren.

"But American Jews have yet to learn a fundamental lesson: the more you speak out, the more you are protected." □