



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 78, No. 99

Friday, May 26, 2000

83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak makes appeal for peace

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak called on the president of Lebanon to make peace. "I appeal to you, President Emile Lahoud," Barak said. "Let's exploit the moment. Let's talk peace."

Barak spoke at a special Knesset session held in the northern town of Kiryat Shmona.

Mordechai to be indicted

Israel's attorney general recommended that Transportation Minister Yitzhak Mordechai stand trial for sexually assaulting three women during the past eight years.

The Justice Ministry said it would seek the lifting of Mordechai's parliamentary immunity so he can stand trial for sexual assault, indecent acts and sexual harassment. If convicted, Mordechai could face up to seven years in prison.

Insurer faces California lawsuit

Relatives of Holocaust victims filed a class-action lawsuit against Italy's largest insurer for allegedly failing to pay claims dating back to the Holocaust era. The lawsuit, filed against Assicurazioni Generali in a San Francisco court, seeks remedy for as many as 20,000 Californians whose relatives were killed during the Holocaust and held insurance policies that were never honored by the firm.

Iranian minister tours Lebanon

Iran's foreign minister toured an area of southern Lebanon from which Israeli troops withdrew only a day before. "This is a victory promised in the Koran to the people who exhibit patience and steadfastness," Kamal Kharrazi said at a rally for Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran.

Argentina honors Shoah victims

Argentina's president met with a group of 24 Holocaust survivors and apologized for the nation's postwar harboring of Nazi war criminals. Fernando de la Rúa gave each of the survivors a medal during Wednesday's ceremony in Buenos Aires.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, May 29.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Ethiopian Israelis worry about the fate of relatives

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM, May 22 (JTA) — From the hilltop caravan site known as Givat Hamatos, the entire new city of Jerusalem shines below like a mirage.

About 150 Ethiopian immigrant families once known as Falash Mura — Ethiopians whose ancestors converted from Judaism to Christianity — look down in envy at everything from the drab housing projects of Katamon to the quaint red-roofed homes of old Talpiot.

Yet despite their relative poverty, most of the people here know they are very lucky. Back in Ethiopia, war is raging, famine is spreading and 26,000 more Falash Mura — including many of their family members — are desperately waiting to be granted entry to Israel. Some 18,000 of them have amassed at transit camps in Addis Ababa and Gondar, where they live in squalid conditions.

They would be more than happy to live in temporary housing.

Last month, Israeli Interior Minister Natan Sharansky returned from a visit to Ethiopia with promises to expedite the process of verifying who is eligible to immigrate. But Sharansky also indicated that perhaps only several thousand will qualify.

For Israel, the unresolved debate over whether the Falash Mura were originally converted by force or chose Christianity is not the main issue. Rather, Israel fears that a sweeping exodus could open the floodgates to non-Jewish Ethiopians seeking to escape Africa by claiming reunification with family members in Israel.

But the residents of Givat Hamatos do not understand why, if the Jewish state has recognized their right to return, their relatives are undergoing such scrutiny.

"They are eligible to come," said Bakala Abera, a tall, 65-year-old high school director who immigrated with his Falash Mura wife and then converted to Judaism himself. Abera's wife has two brothers waiting to emigrate from Ethiopia.

"The people in the camps have left their homes, farms, cattle and everything," Abera said. "The Israeli government must facilitate their arrival. I find it a very puzzling question why they are making difficulties for Ethiopians when there is no such difficulty for immigrants from other states."

Israel says the problem is not so simple. In 1997 and 1998, pressure mounted on Israel to allow about 4,000 Falash Mura to immigrate.

"We decided to bring them all in without checking them," Sharansky told JTA. "When it was checked, we discovered that more than half were not really eligible" under the Law of Return.

Sharansky rejected accusations that the government is dragging its feet because the immigrants are black. "One of the most disgusting things that I have heard is that Israel brings goyim from Russia and lets Jews die because they are black," he said. "Of all the countries in the world, we are the only ones bringing black people from Africa and granting them citizenship immediately. We never provided such liberal criteria like in Ethiopia."

Sharansky has now secured support from the Finance Ministry and American Jewish organizations to increase the government staff in Ethiopia from one to three people. The Jewish Agency for Israel expects about 10 people — Israelis and local staffers — to be on the ground by the end of May. There are currently about 250 Ethiopians cleared for immigration.

However, although Sharansky hopes that the process will be speeded up "by many

MIDEAST FOCUS

IDF destroys Mt. Hermon outpost

Israel's army evacuated and blew up an army outpost on the slopes of Mt. Hermon. But the Prime Minister's Office denied that Israel plans to hand the area over to Lebanon.

Lebanon claims the region, known as Shabaa Farms, lies in its territory and must be returned by Israel.

The United Nations accepted Israel's argument that the area was Syrian territory prior to the 1967 Six-Day War and that Israel is not required to hand it over. Israeli security officials were quoted as saying Hezbollah may use the dispute as an excuse to attack Israel.

Engagement rules issued

The Israel Defense Force's chief of staff issued a directive telling troops in the north not to open fire unless their lives are at risk.

Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz issued the rules of engagement Thursday as Hezbollah gunmen made anti-Israel taunts from across the border, only yards from the Israeli town of Metulla.

Firebomb suspect detained

Palestinian security forces detained a Palestinian suspected of throwing a firebomb at an Israeli car earlier this week, seriously burning a toddler and lightly wounding her mother and another passenger.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat informed Israel's regional development minister, Shimon Peres, of the arrest during a meeting in Rome.

Israelis help SLA refugees

Israelis donated tons of clothing, toys and equipment to help members of the South Lebanon Army and their families who received asylum in Israel.

Despite the effort, officials working to settle the SLA members said there were still shortages of basic supplies, including food and baby clothes.



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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times," it could take as long as a year before all potential immigrants are checked. It's a very tedious process because most people have no documents and their eligibility must be verified by field research.

It is possible, he added, that more than half of those waiting will be denied visas.

"They are saying that anyone with an aunt or uncle should come," said Sharansky. "But we do not have such a policy under the Law of Return."

Israel's Law of Return allows immigration for anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent, along with his or her spouse, children, grandchildren and their spouses.

Avraham Neguise, director of South Wing to Zion, a Falash Mura lobby group, disagrees. Flipping through lists of all the Falash Mura families still in Ethiopia compiled by an Israeli committee, Neguise shows that almost every single one of the 26,000 would-be immigrants claims a relative in Israel — more than two-thirds claim a first-degree relation.

"It is very convincing," he said. "The most distant relative you see here is cousins."

"If this kind of community existed in Russia or America or Europe, the Jewish Agency would be very happy to quickly bring the people and rejoice," he said, accusing the government of racist-driven foot-dragging despite a severe humanitarian crisis.

The Falash Mura immigrants who have already arrived are apparently keenly aware of what is at stake. "It will not even end after 50,000 immigrants," said one source close to the Falash Mura community, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Even they say that this will not be the end of it." □

Falash Mura immigrants find rough transition to Israeli life

By *Avi Machlis*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Absorbing Ethiopian immigrants into Israeli society has never been easy, but with the Falash Mura, the challenges are even greater.

Potential immigrants are allowed to come to Israel on the condition that they convert to Judaism and live their lives as observant Jews. They know this in advance of their arrival, and all agree. But few are aware of what this entails.

For example, the conversion process demands that all males — even circumcised ones — undergo a ritual of symbolic circumcision involving a small cut to the genitals. Many find this degrading. They are also asked to remarry their spouses in a Jewish ceremony, a process that couples with children and grandchildren consider absurd.

If they do not undergo the entire process, the Falash Mura immigrants are denied fundamental rights such as social security and unemployment income.

Most of the 4,000 Falash Mura immigrants who arrived in Israel in 1997 and 1998 go to great lengths to demonstrate that they are practicing Jews.

They try very hard to shake off the derogatory term Falash Mura, and the Israeli staff at the Ethiopian immigrant community of Givat Hamatos has banned the word.

"We decided not to call them Falash Mura because this is a sensitive issue," said Danny Dorani, manager of the Givat Hamatos site for the Jerusalem municipality.

"As far as we are concerned, they are immigrants from Ethiopia."

Veteran Ethiopian Jewish immigrants are often not nearly as sensitive. The Beta Yisrael, or Ethiopian Jewish community, has for generations detested the Falash Mura, a community that they say abandoned Judaism while the Beta Yisrael stuck to their roots at great personal risk.

Meanwhile, Absorption Ministry officials say the absorption process is even more difficult than for other Ethiopian Jewish groups because most Falash Mura have spent an extended period of time waiting to depart for Israel in camps, where they did not work or fend for themselves.

"Our ministry is not ready for this long-term process financially, either," said a ministry spokesperson.

The Jewish Agency for Israel agrees. "The main problem here is that it is still a tremendous task to absorb these people," said Mike Rosenberg, director of the immigration and absorption department at the Jewish Agency.

"If they come faster, it means the problem will be even greater and our feeling is that the Jewish people around the world have an obligation to help." □

JEWISH WORLD

German archives provide details about looted assets

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Some 100,000 files documenting assets stolen by the Nazis have been added to a Web site aiding Holocaust victims and their heirs.

The Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center and Risk International Services announced the newly gained access to the files during a news conference Tuesday in New York.

Information about the files, culled from archives in Berlin, Frankfurt and Hamburg, has been posted on www.LivingHeirs.com.

The Living Heirs Project and Web site were established a year ago as a joint venture of the Wiesenthal Center; the Houston-based Risk International; Avotaynu, a Jewish genealogy service; and MyFamily.com, a family history publishing company.

In addition, archives in Rome have yielded the names of 5,000 Italian Jews who were stripped of their belongings by the wartime Italian government, said Terrell Hunt, president of Risk International.

A further 2,500 names have been culled from lists of three German and Swiss insurance carriers.

The 100,000 German files have not been indexed, so potential heirs will have to enter their family names on the Web site and request information.

Risk International charges a \$55 fee to locate, retrieve, review and deliver the documents.

Hunt said many of the German documents pertain to insured Jewish property destroyed during Kristallnacht, the night of Nov. 9-10, 1938, when Nazi thugs ransacked Jewish-owned shops and set synagogues ablaze across Germany and Austria.

Risk International is planning similar archival searches in Switzerland, the Czech Republic, France, Holland and Poland.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Wiesenthal Center, urged Germany and Italy to open all files that would help locate financial records from the Holocaust era.

"There cannot be any closure on this issue until such time as we get the relevant data into the hands of the people who count the most, meaning the people who actually were victimized during the Holocaust," Cooper said.

In another development, relatives of Holocaust victims filed a class-action lawsuit against Italy's largest insurer for allegedly failing to pay claims dating back to the Holocaust era.

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday against Assicurazioni Generali in a San Francisco court, seeks remedy for as many as 20,000 Californians whose relatives were killed during the Holocaust and held insurance policies that were never honored by the company.

Also in San Francisco, a federal appeals court ruled Tuesday that foreign companies sued in Holocaust-related lawsuits must provide information about their business ties in California. The decision by the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned a lower court ruling and is seen as a boost to heirs of victims seeking damages from European insurers. "This decision will help establish that courts in California have jurisdiction over European companies that have been trying to hide from justice and hopefully will make them face up to their responsibilities," said William Shernoff, attorney for the plaintiffs. □

U.S. legislators praise withdrawal

The U.S. Senate and House of Representatives passed resolutions commending Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

The resolutions also call for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Lebanese soil — a reference to the 30,000 troops Syria still maintains in Lebanon.

China trade vote criticized

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom voiced regret over the House of Representatives' vote to grant China permanent normal trade relations status. "There is a risk" that the vote "will be misinterpreted in China as a sign of American indifference to violations of religious freedom there," said the commission's chairman, Rabbi David Saperstein. Saperstein also heads the Reform movement's Religious Action Center, which took no stand on the issue.

Gore takes swipe at 'Moses'

U.S. Vice President Al Gore took a biblical jab at the National Rifle Association's president, Charlton Heston, and Texas Gov. George W. Bush, the Republican presidential candidate who has close ties to the NRA. Gore said at a record-breaking \$26.5 million Democratic fund-raiser in Washington, "The last time Moses listened to a bush, his people wandered in the desert for 40 years."

Group calls for pressuring Austria

The executive vice president of the Claims Conference called on a panel of U.S. financial officers to monitor Austria's actions on Holocaust-era property restitution. Gideon Taylor was among several Jewish leaders to appear before the panel, led by New York City Comptroller Alan Hevesi. The panel announced it is sending a letter to Austrian officials calling on them to come to terms with their wartime past. It is also sending a similar letter to officials in Holland.

Cuban Jews inaugurate temple

The Cuban Jewish community marked the inauguration of a newly renovated temple, Bet Shalom, in Havana. Attending last weekend's ceremony were Jewish delegations from several countries, according to Radio Havana.

Jewish leaders to meet in Spain

Jewish communal leaders plan to gather in Barcelona, Spain, next week for a two-day meeting aimed at furthering cross-border cooperation and guaranteeing Jewish continuity. The meeting of the European Council of Jewish Communities will bring together senior lay leaders from the emerging communities in post-Communist Eastern and Central Europe as well as from established communities in the West.

Survivors meet with Swiss Cabinet members

ZURICH (JTA) — Two Holocaust survivors whose parents died in Auschwitz after they were deported from Switzerland in 1942 met with members of the Swiss Cabinet.

Interior Minister Ruth Dreifuss, who last year served as the nation's first Jewish president, was among the ministers meeting Tuesday with Sabine and Charles Sonabend. Days earlier, the two received an out-of-court settlement of \$118,000 to cover their costs from a legal battle with the government over their parents' deportation. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**Rise in violent hate crimes worries Czech Republic's Jews***By Magnus Bennett*

PRAGUE (JTA) — The Czech Republic's chief rabbi understands from personal experience just how frightening it is to be a target of hate.

Rabbi Karol Sidon, out for a stroll with his young son last winter, faced a volley of insults and abuse from a large group of skinheads who had started to tail him.

"I was worried because there were quite a lot of them and there were no policemen around," Sidon said. "I told them if they wanted to fight, that was OK as long as they let my son go."

Sidon escaped without injury, but the episode illustrates the Jewish community's wider concern — the threat posed by neo-Nazi hate groups.

Since 1989, at least 13 killings have been deemed to be racially motivated by the Czech government's human rights commission. Eleven cases involved Gypsies and two involved foreigners from North Africa.

According to the Czech Ministry of Interior, three or four extreme right-wing organizations are registered with the authorities, but there are dozens of groups operating in the country.

A number of groups, such as Blood and Honor and the Hammerskins, are known to have links with international extremist organizations.

Official police statistics also show a steady rise over the past few years in the number of racially motivated crimes, such as inciting racial hatred and verbally abusing a nation or race.

But Czech officials and human rights activists are unsure about the gravity of the problem.

"We have statistics which imply that the incidence of racially motivated attacks is growing, yet at the same time we know the police are doing a better job — if only because they could only improve on their performance at the beginning of the 1990s," said Jan Jarab of the Czech government's human rights commission.

The manner in which crimes are defined in the Czech courts further complicates the picture. The U.S. State Department's recent annual report on human rights said the number of attacks in the Czech Republic was probably higher than recorded because the courts did not categorize attacks on Gypsies as racially motivated.

Although the Roma — as the Gypsies are known — have borne the brunt of attacks and abuse, Jews have also been targeted by some of the country's estimated 5,000 skinheads. The following is a small sample of cases:

- November 1998: A 17-year-old skinhead stabs a 22-year-old Jewish soldier in a Prague restaurant.
- November 1998: Headstones in a cemetery in the eastern Czech town of Trutnov are sprayed with anti-Jewish graffiti. A plaque marking the site of the town's former synagogue is also covered in graffiti, as is a monument to Jewish girls used as slave laborers in World War II.
- March 1999: A police officer in Ostrov is charged with making racial insults against a group of Roma. In 1998, the same officer received a one-year suspended sentence for wearing a swastika in public.
- June 1999: A Prague court prohibits the editor of the

right-wing weekly *Republika* from publishing for 10 years following the publication of two articles containing anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi views.

- March 2000: The Federation of Czech Jewish Communities receives an e-mail threatening that skinheads would be coming to its headquarters to beat them up. So far nothing has happened.

- April 2000: Police confiscate dozens of CDs promoting neo-Nazism, racism and xenophobia at a market close to the Czech-German border. Two Vietnamese traders are arrested in the second such case within a week.

Other developments in recent weeks have worried human rights activists and caused considerable anxiety among Jewish groups in the country. Last month, a documentary by German television station ZDF reported that German neo-Nazis had found new room for their activities in the Czech Republic, undergoing paramilitary training at a former army base.

In a fax to the TV station's Prague office, Czech Ministry of Interior spokesman Milan Kriz confirmed that paramilitary exercises of different extremist groups are taking place in the Czech Republic, but added, "We cannot confirm the presence of individuals or groups from foreign countries."

One of the Jewish community's main concerns is the perception that the police and the courts have acted leniently toward skinheads and other extremists who have been accused of racially motivated crime, thereby sending the wrong signal to perpetrators.

"Of course we would like to see the Czech authorities being tougher by introducing and keeping the concept of zero tolerance towards hatred," said Tomas Kraus, executive director of the Federation of Czech Jewish Communities.

"I have to stress it is not because of the Jews or any other minorities. It is for the sake of the majority."

Jarab said he shares these concerns.

A further concern to human rights groups in the Czech Republic is the way extremists appear to be changing tactics by increasingly looking towards a political platform to air their views.

One right-wing group, the National Alliance, which was disbanded recently, says it will set up a political party soon.

The movement gained notoriety recently when its chairman, Vladimir Skoupy, was charged with propagating fascism for allegedly wearing Nazi symbols during a far-right demonstration in February.

Despite this, National Alliance spokesman Michal Podalak claimed the movement was against discrimination.

"We are not a skinhead organization," he said, "but we don't judge people on the basis of their looks. So I can't really say how many skinheads there are in our organization."

Some believe that the Czech authorities are at last showing signs of taking the issue of racism seriously. Michal Horak of the human rights group HOST welcomed the decision by the Ministry of the Interior to disband the National Alliance.

"The National Alliance is the first case of an officially registered right-wing organization being closed," Horak said. "I think official structures in this country are beginning to take the necessary steps to resolve the problem."

A successful conclusion to the issue cannot come quickly enough for Jews and other minority groups in the Czech Republic.

"We are not as threatened as the Romanies of course," Sidon said. "Unfortunately, skinheads are a feature of this society, and in a sense they represent its opinions and characteristics." □