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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Mideast talks begin again

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met Sunday in an attempt to restart the peace talks after the Camp David summit. More meetings are planned during the next several days.

Meanwhile, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy delayed his decision on whether he will resign from Prime Minister Ehud Barak's government.

Levy's delay appeared to indicate that the foreign minister would not vote against Barak in a no-confidence vote scheduled for Monday in the Israeli Knesset. [Page 1]

Republicans court Jewish vote

Jewish Republicans kicked off the U.S. Republican national convention in Philadelphia with a series of events featuring party officials courting the Jewish vote.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Newt Gingrich were among the dignitaries appearing at separate events sponsored by the Republican Jewish Coalition, and by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and United Jewish Communities.

The Republican Party platform says that the United States has a "moral and legal obligation" to move its embassy and ambassador to Jerusalem.

The platform, which has yet to be ratified by convention delegates, also opposes a unilateral declaration of statehood by the Palestinians.

Panel to hear 'Iran 10' appeal

A three-judge panel will review the appeal by 10 Iranian Jews sentenced to two to 13 years in prison for allegedly spying for Israel, according to an Iranian judiciary official.

The Iranian government said it would not accept any outside interference into the case. President Clinton said in a letter released last Friday that he has asked other world leaders to raise the issue with Iran.

Jews injured in German incident

Last week's bomb attack at a train station in Dusseldorf, Germany, may have been an anti-Semitic act, investigators say.

Nine people, several of them recent Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, were injured in the July 27 blast.

Clinton stands by Barak in an Israel TV interview

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In an interview designed to shore up support for Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, President Clinton said he will look into moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

In making the comments about the embassy, Clinton was reportedly responding to a request from Barak, who faced a scheduled no-confidence vote in the Israeli Knesset on Monday as polls show his support among the Israeli public is diminishing.

The statement, which Clinton made in an exclusive interview to Israel Television broadcast last Friday, drew immediate anger from Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world.

"I have always wanted to move our embassy to west Jerusalem. We have a designated site there," Clinton said.

"I have not done so because I didn't want to do anything to undermine our ability to help to broker a secure and fair and lasting peace for Israelis and for Palestinians. But in light of what has happened" at Camp David, "I've taken that decision under review, and I'll make a decision sometime between now and the end of the year on that."

Contacts between Israel and the Palestinians resumed Sunday. Israeli negotiator Oded Eran met with his Palestinian counterpart, Saeb Erekat, to discuss less controversial issues, including another Israeli pullback from the West Bank and a demand for the release of 250 Palestinian security prisoners held in Israeli jails.

Some 53 percent of respondents to a poll published last Friday in the Jerusalem Post said Barak offered "too much" at Camp David.

Eleven percent said he did not offer enough, while 28 percent said he offered the right amount.

Barak received a boost Sunday, when Foreign Minister David Levy said he would delay his decision on whether to remain in Barak's coalition in the hopes of persuading him to form a national unity government with the opposition Likud Party.

In the Israel Television broadcast, Clinton made several additional comments regarding the Middle East and the just-concluded Camp David talks, among them:

- Clinton warned of consequences if the Palestinians carry out their threat to unilaterally declare statehood in mid-September. But he did not say whether he would support an initiative in the U.S. Congress to cut off aid to the Palestinians if they make a unilateral declaration.

"Our entire relationship will be reviewed," Clinton said. "I think it would be a big mistake to take a unilateral action and walk away from the peace process. And if it happens, there will inevitably be consequences — not just here, but throughout the world, and things will happen. I would review our entire relationship, including, but not limited" to financial aid.

- The Palestinians agreed at Camp David that a fund should be created for Jewish refugees expelled from Arab lands following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The president said he recently sought money for such a fund from European nations and Japan. This fund would be in addition to a proposed fund to compensate Palestinian refugees who fled to Arab states during Israel's War of Independence.

- The Clinton administration would begin a comprehensive review of the strategic relationship between Israel and the United States aimed at ensuring that "Israel maintains its qualitative edge, modernizes" its army "and meets the new threats that Israel and the other countries will face in the 21st century." Clinton spoke of providing

MIDEAST FOCUS

Mossad seeks a few good agents

Israel's Mossad intelligence agency is openly seeking new agents for the first time.

The campaign will include newspaper ads and letters to college graduates.

The Prime Minister's Office said it began the campaign because of increased competition with high-tech companies for qualified personnel.

U.N. troops deploy along border

Some United Nations' troops took up positions along the Israel-Lebanon border, beginning the deployment of international peacekeeping troops there. U.N. and Lebanese officials are expected to discuss the peacekeepers' full deployment and the stationing of Lebanese troops in the southern part of the country.

Hamas leader arrested

Palestinian police reportedly arrested a Hamas leader who has been a critic of the Middle East peace process. Officials would not comment on the reasons for arresting Abdel Aziz Rantissi, who called for a renewed jihad, or holy war, last week after the Camp David summit.

"I renew my request to give Hamas a five-year chance to work its jihad and resistance. Within five years, Hamas will be able to achieve the gradual liberation of all of Palestine," he said last week.

Report: Hezbollah crossed border

Hezbollah units twice crossed into Israeli territory from Lebanon during the last month, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

Israeli defense sources told the paper it was possible the two units unwittingly entered Israel because there is no permanent border fence in the area near Mount Hermon, or that it was possible the units were trying to test Israel's response and gather information on Israeli army activities.



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further assistance to Israel in light of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in order to maintain the Jewish state's security along its northern border.

The Arab media attacked Clinton's remarks, saying they revealed pro-Israel sympathies that barred him from being an honest broker in the peace process.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat accused the Americans of trying to blame the Palestinians for the failure of the Camp David summit.

Speaking in Paris, Arafat said his tour of capitals in Europe and the Middle East would counter "the big lies that they are trying to put out about what happened at Camp David."

Arafat added the Palestinians would declare a state when the "time is right."

Israel and the Palestinians have set a Sept. 13 target date for reaching a final peace accord. The Palestinians have said they will declare a state then, with or without a peace agreement.

Israel has previously threatened that it would respond to such a move with its own unilateral steps, including the annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Regarding the president's comments on the embassy, the militant Islamic Hamas movement warned the United States that if it moves its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem "the entire interests of the United States will be in danger in all Islamic states." □

Congress OKs bill to discourage local laws that block synagogues

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish groups are praising passage of a religious liberty bill — despite the legislation's limited scope and effect.

During the past several years, legislation designed to protect religious groups and minorities has undergone many changes and produced some discord among Jewish organizations.

The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000, passed July 27 by the U.S. House and Senate, requires state and local governments to provide compelling reasons for zoning laws that block religious institutions.

Many religious institutions say churches, synagogues and other religious assemblies are often discriminated against through unreasonable land-use regulations.

The Orthodox Union hailed the bill's passage, saying Jewish communities now can build synagogues without discrimination or undue interference from government authorities.

The religious land use act also establishes the rights of prisoners and nursing home and group home patients to freely exercise their religion.

Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), a co-sponsor of the bill, said the prisoners and mental health patients who have not been allowed to practice their faith include Jewish prisoners who have been prevented from having matzah during Passover even when Jewish groups donated the food for free.

The land use act is a more limited version of the Religious Liberties Protection Act, which failed last year.

That bill ran into trouble when some supporters, including the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said the bill would have endangered certain civil rights protections.

In a statement, the Religious Action Center said the current legislation is of "monumental importance" as it will ensure "religious life in America will flourish without undue government interference."

The American Jewish Congress said the bill provides "important protection" but does not provide universal protection for religious liberty.

The AJCongress said the effort to provide more comprehensive protection for religious liberty will now shift to state legislatures and state and federal courts.

The bill passed both the House of Representatives and the Senate in a last-minute rush before Congress broke for its August recess.

President Clinton is expected to sign the bill soon. □

JEWISH WORLD

Russian Jewish banker arrested

The leader of the Jewish community in the Russian city of Magnitogorsk was arrested July 27 for alleged embezzlement.

The charges against Gennady Rubin, a banker who heads the local branch of the Russian Jewish Congress, are the same as those recently dropped against Vladimir Goussinsky, the media mogul who is the group's president.

Hate crimes up in Calif.

Hate crimes increased in California by 12 percent in 1999, according to a report from the state's attorney general.

The largest number of victims of the 1,962 hate crimes were African Americans. Anti-Semitic attacks were classified under the religion category, which made up 17 percent of the total number of attacks.

Birthright registration begins

Birthright Israel announced that registration for Winter 2001 trips to Israel will begin Tuesday.

Program organizers expect to take 7,500 Jewish young adults from North America on a first-time trip to Israel.

The number of participants is expected to roughly double the number who went last year.

Massacre in Poland marked

Rabbis joined other religious leaders in prayers in Poland as a memorial was dedicated last Friday to thousands of Polish officers killed by Soviet secret police during World War II.

Until 1990, the Soviet Union claimed that the Nazis had killed the 4,000 people in the 1940 Katyn massacre.

Some 500 Soviet victims of the Nazis are also buried in mass graves there.

Study: Infant pain may linger

Pain administered in infancy, such as circumcision without anesthesia, could have long-term negative effects, according to a new study.

But scientists say the study, which was conducted on rats, would have to be replicated on humans before any conclusions can be drawn.

Jewish Agency official dies at 65

Uri Gordon, head of the Jewish Agency for Israel's department of immigration and absorption, died over the weekend at the age of 65.

Gordon supervised the absorption of 14,000 Ethiopian Jews who entered Israel as part of Operation Solomon during the early 1990s, and in recent years was involved in absorbing Jews from the former Soviet Union.

Judge strips U.S. citizenship from alleged Nazi camp guard

By Brian Seidman

NEW YORK (JTA) — A U.S. judge has revoked the citizenship of a 76-year-old suburban Philadelphia man accused of serving as a concentration camp guard during World War II.

The most damaging evidence against Theodor Szebinskyj, a retired machinist, came from six World War II documents released after the collapse of the Soviet Union and from the videotaped testimony of the wife of the owner of a farm where Szebinskyj worked in the early 1940s.

Szebinskyj claimed he worked at now-88 year-old Hildegard Lechner's farm until November 1944.

But Lechner, whose husband was a Nazi soldier, recalls that he left in the fall of 1942.

Lechner's date corresponds with the wartime documents, which show Szebinskyj working as a concentration camp guard from 1943 to 1945.

Szebinskyj's lawyer questioned Lechner's testimony.

Lechner supported the Nazis and was "given slave laborers to work her farm for the betterment of the Third Reich.

"I don't see any difference between her relationship with Mr. Szebinskyj and a slave owner in the Deep South before the Civil War," said Andre Michniak, Szebinskyj's lawyer.

"Most people in this country question a slave owner in the South when they say something in conflict with a runaway slave."

It is unclear whether Szebinskyj actually ran away from the farm or left on his own accord.

"You need something more than just paper that says someone was somewhere," said Michniak, suggesting that Szebinskyj's identification might have been used without his knowledge.

The documents, however, include Szebinskyj's date of birth, religion, mother's name and address, and physical description.

The Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, which began the investigation against Szebinskyj, remains firm on the man's wartime activities.

"This decision is proof that the cries for justice of the surviving victims from this terrible period in human history are still heard," said Eli Rosenbaum, director of OSI.

"Szebinskyj and other SS Death's Head guards were integral parts of the Nazi system of degradation, brutality and murder."

Szebinskyj is accused of serving at concentration camps that include Gross-Rosen in Poland and Sachsenhausen in Germany.

Szebinskyj, who was born in what is now Ukraine, entered the United States in 1950, becoming a naturalized citizen in 1958.

There is no record that Szebinskyj directly harmed anyone, but Judge Stewart Dalzell wrote in his July 24 ruling that concentration camp guards received new assignments daily "and none could plausibly contend that he spent the war merely watching from the edge.

"The heavy presumption from this incontrovertible historical record is that guards were, at a minimum, complicit in this closed culture of murder even if there may not be hard evidence of actual homicide at a particular guard's hands."

Michniak said that Szebinskyj learned of the investigation in late 1996 through a letter asking him to appear for a sworn interview. Michniak said that Szebinskyj's compliance with authorities adds credibility to his denial of the charges.

"Most people would get a lawyer, but" Szebinskyj "just walked right in there," Michniak said. "This is someone who did not try to hide in any way."

Szebinskyj plans to appeal the ruling. Deportation proceedings have not yet begun.

Rosenbaum, who estimates his office is currently investigating 250 suspected Nazis, maintains that Szebinskyj is "one of the people who did the dirty work of the Nazis."

"This is a major victory for the government in Nazi cases," Rosenbaum said. □

Proposal for Orthodox women who want divorces dies in Britain

By Richard Allen Greene

LONDON (JTA) — British advocates for the rights of women whose husbands will not grant them Jewish divorces are disappointed at the defeat of a bill designed to remedy the problem.

The Board of Deputies, which represents most British Jews, vowed to continue to press for a change to the law after the House of Commons rejected the bill July 21.

"We are deeply disappointed that, after the bill's rapid passage through the House of Lords, it should fail on a single objection," said Jo Wagerman, the board's president.

"We will be exploring all possible avenues to see how we can have the bill brought back into Parliament as a matter of priority," she said.

Some leading activists on behalf of agunot, as these women are known, took the defeat of the bill in stride.

"We didn't hold a great deal of store by it anyway," said Sandra Blackman, who co-chairs the Agunot Campaign, a group that supports agunot.

"The only way the situation can be resolved is by rabbinic authorities," she said. "It's not an enormous disappointment, just a small disappointment," she said.

The bill's rejection means it will not have another chance of passage for two years, given that Parliament is about to recess for the summer and the likelihood that a general election will be held next year, said Andrew Dismore, the member of Parliament who took responsibility for the bill in the House of Commons.

Proposed by Lord Lester, a human rights lawyer, the bill would have given British courts the power to withhold the final stage of a civil divorce if a husband refuses to give his wife a get, a Jewish divorce.

The defeat of the bill, aimed at helping agunot, Hebrew for "chained women," is "absolutely appalling," said Dismore.

Agunot are prevented from remarrying in an Orthodox ceremony. Children born to an agunah are classified as mamzerim, or illegitimate, and may marry only other mamzerim, according to Jewish law.

No such provision applies to a husband who fathers children without first completing the Orthodox requirements for divorce.

The legislator whose objection killed the proposal said he is opposed to the form of the bill, not the substance.

"I don't know what the contents of the bill are. It hasn't been discussed or debated," said Eric Forth.

The bill was what is known as a private member's bill, one sponsored by an individual legislator, not the government.

"It's absolutely proper that it's difficult to make laws," Forth said in defense of his action. "I would have thought that the Jews of all people would be suspicious of laws being made in a peremptory manner."

British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks had urged him not to object to the bill, according to Forth.

Blackman also pointed out that English courts can withhold what is known as the decree absolute, the final stage of an English civil divorce, without the proposed law.

"The judge withheld the decree absolute" until the husband granted his wife a religious divorce, she said. □

ARTS & CULTURE

Chronicler of Jewish events does not know about 'retirement'

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — "I'm glad you caught me now," says Ruth Gruber, talking by phone recently from her Manhattan apartment. "Tomorrow at 7 a.m. I'm leaving for Toronto, where CBS is doing a four-hour miniseries based on my book 'Haven.'"

"Then Random House is sending me on a 20-city tour to publicize the republication of four of my books."

In between, she'll stop off in Beverly Hills, Calif., on Aug. 9, proclaimed Ruth Gruber Day by the mayor, to accept an award from the Israel Cancer Research Fund.

Not too bad for a lady of 88, whose participation in the defining events of the 20th century, as eyewitness and chronicler, can be equaled by few living contemporaries.

Even a bare outline of her accomplishments boggles the mind: Born in Brooklyn, she earned a doctorate at the age of 20 and was foreign correspondent in Nazi Germany, an explorer in the Soviet Arctic and a researcher in Alaska.

All that was only a run-up to her biggest assignment. In June 1944, Interior Secretary Harold Ickes called in Gruber to tell her that President Roosevelt had authorized the admission of 1,000 European refugees, predominantly Jewish, into the United States, as a one-time gesture.

Someone was needed to allay the refugees' fears, prepare them for their new lives in America and function as their housemother, Ickes said.

The refugees — men, women and children from 18 countries — had already been selected out of some 3,000 desperate applicants and were waiting at the Italian port of Naples, which had been earlier liberated by U.S. forces. Gruber, given the temporary rank of general, accepted the assignment.

Aboard the ship Henry Gibbins, the refugees shared facilities with wounded GIs and airmen returning to stateside hospitals.

As the Henry Gibbins, part of a convoy of 29 ships and 16 destroyers and cruisers, plowed through the Mediterranean Sea, a squadron of 30 German Air Force planes appeared overhead.

When the escorting warships opened fire, the reaction on board was two-fold. The Jews were jubilant that "somebody finally has guns shooting for us." But many of the wounded soldiers, convinced that Hitler had sent the planes because he knew that the ship was loaded with Jews, cursed that after surviving battles, "we'll now sink because of the goddamn Jews."

After the Nazi planes were driven off, Gruber realized that she had to do something to unite the two groups. She picked out the most professional singers and the best-looking women among the refugees and put on a show. The GI audience loved it.

Today, "Mother Ruth," as she was dubbed by the refugees, stays in touch with the survivors and revels in some 5,000 "grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

A second defining moment came when she managed to be the only correspondent to cover the voyage of the ill-fated refugee ship Exodus. Gruber has continued to work as an author, with 14 books to her credit, including one on the rescue of Ethiopian Jews.

She, by the way, should not be confused with JTA correspondent Ruth E. Gruber. □