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84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel remembers fallen soldiers

Sirens wailed in Israel as the Jewish state remembered its war dead.

Since Israel's creation in 1948, 19,312 Israeli soldiers have died defending their country, according to statistics released for the Jewish state's observance of Memorial Day.

At a ceremony at Mount Herzl military cemetery in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said he was all too familiar with the burial ground. "My friends, the soldiers under my command and my commanding officers are buried here," he said.

As Israel marked Memorial Day on the eve of its 53rd anniversary, the army tightened its blockade of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, fearing attacks by Palestinian militants.

Battles between Israeli troops and armed Palestinians raged Tuesday near Ramallah and other West Bank areas.

Further violence was reported Wednesday in Hebron and southern Gaza.

U.S. slams ayatollah's denial

The United States condemned Holocaust-denial statements made by Iran's spiritual leader.

After Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told a conference Tuesday in Tehran that Jews exaggerated the extent of the Holocaust to gain international sympathy, State Department spokesman Philip Reeker called the comments "outrageous and deplorable."

Such statements "do nothing to allay our concerns about Iran and its support for terrorism and opposition to Middle East peace," Reeker said.

Israel seeks 'changes' in proposal

Israel wants "some changes and improvements" in an Arab plan for restarting Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told the Jerusalem Post.

Palestinian officials say, however, any changes would erase the proposal's meaning.

The proposal calls for an end to violence and an Israeli freeze on settlement construction before talks resume on a final peace deal.

The Israeli prime minister told the newspaper he plans to send Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to Egypt to discuss the proposal before Peres goes to Washington next week.

NEWS ANALYSIS

After 100 days in office, Bush gets passing grade from Jewish leaders

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — There has been good, there has been bad, but so far it hasn't gotten that ugly.

As President Bush and his administration complete their first 100 days in office, Jewish groups give the new president a fair grade, but many are still taking a wait-and-see approach.

While some of its steps have angered many in the Jewish community — notably the faith-based initiative that would provide federal funding to religious groups providing social services — the Bush administration generally has avoided major pitfalls on issues of concern to Jewish organizations.

On the foreign policy front, the White House has avoided major criticism from Jewish groups.

Though he has not engaged in the day-to-day involvement in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that characterized the Clinton administration, Bush has not disengaged from the issue entirely. And U.S. support for Israel in the United Nations — including a key veto on a Security Council resolution to send troops to "protect" Palestinians from Israel — has helped the White House win favor in the Jewish community's eyes.

On the domestic front, Bush has run into a bit more trouble, but still has managed to maintain good ties with the Jewish community.

"All in all, many anxieties have not been realized," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

Foxman noted that Bush appears sincere about resolving potential problems and is sensitive to the Jewish community. Bush met with Jewish leaders in March to discuss a variety of topics, and Jewish leaders are beginning to find a comfort level with Bush, Foxman said.

"There is a willingness to engage more with the administration," said Jason Isaacson, director of government and international affairs for the American Jewish Committee.

April 30 will mark Bush's first 100 days in the White House, the traditional checkpoint of a new president's performance.

Jewish groups still want to give Bush a chance to establish himself. At the same time, the groups also have an interest in ingratiating themselves with a new White House that might look to them later for input and lend an ear to their concerns.

With the release of Bush's budget plan earlier this month, Jewish groups have gotten a clearer picture of his agenda. Some groups criticized the budget as a conservative document with misguided priorities, and social service groups say the money still falls well short of what they want.

Groups like the United Jewish Communities were unhappy with funding levels for some social service programs of key importance to the Jewish community — such as housing and refugee assistance programs — but said cuts were not as grave as feared.

Overall, the general outcry from the Jewish community that many anticipated has not emerged.

Even where administration actions might have been expected to engender criticism — such as the fact that the appointments to Bush's Cabinet did not include a single Jew — the community did not react with public anger. Instead, some Jewish leaders said it was time to stop counting heads on an ethnic basis, and noted the number of Jews in other prominent policy positions. Of course, some issues indeed have caused

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel population hits 6.2 million

There are 5.2 million Jews living in Israel, out of a total population of 6.2 million, according to the nation's Central Bureau of Statistics.

Since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, 4.5 million babies were born in Israel and 1.2 million people died, the bureau said.

IDF deputy doubts P.A.'s motives

Security meetings that Palestinian officials are holding with their Israeli counterparts do not reflect a commitment by the Palestinian Authority to halt violence, according to the Israel Defense Force's deputy chief of staff. "Just as the Palestinians made a decision to go to violence, they must make a decision to cease it, and I still don't see them taking that decision," Maj. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon told Israel's Army Radio on Wednesday.

Goussinsky arrives in Israel

New charges that Russia filed against Vladimir Goussinsky are a "joke," the Russian Jewish media magnate told Reuters following his arrival in Israel from Spain on Wednesday. After Spain refused to extradite him, the Russian government issued a new charge, money laundering, and sent a new request to Interpol for his arrest and extradition.

The charges were aimed at bringing down Goussinsky's media empire, which has been critical of the Kremlin, said Goussinsky, who added that Russian President Vladimir Putin "wants absolute power."

Buddhist defends Rachel's Tomb

A Buddhist monk from Taiwan said he is launching a movement to preserve sacred sites around the globe. Among the threatened religious sites mentioned Wednesday by the Venerable Dharma Master Hsin Tao was Rachel's Tomb near Bethlehem. The site has come under repeated assaults by Palestinian gunmen since violence erupted in the region last September.



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consternation in the Jewish community. During the campaign, Bush had promised to regulate emissions of carbon dioxide and other pollutants from power plants, and indicated support for the Kyoto Protocol, an agreement to combat global warming.

Since taking office, however, Bush has backed away from both commitments. He said he will not include carbon dioxide in a multi-pollutant bill and appears to have abandoned the Kyoto agreement. Also, he has set in motion a Cabinet-level review of global policy.

The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life joined a broad coalition of religious groups calling on Bush to combat global warming and address issues such as a reliance on oil and coal — industries closely tied to the administration — for energy.

The proposed repeal of the estate tax — a relatively high tax on the estates of recently deceased persons — has funders concerned that charitable giving will suffer.

Some studies have estimated that repealing the estate tax, which is levied at graduated rates depending on the size of the estate, could reduce charitable gifts and bequests by close to \$6 billion annually. The organized Jewish community at first stayed quiet on the issue, worried about offending big donors.

Last week, however, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism urged Congress to reject efforts to repeal the estate tax. The group's executive vice president, Rabbi Jerome Epstein, argued that eliminating the tax would remove an incentive for the wealthy to donate to charitable, philanthropic and educational organizations.

Despite the community's continued willingness to give Bush the benefit of the doubt, the most controversial issue has been the administration's faith-based initiative.

Bush wants to expand charitable choice, which passed as part of the 1996 welfare reform, and has established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Charitable choice allows religious institutions to bid for government contracts to provide services to welfare recipients.

Most Jewish groups are opposed to expanding financial partnerships between government and religious organizations in the manner suggested by the Bush administration, and want assurances that secular alternatives to religious programs will be available — and that beneficiaries of social services will not be proselytized.

Such groups say the program chips away at the constitutional separation between church and state, could allow for employment discrimination based on religion and may infringe on religious liberties.

Orthodox groups, on the other hand, are pleased with the chance to get more funding for their religious organizations that run soup kitchens and other programs. They say faith-based programs are successful and faith-based institutions should play a greater role in providing social services. Previously, synagogues and churches had to establish separate, non-religious entities to run such programs.

Bush reportedly termed his faith-based plan a "work in progress," and said he was willing to work with the Jewish community on the matter.

Jewish groups are concerned over which religious groups will receive government money, an issue that remains unresolved. Despite the concern on domestic issues, Bush has earned praise for his position on Israel.

The United States has taken a lower-key role, with Bush vowing that America will be a facilitator for peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians rather than a party forcing new steps.

In addition, Bush has taken several symbolic steps to emphasize his affinity with Israel: Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was the first Middle East leader Bush invited to the White House, and the administration has made clear that Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat will not be invited to the Oval Office until he makes a concerted effort to stop Palestinian violence, according to David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Even after the State Department called last week's Israeli occupation of part of the Gaza Strip an "excessive and disproportionate" reaction to Palestinian attacks, Jewish groups did not get up in arms.

Some Jewish organizations were not critical of the strong U.S. statement, saying they understood that the Bush administration feels compelled to issue tough comments on Israel in order to win Arab support for America's Iraq policy.

At the United Nations, in addition to the veto for the peacekeeping force, the United States last week voted against resolutions accusing Israel of human rights violations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. □

JEWISH WORLD

Lower East Side now historic site

Manhattan's Lower East Side, long home to immigrant groups, was designated a historic district in both state and federal registers. Between the 1880s and 1920s, the neighborhood was thought to be home to the world's largest Jewish community.

Diplomat to head D.C. think tank

Edward Walker, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, will become the next president of the Middle East Institute. Walker, an ambassador to Israel under President Clinton, will take up the post at the Washington-based think tank next month.

Chasid elected to Iowa council

A Chasidic Jew was elected by a broad margin to the city council of a predominantly Christian Iowa town. Aaron Goldsmith, who defeated a lifelong resident of Postville in a special election to fill a vacant seat, is one of hundreds of Lubavitch Jews to move to the town in recent years, following the establishment of a kosher slaughterhouse there.

Jewish war memorial destroyed

A memorial in Russia's Caucasus region to more than 300 Jewish soldiers who died in World War II was destroyed by vandals, according to the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews. The memorial in the city of Vladikavkaz was slated to be dedicated next month. Anti-Semitic slogans were reportedly painted on what remains of the monument.

Putin wants anti-racism campaign

Russian President Vladimir Putin called for a crackdown on racists. He told his Cabinet that such acts were becoming more frequent. "For Russia, a multi-ethnic country, this is absolutely unacceptable," he said. His comments followed a series of attacks on Chechens last Friday, when skinheads marked Hitler's birthday.

Hungarian cemetery desecrated

A group of children recently desecrated a Jewish cemetery in Hungary, according to reports cited by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Twenty-two headstones were knocked down in the Jaszkarajeno cemetery and painted with swastikas.

Genealogy center opens in N.Y.

A genealogical institute opened at the Center for Jewish History in New York. The institute provides free access to Ancestry.com, a fee-based Web site, while the center itself houses 100 million archival documents belonging to five Jewish institutions. Information about the institute is available at cjh.org.

U.S. pullout from Sinai would harm stability in the Mideast, analysts say

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Bush administration seems to be reconsidering plans to downsize the U.S. presence in the Sinai Peninsula following strong criticism in the United States and Middle East.

News reports last week said U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had broached the idea of withdrawing U.S. troops from the Multinational Force and Observers, a peacekeeping mission with 1,900 international troops. Rumsfeld broached the idea to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during their recent Washington visits.

The suggestion was not well-received. Though Sharon ultimately said he would go along with the move, both Israel and Egypt have officially opposed the withdrawal of troops, and U.S. analysts believe the timing of a potential pullout is wrong.

"What concerns people the most is the timing and the signal it sends to the region about U.S. involvement," said Tamara Wittes, director of programs at the Middle East Institute, a Washington-based think tank.

Wittes, noting that Rumsfeld's timing was probably unintentional, said the peacekeeping force acts as a deterrent to violence.

"It's not a peace that Egypt publicly is committed to," she said. "In their strategic planning, the Egyptian military and Israeli military still view each other as adversaries."

The troops, she said, act as a buffer between the two countries, and also serve as a monitoring force, reviewing the actions of both militaries.

The United States is one of 11 countries participating in the mission, and currently 860 U.S. troops are in the Sinai. There have been no major incidents along the border the troops patrol since the mission began in 1982.

Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, a Philadelphia-based think tank, said the troops have become "part of the scenery" and their removal could be a disruption to peace.

"However quiet they've been, they are a force for stability," Pipes said. "We can only worry that a unilateral withdrawal can lead to problems."

Tom Neumann, executive director of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, said the troop deployment is important in the "psychological parameter."

"It shows that the U.S. carries through and doesn't leave and desert the area," Neumann said.

The Bush administration appears to have backed off from the proposal in recent days, and has reaffirmed that Secretary of State Colin Powell was informed of the plan before Mubarak and Sharon, contrary to earlier reports.

Defense Department officials said the review of the U.S. officers in the Sinai region is part of the administration's review of all international deployments.

"It's a complicated process to go through this, but you've got to start somewhere," Defense Department spokesman Craig Quigley said.

"And there's no question that conceptually, the president very much wants to look at this around the world."

Bush echoed those comments April 19.

"I understand we've made commitments, and we just won't simply walk away from our commitments," he said. "We'll consult with our allies, we'll lay the groundwork for reductions if, in fact, we think it is our nation's best interest and the world's interest" to do so.

In May 1967, a United Nations force left the Sinai after pressure from Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser.

Nasser subsequently closed the strategic Straits of Tiran to Israel-bound ships and moved Egyptian troops toward the border with Israel, sparking the Six-Day War.

Under the Camp David Accords signed in 1979, removal of the current Sinai peacekeeping force would require both Israeli and Egyptian approval.

Pipes said the United States should sit down with Egypt and Israel before removing the troops.

He also suggested that the two countries might be willing to pay for the protection that the U.S. and other allies provide. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

New synagogue project unites Bosnians of different backgrounds

By Ruth Gruber

SARAJEVO, Bosnia (JTA) — In a country riven by ethnic violence during the past decade, leaders from Bosnia's three main religious communities joined this week with Jewish officials to lay the cornerstone for a synagogue and Jewish cultural center.

Bosnian Muslim, Croat and Serb religious leaders joined local Jews and international officials at Tuesday's ceremony in the Bosnian city of Mostar.

The project is believed to be the first synagogue built from the ground up in the Balkans since World War II.

A new synagogue was inaugurated last year in Skopje, Macedonia, but it is located in the Jewish community building.

"The Mostar synagogue is an important symbol of new life — not just for Jews, but for the whole country," said Jakob Finci, president of the Bosnian Jewish community.

"It is especially important that it is being built in a small town that was sharply divided between Muslims and Croats and heavily damaged during the war in the 1990s," he said.

Mostar's Jewish community has only about 45 members. Its leader, Zoran Mandlbaum, became a local hero during the Bosnian war for his nonsectarian humanitarian work.

His efforts were crucial in getting the synagogue project off the ground.

Construction of the three-story complex will be financed by Mostar municipal authorities, who pledge to complete the building next year.

The complex is located just 100 yards from the site of the famous 16th-century stone bridge at Mostar that was destroyed by Croat mortar fire in November 1993.

The bridge is to be rebuilt under the auspices of UNESCO. Mostar officials say they hope the synagogue and bridge can be inaugurated at the same time.

In addition to the synagogue, the Jewish complex will include a cultural center open to members of all faiths.

"A synagogue in itself is open one day a week," Finci said. "But the culture center will be open three days a week. We hope it will be a wonderful meeting point for Christians, Muslims and Jews to learn how similar and close we are, all children of one God."

Taking part in the cornerstone-laying ceremony were a Serbian Orthodox archbishop, the deputy Catholic bishop of Mostar and an Islamic official, the chief imam of Mostar.

The ceremony was the first time in months that senior officials of Bosnia's three religions joined together, Finci said.

In addition, Mostar's Croat mayor and Muslim deputy mayor attended, along with foreign ambassadors and other senior diplomats.

"It seems as if the Jews are the only glue that can bring together these groups," quipped one senior Western official who attended.

American representatives did not attend, however.

This was because of a travel ban to Mostar and surrounding areas that the United States imposed on American officials after violent riots by Croat extremists erupted there earlier this month.

Ironically, the travel ban prevented a 10-member delegation of

the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee currently visiting Bosnia from attending the ceremony.

JDC officials said that, as an American delegation, the group had to bow to the directives of the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo and State Department. □

As Britain conducts its census, religion question ruffles feathers

By Richard Allen Greene

LONDON (JTA) — For the first time since 1851, Britain's census includes a question on religion this year.

The official bodies of British Jewry welcome the question on faith, but some Jewish thinkers believe the effort to draw a religious map of Britain is seriously flawed.

Sociologist Barry Kosmin, director of the British-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research, warned as far back as 1999 that the question will create "a false picture of homogeneity" because it fails to distinguish among different Christian groups.

"One can picture the pie chart already: a solid block of undifferentiated Christians taking up about 90 percent of the circle, with tiny slivers of exotics, and, for the most part, non-European faiths making up the rest," he said.

The questionnaire "is not a census for a multicultural Britain," Kosmin added. "Instead of providing the data needed for building the communal structures appropriate to diverse local populations, it will create a false map of homogeneity over large areas of the U.K. alongside small, 'exotic' enclaves."

Approximately 285,000 Jews live in Britain, out of a total population of some 59 million.

Kosmin also is concerned that there is no "Jewish" option on a question about ethnicity, only on the religious question.

He wondered how many Jews would respond to the religion question at all. The religion question is the only voluntary one on the census, which includes mandatory questions about housing, education, health, transport and work.

"It will be interesting to see, given the current climate, how relaxed people feel about identifying themselves," Kosmin said, pointing out that Britain's Jews are nervous about potential anti-Semitism linked to Mideast violence.

The Board of Deputies, the umbrella organization that represents most British Jews, said it is making every effort to ensure that Jews answer the religion question.

Checking the Jewish box "is an easy, anonymous way of aligning with the Jewish community. The community needs your positive response to this unprecedented question," the board said in a statement in the run-up to the census, which begins next week.

Marlena Schmool, community issues director for the board, agreed with Kosmin's concerns.

"Ninety-six percent" of respondents "will probably say Christian" when asked their religion, Schmool acknowledged. But she added that the board hopes the census will give a better picture of how many Jews there are in Britain and what their needs are.

The Office of National Statistics, which is running the census, defended the question, saying that the faith groups they consulted were the most eager for a religion question.

Aside from the concerns of some civil liberties campaigners, the office has found little resistance to the question, spokesman David Marder said. □