



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 79, No. 85

Monday, May 7, 2001

84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S. exclusion from panel blasted

Jewish groups condemned a U.N. vote that excluded the United States from the world body's Geneva-based Human Rights Commission.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations said after the May 3 vote, "It is outrageous when the worst violators of human rights are now dictating the agenda of this important commission." Commission members include Sudan and Libya, two nations on the U.S. list of terrorism sponsors.

Freeze on settlements rejected

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon rejected a recommendation by a U.S.-led commission that Israel freeze all settlement construction.

Sharon said Sunday that the recommendation by the Mitchell Commission flies in the face of Israeli-Palestinian accords, Israel Radio reported.

Meanwhile, violence in the region showed no signs of abating. [Page 4]

Katsav: Assad's an anti-Semite

Israeli President Moshe Katsav called Syrian President Bashar Assad an anti-Semite on Sunday.

In a speech welcoming Pope John Paul to Syria on Saturday, Assad blamed Israel for oppressing Arabs and compared it to the way the Jews had "betrayed" Jesus and the Prophet Mohammad.

The pope did not respond.

"Just as the Vatican cleared the Jewish nation of the blood libel," Katsav said, "so the Vatican has to respond to Assad's remarks."

The pope is visiting Syria as part of a trip retracing the steps of the Apostle Paul.

eBay bans Nazi material

Jewish groups are applauding eBay's decision to ban Nazi memorabilia from its online auction site, effective May 17. [Page 3]

Hadassah OK'd for U.N. council

Hadassah: The Women's Zionist Organization of America received final approval for consultative status in the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council.

Last week's decision — which Arab countries had opposed because of Hadassah's ties to Zionism — will enable the group to increase its work with nongovernmental organizations on humanitarian issues.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Last remnants of Jewish community guard heritage in beleaguered Eritrea

By Matthew Gutman

ASMARA, Eritrea (JTA) — The synagogue on Haile Mariam Mammo Street, with its tall white plaster walls and blue iron gate featuring a large Magen David, has welcomed few Jews or tourists since Eritrea's bloody war of liberation from Ethiopia began more than 25 years ago.

Once a thriving center of local Jewish activity, the synagogue now sits deserted, its gates locked, only one block from Asmara's central mosque and three blocks from its enormous Orthodox Christian cathedral.

Women in colorfully embroidered linen shawls and lounging shoeshine boys rarely take note of the old building, which has been there longer than any of their elders can remember. Its upkeep falls essentially to one man, Samuel Cohen, who at 53 is the youngest member of Eritrea's last Jewish family.

"The last wedding celebrated in the synagogue was in the '60s, and our last rabbi was evacuated along with the great majority of the expat community in 1975," says Cohen, a thin man with silver hair and a serious demeanor.

Decades ago, the 60-seat synagogue resonated with the sounds of grown men bickering over seats in Turkish, Italian, Hebrew and Arabic, but these days the Cohens pray alone, rocking in silence.

Since they rarely can muster a minyan, the Torah is taken out of its beautifully fashioned wooden cabinet just once a year.

At its height in the 1950s, Asmara's Jewish community numbered some 500. Jews even used to come from as far away as Khartoum, Sudan, to celebrate the High holidays, according to Samuel Cohen's uncle, David Cohen.

As the last remnants of that community, the four Cohens epitomize the plight of the wandering Jew. Samuel Cohen has lived in Eritrea most of his life and is a permanent resident — but not a citizen.

He carries a British passport.

"We are locals, but then again we're not local," he says. "I suppose this is the plight of Jews everywhere in the Diaspora. We have strong feelings for this country and we feel that it is our country; otherwise, we would have left it long ago. But we are also anchored here by financial constraints: All of our family assets are here and we cannot simply sell our house and office and leave."

Having resided in Aden — then a British colony and now part of Yemen — for more generations than Cohen's father, Menahem, can remember, Cohen's grandparents immigrated to the Eritrean port city of Massawa at the turn of the 20th century. They lived there for several years until an earthquake destroyed most of the city in 1923 and forced them to move again, this time to Asmara.

The family has since scattered to Israel, England and Italy. Cohen's parents, both in their 80s, spend much of their time visiting far-flung relatives.

Asmara, the capital, is a charming city, towering 8,000 feet above Eritrea's sultry lowlands and blessed with almost perpetual sunshine and cool breezes. Beneath the facade of neatly kept streets, multicolored art-deco buildings and bustling cafe life, however, is a country suffering from almost 40 years of war and famine that have undermined its economic stability and driven it into desperate poverty.

In many ways, the government has achieved remarkable civil stability in a country whose populace is evenly split between Muslims and Christians.

In the eight years since Eritrea became independent, the government has

MIDEAST FOCUS

P.A. wants child martyrs

A television campaign has been launched by the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Information to call on Palestinian children to become martyrs.

The campaign focuses on a Palestinian boy killed in his father's arms last fall and features children putting down their toys and picking up rocks.

High court rules for Sharon's son

The Israeli Supreme Court agreed that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's son could serve as a courier between Israel and the Palestinians in "life and death" circumstances and with the prior knowledge of the attorney general. The Movement for Quality Government in Israel had raised objections to Omri Sharon's participation in diplomatic missions for his father.

Peres to visit Germany

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres plans to visit Germany this week in an effort to drum up support for the Jewish state.

Peres hopes to have Germany vote against a possible E.U. move to criticize Israeli actions during the ongoing violence with the Palestinians.

Israel to host gay/lesbian event

Israel's umbrella organization for homosexual groups won a bid to host World Pride, a weeklong international gay, lesbian and bisexual gathering in Tel Aviv in 2004. It will mark the first time the gay pride event has taken place in Israel or anywhere else in the Middle East.

Jobless techies flock to Mossad

Laid-off Israeli high-tech workers are finding a new source of employment — the Mossad intelligence agency. The Israeli daily *Ma'ariv* reported that some 1,000 former computer employees have responded to newspaper ads seeking candidates for the Mossad's technology division.



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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significantly reduced corruption and crime and has spearheaded a massive education drive. Most importantly, it has avoided the Christian-Muslim conflict that sucked neighboring Sudan into 17 years of civil war.

The economy, however, has continued to languish. Despite its rhetorical embrace of Western-style free markets, Eritrea's government has not relinquished Marxist tenets; it still controls many industries and imports goods and food duty free, forcing private competitors out the market.

"This nationalization scheme is killing us," sighs David Cohen, 72, leaning wearily against the counter of the family's import-export shop, where goods covered with years of dust line the shelves. "We are dying here."

In the dimly lit synagogue, meanwhile, Samuel Cohen winces and lowers his voice when asked about the government, which uses spies and listening devices to stifle dissent.

A self-proclaimed optimist — with a doctorate in economics from the University of Bologna — Cohen acknowledges the government's successes, but believes only full economic liberalization will lift Eritrea out of its economic doldrums.

More important is the military confrontation with Ethiopia, which began in May 1998 and officially ended only last month.

Yet tension between the two African Horn countries still runs high.

Neither nation has fully demobilized troops, a state of alert which hampers Eritrea's economic recovery.

Nevertheless, Cohen says, "the relatively great amount of freedom we have is very important after so many years of suffering. Now you can walk anywhere at anytime.

"And," he paused, his eyes opening wide, "you can travel" — something the Cohens have done regularly since Eritrean independence in 1993.

Nevertheless, real freedom remains elusive.

"There really is no wavering from the government stance that we see printed in the papers, and while most things are better than before, there is still a long way to go," says David Cohen, absent-mindedly fingering a stack of Israeli newspapers that he calls "real news."

"But you also have to remember that most people here have lived under the reign of occupier after occupier and never had a truly democratic government. So they really don't know better."

Indeed, the list of Eritrea's colonizers reads like a who's who of 19th- and 20th-century imperialists: The Ottomans were replaced by the Egyptians in 1865, who in turn were replaced by the Italians in 1890 and the British in 1947.

They were followed by the Ethiopians in 1952 under Emperor Haile Selassie, who was succeeded in 1974 by Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The political turmoil took its toll on Eritrea's Jewish community.

After Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea to Ethiopia in 1952, a movement began in 1962 to expel Ethiopians from what the United Nations had decided would be an autonomous Eritrea, and many Jews took their cue to exit.

After fits and starts, the anti-Ethiopian revolution gained momentum in the early 1970s, and fully half the Jewish community left in the ensuing violence.

Only the hardy — and those whose assets were less liquid — stayed on.

"From the mid-'70s until 1991, we had a pretty rough time," Samuel Cohen says with some understatement.

A rough time it was indeed. As Ethiopia's major garrison in Eritrea, Asmara was under constant siege by Eritrean rebel forces and a reign of terror by its Ethiopian occupiers.

Eritreans often don't know what to make of the lonely synagogue and the dedicated Jewish family that maintains the site.

"We've had people throw coins over the gate, women light candles and people sit vigil all night. Apparently the Christians here think it is some kind of shrine," Cohen says.

Despite active proselytizing in the area by anti-Jewish, anti-Israeli clerics from Iran, Cohen insists that his family has had no serious problems with the Muslim community.

While David Cohen worries about the upkeep of the synagogue when the family leaves or dies, Samuel Cohen remains optimistic — if a little quixotic.

"Perhaps the scattered Eritrean Jews will be attracted enough by future investment opportunities to return," he says. "Stranger things have happened." □

JEWISH WORLD

Bush slams religious persecution

President Bush used a speech to the American Jewish Committee to condemn countries that persecute citizens because of their religion, singling out Sudan and China.

"It is not an accident that freedom of religion is one of the central freedoms in our Bill of Rights," Bush said May 3. "It is the first freedom of the human soul, the right to speak the words that God places in our mouths."

Poll: Germans tired of guilt

Some 60 percent of Germans surveyed feel neither guilty nor responsible for the Holocaust, and 45 percent said they are tired of being confronted with the Nazi past, according to a new poll.

The survey, published Sunday in *Der Spiegel* magazine, also had 28 percent saying Hitler would have been a great statesman had he not instigated World War II and the Holocaust.

Senators urge Red Cross visits

About a dozen U.S. senators signed a letter calling on Middle East governments to compel Hezbollah to allow Red Cross officials to visit kidnapped Israeli soldiers the Shi'ite group is holding in Lebanon.

The lawmakers, led by Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), have asked Iran, Syria and Lebanon to aid the soldiers, who were kidnapped in October.

Catholics, Jews press Vatican

Catholic and Jewish leaders agreed not to try to influence each other's theology and called for the protection of holy sites around the world.

The International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee also said in a joint statement last Friday that the Vatican should open all its World War II archives.

Holland remembers Shoah

Holland remembered Jewish victims of the Holocaust last Friday with a televised ceremony attended by Queen Beatrix and Crown Prince Willem-Alexander.

The nation's annual Holocaust Remembrance Day is followed by Liberation Day, which marks the end of the Nazi occupation on May 5, 1945.

Suit: Fries may not be 'kosher'

McDonald's is being sued by two Hindus and a vegetarian for preparing its french fries with beef fat, despite promises that after 1990 they would be cooked in vegetable oil. In addition to Hindus and vegetarians, the outcome of the class-action lawsuit could affect many Jews who partially observe kashrut by eating only vegetarian food outside the home.

U.S. Jews bid up the applause as eBay site bans Nazi memorabilia

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Jewish groups are applauding eBay's decision to ban Nazi memorabilia from its online auction site, effective May 17.

"eBay has made clear that those who wish to profit by the sale" of Nazi memorabilia "have no place in the eBay community," Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said in a statement.

The decision, which also bans material associated with murders committed in the past 100 years, exempts wartime German stamps and coins, as well as books and movies about World War II.

eBay previously had discontinued auctions involving recent hate-filled memorabilia, with the exception of items more than 50 years old that it deemed "historical."

The Simon Wiesenthal Center, which had lobbied for the policy change for two years, welcomed the decision, noting that eBay had become the largest retailer of Nazi material online — much of which is believed to be fake.

"Because eBay charges for auction listings and gets a cut of successful sales, it is morally responsible for what is available on its massive site," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, the Wiesenthal Center's associate dean.

The move by eBay, one of the most popular e-commerce auction sites, brings it in line with stricter European rules against Nazi material.

Not everyone lauded the new policy, however.

One person protesting was Arthur Rosenblatt, a Florida-based collector who has sold thousands of crime-related items through eBay, according to wire service reports.

"I'm Jewish, and I think if people want to sell Nazi memorabilia on eBay, that's their business," Rosenblatt was quoted as saying.

But Cooper disagreed. "This is not a matter of free speech rights. We're talking about commerce," he said. □

Arafat speaks of peace in Pretoria, but South African Jews are skeptical

By South Africa Jewish Report Staff

JOHANNESBURG (JTA) — Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat spoke warmly of his commitment to peace in an address last week to the Non-Aligned Movement, but the chairman of the South African Zionist Federation is highly skeptical.

Addressing the Committee on Palestine of the Non-Aligned Movement, which met in Pretoria, Arafat said the "Palestinian people have decided not to walk away from the peace process under any circumstances."

Committee members include Algeria, Bangladesh, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Senegal, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The Non-Aligned Movement came into being during the Cold War as a forum of developing countries navigating between the American and Soviet spheres of influence. Israel has been concerned about the NAM — which is overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Palestinians and critical of Israel — because its members comprise a huge bloc of votes at the United Nations.

Arafat also said he had accepted a recent Egyptian-Jordanian proposal for halting the violence — without mentioning that Palestinian officials had helped draft the proposal.

Federation chair Kenny Katz accused Arafat of duplicity, saying that Arafat's words and actions were sharply divergent.

"He may talk peace, but his actions and behavior don't suggest peace," Katz said.

Israel's ambassador to South Africa, Tova Herzl, offered a similar assessment.

"It should be noted that it is not his statements, but his actions and results that ultimately count," she said of Arafat.

Addressing the NAM conference, South African President Thabo Mbeki called on Israel and the Palestinian Authority to return to the negotiating table. □

Israel cautious on U.S. report, rejects call for settlement freeze

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli officials are giving a mixed response to the findings of a U.S.-led commission probing the causes of Israeli-Palestinian violence that erupted last September — and which continues unabated seven months later.

The officials said they are pleased that the commission found Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount last September did not cause the violence that erupted soon after, as the Palestinians originally claimed.

Some Palestinian officials later admitted that the violence had been planned for months — a claim the Mitchell Commission rejected.

The commission also recommended against deploying international observers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as the Palestinians had sought.

But Israel was dismayed by the report's linkage of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to the ongoing violence.

The report called for a halt to all Jewish settlement activity, including the "natural growth" of existing settlements.

At the same time, the report said the Palestinian leadership should crack down on terrorism if peace talks are to resume.

Sharon rejected the call for a settlement freeze. He said the recommendation by the Mitchell Commission flies in the face of previously signed Israeli-Palestinian accords, which do not state that Israel should freeze all settlement construction.

Israel has agreed not to build new settlements, but reserves the right to expand existing settlements to handle "natural population growth."

Zalman Shoval, a Sharon adviser and former ambassador to the United States, told Israel Radio on Sunday that the committee made a "big mistake" in linking the settlement issue to the outbreak of violence.

For the Palestinians, the linkage was political gold.

Yasser Abed Rabbo, the Palestinian Authority's minister of information, told a news conference Sunday that while the Mitchell Commission's findings are not complete, they could provide a way to halt the current violence.

The commission was conceived as part of a peace package at a summit in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, last October. In the end, it was the only element of the package — whose main element was an immediate cease-fire — that was implemented.

Among the report's other recommendations:

- The Palestinian Authority should prevent Palestinian gunmen from firing on or from populated areas and establish a clear chain of command for all armed personnel operating in areas under its control;

- Israel should lift closures on Palestinian areas, permit Palestinian workers to return to their jobs in Israel and transfer to the Palestinian Authority all tax revenues owed; and

- Israel should ensure that its security forces avoid destroying homes, roads and trees in Palestinian areas.

The report was presented to Israeli and Palestinian officials last Friday. A final report will be published after the two sides have a chance to respond.

Panel members include former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, the

group's chairman; Turkish President Suleyman Demirel; Thorbjørn Jagland, Norway's minister of foreign affairs; and Javier Solana, the European Union's top diplomat.

The issue of Jewish settlements also is emerging as a stumbling block to an Egyptian-Jordanian initiative aimed at stopping the violence and restarting peace talks. The initiative, drafted with the help of Palestinian officials, calls for an end to all settlement activity.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres visited Egypt, Jordan and the United States in recent weeks to offer Israeli input on the plan.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa, however, was quoted Sunday as saying that no changes could be made to the proposal.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat over the weekend called for an international summit in Sharm el-Sheik to discuss the Mitchell Committee conclusions.

Israel rejected the idea.

Sources in Jerusalem were quoted as saying that Arafat made the suggestion in an effort to get an invitation to the White House and forge closer ties with Washington.

Meanwhile, violence in the region showed no signs of abating.

Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said Sunday that he has given the army permission to enter Palestinian-controlled areas whenever the army feels it necessary for Israeli security.

Ben-Eliezer made the announcement after Israeli forces briefly entered the Arab town of Beit Jalla on the southern outskirts of Jerusalem.

Israel's incursion came after Palestinian gunmen fired at cars on a road linking Jerusalem to Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Palestinian sources reported that a Palestinian militia officer was killed during heavy fighting in Beit Jalla.

Ben-Eliezer called the army action a tactical response to the situation on the ground, and said the Israel Defense Force has no strategic interest in retaking Palestinian-controlled territory.

In other violence Sunday, five Israelis were hospitalized — one for light wounds and four for shock — after a bomb exploded in a trash can in the city of Petach Tikva on Sunday morning.

The blast was the third to rock the Tel Aviv suburb in recent weeks.

In the Gaza Strip, Palestinians on Sunday fired four mortar shells at the nearby Israeli town of Sderot and at the settlement of Netzarim, but the attacks caused no injuries.

Following a similar mortar attack last Friday on a kibbutz in the western Negev, Ben-Eliezer questioned the utility of security contacts with the Palestinians and said he would reconsider them.

In another development, Israel did not comment on Palestinian accusations that Israeli forces were behind the killing of a local Islamic Jihad leader killed by sniper fire Saturday near his home in the Bethlehem area.

The Shin Bet domestic security service recently detained two Palestinians who assisted the activist, Ahmed Khalil Issa Assad, and said he had been involved in planning terrorist attacks inside Israel, including two car bombings.

Also on Saturday, Israel fired missiles at the Palestinian intelligence headquarters in Jericho.

Israel charged that officials there had been involved in terror attacks against Israel. □