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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Youths slain in West Bank

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon condemned the murders of two Israeli youths in the West Bank, calling the youths victims of "Palestinian terror." Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat sidestepped a question about the murders.

Meanwhile, Israeli police arrested 15 Palestinians near Bethlehem for their alleged involvement in the murder of the two Israeli teen-agers, one of whom was a U.S. citizen. [Page 3]

Maccabiah victims get settlement

An Israeli court approved an agreement under which three Australian victims of the 1997 Maccabiah Games disaster will receive a total of \$6.8 million, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Sasha Elterman, a teen-aged girl who was injured in the bridge collapse, will receive \$3.4 million, while two widows will receive \$2.5 million and \$923,000, respectively. Four Australian athletes were killed and 70 injured when a temporary footbridge collapsed during the opening of the Games.

Vatican does damage control

The Vatican said it hopes the pope's silence in the face of anti-Jewish comments made by Syrian President Bashar Assad and other Syrian officials during the pope's visit to Syria this week would not damage Vatican relations with the Jewish state.

"We were guests in that country, and the position of the Holy See regarding anti-Semitism has been expressed thousands of times in very clear language," a Vatican spokesman said Wednesday.

Jewish school bans Mother's Day

U.S. conservative groups and talk show hosts are criticizing a decision by a Manhattan day school to ban celebrations of Mother's Day and Father's Day after a request from a gay parent.

The Rodeph Sholom Day School is "being very narrow-minded," Rabbi Sholem Bar-Hecht, of the Lubavitch National Committee for the Furtherance of Jewish Education, told the New York Post.

Robert Levine, the senior rabbi at Reform Congregation Rodeph Sholom, explained the decision by saying that children "who have no mother should not be have to sit in class while cards are being made for the mothers of others."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

U.S. ouster from rights panel prompts new Israel-bashing fears

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Now that the United States has been booted off the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, Jewish activists predict it will be open season on Israel at the world's leading human rights body.

During the seven months of Israeli-Palestinian violence, the Geneva-based commission has already accused Israel of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and it has issued reports and passed resolutions that Israel has deemed one-sided.

What's next? Some predict the commission just might dust off and reintroduce the notorious 1975 resolution that equated Zionism with racism.

In a stunning vote last Friday, the 53-member organization ousted the United States — effectively replacing it with Sudan, which has been in the spotlight lately for its state-sanctioned slavery trade.

With three seats available for the West, the United States came in fourth behind France, Sweden and Austria in the vote.

It's unclear what exactly led up to America's removal, but analysts suggest a range of factors:

- China, stinging from the spy-plane incident, sought to embarrass Washington and deflect attention from its own poor human rights record;
- the Europeans, trying to play a greater role on the world stage, were irritated by recent shows of U.S. unilateralism;
- Arab states were outraged by what they view as continued U.S. protection of Israel, especially its recent veto of a U.N. Security Council move to send peacekeepers into the West Bank and Gaza Strip; and
- the actions of the Bush administration itself — for being, as some have described, "asleep at the wheel" and neglecting the requisite behind-the-scenes lobbying.

While some described last Friday's ouster as a blow to "American prestige," observers suggest that the anti-American forces behind it may have won themselves only a Pyrrhic victory.

Since much of the world continues to look to the United States for moral and diplomatic leadership, observers say that without America at the table, the rights commission may have marginalized itself.

With countries like Sudan, Syria, China and Cuba sitting on the commission, "Why should anyone concerned with human rights pay attention to it?" asked Michael Colson, executive director of the Geneva-based U.N. Watch.

"I wouldn't ask a country that's all desert its opinion on forest conservation. So I may not ask a commission largely composed of abusive states, or those not willing to confront them, its opinion on human rights."

The United States has long been pressured to pay its back dues to the United Nations, a debt the world body estimates at \$1.3 billion.

While no one is calling for Washington's out-and-out disengagement from the United Nations, some Jewish activists now want the Bush administration to review its relations with the commission — and perhaps go it alone on human rights.

"It's appropriate for Congress to call hearings to re-evaluate a system that a) will never treat Israel equally among nations, and b) because of the fiasco" of certain rogue states "serving as prosecutor, jury and judge on human rights issues," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which is an accredited nongovernmental organization within the United Nations. "Instead of

MIDEAST FOCUS

West Bank town bans Arabs

Efrat officials banned Arabs from entering the West Bank town. The council took the move Wednesday after the mutilated bodies of two teen-agers from the nearby settlement of Tekoa were found dead in a cave.

Israeli Arab knows his Talmud

A Safed boy became the first Israeli Arab to compete in an annual school competition on oral Jewish law.

Amor Hayeb, a 13-year-old Muslim, came in 20th out of 1,000 pupils in Tuesday's competition for middle schoolers.

European pressure sought on P.A.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres called on Europe to exert greater pressure on Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to end attacks on Israelis.

Speaking to a group of journalists Wednesday in Berlin, Peres also said the European Union should not cut financial support to the Palestinian Authority.

Israelis form new peace lobby

A group of left-wing Israelis, including Knesset members from the Labor and Meretz parties, announced on Tuesday the formation of a group that would press the government to pursue peace efforts and adopt an Egyptian-Jordanian initiative to end the violence and restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Labor Party members taking part in the group include former Cabinet members Yossi Beilin and Shlomo Ben-Ami.

Soldiers to get safety training

In the wake of several military training accidents, the Israel Defense Force canceled all training exercises scheduled for Thursday in order to hold meetings for army units on safety precautions. Three soldiers have been killed in such accidents in recent days.



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returning with hat in hand, we should consider taking our marbles elsewhere. Nobody likes to go it alone. But the U.S. is powerful enough, and has the self-image and bipartisan support for human rights, that if it needs to skip Geneva for a few years, so be it."

Meanwhile, Jewish leaders were heartened by the long-awaited granting to Hadassah: The Women's Zionist Organization of America of a "special consultative status" to the U.N. Economic and Social Council.

For a year and a half, several Arab states have attacked the 89-year-old humanitarian organization as inherently political because of the "Zionist" in its name.

During that time, the Palestinian observer to the Commission on Human Rights has even accused some doctors who work at the Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center in Jerusalem of injecting Palestinian children with the HIV virus, said Amy Goldstein, Hadassah's director of Israel, Zionist and international affairs.

On Friday, the council admitted Hadassah and 51 other groups.

As far as the human rights commission is concerned, though, it is unclear how severely the Jewish state will be affected without its American defender.

Some say there will be a ratcheting up of anti-Israel rhetoric.

There may be more resolutions, they add — and more will pass unimpeded.

But for the most part, it's bluster, say Jewish observers.

Only the U.N. Security Council, where the United States remains one of five permanent members, can take action that is bound by international law.

Nevertheless, much of the world still looks to the commission as a moral authority that has historically set a human rights framework for it to follow.

Already, some in the Arab world have spoken of reviving the 1975 "Zionism is Racism" resolution, which was repealed in 1991.

Now, there will be little blocking their path, some fear.

Goldstein of Hadassah said there is a potential silver lining to last Friday's vote.

Here's an "opportunity" for President Bush to demonstrate moral leadership, unrestrained by diplomatic protocol, Goldstein said.

"Now the administration can speak out more loudly, because they won't be a part of the process of negotiation or hammering out resolutions," she said.

Likewise, "If things turn ugly at the commission, the U.S. won't be tainted by what happens." Most disturbing for Israel, Cooper said, is how quickly and dramatically its relations with the United Nations have unraveled.

One year ago, there was upbeat talk about warmer relations with the world body, as Israel was praised for, among other things, withdrawing from southern Lebanon and showing flexibility in peace talks with the Palestinians.

Now, that seems so long ago, Cooper said.

"The hope for a new world, a new age of normalcy for Israel is now a distant pipe dream," he said. "We're bracing for a rocky road ahead." □

Austria gets first female rabbi

BERLIN (JTA) — A child survivor of the Holocaust has become the first female rabbi in the country her family fled some 63 years ago.

After her appointment was announced in March, Eveline Goodman-Thau was welcomed Sunday to Vienna's 160-member liberal congregation, Or Chadash, where she will serve for at least one year.

Goodman-Thau, who will be 67 next month, was ordained in Jerusalem last October by an American-born modern Orthodox rabbi, Rabbi Jonathan Chipman.

Goodman-Thau was born in Vienna in June 1934. Months after the Nazis took control of Austria, her family fled the country in December 1938. They survived World War II in hiding in Holland.

Goodman-Thau, who is now a Dutch citizen, was named in 1996 director of the Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry in Holland.

Goodman-Thau has held various academic posts in fields of contemporary Jewish philosophy and Holocaust studies, in Europe, Israel and the United States.

In 1999, she served as a visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School.

She and her husband, Moshe Goodman, who live in Berlin and Vienna, have five children and 14 grandchildren. □

JEWISH WORLD

Austria a defendant in art case

A court in Los Angeles ruled that the Austrian government must answer a lawsuit seeking the return of Nazi-looted artwork.

Maria Altmann, 85, of Los Angeles, is claiming six paintings by Austrian artist Gustav Klimt, worth an estimated \$150 million, which were seized from Altmann's uncle, Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, in 1938 and later claimed by the Austrian government.

Altmann's attorney, E. Randol Schoenberg, told JTA he believes it is the first time a foreign state has been held to answer in a U.S. court for a Holocaust-related claim.

Pope deplores teens' murder

Pope John Paul II deplored the "terrible violence" in the Middle East after two teen-agers from a West Bank settlement were found stoned to death on Wednesday.

"Again today we hear sad news from the Holy Land, of terrible violence even against young people," the pope said Wednesday at a mass in Malta, where he was ending a six-day pilgrimage retracing the steps of the Apostle Paul.

Austria to press for Waldheim

Austrian Foreign Minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner, is expected to press American officials during her upcoming trip to the United States for the removal of former Austrian President Kurt Waldheim from a list that prevents alleged Nazi war criminals from visiting the United States.

Waldheim, who served in the Balkans with a German army unit during World War II, has denied that he was involved in Nazi war crimes.

Russian anti-Semite to be rehired

A Moscow court ordered a local television channel to rehire a station director who was fired for his anti-Semitic and xenophobic remarks, according to the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews.

Under Alexander Krutov, the Moscow Television Channel was known as an outlet for ultranationalist and other extremist beliefs.

The station has also broadcast Holocaust denial and interviews with neo-Nazis.

Swiss get new Jewish paper

A new Jewish paper hit the newsstands in Switzerland.

Tachlis, a weekly, hopes to appeal to non-Jewish readers in addition to the nation's 18,000 Jews.

Although its editorial policy strongly backs Israel, the paper's current issue also presents differing views on the Israeli government's handling of the ongoing violence.

Mideast violence intensifies as teens found dead in West Bank cave

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli-Palestinian violence intensified even further this week as the mutilated bodies of two teen-aged Israelis were discovered in a West Bank cave.

Ya'akov Mandell, 13, who held American citizenship, and Yosef Ishran, 14, were found Wednesday after searches were launched the night before, when the two failed to return from a hike near their West Bank settlement of Tekoa.

Ya'akov's family immigrated to Israel several years ago from College Park, Md.

The two youths were killed with stones and knives, prompting investigators to hypothesize that the murderers were Palestinians who encountered the youths in the area and spontaneously decided to kill them.

Investigators also were checking possible links between the double murder and the theft Tuesday night of 100 goats from Tekoa.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon condemned the murders, calling the youths victims of "Palestinian terror."

"The horrifying murders constitute an additional escalation in the Palestinians' violent terrorist activities against innocent civilian populations," he said.

The United States also expressed outrage over the "vicious murder."

In a statement, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk said: "It is unacceptable that children have so often become the victims of this bloody conflict. It is time to put an end to this violence."

Palestinian official Saeb Erekat said the Palestinian Authority opposes the killing of civilians, but Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat sidestepped questions about the murders.

Shaul Goldstein, chairman of a regional settlers council, warned that if the Israel Defense Force fails to respond to the violence, settlers may take the law into their own hands.

"The fuse is very short, and we must remember that Yasser Arafat is the murderer responsible for the deaths of the two youths," he said.

Israeli security forces detained about 15 Palestinians in the Tekoa area for questioning about the slayings, according to Israeli radio reports.

The murders came a day after Palestinian terrorists shot and stabbed to death a 48-year-old Israeli near the West Bank settlement of Itamar, and two days after a Palestinian infant girl was killed by Israel Defense Force shelling of a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip.

Sharon apologized for the infant's death in the shelling, which came in response to a Palestinian mortar attack on a Jewish settlement in Gaza.

In fresh violence on Wednesday, Israel Radio quoted Palestinian sources as saying a three-month-old Palestinian infant was wounded along with her mother and six other people in exchanges of fire near Rafah in southern Gaza.

Asked about the murder of the Jewish teen-agers in the West Bank, Arafat instead spoke about the Palestinian infant.

"Today in Rafah a small baby has been exposed to the same tragedy," he said.

Earlier, the Palestinian mother held the baby up to cameras as doctors pointed to a pinpoint-sized wound on its head.

Also on Wednesday, IDF forces briefly entered an agricultural area in a Palestinian-controlled part of the Gaza Strip near Beit Hanoun from which, the IDF said, the Palestinians launch attacks on Israeli targets. □

Egyptian Islamists want war

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Egypt's leading Islamist group said Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is winning the confrontation with the Palestinians because the wider Arab world has ruled out war with the Jewish state.

Arab "rulers should review their choices anew" and prepare for war, the Muslim Brotherhood said Wednesday. □

As McVeigh's execution nears, some Jews want it called off

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Reform and Conservative movements are seeking clemency for Timothy McVeigh a week before the convicted Oklahoma City bomber is scheduled to die by lethal injection.

In a letter to President Bush on Tuesday, the two movements joined numerous prominent religious leaders in opposing the death penalty for McVeigh, saying they are concerned about the possibility that innocent people could be executed if the death penalty is condoned, and the dubious morality of state-sanctioned executions.

"When the government responds to violence with violence," the letter said, "its action breeds more violence."

McVeigh is scheduled to die May 16 in Terre Haute, Ind.

He was convicted of masterminding and carrying out the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168 people, 19 of them children, and wounding at least 400 others. An accomplice, Terry Nichols, was sentenced to life in prison by a federal judge and may also face state charges in Oklahoma.

The letter also calls for a moratorium on federal executions and clemency for Juan Raul Garza, scheduled to be executed June 19 for killing three men in the early 1990s. His execution, originally scheduled for last August, was postponed by President Clinton, who ordered a review of clemency guidelines.

Many Jewish organizations are opposed to the death penalty. They cite the possible innocence of those on death row, possible racial or economic bias — and whether the accused had competent legal representation. None of those factors is at play in the McVeigh case. Even so, the leader of the Reform movement said it must oppose McVeigh's execution — and all others — because of concerns about the death penalty.

"You have to make note of the terrible suffering he caused," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations. "But the fact of the matter is that with the death penalty, you can't be for it part of the time and against it part of the time."

Yoffie said the justice system is "too prone to error."

"We are concerned about those who sit on death row now and in the future, where there will be questions about their guilt or innocence," he said. "The only way to deal with this is to stop the death penalty."

While the issue is important to Jewish leaders, it does not appear to be a priority for the Jewish community as a whole.

In a survey released last month by Amos, a new Jewish social action coalition, fewer than half of the 1,002 Jews polled said they were in favor of a moratorium on capital punishment. It was the only social cause in the survey that had a majority of opposition.

And even some people who have reservations about the death penalty in general are in favor of the punishment for McVeigh because of the severity of his crime, the deadliest terrorist incident on U.S. soil.

The Orthodox movement has been quieter on the death penalty issue.

Orthodox Union President Harvey Blitz said the movement does not want to abolish the death penalty, but supports a moratorium because of concerns about the execution of innocent people.

But the O.U. does not oppose McVeigh's execution, in part

because he has already confessed to the bombing.

Jewish law sees the death penalty as an appropriate response to certain types of sins, while noting it must be done with caution and under strict rules of evidence.

Yoffie admits that it is unlikely that the letter will likely sway anyone at the White House. Already, Bush has rejected a call from Pope John Paul II for clemency for McVeigh.

"It would be very hard to believe that the president would stop the execution," Yoffie said. □

Jewish delegation to Sarajevo gets rare glimpse of Haggadah

By Ruth E. Gruber

SARAJEVO, Bosnia (JTA) — The famous Sarajevo Haggadah is alive and reasonably well — and living in an underground bank vault in the heart of the Bosnian capital.

A 10-member delegation from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee got a rare glimpse of the priceless illuminated manuscript last week during a fact-finding mission to Bosnia.

It was one of the few times that the Haggadah has been revealed to outsiders in recent years, and the experience was colored by a sense of drama.

A bank functionary led the group through corridors and down narrow stairways into a basement vault lined with safety deposit boxes.

Wrapped in white tissue paper, the Haggadah was removed from a sealed, blue metal lock box and placed on a table.

Wearing clean, white gloves, a staff member from the Sarajevo national museum then opened the book, turning over page after page to reveal the elegant Hebrew calligraphy and brilliantly colored and gilded illustrations.

Created in Spain in the 14th century, the Haggadah was brought to Sarajevo after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

Owned by the Sarajevo National Museum since 1894, the 109-page manuscript, lavishly illustrated with exquisite illuminated paintings, has long been a symbol of Jewish presence in the Balkans.

More recently, during the Bosnia war in the 1990s, it became a symbol of the shattered dream of multiethnic harmony in Bosnia.

Just before Passover, three international experts examined the Haggadah at the invitation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

After their visit, Jacques Klein, the head of Bosnia's United Nations mission, told a news conference that experts would soon come to Sarajevo to make minor repairs on the Haggadah, primarily on its binding.

He also said UNESCO might include the Haggadah in its Memory of the World Program, which lists world documentary heritage.

"The Sarajevo Haggadah deserves our utmost care and attention," Klein said.

He said he planned to seek international support for the preservation project, "so that the Sarajevo Haggadah may survive as a lasting symbol of religious and ethnic tolerance in Bosnia."

Klein said the experts had found that the Haggadah had suffered remarkably little damage during six centuries of conflict and upheaval. □