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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Belgian court hears Sharon case

A Belgian court heard arguments about whether Ariel Sharon should be prosecuted for crimes against humanity. The Israeli prime minister faces lawsuits filed by Palestinians and Lebanese accusing him of responsibility for the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon.

Lawyers for Sharon argued Wednesday that the case was launched in an effort to smear Israel, not to seek justice for the massacre victims. The court is expected to rule in January whether the case should proceed.

U.S. envoys meet Arafat

U.S. envoys held talks with Yasser Arafat in the West Bank city of Ramallah. During the meeting, Arafat reportedly renewed his calls for international observers.

Before meeting Wednesday with the Palestinian leader, former Marine Corps Gen. Anthony Zinni and Assistant Secretary of State William Burns toured friction points in the West Bank.

Legislators' loyalty questioned

An aide to a Georgia congresswoman says pro-Israel lawmakers have a "conflict of interest" in supporting the United States and Israel.

Raeed Tayeh, legislative assistant for Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.), wrote in a letter to a Capitol Hill newspaper that he was disturbed that lawmakers "care more about Israel than human rights and American values," and said President Bush took a "courageous step" in recognizing Arab rights to "stolen Palestinian land."

"What is more disturbing to me is that many of these pro-Israeli lawmakers sit on the House International Relations Committee despite the obvious conflict of interest that their emotional attachments to Israel cause," Tayeh wrote in the Wednesday edition of *The Hill*.

Sharon to visit Ground Zero

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is slated to visit the site of the World Trade Center attack.

Sharon is expected to visit the site after arriving in New York on Friday. He will be accompanied by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his successor, Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Proposed missile sale to Egypt raises alarm with Jewish activists

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israeli activists are trying to figure out how to block the United States from selling a new, sophisticated type of missile to Egypt that could reach Israeli targets with greater accuracy.

The Bush administration has told Congress of its plans to sell Egypt 53 Harpoon Block II missiles and four patrol boats from which to fire them.

Administration officials have told American Jewish leaders and Israeli officials that Egypt needs the weapons to protect the Suez Canal from an attack like the one that occurred last year on the USS Cole in Yemen.

But Israeli officials and Israel advocates say that if Egypt receives the Harpoon Block II — which manufacturer Boeing Co. calls the "world's most successful anti-ship missile" — Israel could lose its qualitative military edge.

"This is an especially capable system that has the ability for offensive strikes, and the Israelis don't have an effective defense against it," said a military analyst for one American Jewish organization.

"There are probably other ways to defend the Suez Canal that don't include providing a missile that has a second capability that is destabilizing to the region," the analyst said.

However, a State Department official said the sale would not upset the strategic balance in the region.

"We would never sell weapons to another country that would adversely effect or undermine Israel's security," the official said.

Officials with the Egyptian embassy in Washington were not available for comment.

Since making peace with Israel in 1979, Egypt has been the second-largest recipient of American aid.

Much of that money has gone into a massive buildup, with advanced American weapons, of the Egyptian military — though Egypt no longer faces any real military threat.

Israel is concerned about the military buildup, as well as a recent harshness in Egyptian policy toward Israel.

In the current political climate, however, few want to question the Bush administration's right to send military aid to allied countries, especially if the weapons could be used to defend U.S. interests overseas from terrorist attacks.

"Israel has serious concerns about the proposed sale, but because of the geopolitical situation since Sept. 11 and the understanding of America's needs, and because of our desire not to be seen as causing instability in regards to more moderate Arab regimes, we decided not to initiate any sort of campaign or battle over this issue," an Israeli official in Washington said.

The official would not comment on whether Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will raise the issue when he meets with President Bush next week.

American Jewish leaders knew of plans to sell the Harpoon to Egypt, but were told by Bush administration officials that the plan was on hold.

Nonetheless, community leaders say they will defer to Congress, hoping Congress can block the sale.

"We hope that Egypt's legitimate military needs can be met without selling them this kind of an advanced missile," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chair of the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Palestinians fire on Gilo

Palestinian gunmen fired on Jerusalem's Gilo neighborhood. There were no reports of casualties from Wednesday night's attack. Israeli soldiers returned fire at the nearby Arab town of Beit Jalla.

Israel keeps large-family subsidy

Israel's Knesset voted down three bills to cancel the Large Family Law. The law, which raises the child allowance given to families after their fifth child, primarily benefits the fervently Orthodox community.

During Wednesday's stormy debate, Labor Party legislator Ophir Pines caused an uproar when he called that community "parasites."

Jewish home in Jerusalem razed

Jerusalem officials razed a Jewish-built house they said was constructed illegally.

It was the sixth such structure in a Jewish neighborhood of the city to be bulldozed during the past year. In the same period, the municipality razed 30 mostly empty Arab-built structures in eastern Jerusalem, according to the Jerusalem Post. The demolition of Arab structures generally is condemned around the world.

Sexual abuse conviction upheld

A Jerusalem court upheld a former minister's sentence on sexual abuse charges. However, Yitzhak Mordechai's second sexual harassment conviction was overruled when judges decided that the defendant didn't remember exact details of the incident. Still, the court left intact an earlier decision to sentence Mordechai to an 18-month suspended sentence.

In March, in a ruling that Israeli women's groups hailed as a landmark, Mordechai was convicted of sexually assaulting and harassing two women. In his appeal, Mordechai asked the court to overturn the convictions.



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Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Already, Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), ranking member of the House International Relations Committee, have expressed concern over the potential sale.

"A stable and prosperous Egypt is in our interest, while an arms race between Israel and Egypt is not," Lantos told The Washington Post. "The State Department is sort of following a pattern of escalating the level of arms sales to Egypt, which in turn will mean escalating the number of arms sales and the sophistication to Israel."

It's unclear how much political capital pro-Israel lawmakers will expend to block the sale.

"Clearly, there is a reluctance to publicly oppose the administration in an area of national security unless it is a special case," said an aide to a Democratic pro-Israel lawmaker. "I wouldn't rule out the possibility that this case rises to this level."

The American Jewish community has been concerned about Egypt's actions of late, including anti-Israel and anti-American vitriol in the official Egyptian media, which has become more shrill since the Sept. 11 attacks. That makes the timing of the sale even more contentious.

In addition, Egypt often has played an obstructionist role in Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and helped kill a compromise resolution at September's U.N. World Conference Against Racism that would have forestalled an American and Israeli walkout. Also, Egyptian support for the American-led war in Afghanistan is considered lukewarm.

"The size and quality of their arms imports relative to the potential threat, the removal of their ambassador to Israel last October, their record on human rights, and the constant stream of anti-Western and anti-Israel rhetoric in the government-sanctioned media have caused both journalists and members of Congress to raise some serious concerns about Egypt," said Rebecca Needler, spokeswoman for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Some congressional aides describe the issue as a "tempest in a tea cup," but predict it will be used by lawmakers and activists who consistently question military aid to Egypt to bring the issue to the forefront. Experts say that if the missile sale goes through, Israel could be provided with technology to defend itself, or the missiles could be manipulated so they can't target ally ships or have land capabilities.

A State Department official said the sale is part of an American request for Egypt to enhance security of U.S. military vessels and personnel passing through the Suez Canal. That follows last year's attack on the Cole, when terrorists pulled alongside the ship in Yemen and detonated explosives, killing 17 crew members.

Egypt in turn requested more accurate missiles, and experts believe the Harpoon would be effective against a similar attack.

What remains unclear is the relation between the proposed sale and reports that North Korea plans to provide Egypt with medium-range missiles. Congress is investigating those reports, and State Department officials refused to comment.

The proposed U.S. arms sales are now in a 20-day comment period for Congress, and congressional sources say it is too soon to tell whether a formal notice to Congress of the sale will spark action. A simple majority is enough for lawmakers to pass a resolution against the sale within 30 days of its announcement.

If Bush were to veto such a resolution, a two-thirds majority would be needed to override the veto, something that has never happened before.

Congressional aides say they can have more luck through back channels.

"The administration is going to need Congress over the next several months and years to win the war on terrorism," the Democratic aide said. "The real question is how important is this sale to the administration, and how willing are they to push the envelope on this." □

Save that toilet water

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli legislator proposed a bill to flush less water. Nahum Lagenthal proposed the bill, which requires toilet manufacturers to reduce the amount of water used to flush toilets.

Cutting the necessary flush water by some 20 percent would help Israel's worsening drought, suggested Lagenthal, a member of the National Religious Party. □

JEWISH WORLD

Court: Rabbis not liable

Clergy members cannot be sued for divulging information given them in confidence, New York's highest court ruled. New York's Court of Appeals on Tuesday dismissed a case by a Long Island woman against two rabbis.

In what they described as their religious obligation, the rabbis had told her husband that she had discontinued certain Orthodox practices, including ritual bathing, and was seeing another man. The court acknowledged that the information would be inadmissible in court, but that the woman nonetheless could not seek damages against the rabbis.

Austria to pay Jewish community

Austria plans to pay the nation's Jewish community \$22.5 million for assets seized by the Nazis.

The government contribution comes in addition to \$16 million promised to the community earlier this week by the nation's provincial governments. The money will be used for Jewish schools, the reconstruction of a synagogue and communal security needs.

Anti-Semitism cited in case

A retrial began in the 1986 murder of an Orthodox Jew in Pittsburgh. The prosecutors' case against Steven Tielsch rests on two "jailhouse snitches" who claim Tielsch spewed anti-Semitic slurs, painted a swastika on his forehead and confessed to killing Neal Rosenbaum.

A prosecutor told the court Tuesday that Tielsch told a cell mate he "hated Jews so much he killed a rabbi." An earlier trial ended in a deadlocked jury.

Wartime relics return to Croatia

The U.S. Holocaust Museum is returning documentation from Croatia's most notorious World War II concentration camp. The documentation, which includes photos and letters from the Jasenovac camp, was delivered by the Washington-based museum to the Croatian Embassy earlier this week.

The collection was taken from the Jasenovac museum for safekeeping during the civil war that ravaged the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, and was turned over to the Holocaust Museum last year. During World War II, an estimated 500,000 people — including 17,000 Jews — were tortured and killed at Jasenovac, known as the "Auschwitz of the Balkans."

Russian JCC defaced

A new JCC in Russia was defaced with swastikas. Vandals scrawled graffiti on the walls of the JCC in the Siberian city of Tomsk a few days before the center was officially dedicated last week. The Moscow office of the Anti-Defamation League called on local authorities to improve interethnic relations in the city.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

With anti-Semitism on the rise, French Jews focus on security

By Andrew Diamond

PARIS (JTA) — The city's most important Jewish institution normally focuses on education and kosher certification.

This month's elections for the assembly of the Consistoire de Paris, however, were dominated by another issue — community security, following a resurgence of anti-Semitic aggression this month around Paris and in the southern port city of Marseilles. The most recent incidents involved a Molotov cocktail attack against a synagogue in a Jewish neighborhood of Paris and smashed windows at a Jewish school in the Paris suburb of Epinay-sur-Seine.

Just days before, vandals burned down part of a Jewish nursery school in Marseilles, leaving anti-Semitic slogans painted on the walls of the main building.

The aggression shattered the relative calm that had prevailed since the Sept. 11 terror attacks in the United States, reawakening French Jews to a problem that dominated Jewish political culture in France after the start of the Palestinian intifada in September 2000.

Interviewed a week before the elections, three of the leading candidates for Consistoire president — a position that the assembly members will elect soon — outlined their views on ensuring the security of the city's Jewish community.

While they differed on specific plans, the candidates agreed that the French government must take a more active role in protecting Jewish citizens.

"We have the impression that the government is not sufficiently conscious of the threats presented to the national community, Jews included," Consistoire President Moise Cohen said, recounting how he had tried to draw President Jacques Chirac's attention to the problem.

Yet challenger Jack-Yves Bohbot, a city councilor and vice president of the Nazareth synagogue, suggested that the community's lobbying efforts with the French government have been insufficient.

"The voice of the Consistoire in this matter is not strong enough," he alleged.

Similar reproaches have been directed over the past year at CRIF, an umbrella organization bringing together Jewish institutions across France.

Following an explosion of anti-Semitic violence in October 2000, Henri Hajdenberg, the former CRIF president, came under criticism for downplaying arson and other attacks on Jewish sites as the consequence of "groups in the suburbs who try to spread what is happening in the Near East to France." His perspective mirrored that of Interior Minister Daniel Vaillant, who at the time viewed the violence as juvenile delinquency, diminishing its ethno-religious motivations.

Abraham Foxman, of the Anti-Defamation League, sharply disagreed, arguing that the attacks were "more than just heat-of-the-moment crimes" and could have "a devastating impact on entire communities" if not dealt with properly.

Foxman's views now appear more persuasive to many in the French Jewish community. The Consistoire's new emphasis on reassuring Parisian Jews reflects the increasing number of constituents who talk of leaving the city.

In the 19th district, the heart of the Sephardic community, worsening relations between Jews and Muslims can be detected in the increasing number of residents who refer to the area as *mal frequent*, a French expression for unsafe.

But if there is general agreement about the need to act, concrete plans are few. Calls for government intervention remain vague, but the implication is that authorities should beef up police patrols around Jewish sites and redouble efforts to apprehend and prosecute the perpetrators of hate crimes.

As this spring's French presidential election nears, such calls are becoming louder. On Nov. 12, the mainstream French daily *Liberation* ran an Op-Ed piece on the situation by Marc Knobel, vice president of the anti-racist organization LICRA and a researcher at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Paris.

Knobel points to new research revealing how media images of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict motivate some Arab youths to commit anti-Semitic acts. Yet the ethnic hatred behind such acts is no less real, he says, and no less dangerous. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**Facing bleak demographic picture, Dutch Jews scramble for answers**

By Elise Friedmann

AMSTERDAM (JTA) — On a recent Friday morning, Amsterdam's Jewish Cultural Center was deserted but for four Jewish movers and shakers discussing ways to follow up on the survey.

Empty formica-topped tables formed a stark backdrop, despite recent efforts to cozy up the hall for coffee mornings for the elderly.

Almost half of Holland's 44,000 Jews live in Amsterdam, but this Orthodox center is their only community building. Yet some fear the elderly might soon be the only ones left to cater for.

Dutch Jewish leaders are working to devise programs and responses to counter a sobering demographic survey of the Jewish community, the first one conducted in 35 years.

According to the survey the four leaders were discussing, the majority of Dutch Jews are older than 50, and less than one in 10 are younger than 20.

Marriages between Jews and births are down, while divorces and mixed marriages are up — and rising.

Just over a quarter of Dutch Jews belong to a synagogue. Only 6 percent are observant, and 57 percent follow no Jewish practices at all. Yet according to the survey, a clear majority would be sad to see the Jewish community decline, and 72 percent said being Jewish is fun.

That creates a dilemma for Jewish leaders struggling for ways to counter the community's decline.

"The Jewish community doesn't exist; this is a collection of individuals," says Chaya Italiaander, 50.

The Passover seders and Purim parties she organizes for Amsterdam's Orthodox community attract 300 participants, including nonmembers who may not be Jewish according to halachah, or Jewish law.

"They obviously feel a need for tradition, religion. But our religion is almost too complex to pick up again once you've lost it," Italiaander says. "We must offer them a way back."

For Wanya Kruyer, 47, that is not enough, though she claims that Shabbat services in the Reconstructionist synagogue she helped found are the biggest in Amsterdam. "Religion is only one part of our rich cultural heritage," she says.

Kruyer wants to form an independent Jewish community center in the center of Amsterdam that will be open to all who identify as Jews. "There is a large group of lonely, unaffiliated singles out there," Kruyer says. "They need a place to meet for meals and cultural activities. When you meet, you marry and may even join a synagogue."

Rabbi Shmuel Spiero, 33, disagrees.

"People would go to this club looking for a Jewish partner and might find afterward that the one they met is not what they think," the Chabad leader says, meaning that the partner may not be Jewish according to Jewish law.

Spiero is the rabbi of a large area surrounding the small town of Haarlem, near Amsterdam. He says the recent survey is overly pessimistic, and sees no reason to change course.

"The number of synagogue members is declining, but we are seeing a growing number of people at our activities, and even weekly services in places that used to have nothing," he says.

Ronny Naftaniel, head of the secular Zionist organization CIDI and a member of the Central Jewish Organization in the Netherlands, says the community should welcome anyone who identifies with the Jewish community in any way.

Even more worrying than the tragic demographic data, he says, is the fact that most Dutch Jews identify Jewishly only because of World War II and anti-Semitism, both negative factors.

The only other binding element is Israel.

"We need to send our teens there to meet other Jews; this is the only way to give them a sense of community," Naftaniel says. "We need subsidized programs like Birthright; if the U.S. can do it, we can. And we must do it now, before it's too late. If we use the restitution funds for this, at least some good will have come out of World War II."

Birthright Israel is a program that offers free trips to Israel for young Jews.

Naftaniel was one of the main negotiators who reached a restitution agreement with the Dutch government last year.

This included the return of \$145 million taken from the account in which the Nazis deposited the financial assets of Holland's 140,000-member prewar Jewish community, but was never returned.

Financial institutions and insurance companies also are compensating the community for unclaimed assets.

The bulk of the funds are being distributed among survivors, but up to 20 percent is earmarked for communal purposes. The results of the demographic survey may well influence decisions about its distribution. In the decades since World War II, Jews have been almost invisible in the Netherlands.

Nobody wanted to be reminded of their fate.

Many survivors protected their children from the Jewish culture and religion that had proved so dangerous for them.

But the run-up to the restitution fight generated a wave of publicity and interest in things Jewish, and being Jewish has become almost fashionable in the Netherlands.

A recent survey into the repatriation of Holocaust survivors and other returnees, such as forced laborers, was covered by all the national media. So was the Jewish demographic survey; the country's most respected daily, in fact, dedicated a whole section to "Jews in Holland."

There is a yearly Jewish music festival — hugely popular with Jews and non-Jews alike — and a Jewish book weekend.

This year's book events, held recently, drew full houses. Klezmer music and Yiddish language courses are blooming.

Public interest in Jewish culture and religion appears to have enabled Dutch Jews of the postwar generation to enjoy their own culture again, and the more Jewishly ignorant among them find their tradition as exotic as do their non-Jewish friends. □

Lovemaking up in Israel

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israelis made love an average of 110 times last year, as compared with 105 the previous year, according to an international survey taken by the Durex condom company.

The number placed Israel toward the top of the 28 countries surveyed, but below the United States, where residents averaged 124 times a year.

In the survey, Israelis also rated sex as their favorite pastime in comparison with other activities. Twenty-three percent prefer having sex, while 20 percent opted for socializing with friends and 13 percent for watching TV. □