



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 79, No. 237

Thursday, December 27, 2001

84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Faint glimpse of peace

Israeli and Palestinian security officials agreed to ease some restrictions on Palestinians. The Rafah Crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip will be opened and travel restrictions on Palestinians in Gaza can be eased. In addition, the runway at the Gaza Airport, destroyed earlier this month by Israeli bulldozers, can be rebuilt.

Wednesday's announcements came as Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said chances for peace "have departed from the zero point and begun to move."

Israeli killed on Jordanian border

An Israeli minister said it's unlikely the border with Jordan will become a trouble spot, despite a terrorist attack there Tuesday.

An Israeli soldier was killed in the ambush, which began when two gunmen fired on an Israeli patrol near the border fence, wounding two soldiers. When other troops came to investigate, the gunmen fired on and threw grenades at them, killing reserve Sgt. Michael Sitbon and wounding two others.

The attackers, believed to be Palestinians, were killed when Israeli helicopter gunships gave pursuit. There was no claim of responsibility for the attack. Israel praised the close security cooperation with Jordanian forces on their side of the border.

Israel protests nuke threat

Israel said it would formally complain to the U.N. Security Council after a former Iranian president called on the Muslim world to develop nuclear weapons to annihilate Israel. In a letter to members of the Security Council, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres called Ali Hashem Rafsanjani's comments a "threat to genocide."

New Testament burned at school

An Israeli religious school apologized for burning a copy of the New Testament earlier this month. The New Testament burned reportedly was given to a pupil by a Christian missionary.

"The intentions were not to criticize Christianity, but only to tell these Jewish boys they don't have to listen to the missionaries," said a spokeswoman for the Orot school near Beit Shemesh. Israel's Education Ministry said it had summoned the school's principal for a disciplinary hearing.

First planeload of Argentine Jews arrives in Israel since recent riots

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Hugs and tears awaited the first group of Argentine immigrants to arrive in Israel since riots erupted in Buenos Aires over the country's economic collapse. The 63 new arrivals, young families as well as seniors, were welcomed at Ben-Gurion Airport by officials of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Ministry of Absorption.

They were escorted to the Ministry of Absorption hall for orientation and initial immigration processing before heading to absorption centers in Beersheba, Ra'anana and Haifa. For some of the new immigrants, there also were emotional reunions with relatives and family members.

"I'm happy to finally be home," Claudia, a Hebrew teacher, told reporters as she embraced her mother and sister.

Many new arrivals pointed out that their decisions to make aliyah, or immigrate to Israel, were not spontaneous decisions spurred by this month's rioting, but had been in the works for several months. At the same time, the ongoing economic difficulties in Argentina were a factor in their decision to emigrate.

"The vast majority who came did not decide on aliyah from one day to the next," said Yehuda Weinraub, a Jewish Agency spokesman. "They had been preparing for some time. Many with whom I spoke made the decision last September or so. The economic situation was a main factor in that."

Many Argentine Jews have been falling into poverty since the mid-1990s, and a quarter of the country's 200,000 Jews are believed to live below the poverty line.

Jewish Agency officials in Buenos Aires said that, in recent weeks, they have received 300 percent more telephone inquiries for aliyah and 30 percent more inquiries from parents wondering about sending their children to university in Israel.

Kito Hasson, the Latin American representative of the Jewish Agency, told JTA that the organization's Argentine offices have extended interviewing hours until 10 p.m., and have opened on Sundays as well. The agency has added five more employees to its staff.

Given the magnitude of the crisis — which eased somewhat with the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa on Dec. 20 and the subsequent ascension of Adolfo Rodríguez Saa as caretaker president — the Jewish Agency canceled staff holidays.

"While worldwide aliyah to Israel decreased between 30 and 80 percent in 2001 because of the situation in Israel, in Argentina it has grown 30 percent," Hasson told JTA.

In 2001, 1,400 Argentine Jews made aliyah. That's up from 1,033 in 2000, and is twice the 1998 figure. "After this new unease, the Jewish Agency expects to have 3,000 Argentine Jews emigrating to Israel in 2002," said Hasson.

Jewish Agency officials in Argentina are currently processing some 7,000 applications — and they are still receiving new inquiries.

Jorge Rusler, a car mechanic from Buenos Aires who arrived in Israel with six children, said he hoped to be able to work in his profession.

Another new arrival, Mariella, 14, described her mixed feelings.

"I'm here with my mother and father. It was hard for me to leave Argentina because of the many friends who stayed there," she told the Israeli daily Ma'ariv. "But it was important to leave because of the economic situation there."

On Wednesday, some 40 Argentines were due in Israel as part of the Jewish Agency's Na'aleh program, in which teen-agers come to study in Israel and prepare the way for their families to make aliyah. Also expected was a group of 24 adults on a pilot

MIDEAST FOCUS

Soldiers, foreign activists fight

Israeli soldiers scuffled with foreign activists trying to enter the Gaza Strip for a solidarity visit with Palestinians.

Shots were fired in the air to discourage the 90 activists from crossing the border at the Erez Checkpoint, according to a spokesman for the Israeli army.

Ben-Eliezer to lead Labor

Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer will become the first Sephardi to lead Israel's Labor Party.

Ben-Eliezer defeated Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg on Wednesday in a revote for party chairmanship.

Burg's razor-thin victory in the initial September vote was overturned because of alleged fraud at Druse polling booths that went overwhelmingly to Burg. Arabs and Druse boycotted the revote.

P.A. paper libels Israel

The Palestinian Authority's newspaper accused Israel of stealing body parts from Palestinian intifada "martyrs" for use as transplants in Israeli hospitals.

The article also accused Israel of torturing the corpses and then burying them "under dubious circumstances," according to Palestinian Media Watch. The libel appeared in Monday's edition of the official Palestinian Authority daily, *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*.

Terror cells uncovered

Israel uncovered three Palestinian cells responsible for shooting attacks in the West Bank. The *Shin Bet* revealed Wednesday that arrests of at least 17 members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine had been made in villages between Nablus and Kalkilya.

The suspects admitted to three shooting attacks on Israeli cars and attempting to plant a roadside bomb. There were no injuries in any of the incidents.



Daily News Bulletin

Ivan Michael Schaeffer, *President*

Mark J. Joffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*

Lisa Hostein, *Editor*

Michael S. Arnold, *Managing Editor*

Lenore A. Silverstein, *Business Manager*

Paula Simmonds, *Marketing and Development Director*

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.
© JTA Reproduction only by previous arrangement.

trip to explore possible immigration. The olim who arrived Tuesday and those expected to follow will enjoy a special benefits package approved by the Israeli government earlier this week, in consultation with the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Absorption.

Valid for a year, the package includes \$20,000 in government assistance to purchase housing — one-third of that a grant, two-thirds a low-interest loan — and a \$2,500 Jewish Agency absorption grant, in addition to the existing benefits package all new immigrants receive. □

(JTA correspondent Florencia Arbiser in Buenos Aires contributed to this report.)

Leader of Prague Jewish community loses job in President Havel's office

By Magnus Bennett

PRAGUE (JTA) — As far as the leader of Prague's Jewish community is concerned, the spirit of native son Franz Kafka is alive and well in the Czech capital.

Forced out as a senior aide to President Vaclav Havel because his role as a Jewish leader allegedly clashed with his state post, Tomas Jelinek invoked the sort of anonymously sinister plots that have become synonymous with Kafka's fiction.

Jelinek, who worked as an economist in the political department of Havel's presidential office, was told that his election as chairman of the Jewish community last April breached Czech labor codes because the community acts like a business in conducting financial transactions.

Jelinek said he reluctantly agreed to terminate his contract at the end of October to spare Havel potential embarrassment. Since then, he has been given a short-term, non-staff contract to clear his desk of current projects.

Jelinek, who now has taken on the role of Prague Jewish community chairman on a full-time basis, said he is extremely disappointed at the way Havel's office handled his case.

"They were clearly unhappy that I became chairman of the Prague Jewish community, and they found some reason that it was inappropriate for me to carry out both functions," he said.

"It is like something from a Franz Kafka novel, in which a person doesn't know what he is accused of until he is found guilty.

"They told me nothing behind the reasons, other than the fact that it was against the labor code," he said.

The presidential office's chief of staff, Ivo Mathe, said the office had consulted a number of lawyers in an attempt to keep Jelinek in his post.

"I tried for seven months to find one legal opinion that supported Mr. Jelinek's position, but unfortunately they all said the same, that he must leave because he is chairman of a business," Mathe said.

Jelinek said his own legal advisers had said the Prague Jewish community is a non-profit organization, and therefore not a business in terms of the labor code.

He also argued that his Jewish community role was very similar to a previous position he held from 1998 to 2001 as chairman of the Prague Jewish community's foundation, which collects rents from real estate it owns.

"I find it very difficult to understand what the problem is because there were no objections raised regarding my role with the foundation," he said.

Havel met Jelinek last week to thank him for his work in the political department during the past five years.

"It was clear that the president was not aware of the circumstances of my departure. We talked mainly about my work and the revival of the Jewish community in Prague, but I also informed him of the reasons for my departure," Jelinek said.

Jelinek said he had been left with only two options — to leave his post quietly or sue the state.

"I decided to leave because I did not want to harm the president's image by going to court," he said.

"President Havel has always shown great respect for the position of Jews in the Czech Republic, and he was extremely supportive in the struggle for restitution for the Jewish communities here in the 1990s." □

JEWISH WORLD

WZC election tiff cleared up

Two U.S.-based Zionist organizations charged with misconduct in the campaign for the World Zionist Congress will be allowed to stay in the election.

Hadassah was criticized for "double-dipping" by allowing its leadership to run on B'nai Zion's ballot.

The WZC court concluded that B'nai Zion should re-order the placement of its Hadassah-affiliated delegates. A seat at the congress translates into influence over the \$350 million budget of the Jewish Agency for Israel, which is dispersed through religious, political and educational programs throughout the world.

Any American Jew older than 18 is eligible to vote in the U.S. elections for the WZC elections, and registration ends Jan. 18.

Poll: Arabs out of favor

Americans have a far less favorable view of Arab countries since Sept. 11.

According to a recent poll by Zogby International, Egypt — with 38 percent — and Saudi Arabia — at 24 percent — registered the lowest favorable ratings since 1993.

Israel's approval rating in the survey is at 59 percent, about the same as the past eight years. But Israel's unfavorable rating has risen from 14 percent in October to 28 percent.

Ten percent of those polled have a favorable opinion of the Palestinian Authority, with 72 percent expressing disapproval.

Increase in French Jewish aliyah?

An increasing number of French Jews are considering moving to Israel.

The reported 30 to 40 percent rise this fall in inquiries at the Jewish Agency for Israel's French office comes amid a rise in anti-Semitism since the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada in September 2000.

The potential applicants "are motivated by the situation in France as much as the situation in Israel," a Jewish Agency official said, "but they are more concerned than in the past with the situation in France."

Group blasts Saudi leader

The Anti-Defamation League is slamming a Saudi leader for reportedly blaming "the Zionist lobby" for media coverage critical of his country.

"It is unacceptable" that media coverage "has led to the scapegoating of American Jews," the ADL said in a statement.

Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz also reportedly said, "If we were to betray ourselves and befriend the Jews," what he sees as the anti-Saudi media campaign "would end within 24 hours."

Poll shows Jews support Bush; parties clash on interpretation

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish support for President Bush is high, but whether it will translate into sustained support for the Republican Party is up for debate.

Jews give the president an approval rating of nearly 80 percent, according to a survey released Dec. 12 by the Republican Jewish Coalition.

If the election were held today, the survey found, more Jews would vote for Bush — 42 percent — than for former presidential candidate Al Gore, who received 39 percent. In the 2000 election, Gore got 79 percent of the Jewish vote to Bush's 19 percent. Republican activists were quick to hail the results as a shift of Jewish political sentiment, but Democrats cast doubt on the survey's significance.

Republican pollster Frank Luntz, who conducted the poll for the RJC, said the survey suggests a possible political realignment within the Jewish community.

"Despite conventional wisdom, Jewish voters are no longer a lock in the Democratic column," Luntz said, speaking on behalf of the RJC.

Observers across the political spectrum did not find Bush's approval ratings surprising, since every president is buoyed in times of national crisis. Bush also has gained favor recently in the eyes of many American Jews with his war against terrorism, his support for Israel and his pressure on the Palestinians to crack down on terror.

But some say that makes the survey an unfair snapshot of a president at his peak, rather than a clear indication of major political shifts among Jews.

Mark Mellman, a Democratic pollster, called the survey a "publicity stunt" and said the realignment was a "gross exaggeration."

"Every year we hear the magic word 'realignment,'" said Ira Forman, executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council.

Forman said aspects of the survey were "hokum" and sounded "bogus," adding that the survey appeared to draw conclusions from statistically insignificant samples.

The survey of 400 Jewish voters was conducted Nov. 28-29. The margin of error was 4.9 percent. Among the key findings:

- Two-thirds approve of the way Bush has handled U.S.-Israeli relations;
- Nearly 80 percent approve of Bush's policy toward Yasser Arafat;
- Some 27 percent said Bush's performance makes them more likely to vote for other Republicans, 28 percent said less likely, and 35 percent said no difference.

Luntz said the results show that Republicans need an active and sustained outreach in the Jewish community, and noted that young Jewish voters are "up for grabs."

It was not clear what impact Bush's present support might mean for the future of his presidency or the Republican Party.

Democrats should be warned but not alarmed by the survey, said Hyman Bookbinder, the former longtime American Jewish Committee representative in Washington. Bush deserves to gain politically in the Jewish community because he has done the right thing regarding Israel and the war on terrorism, Bookbinder said, but it's too soon to count votes for the next elections.

Bookbinder questioned results showing more favorable ratings for Bush's domestic agenda, saying people were not really focused on domestic issues now. Republican positions on domestic issues such as abortion and school prayer have alienated Jewish voters in the past.

In the survey, 42 percent approve of Bush's handling of domestic issues such as education and social security, but 47 percent disapprove. In the past, only 20 to 25 percent of Jewish voters have supported a Republican domestic agenda, pollsters said.

The Jewish community has been moving in a conservative direction for some time, according to Murray Friedman, director of the Feinstein Center of American Jewish History at Temple University and director of the Mid-Atlantic region for the AJCommittee.

Democrats say the results of the 2000 election show how strong the Democratic base is in the Jewish community.

But what's important about the approval ratings in this week's survey is that Bush is seen as a leader, according to Marshall Breger, who served in the Reagan administration and is now a law professor at Catholic University in Washington. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Unlike their U.S. counterparts, Russian Jews ready to visit Israel

By Daniel Nehmad

MOSCOW (JTA) — Violence in Israel is forcing thousands of Jewish youth from North America to cancel plans to visit Israel this year.

But teens from the Soviet Union apparently aren't experiencing the same fear.

More people than ever from the former Soviet Union are preparing to take the free trips, sponsored by the Birthright Israel program, during the next six weeks.

"In the 18 months of the program's existence, a total of 1,547 people from the former Soviet Union visited Israel on four" Birthright trips, said the CEO of Birthright Israel International, Shimshon Shoshani. But this winter alone, he said, "we are bringing almost 1,600."

The unprecedented number is largely due to an increase in funding for the Birthright program in the former Soviet Union.

But widespread interest in the program suggests that, unlike their Western counterparts, Jews here have largely discounted the personal threat from Israeli-Palestinian violence.

"We also live in a country that isn't very stable," said Kirill Fishkin, 20, a student at the Kazan Aviation Institute in the central Russian city of Kazan. "So it makes no difference whether we're here or there. 'Which place is more dangerous?' That's not a question."

Fishkin hopes to participate in a second round of trips from the former Soviet Union planned for June.

Birthright Israel expects to send 6,135 young Jews to Israel this winter. The free 10-day trips include 3,149 North Americans, 1,596 Jews from the former Soviet Union and 670 from Latin America.

The program initially had hoped to send more than 10,000 Jews this winter.

Inna Osinovskaya, a 24-year-old Muscovite leaving on a Birthright trip in early January with her husband, also admits to a sort of fatalism.

"Honestly, I'm a little scared, but Moscow is not much safer," she said. "We have the threat of terrorism here too, but life goes on.

"Anyway, there's so much going on in Israel," Osinovskaya said. "It's a normal, healthy country. I really think that, as advertised, this experience will be a great discovery. I'm expecting a life change."

The indifference about traveling to a region known for explosive violence is affirmed by people who work closely with Jewish youth in Russia.

Natasha Bobkova, the secretary of the Jewish Agency for Israel's youth department in Moscow, said that since October only five people out of 42 have canceled reservations made through the Jewish Agency, and "those were because of" university exams, she said.

Meyer Newman, director of Arevim, the youth movement of the Federation of Jewish Communities of the Commonwealth of Independent States, reported that only about 40 out of 500 people who had made reservations through the federation have canceled since October. Newman said the spots were immediately filled by others.

Participants from the former Soviet Union face local obstacles

far more formidable than those faced by Western participants. Birthright requires each participant to pay a \$150 deposit, which is later refunded, to ensure participation in the program once reservations have been made. This is quite a lot in Russia, where the average monthly wage is \$113.

Nonetheless, participation has increased each year. Birthright reports that 90 citizens of FSU countries made the trip in the winter of 2000 and 714 in the winter of 2001. This winter, 1,050 will go from Russia, Belarus and the Baltic states, 450 from Ukraine and 42 from Uzbekistan.

In Russia, the Birthright program is administered through four Jewish groups: The Jewish Agency; the Federation of Jewish Communities; Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life; and Lishkat Hakesher, an Israeli government-sponsored cultural organization. Most of the new funding for this year's trips came as a private donation from businessman Lev Levayev, who is president of the federation.

This is the first year the federation has sponsored Birthright.

A native of Uzbekistan who moved to Israel in 1971, Levayev feels a strong sense of obligation to build Jewish life in the former Soviet Union.

"Jewish youth today are eager to build their lives as Jews in the FSU. Unfortunately their parents cannot provide the material support or spiritual help to build their lives as Jews," Levayev said. "I see the Birthright trip as a means to fill this gap and guarantee a future of Jewish life there."

The executive director of the federation, Avraham Berkowitz, said Levayev's donation will be responsible for sending 1,000 citizens from the former Soviet Union to Israel this winter and an additional 1,000 next summer.

"We wanted to do something that would totally energize our youth movement," Berkowitz said. "And we thought this would bring the biggest bang for our buck."

But Birthright's fate in the region will not depend solely on its ability to attract more participants.

"We are always working on evaluation," Shoshani said, emphasizing the need to examine whether and how participants are changed by the trips.

With this in mind, professors at Moscow State University, in cooperation with professors at Brandeis University in Boston, are planning to research how effective Birthright is in making participants more active in their Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union. For many in the region, there's another incentive to go on Birthright, beyond a free trip to an exotic land or the chance to learn about Jewish history.

Given the mass emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel over the past decade, many of the Jews on Birthright know someone in Israel they would like to visit.

"It's hard to find anyone who doesn't already have a friend or family member in Israel," said Ilya Velder, 21, director of a Jewish youth center in Kazan. □

Israel-India plane deal backed

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The United States has backed Israeli plans to sell military planes to India. U.S. officials said they are pleased that Israel coordinated with the United States its plan to sell three Phalcon surveillance planes to India for an estimated \$1 billion, the newspaper Ha'aretz reported.

Last year, Israel canceled a deal to sell Phalcon planes to China because of intense American pressure. □