



Daily News Bulletin

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84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel sends burn experts to Peru

Israel is sending a special burn unit to Peru.

The delegation of burn experts and plastic surgeons will treat victims of a massive blaze in Lima, the country's capital.

At least 264 people were killed and hundreds injured when fireworks set off a blaze in a crowded shopping district.

Palestinians vow revenge

Palestinians vowed revenge at the funerals of six Palestinians killed Sunday in the Gaza Strip.

Activists, including those affiliated with Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, vowed to retaliate against "Zionist occupiers."

In one of Sunday's incidents, Israeli anti-terror forces killed three Palestinians who were attempting to cross a border fence that separates Gaza and Israel.

Earlier Sunday evening, Israeli forces killed three armed Palestinians in a gun battle that took place in northern Gaza.

France stands up for Hezbollah

Lebanon says French diplomats kept Hezbollah off the E.U.'s new list of terrorist groups.

Last Friday, the European Union froze the assets of Islamic Jihad and the military wing of Hamas.

According to The Associated Press, the European Union drew up a list of organizations accused by all 15 E.U. states of terrorist activity.

The package of measures announced also includes a common definition of terrorist crimes accepted by all E.U. nations; agreement to deny safe haven to terrorists, their supporters or financial backers; enhanced cooperation and information exchange among national law enforcement agencies; and tighter monitoring of asylum seekers to ensure terrorists are not given refugee status.

Lebanon's Daily Star newspaper quoted "diplomatic sources" who said France rebuffed efforts to include Hezbollah on the list.

The sources described the French move as "another good gesture by Paris toward Beirut."

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Wednesday, Jan. 2.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Christmas snub highlights triangle of religious tensions in Holy Land

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Danny Naveh couldn't resist the temptation to provoke Arab Knesset members.

Speaking in the Knesset last week, the Israeli Cabinet minister charged that Muslims in the predominantly Christian town of Beit Jalla in the West Bank were sexually harassing young Christian girls — and that the Palestinian Authority neither prevented it nor punished the perpetrators.

The reaction to Naveh's allegation was harsh. Knesset Member Mohammad Barakeh charged that such statements had a "Nazi" connotation. His colleague, Ahmed Tibi, scornfully spoke about "Danny Goebbels Naveh," referring to Hitler's propaganda chief.

And Gush Shalom, a far-left group, published ads comparing Naveh's statement to the Nazis' Der Sturmer newspaper, which tried to link Jews to sex crimes.

Naveh's comments did not come out of the blue; indeed, reports have circulated in Israel for some time of Christian girls in the West Bank being raped and harassed by Muslims.

Yet the comments must also be seen in the context of the public and parliamentary onslaught against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government after it barred Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat from attending Christmas mass last week in Bethlehem.

On the defensive, Israel is playing up the Palestinians' own Muslim-Christian tension to deflect some heat from itself, some say.

The Palestinians always have counted on the support of the Islamic world, but last week they basked in the sympathy of the Christian world as well.

Arafat could hardly have asked for a better Christmas gift.

After failing to convince Israel to allow Arafat to attend midnight mass, Pope John Paul II used his traditional Christmas message to focus attention on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel insisted that it will not relax its travel ban until Arafat arrests the members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who assassinated Israel's tourism minister, Rehavam Ze'evi, on Oct. 18.

Palestinian officials announced this weekend that they had arrested four PFLP men suspected of involvement in the attack. Israel said the four were involved in the plot but were not the actual killers.

In any case, Bethlehem was not the only area where relations between the Jewish state and the Holy Land's Christian community were on shaky ground.

In Nazareth, construction work continued on a huge new mosque in the center of town despite objections by the city, the local Christian community and a coalition of the Christian denominations in Israel.

Israel also has yet to approve the election of Irineus the First, the new Greek Orthodox patriarch, because some consider him too close to the Palestinian Authority.

In the past, the Christians were the majority in the "Christian triangle" of Bethlehem, Beit Jalla and Beit Sahour in the West Bank, a prosperous community of businessmen who made the region one of the economic success stories of the Palestinian areas.

Under Palestinian rule, however, the Christian community has been decimated. Intimidated by the Muslim-dominated Palestinian Authority and exasperated by the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Katsav may address Palestinians

Israel's president may ask the Palestinian Parliament for a cease-fire.

Both President Moshe Katsav and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat are open to the idea, Israel Radio reported.

The proposal was initiated by former Knesset member Abdel Wahab Darawsh.

He suggested that Katsav appear before the council in Ramallah and call for a yearlong hudna, the Arabic term for a temporary armistice. Katsav reportedly did not rule out the idea, on condition that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon approve it.

Israel's economic growth down

Annual economic growth in Israel in 2001 fell to its lowest level since 1953. The gross domestic product fell 0.5 percent in 2001, after having grown by 6.4 percent in 2000. The global economic slowdown and the Palestinian intifada are the main reasons.

Meanwhile, Israel's population rose in 2001 by its slowest rate since the 1980s. The slowdown to a 2.1 percent growth rate is attributed to a drop in new immigrants coming to Israel.

There are 6.5 million people living in Israel, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics. Of these, 5.3 million are Jews and 1.2 million Arabs.

No budget for new year

Israel headed into 2002 with no new budget. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Finance Minister Silvan Shalom were continuing efforts to muster a parliamentary majority to pass the revised 2002 spending legislation.

Contentious measures include a freeze on benefits for large families and for residents of the Negev region. This is the third straight year that a government heads into the new year operating on the previous year's budget.

endless conflict with Israel, thousands of Palestinian Christians have emigrated in recent years, joining large communities of Palestinian and other Arab expatriates in Latin America.

Some 170,000 of the Arabs in Israel and the Palestinian self-rule areas are Christians. Of those, 50,000 to 60,000 live in the latter.

Christians were a 60 percent majority in the triangle in 1990, but the 23,000 who remain today constitute a 20 percent minority in a predominantly Muslim region. A similar process has affected the 20,000 or so Christians of Ramallah.

As radical Muslim influence has grown — especially in the three refugee camps within Bethlehem's municipal boundaries — Christian businessmen were criticized for maintaining business contacts with Israel and were accused of selling land to Jews, a crime punishable by death under P.A. law.

Israeli sources say that Atef Abayyat, a leader of the Tanzim militia of Arafat's Fatah Party who was assassinated by the Israel Defense Force in the early stages of the intifada, was responsible for violence against Christians in the triangle.

"Abayyat was the head of a gang which harassed the Christians — until he was given the opportunity to harass the Israelis," Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert said.

In addition, the frequent use of Beit Jalla by Palestinian gunmen firing on the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo is not accidental. Israeli analysts deduced that the Palestinian Authority hoped to draw return fire that would damage Christian holy sites, rousing the Christian world against Israel.

Tanzim activists frequently fired from positions close to Christian religious institutions, including the Christian-Orthodox Club, formerly a popular restaurant for Israelis coming from Jerusalem. They also put pressure on the Christian communities over what some Muslims considered the "too-liberal" style of Palestinian Christian women.

The harshest allegation was that even secular PLO and Palestinian Authority activists were sexually harassing Christian women. The Israeli daily Ma'ariv reported last week that a Muslim Tanzim activist who raped a Christian girl several months ago was released from prison due to pressure from his Tanzim colleagues.

Only after angry protests by Michel Sabbah, the Latin patriarch in Jerusalem and an ardent Palestinian nationalist, did Arafat instruct his security forces to act against harassment of Christians, the report said.

However, Arab Knesset members charge that spreading such allegations is an unacceptable attempt by Israel to incite Christian-Muslim tension and justify Israel's own snub of Arafat on Christmas.

"I have testimonies that rabbis harassed their students, and I have evidence of an IDF general and a former defense minister who were convicted of sexual assaults," Barakeh said. "They are all Jews, but I still don't suspect that this says anything about the Jewish people."

Israeli officials, in return, questioned why Arafat, who is Muslim, needed to be present in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.

In fact, the occasion is highly symbolic. Since the Palestinian Authority took control of Bethlehem in the mid-1990s, Christmas has become the pre-eminent Palestinian national festival. It also allows Arafat to project himself as the guardian of Christian interests in the Holy Land, a figure of supposed religious tolerance, on a day when the eyes of the world are focused on Bethlehem.

In addition, Islam considers Jesus one of the prophets proceeding Mohammad, just like Moses.

Minister Tzachi Hanegbi last week played down the public relations damage caused by Israel's Christian policy.

"It will take but a few days before world public opinion forgets about the whole thing," he said, referring to the ban on Arafat's visit to Bethlehem.

Perhaps so, but Hanegbi — as well as Sharon and other Israeli leaders — disregard the long-range effects. Israel no longer is perceived as an impartial bystander in the relations between Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land.

Clearly, there is obvious tension between Christians and Muslims in Palestinian society.

Yet when the Christians have had to choose between ties to Israel or their ethnic and political loyalty to their Muslim Palestinian brethren, they have always opted for their kin — though whether out of interest or fear is unclear. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Congress OKs refugee funding

The U.S. Congress approved a provision to ease refugee processing. Lawmakers recently granted a one-year extension of the Specter Amendment, which will help facilitate refugee processing of Jews, evangelical Christians and other religious minorities in the former Soviet Union.

The Labor, Health and Human Services bill also includes funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which provides grants to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and other Jewish social service agencies for initial resettlement needs of refugees from the former Soviet Union, Iran and elsewhere.

In 2001, HIAS received approximately \$8 million from the office, specifically for job skills and placement programs.

Sabbath bill makes waves

Israeli legislators are sparring over a bill that would change which establishments are allowed to open on the Sabbath.

The bill would allow places of entertainment, such as theaters and cafes, to open on the Sabbath, while stores would shut down.

Lawmakers from Likud, Labor and religious parties back the bill. Meretz Party leader Yossi Sarid said he could not support a bill that would infringe on the standard of living of the secular public by shutting down large shopping centers that currently open on the Sabbath.

But Israel's chief Ashkenazi rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, said that both religious and state laws currently are being flouted.

Ex-JTA staffer dies at 91

Binyamin Peled, a former JTA correspondent, died Sunday in Israel at the age of 91.

Born in New York, Peled graduated from Yeshiva University before emigrating to Palestine in 1935. In addition to JTA, Peled also worked for The Palestine Post and a number of foreign wire services, covering the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel and the country's first decades.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert announced three weeks ago that Peled would be named a Distinguished Citizen of Jerusalem for his service to the city.

Torah scroll back home

A Torah scroll stolen from a Brooklyn synagogue was recovered.

The scroll, estimated to be worth tens of thousands of dollars, was recovered by police from an apartment in the area.

The homeless man believed to have carried out the robbery of Congregation Netivot Israel earlier this month was arrested.

Flap over Zionist elections highlights a power struggle

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — Despite a Jerusalem court recommendation, a flap over a slate of delegates running for the World Zionist Congress remains unresolved.

But the flap may have had more to do with a power struggle among American Zionist organizations than with the elections themselves.

The issue centers on two U.S.-based Zionist organizations accused of misconduct.

Hadassah: the Women's Zionist Organization of America was criticized for "double-dipping" by allowing its leadership to run on B'nai Zion's ballot.

Hadassah and B'nai Zion are partners in an ideological grouping called the World Confederation of United Zionists. Because Hadassah opted out of the elections with a special status that guaranteed it a set number of seats, its representation on its partner's ticket was viewed as duplicitous.

The World Zionist Congress court recommended Dec. 23 that B'nai Zion move half of its six Hadassah-affiliated delegates toward the bottom of the list, giving them little chance of being elected.

In a nonbinding decision, the court also recommended that Hadassah rejoin the American Zionist Movement, the umbrella group for American Zionist organizations, which also runs the American elections for the World Zionist Congress.

The elections, which take place in March, determine who will sit on the World Zionist Congress, a group regarded as the official representative of Diaspora Jewry that determines the policies of the World Zionist Organization.

A seat means influence over the \$350 million budget of the Jewish Agency for Israel, which is involved in immigration and absorption and runs religious, political and educational programs throughout the world.

The American elections determine 29 percent of the elected delegates to the Congress, which is slated to convene in Jerusalem in June.

B'nai Zion, a nonpartisan Zionist organization, will abide by the recommendation, according to Kalman Sultanik, an officer of B'nai Zion. Hadassah has not yet decided whether to accept the court's opinion that it rejoin the AZM, according to Amy Goldstein, director of Israel, Zionist and international affairs at Hadassah.

AZM officials say they are unsure how it will proceed if Hadassah rejects the recommendation. The AZM will meet next week to present the court's proposal to members of the elections committee, who have the option to challenge the court.

An ironic twist, too, is the fact that B'nai Zion is a minor player at the AZM, winning only one seat in the last election. But each seat has become increasingly coveted over the last several years as Jewish organizations jockey to push forward their own agendas.

Goldstein said the AZM has been trying to convince Hadassah to rejoin ever since the group pulled out in 2000. But she said Hadassah, the Zionist organization with the largest membership, is functioning fine without the AZM.

Furthermore, she said, "if the largest, most active organization leaves the American Zionist Movement, what does that say about the American Zionist Movement?"

Nothing, says one insider, who notes that Hadassah's departure coincided with the rise of the religious streams in the AZM. The popularity of the Reform and Conservative movements, in particular, began to threaten Hadassah's majority status.

In fact, while Hadassah's defection may be a thorn in AZM's side, a bigger issue for AZM may be the growing influence of ARZA, the Reform Movement's Zionist arm.

In the last election, ARZA garnered almost 50 percent of the American votes, followed by the Conservative and then the Orthodox movements. The contentiousness of pluralism in recent years and the mobilization of voters at the pulpits fed the growth of the religious movements.

ARZA's executive director, Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, said there was broad agreement on the decision to challenge Hadassah's electoral lists. Still, he conceded that AZM is a political organization with competing political interests.

On some issues, "other organizations will join us — for example, the Hadassah question — and other times we won't see eye to eye," Hirsch said. "All such circumstances are normal, positive and to be expected." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Florida cemetery controversy could be just tip of the iceberg***By Julie Wiener*

NEW YORK (JTA) — A lawsuit alleging that Jewish cemeteries in Florida desecrated remains of buried people could have implications for Jews across the United States.

The cemeteries' owner, the Houston-based Service Corporation International chain, is the country's largest funeral company, according to *The New York Times*.

The current class-action lawsuit is not the first time SCI has clashed with the Jewish community.

A 1999 report by the New York City Consumer Affairs Commission found that SCI owned 14 of the city's 28 Jewish funeral homes, including four out of five in Manhattan.

The consumer affairs report noted that Jews are particularly vulnerable to exploitative practices by funeral companies like SCI because Jewish law dictates a prompt funeral, leaving Jews little time to shop around or compare prices.

In New York, SCI has been accused of price gouging and of aggressively marketing expensive items and services inconsistent with traditional Jewish funeral practices.

For example, Jewish law forbids cremation and says Jews should be buried in plain caskets. However, many Jewish funeral homes offer cremation and embalming and encourage the bereaved to buy expensive caskets and floral arrangements.

In the wake of the 1999 report, New York State's attorney general sued SCI, charging it with "monopolistic practices that reduced competition in the New York market."

An out-of-court settlement last year required SCI to sell three of its Jewish funeral homes in New York, one of which was purchased in March 2001 by several New York Jewish community organizations that are now running it as a nonprofit.

In addition, the New York investigation led to new rules requiring funeral homes to disclose their ownership.

SCI does not own cemeteries in New York, however, due to a state law that prohibits for-profit companies from owning cemeteries.

But an SCI-owned Jewish cemetery in Maryland has drawn criticism from the Jewish community there, according to David Zinner, the head of a new Washington-based national group, Kavod v'Nachum, that is forming to provide resources and information on Jewish funeral practices.

Zinner, who is vice president of the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington, said a local SCI-owned cemetery has been accused of not burying people in the right plots and of forcing families to make payments and sign contracts on Shabbat.

Zinner said he was disturbed to learn of the case in Florida, noting that if allegations are proven, "not only did they mess up morally, spiritually and ethically, but also legally."

He was not surprised, however.

"What we're seeing in Florida is not news for people familiar with SCI, but it's a little more extreme," Zinner said. "Management issues and administrative issues in cemeteries are complex, and when you overlay that with Jewish issues, a lot of attention to detail is required."

No one outside SCI knows how many cemeteries the company

owns, and a company spokeswoman did not return JTA's calls. But the corporation is believed to own a sizeable percentage of Jewish cemeteries and funeral homes throughout the United States.

In recent years, SCI and Loewen, another funeral company, have quietly purchased many family-owned and independent Jewish funeral homes.

Most consumers are unaware that the homes have been purchased, as they generally do not change their names or publicize their corporate ownership.

For their part, company officials said in a statement earlier this month that the practices alleged in the lawsuit were "completely contrary to our policies and procedures" and that the company is conducting an internal review.

The investigation into SCI's practices apparently prompted one of the firm's employees to commit suicide last week. The wife of Peter Hartmann, 45, who managed four funeral homes in Florida, said he was distraught over the issue.

Jules Polonetsky, who oversaw the 1999 report as New York's consumer affairs commissioner, said he wasn't surprised to learn of the Florida case.

Similar abuses have "happened elsewhere before, and sadly, without a greater level of communal oversight of what happens in the funeral and cemetery world, it's destined to happen again," he said.

Polonetsky, now chief privacy officer for the media company DoubleClick, said SCI is not the only offender and that nonprofit and independently owned cemeteries also have been known to neglect graves or treat family members poorly.

In New York, there have been problems with several nonprofit cemeteries not allowing people to visit family member's graves on Jewish holidays, Polonetsky said. In another case, a New York cemetery was accused of dumping debris near graves.

Part of the problem, Polonetsky said, is that hardly anyone in the Jewish community is monitoring the cemeteries or advocating for people who have plots there.

Previous generations of U.S. Jews participated in burial societies, collectives that enabled members to purchase burial plots cheaply and "looked out for concerns," Polonetsky said.

But most such groups have died off with their members or are near bankruptcy.

Given Americans' squeamishness about death, it is difficult to mobilize people for funeral-related activism.

"When I made this an issue in government, people said, 'Oh, who wants to talk about these things?'" Polonetsky said. "Funerals and death are not a cause celebre."

So how can individuals protect themselves and their loved ones from having their graves neglected or even desecrated?

Zinner advises three steps. First, people should visit the cemetery, talk with the staff, check to see how it's maintained and ask to view the cemetery's burial records to see if they are organized and well-maintained.

"If you see any problems, ask questions, take notes and take pictures," he advises.

In addition, Zinner urges people to be in contact with the local synagogue or federation near the cemetery and share concerns with them about the cemetery's management.

A third step is to contact the state attorney general's office and find out if your state has an official in charge of monitoring cemeteries.

"It's important for them to hear from people," Zinner said. □