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85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Bush fails to blame Arafat

President Bush said he suspects that a smuggled arms shipment linked to the Palestinians was part of a campaign to "promote terror."

Bush did not directly blame Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, but said, "I do believe that once the evidence is in, those responsible need to be held to account." He also called on Arafat to "work hard to get to the peace table."

Warsaw Jewish museum planned

Poland's prime minister announced the creation of a Jewish Museum in Warsaw.

Speaking Thursday to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish organizations, Leszek Miller said the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will be built on the site of the old Jewish Quarter in Warsaw and will showcase the Jewish community that once flourished in Poland.

The museum is expected to open in four or five years.

AJCongress to be sued

A former regional director of the American Jewish Congress plans to file an age- and gender-discrimination lawsuit against the group. Sheila Decter, 63, was fired in November from her position as the group's New England regional director.

Decter already has filed a complaint on the issue with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, according to the Forward newspaper. Jack Rosen, the president of the AJCongress, told the Forward there is "no basis" for Decter's complaint.

Agency to step up Argentina plan

The Jewish Agency for Israel plans to expand its operations in Argentina. Jewish Agency officials say they plan to put the organization on an "emergency footing" to accommodate increased demands by Argentine Jews to emigrate to Israel.

Jewish Agency Chairman Sallai Meridor, just returned from a fact-finding mission to Argentina, said Wednesday the economic situation of the 200,000-strong Argentine Jewish community is very grave. "Lack of hope abounds. Twenty thousand former middle-class businessmen and professionals are reduced to accepting hand-outs at food kitchens," Meridor said.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Jewish activists hope for action as Congress prepares for return

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — For all the talk of bipartisanship and change, the U.S. Congress ended the year much the same way as it began — sharply divided and unable to agree on major legislative issues.

Now, as issues unrelated to terrorism, which were nearly wiped off the congressional calendar after Sept. 11, slowly make their way back on the nation's radar screen, Jewish activists are hoping to see more action when Congress returns to the Capitol on Jan. 23.

But those issues — from funding for religious groups to religious accommodation in the workplace — will be looked at through a different lens, as the greatest terrorist attack on American soil continues to spur a reassessment of responsibilities and priorities.

"We keep reanalyzing where we are," said Reva Price, Washington representative for the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. "Money spent on anti-terrorism issues means a constant re-evaluation of other needs."

At the same time, many of these issues could continue to take a back seat given the growing problems of the economy, the effects of President Bush's tax cut and the inability of lawmakers to agree on an economic stimulus package.

In addition, campaigning for November's elections will begin during the summer, leaving only several months of full-time work on Capitol Hill.

The debate about anti-terrorism legislation, which passed quickly through Congress, is likely to resurface as other related bills make their way through Congress this year.

Jewish groups by and large backed the legislation, even as they worried about the balance between security needs and civil rights.

"We supported the bill because there was a clear and present danger of terrorism, and it was important for Congress to move quickly," said Richard Foltin, legislative director for the American Jewish Committee.

Now Jewish groups will be watching how the bill is implemented — and how it affects other legislation.

For example, Jewish groups are fighting to maintain the rights of immigrants while recognizing the need for stricter measures to ensure greater security.

One major accomplishment of the last congressional session that drew approval from the organized Jewish community was the passage of the education overhaul bill, which stressed accountability for schools but left out the controversial issue of vouchers.

Jewish groups are divided on vouchers.

Most organizations say vouchers, which provide government funds for students to attend parochial or private schools, violate church-state separation and drain money away from the public school system.

However, many Orthodox Jews, who typically send their children to Jewish day schools, support publicly financed tuition vouchers.

The Supreme Court is poised to rule on the constitutionality of school vouchers sometime this spring.

That ruling is likely to affect other church-state issues, such as allowing federal money to go to religious groups that provide social services.

That controversial issue, also called charitable choice, rallied many groups against the larger faith-based initiative whose passage was supposed to be a priority for Bush.

The administration's much-heralded plan to "level the playing field" and extend

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel razes Palestinian buildings

The Israeli army tore down Palestinian Authority buildings in the Gaza Strip in retaliation for a deadly Hamas attack a day earlier.

Some 30 structures used by the Palestinian naval police were destroyed Thursday in the Rafah refugee camp. Israel said armed Palestinians had used the structures to fire on Israelis.

The United States criticized the Israeli demolitions, saying they would not help end violence.

P.A. justifies Hamas attack

A senior Palestinian security official justified a Hamas attack on an Israeli army outpost.

Jibril Rajoub, the head of Palestinian security in the West Bank, called Wednesday's attack, in which four Israeli soldiers were killed, a "natural response" to what he called Israeli crimes.

Israel, China discuss deal

Israeli officials arrived in Beijing for talks on the canceled sale of an airborne radar system to China.

Beijing is seeking compensation for Israel's cancellation of a \$250 million dollar deal to purchase planes equipped with the Phalcon system.

Israel canceled the arms sale in July 2000, following objections from U.S. officials, who feared the sale would enhance China's threatening position against Taiwan and could be used to track U.S. aircraft in the case of a military conflict there.

Islamic Jihad quits cease-fire

Islamic Jihad officials said they would no longer abide by a deal to halt attacks on Israel.

After agreeing last month to a demand by Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to halt such attacks, the officials said they would "not necessarily" resume the attacks, but added, "There is no justification to keep our hands tied behind our backs."



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funding to religious groups was opposed by most Jewish organizations.

Many U.S. Jewish leaders fear that an expanded partnership between the government and faith-based institutions could break down the constitutional wall separating church and state, infringe on religious liberties and imply toleration of employment discrimination.

Orthodox groups favor direct federal monies going to religious groups, saying these groups have been unfairly excluded from receiving such funds.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill in August containing charitable choice language that some Jewish activists said allowed for hiring discrimination, forced religious institutions to be exposed to government scrutiny and did not provide safeguards against proselytizing.

The faith-based initiative lost steam not only because it was displaced along with other issues after Sept. 11 but also because the Democratic-controlled Senate chose not make it a priority.

Sens. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) are now fashioning a bill that appears to omit most of the controversial aspects of charitable choice, while increasing tax incentives for charitable giving.

Other issues that lawmakers could not finalize in 2001 include:

- The Workplace Religious Freedom Act, which would strengthen provisions for religious accommodation, is in a stronger position now, according to Nathan Diament, director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs.

- Energy legislation, where reducing America's dependence on foreign oil is a major point of consensus but how to go about doing it is not.

Most Jewish groups are opposed to opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil drilling.

While it has no official position on drilling in Alaska, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations joined a news conference last month with Senate Republicans, who proposed an energy bill that calls for drilling in the refuge.

One thing Congress is expected to do this year is officially end the application of trade restrictions to Russia and stop the historic Jackson-Vanik law that helped ensure the emigration of tens of thousands of Soviet Jews. Bush called for the change in November.

American Jewish groups say they understand the reason for adjusting the law and acknowledge the progress Russia has made.

But they also want assurances that the Russian government will help Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union.

Russian Jewish groups accept lifting the trade regulations without any strings.

And pro-Israel activists are also pushing measures related to Israel.

They hope to capitalize on the pro-Israel feelings expressed by lawmakers last year following terrorist attacks against the Jewish state.

There also could be new opportunities in the coming year for increased collaboration between the United States and Israel in fighting terrorism, said Rebecca Needler, spokeswoman for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

There has been an Israeli-U.S. counterterrorism group since 1996, but this year its work takes on greater significance because of increased awareness about the threat of terrorism, Needler said.

AIPAC, as always, will work to ensure that Israel gets its annual foreign aid package.

Last session, Congress agreed to the full amount for Israel requested from the Bush administration — \$2.04 billion for military aid and \$720 million for economic needs.

A number of lawmakers spoke out against Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in Congress.

But more forceful language demanding that Bush impose sanctions on the Palestinians if they do not end or prevent terrorism and stop anti-Israel incitement was not included in the foreign aid bill.

The bill does contain a provision urging Bush to review Palestinian Authority compliance with its peace agreements with Israel.

The bill also suggests the president impose sanctions on the Palestinian Authority if it does not rein in Palestinian violence.

Needler said AIPAC would continue to lobby for passage of free-standing legislation requiring Palestinian compliance. □

JEWISH WORLD

U.S. concludes Arafat in on ship, but Zinni peace push to continue

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Evidence from Israeli military officials has compelled the Bush administration to conclude that the Palestinian Authority were directly connected to a shipment of 50 tons of weapons apparently headed for the Gaza Strip.

"The information we are receiving, and developing on our own, makes it clear that there are linkages to the Palestinian Authority," Secretary of State Colin Powell said Thursday. "We are deeply disturbed by the arrival of this ship in the region and the fact that it could have completed its mission and off-loaded weapons that would have been put to the worst kind of use against Israel and others in the region. I'm glad the Israelis intercepted it, and now we have to find all those responsible and accountable for this incident."

While Powell said he had not seen a direct link to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, Israeli military officials gave evidence of his affiliation with the plan, according to a senior Israeli security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. State Department officials said the Israelis laid out a "compelling and extensive case" linking the Palestinian Authority and Arafat to the weapons shipment.

"We think there's a compelling case to say that there were very senior Palestinian Authority and Fatah figures involved, and that in itself is a very troubling and serious matter," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Thursday. "We think the weight of the evidence is compelling with respect to Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in this arms smuggling operation, including in the provision of the weapons and the planning for their delivery."

While not providing direct evidence of Arafat's involvement to reporters, the Israeli security official said those responsible for loading the ship were told to contact Arafat's office when the job was finished, and that several of the men directly involved were key lieutenants of Arafat's security forces.

"We possess clear evidence that this operation was an official act of the Palestinian Authority," the official said.

A State Department official said Arafat's position "at the top of the pyramid as leader of the Palestinian Authority and Fatah" makes him responsible for the weapons shipment, with or without direct knowledge of the events. The official said the discovery of the weapon transfer ultimately could be a turning point for U.S. attitudes toward the Palestinian Authority.

"This incident is going to be looked at very closely for future reports and analyzes of terrorist elements" in the Palestinian Authority and Fatah, the mainstream party of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the State Department official said.

The plan to transfer the weaponry aboard the Karine-A, seized by Israel in the Red Sea on Jan. 3, originated in the Palestinian Authority, with the details worked out by Hezbollah, according to the Israeli official. The boat contained rockets, missiles, mortars and mines, most if not all of them Iranian.

All those weapons are illegal for the Palestinians to possess under the Oslo accords. Their use would have marked an escalation in the Palestinian intifada raging since September 2000.

"The direct purpose was to acquire weapons that would enable the Palestinians to change the nature of the threat they posed to Israel," the Israeli official said.

Israeli evidence states that the mission had been planned since last spring, and was not deterred by cease-fires declared by Arafat after a disco bombing in June and suicide bombings in November, as well as the Sept. 11 terror attacks in the United States.

The actual loading of the ship occurred Dec. 11 on the island of Kish, off the Iranian coast.

President Bush said Thursday he did not believe the weapons find should derail the peace process. His envoy, Anthony Zinni, is expected to return to the region later this month after briefing Powell in Washington about his previous mission.

"I think it's very important for our administration to remain engaged with both parties," Bush said.

"I intend to ask Zinni to go back to the region at the appropriate time, to keep pushing for a dialogue, to keep pushing for the process to go forward." □

Moscow mayor pressed on racism

A human rights group is calling on the mayor of Moscow to take measures to thwart the dissemination of anti-Semitic materials in the Russian capital.

The Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union sent a letter to Yuri Luzhkov after anti-Semitic leaflets were disseminated at Moscow bus stops on Jan. 7, the Russian Orthodox Christmas.

One leaflet featured a cartoon with a grotesque caricature of a Jew stabbing a blindfolded man who represented the Russian people.

Senators: Extend Shoah deadline

Two U.S. senators called for an extension for survivors to file for Holocaust-era insurance restitution.

Sens. Peter Fitzgerald (R-Ill.) and Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) say Holocaust survivors are having trouble documenting their claims or have given up on the restitution process because they believe insurers deny or stall payments of claims.

The senators requested the deadline extension in a letter sent Wednesday to Lawrence Eagleburger, chairman of the International Commission on Holocaust-Era Insurance Claims.

Clinton to get degree

Former President Clinton will visit Israel later this month to receive an honorary degree from Tel Aviv University.

Clinton will give a speech on the Middle East peace process Jan. 20 in Tel Aviv, and will participate in the opening of the Clinton Center for American Studies at the university, which will teach U.S. history, culture and political science.

Rabbi pays tribute to archbishop

Britain's chief rabbi joined the country's leaders in paying tribute to the archbishop of Canterbury.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks praised Dr. George Carey, who announced Tuesday that he would retire at the end of October.

"Dr Carey has been a humane, warm and caring face of Christianity and as such has been a blessed presence in British life. I personally have cherished our close friendship, which has contributed much to strengthen the bonds between Christians and Jews," the chief rabbi said.

MLK meets the Talmud

A one-page text of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is being made available with commentaries drawn from Jewish sources.

The speech, in the form of a Talmud page, is available at Hillel's Web page, www.hillel.org. The page was created in advance of Martin Luther King Day.

Australians fear for their homes as fires devastate millions of acres

By Henry Benjamin

SYDNEY, Australia (JTA) — As the threat recedes from wildfires that have ravaged Australia's most populous state since Christmas, harrowing stories are emerging from Jews who had a close brush with disaster.

Chicago-born Sharon Harris, 51, and her husband David, 52, live with their two teen-age children some 45 miles from Sydney in Warrimoo, a small town of 2,000 people where 15 houses were destroyed in the fires.

"The fires reached within 500 yards of our home," Sharon Harris said. "They were burning with enormous ferocity. We were not evacuated, but our cars are packed with our personal possessions and we are ready to leave at a moment's notice.

"The windsock on our property is watched constantly," she added. "We have to stay at home in case any embers land on our property which could set off another fire. The firefighters have back burned around us for protection, but we have fires all around us. We have lopped trees and removed anything combustible."

The Harrises have lived in Warrimoo since 1976.

"We experienced bad fires in 1977 and 1994, but nowhere as severe as this one," she said. "I know people who have lost their homes. The fire was fast approaching ours, but a wind change sent it back on itself."

No lives have yet been lost in the fires, which have destroyed some 170 homes and more than 1.2 million acres of forest and farm land in the state of New South Wales.

As many as 20,000 firemen, mostly volunteers from around Australia, have been fighting the fires.

At the peak of the crisis last week, thousands of residents were evacuated when the fires threatened Sydney's suburbs.

Australia is particularly vulnerable to fires in the often sweltering weather of its southern hemisphere summer. But officials believe many of the wildfires were caused by arson.

The Insurance Council of Australia has estimated damages to be around \$35 million.

David Solomons, 70, regularly makes the 75-mile trip from his home in Burradoo in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales to the Great Synagogue in the center of Sydney. But last week he heeded the warnings of the local fire authorities and stayed at homing — missing *yahrzeit* for his late mother at the synagogue.

His wife, Eleonore, told JTA: "It's been frightening. We have lived here for 21 years and have seen droughts, bush fires and floods.

"Our main priority was to safeguard our property. We have 11 acres here and gumtrees that are over 150 years old, plus 700 trees that David has planted personally. We would hate to see it going up in smoke."

David Solomons added: "It was frightening on Christmas Day. We could not see the sky and were worried roads would be blocked and we could be trapped. We were monitoring the radio all the time. It was like wartime."

His son Jonathan lives close by in Mittagong with his wife and children.

"The fires are dangerously close," Jonathan Solomons said. "If we have to leave, then we must. It's only a home. As long as the family is safe."

The Great Synagogue's Rabbi Mendel Kastel offered special

prayers for those fighting the fires.

Dr. David Wilson, who heads the tiny Southern Highlands Jewish community of 70, said, "None of our members have suffered any losses — so far." The story was much the same in the Blue Mountains, according to Hal Ginges, the spokesman for the small Jewish community there.

"There has been no damage reported by any of our members, but some of them are very close to the action," he said.

The shaliach for the Betar youth group, Hila Cohen, was in charge of a summer camp where 75 Jewish children from Sydney had been enjoying the bush when the fires began to rage.

Alarmed parents begged her to evacuate the camp.

"Because it was Christmas, we couldn't find a bus company that could help, so the parents organized a fleet of cars to take the children back to Sydney," Cohen told JTA.

"We were not in any immediate danger, with the nearest fires almost 13 miles away, "but wind changes can send fire moving at high speed, so we took the safe option. We spent the last couple of days 'camping' in the heart of Sydney."

Guy Pross, 25, head of the youth group Hag Shama and a native of Beersheba in Israel, has organized a fleet of cars that will drive through Sydney raising funds on behalf of Jewish Care, which, in turn, will donate the proceeds to the wildfire victims.

In Sydney, Kastel and officials from the Jewish National Fund are planning to hold special Shabbat services. They will invite fire officials and New South Wales politicians. □

Sarajevo Haggadah restored — Next up: putting it up on display

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, (JTA) — Experts have completed restoration work on the 600-year-old Sarajevo Haggadah.

Jakob Finci, the president of the Bosnian Jewish community, told JTA that repairs to one of the world's most famous Jewish manuscripts were completed a few days ago.

Work will soon begin to ready a special room for display in Sarajevo's National Museum.

"I hope this will be finished by May," Finci said.

Handwritten and illustrated 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 illuminated paintings, has long been the symbol of Jewish presence in the Balkans.

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

Just before Passover last year, three international experts examined the Haggadah at the invitation of UNESCO.

After their visit, Jacques Klein, the head of the U.N. mission in Bosnia, announced that minor repairs would be undertaken on the Haggadah, primarily on its binding.

The U.N. mission in Bosnia contributed \$50,000 to the project, including the new display room at the museum. Additional financing came from several other donors — Klein, the German Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the World Bank and Bosnia's Jewish community.

A team of international experts, led by Andrea Pataki, a restorer of the Austrian Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, carried out the restoration. □