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85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Sharon defends meetings

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon defended his decision to meet last week with Palestinian officials.

At the weekly Cabinet meeting Sunday, Sharon said there may be another round of talks with the Palestinians after his visit to Washington, which begins later this week. [Page 3]

Al Qaida sought attacks on Jews

An Al Qaida terror manual called for launching attacks on Jewish groups and large gatherings of Jews.

Such attacks should be planned in order to cause as many deaths as possible, according to the manual, which also lists skyscrapers, national monuments, nuclear plants and crowded football stadiums as the best targets for spreading fear in the United States and Europe.

The manual, which was written before the Sept. 11 terror attacks in the United States, was obtained by The Associated Press from a former Afghan resistance fighter, who said he got it from a disaffected Al Qaida member in Afghanistan.

Arafat writes Times Op-Ed

Yasser Arafat reiterated in The New York Times what he would seek from an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord. In an Op-Ed appearing in the newspaper Sunday, the Palestinian leader called for "an independent and viable Palestinian state," sharing Jerusalem "as the capital of two states" and a "fair and just solution to the plight of Palestinian refugees."

Arafat also condemned Palestinian "terrorist groups" that attack Israeli targets and said he was "determined to put an end to their activities."

Faith-based leader named

The White House named a new head for its faith-based initiative. Jim Towey, who worked with Mother Teresa and for both political parties, was named director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

President Bush's faith-based plan has come under fire and stalled in Congress over issues such as direct funding for religious organizations' social service programs, and whether charities can discriminate on a religious basis in their hiring practices. The initiative will be connected with the president's focus on volunteerism and community service.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Argentine meltdown takes a toll on the most defenseless — children

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — An alarming number of at-risk children are among the Jewish victims of Argentina's economic collapse.

Even in the most stable families, children have been hit by the fallout from the collapse.

For unstable parents, desperate conditions like those in crisis-ridden Argentina only make matters worse — and often it is their children who pay the price.

What money still comes in may go to feed the parents, rather than their children. That deprivation, along with the social stress of an economic crisis, is leading to a rise in child abuse, according to social service workers in the Jewish community, which numbers approximately 200,000.

With community resources already overstretched, at-risk Jewish children face abuse and neglect from their parents on the one hand, and the prospect of being turned over to the state's Catholic institutions on the other.

That was the message spelled out by Buenos Aires' municipal justice authority in a letter to Ieladeinu — Hebrew for "Our Children" — an Argentine Jewish organization dedicated to rebuilding dysfunctional families.

The letter urged the organization to increase its efforts because of a marked rise in the number of Jewish children in distress.

In dire straits from Argentina's economic meltdown, however, Ieladeinu hasn't even been able to pay staff salaries since November.

"In Argentina, we are living like in a war," Ieladeinu Director Karina Pincever said.

The "floor is moving," she said, seeking an analogy to express the instability in the country.

Children are an easy target for frustrated parents.

"The kid is the first thing that they have in front of" them, Pincever said.

Ieladeinu opened three years ago when Pincever learned of a Jewish boy in one of the state institutions, which she described as deplorable places where older children often sexually abuse younger ones.

Stoned by the other children for being Jewish, the boy was rescued by Pincever and, eventually, reunited with his family.

The experience showed Pincever how sorely children's services were lacking in the Jewish community.

AMIA, the main social service institution in the community, has been providing social workers to families since 1994, when the AMIA building was destroyed in a terrorist bombing.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee began offering volunteer psychological services to Jewish families in 1996. Today it offers such help in 38 centers across Argentina.

Melina Fiszerman, a JDC staffer in Buenos Aires, confirmed that the economic crisis has put more children at risk and led to increased domestic violence. But that's not the only emotional consequence of the crisis, she said.

"Uncertainty for survival brings emotional problems," Fiszerman said. Many families also are struggling with depression and stressful home environments, as several generations move in together to make ends meet.

However, Jewish leaders in Argentina reject a rumor that hundreds of Jewish children have been dropped off at state-run orphanages by parents who can no longer

MIDEAST FOCUS

Hezbollah equates Bush, Satan

A Hezbollah leader lashed out against President Bush and dismissed U.S. accusations that the group is a terrorist organization.

"Bush is faithful to Satan, was his devotee and is the greatest devotee in a leadership thirsty for killing and blood and aggression," Sheik Naeem Kassem told a rally Sunday.

Reacting to Bush's State of the Union speech last week in which he accused Hezbollah of being part of a "terrorist underworld," Kassem said the "resistance" against Israel "will remain resistance even if America calls it terrorism."

Al Qaida in Lebanon?

Al Qaida and Hezbollah representatives met in Lebanon to discuss moving the terrorist network's base of operations there. Last month's meeting could be an indication that Al Qaida is seeking an accommodation with the Iranian-backed terror group, the London Times reported on its Web site.

British diplomatic sources said Hezbollah, a Shi'ite Muslim organization, and Al Qaida, which is Sunni Muslim, are "unlikely bedfellows," but added that there is substantial evidence of an alliance between the two groups dating back to the early 1990s.

Israel foils infiltration attempt

Israeli soldiers prevented armed Palestinians from entering Israel from the Gaza Strip. After spotting four armed Palestinians near the boundary fence Saturday night, the soldiers opened fire, and the gunmen fled.

Last Friday, an Israeli soldier was lightly wounded after Palestinian gunmen fired mortars at the Gaza settlement of Kfar Darom.

Israel responded by launching a helicopter assault early Saturday on a Palestinian naval base in Gaza.

afford them. The real story, they say, is a growing risk of child abuse.

The community continues to hand out cash assistance and food packages each month to poorer Jews, but that doesn't solve the problems, according to one Ieladeinu volunteer.

In one case, she said, a third-generation welfare recipient had six children — ranging in age from six months to 13 years old — who had been severely neglected.

Six months ago, after a court sentenced each child to a different state institution, Ieladeinu took them in and opened its first foster home for Jewish children.

The organization now works with 70 children who live with their families and has 25 children in foster care who receive room, board, medical care, education, work opportunities and psychological treatment.

As Ieladeinu has grown, the state and the Jewish community have learned to alert it to new cases of abuse. Ieladeinu also has begun an investigation to determine how many Jewish children are suffering in state institutions, in abusive homes or on the street.

To date they have found more than 200 — including the children already in Ieladeinu's care — but the number is always changing as the crisis continues and as Ieladeinu staff speak with more social workers and institutions.

Just last week, for example, they learned of 30 more children, Pincever said.

"We are working like the Mossad," she said of Ieladeinu's intelligence gathering.

But the revelations bring new problems.

Eager to scrimp on expenses, the government is happy to tell Ieladeinu about Jewish children in state-subsidized institutions. But getting those institutions to give up their charges is another matter: Each child in its care brings an institution \$400 a month in government subsidies, Pincever said.

Government red tape also slows down the process of moving Jewish children to Ieladeinu's care.

In any case, Ieladeinu staff know they don't have the resources to help all the Jewish children in danger.

Learning of the high number of cases last month, Jews in Punta Del Este, Uruguay — a vacation spot for wealthy South American Jews — pledged to raise some \$750,000 for Ieladeinu.

In addition, Ari Bergmann, a New York businessman from Brazil, said he is starting a campaign to raise \$20 million to help victims of the Argentine crisis, much of which will go toward Ieladeinu.

Two weeks ago, Bergmann helped bring Rabbi Avraham Seruya, of Argentina's Syrian community, and Rabbi Isaac Saka, of its Turkish community, to New York, where they raised \$1.2 million.

However, Ieladeinu has yet to see the money raised in Uruguay, and says it is not aware of Bergmann's activities.

Ieladeinu's president, Rabbi Zvi Grunblatt, confirmed that Seruya and Saka recently offered their assistance to reach Sephardic donors, but said he hadn't been informed about the result of the pair's recent trip to New York.

Ieladeinu is continuing to look for outside funds, something the self-sustaining Argentinian Jewish community hasn't had to do until recently.

In the meantime, Ieladeinu is making progress, with staffers who continue to work with just the promise of payment.

The adolescent children in Ieladeinu's care arrange Shabbat flower bouquets every Friday morning — which they sell for a few pesos at the market to the Jewish friends or family of Ieladeinu staff.

For now, Ieladeinu is offering what volunteer Deborah Shayo Hazan called "handmade" solutions for each child. Ultimately, however, "We want to rebuild the family so they can live with the parents again," Hazan said.

And the six children Ieladeinu took in from the third-generation welfare recipient are enjoying a summer vacation program with Ieladeinu's other foster kids and other Argentine children, Pincever said.

Their counselors report that the six siblings are playing with the other children and exhibiting no problems.

For those children — kicked out of school six months ago for their poor hygiene — it's nothing short of "a miracle," Pincever said. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Peru welcomes Argentine Jews

The president of Peru is opening his country to the distressed Jews of Argentina.

Speaking before the American Jewish Committee last Friday, Alejandro Toledo said he is considering incentives to bring Argentine Jews to Peru.

Tax incentives or opportunities in Peruvian universities are strategies that may be employed to attract Jewish professionals and intellectuals.

Toledo's wife, Eliane Karp de Toledo, is Jewish, and in his talk Toledo expressed his fondness for the Jewish state.

Israel too dangerous, judge rules

Israel is too dangerous for a woman to take her 2-year-old daughter to live there, a judge ruled late last week.

In awarding custody to the child's father in Birmingham, Ala., the judge said he considered the "day-to-day dangers of living in Israel due to military and suicide bombings having occurred on a random basis."

The mother had gone on a trip to Israel, then allegedly cut off contact with the father for some 14 months.

Michael Korn accused his wife of kidnapping their child, and demanded that the girl be returned.

Wiesel blasts museum exhibit

Elie Wiesel called an upcoming exhibit at New York's Jewish Museum a "betrayal" of the Holocaust.

In an article published in the *Newsday* newspaper last Friday, the Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor said some of the works slated to be exhibited "exceeded the limit" of "simple decency."

The exhibit, "Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art," to be shown at the Jewish Museum starting March 17, includes contemporary artists' renderings of the Holocaust in a manner museum officials believe will present the Nazi horrors in a new and thought-provoking manner.

School offers tuition breaks

A new Jewish high school is offering half-price tuition to its first group of students.

A private donor is funding the tuition "vouchers" at Kehillah Jewish High School in San Jose, Calif., as an experiment to see what role financial concerns play when families decide whether or not to choose a day school, according to the *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*.

The experiment comes as two other new Jewish schools are offering free tuition on a limited basis — the American Hebrew Academy, a boarding school in Greensboro, N.C., and the Jewish Community High School of the Bay in suburban San Francisco.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sharon leaves 'em guessing after meeting with P.A. officials

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's recent meeting with senior Palestinian officials has left politicians and pundits alike pondering his true intentions.

Observers are questioning whether the talks Sharon held Jan. 30 in his Jerusalem home were a tactical move aimed at pleasing the Bush administration on the eve of the prime minister's trip to Washington later this week.

On the other hand, they wonder, perhaps those discussions reflected a shift in Sharon's outlook and signal an openness for reviving a political dialogue with the Palestinians.

Dovish Israelis are welcoming the talks, but some hard-liners are saying Sharon should not be speaking to Palestinian leaders amid the ongoing violence.

In last week's meeting, Sharon met with Palestinian parliamentary speaker Ahmed Karia, top PLO official Mahmoud Abbas and Mohammed Rashid, an economic adviser to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

The talks were the first that Sharon, who has said he will not negotiate while Palestinians continue attacking Israel, has held with top Palestinians since taking office almost a year ago.

At the weekly Cabinet meeting Sunday, Sharon stressed that he had not changed his stance that there would be no negotiations while violence continues.

The meeting had focused on ways to end the violence, Sharon was quoted as telling the ministers. He did not rule out another meeting following his return from Washington.

Sharon also told the Cabinet that he had used the meeting to set out Israeli security demands and to tell the Palestinians that he would consider their requests based on the Palestinian Authority's progress in cracking down on terror.

Sharon said he is ultimately interested in reaching a final settlement with the Palestinians, but without a timetable.

Any accord would depend upon developments in the Israel-Palestinian relationship, he said.

Sharon also said the Palestinian delegation had demanded that Israel halt its targeted assassinations, end military incursions into areas under Palestinian-control and lift travel restrictions on Arafat, who has been confined to Ramallah by Israeli troops since December.

Some Israeli commentators suggested Sharon's meeting last week was aimed at heading off diplomatic initiatives launched by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, and, more recently, by Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer and Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg.

Peres learned of Sharon's meeting with the Palestinian officials as he was en route to the World Economic Forum in New York, where he had his own meeting with Karia.

At Sunday's Cabinet meeting, Sharon reportedly reiterated his objections to a proposal Peres and Karia have been discussing, which includes the idea that Israel's recognition of a Palestinian state should be the starting point for renewed negotiations.

But is this Sharon's real stand? The Israeli daily *Ma'ariv* quoted diplomatic sources as saying that Sharon and Peres are in quiet agreement over most of the elements of the proposal under discussion.

Weekend interviews Sharon gave to two Israeli newspapers added to the confusion.

In an interview with *Ma'ariv*, he conceded he would agree to giving up parts of the "Greater Land of Israel" under certain conditions in a final settlement.

But he also told *Yediot Achronot* that he would recommend while in Washington that the Bush administration refrain from all contacts with Arafat.

"I plan to tell President Bush next week, 'I advise you to ignore Arafat. Boycott him. Don't have any contact with him and don't send him delegations,'" Sharon said last Friday.

Israeli troops have kept Arafat under virtual house arrest in Ramallah in an effort to force him to crack down on terror.

As a result, Arafat has been kept from his globetrotting activities aimed at drumming up support for the Palestinian cause. □

FIRST PERSON

In Peru, descendants of Incas are trying to convert to Judaism

By Bryan Schwartz

CHAN CHAN, Peru (JTA) — Chan Chan is the world's largest mud city.

Lying just outside the town of Trujillo, on Peru's northern coast, Chan Chan's high earthen walls feature pre-Columbian carvings paying tribute to the civilization's many gods.

Last July I ventured to Peru, not just to visit the ruins of great ancient cities founded by the Incas and their predecessors, but to meet nearly 200 Inca descendants who have found Judaism in recent decades. Groups of native Peruvians, who were religious Christians, began practicing Judaism after they came to believe that it was impossible to follow biblical laws without adhering to Jewish ritual.

Prospero Lujan, at 70 an elder statesman among the "Inca Jews," escorted me to Chan Chan one afternoon. I asked him why these Peruvians would take an interest in Judaism, when Peru's own ancient cultures built such splendid monuments.

"Where are they and their gods now?" he replied, referring to their destroyed civilization.

Prospero's past may be Inca, but his future is in Israel. Next month, Prospero will fly to Israel on a chartered plane full of new Peruvian converts making aliyah.

Two groups of Inca Jews were converted and made aliyah before 1991.

The remaining community in Peru struggled for more than 10 years to gain the attention of Israel's chief rabbinate. The rabbinate initially promised to return soon to Peru to convert more people, but reversed course after several earlier converts "defected" to a more secular lifestyle in Israel.

The Inca Jews finally prevailed in November 2001, when an Orthodox beit din, or Jewish court, came to Peru from Israel and converted Prospero and 83 others.

I reminded Prospero that war-torn Israel is no paradise, but he was unfazed, believing the Promised Land will rejuvenate him.

"I will never be afraid again. When I am 80 in Israel, they will think I am 40," he said. "Spiritually, I feel young. Practicing Judaism has totally renewed me."

The new converts' enthusiasm is matched by the disappointment of approximately 80 Inca Jews the beit din left behind.

Ester Guerra, who immigrated to Israel with the first groups in 1991, recently called me in the middle of the night, having heard that I am a friend to the Peruvian communities. Her brother Lucio Guerra's family was one of those wishing to convert with the rabbis last fall. The rabbis passed over Lucio's family.

"Please do something," Ester begged. "I am all alone here in Israel, and it is destroying me. You know my brother Lucio's family, how religious they are."

In July, I visited the Guerras in Cajamarca, a town of more than 8,000 feet high in the Andes, six hours inland from Trujillo. As we spoke, Lucio's wife, Marina, prepared a fish lunch with hot peppers, baked yucca and rice. The Inca Jews generally eat only vegetarian food and scaly fish, because they cannot get kosher meat.

Lucio formerly drove a cargo truck, but was forced to become a garbage truck driver for the municipality to avoid working on

Saturdays. "My old job was better-paying, but we have to look toward spiritual goals before material concerns," he explained. Lucio tries to support his family of six on approximately \$175 a month.

The Guerras' children, in navy-and-white school uniforms, ran in from their morning classes just as lunch was ready. Everyone performed a ritual hand washing and said the Hebrew blessing over rice. As we ate, I talked to Eliel Guerra, 10, about life in Peru's public schools.

"Our teacher makes us pray the Catholic way," he said. "When she called on me to lead the prayers, I looked the other way, and she pulled me to the front and hit me twice on each hand with her tablet."

The Guerras do not know why they were denied conversion last fall by the beit din. Lucio's sister Ester thinks it may be because Lucio does not lay tefillin — which he cannot afford to buy.

Rabbi Eliahu Birnbaum, a member of the beit din in Israel, said the failure to use tefillin would not itself be a reason for denying a conversion. However, Birnbaum would not say why any particular family or individual was denied conversion last fall.

Rabbi David Mamou, the head of the beit din, said he hopes to organize another group of rabbis to go to Peru about six months after this group of 84 people has been "successfully absorbed" — though it's not clear exactly how that determination will be made.

"We have opened a door and we hope to continue forward," Birnbaum said. "Another 10 years of inaction will not pass."

The Peruvians want to believe the rabbis, because they cannot bear the thought of waiting another decade.

"Now we are waiting for the opportunity offered publicly by the beit din to return to Peru," said Aquiles Lujan, Prospero Lujan's oldest son, who also was passed over by the beit din in November.

Aquiles has become the new president of Trujillo's community.

"We also remain at the mercy of men of good will and kind actions to make possible the return of the rabbis," Aquiles continued, stressing the role that world Jewry can play — both with funding and advocacy — in helping the remaining Inca Jews convert and move to Israel.

Under Israeli law, no rabbis other than Mamou's group can help the Peruvians realize their dream of emigrating to Israel. Malka Kogan, an attorney at Israel's Interior Ministry, explained, "The State of Israel's rule is to allow a man to immigrate who converted in a congregation where he lives."

But what if the man is like Lucio Guerra or Aquiles Lujan, without an authorized local congregation willing to help? "Then the chief rabbi's office must convert him before we can bring him to Israel," Kogan said — no matter how long that takes. □

Israel demands locked cockpits

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Foreign airlines lacking a locked cockpit will not be permitted to land in Israel.

Transport Minister Ephraim Sneh issued the directive as part of increased security requirements in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

As part of efforts to monitor airlines, Israel has begun sending undercover agents on flights to verify whether security requirements are being met. □