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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Five Palestinians killed in Gaza

Five Palestinian gunmen were killed in a car explosion in the Gaza Strip. Palestinian sources claimed Israel had targeted the men in a rocket attack.

The Israeli army said it was unaware of the incident, which occurred near Rafah in southern Gaza, though Ha'aretz reported that Israel was behind the blast.

The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine vowed vengeance. Some of the men were members of the group's military wing.

Suspected mortar factory hit

Israeli helicopters attacked a suspected mortar shell factory in the Gaza Strip. Palestinian sources said the structure sustained heavy damage in the strike late Sunday night in the Jabalya refugee camp. There were no reports of injuries.

The Israeli army said the attack on the building was in retaliation for the firing of five mortars in the past three days at Israeli settlements in Gaza.

Students attacked near Paris

Some 40 youths attacked a group of Jewish students leaving school Jan. 31 in the Paris suburb of Montreuil.

According to witnesses, the assailants, many of whom covered their faces with Palestinian scarves, sprayed mace in the faces of several of the Jewish youths.

French authorities are investigating the incident, and have yet to label it anti-Semitic. A week earlier, a school bus carrying Jewish children was stoned as it passed a housing project in the nearby suburb of Aubervilliers.

Peres: Hezbollah can hit Israel

Iran has supplied Hezbollah gunmen in Lebanon with 8,000 missiles capable of striking Israeli cities, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said. In an interview Monday in the International Herald Tribune, Peres said that "if Hezbollah thinks that they will fire those missiles at Israel from Lebanon, then we have to warn Lebanon."

Citing intelligence information, Peres also said North Korea and Iran were cooperating in developing a missile with a range of 6,000 miles that could threaten North America.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

In the former Soviet Union, fighting missionaries is tough

By Lev Gorodetsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — When Leonid Gorelik came out of the subway station at a downtown Moscow square during Chanukah, he was approached by two youngsters who asked if he was Jewish.

When he said yes, they handed him a flier.

"I thought the youngsters were just regular Chabadniks distributing information on Chanukah celebrations," says Gorelik, 32.

The flier was indeed about Chanukah, but it was definitely not produced by Chabad-Lubavitch, a fervently Orthodox group that is leading the fight in the former Soviet Union against Christian missionaries.

The flier explained that since Chanukah is a Festival of Lights and Christians consider Jesus to be the Divine Light, Chanukah should actually be considered Jesus' festival.

It added that Jews should turn to him "to light up your heart with the light of the truth."

It also invited Jews to take part in Chanukah and Sabbath celebrations and other events organized by "messianic Jews," as these missionaries are known. The fliers suggested that attendees at such events might receive economic assistance.

Gorelik never took up the offer to attend.

But Gorelik's experience is typical of what is happening across the former Soviet Union, where missionaries such as Jews for Jesus and other groups are rapidly increasing their strength.

The number of communities in the former Soviet Union where missionaries are active has doubled during the last four years, when they first began operating under then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Eighty-two percent of Jewish communities in Ukraine — and 52 percent in Russia — have reported messianic Jewish activity.

In Belarus, messianic Jews forced into the shadows by legal restrictions have begun to operate in private apartments, imitating the Jewish underground of the 1970s and 1980s.

The number of such groups in Minsk, Belarus's capital, grew to 30 during the past year.

These groups "are acting like a computer virus, infiltrating the community," Gorelik says.

Some 4,000 to 5,000 Jews come to weekly Sabbath celebrations arranged by messianic Jews in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, according to local Jewish sources. In contrast, the combined attendance at "normal" Sabbath celebrations in the city's four synagogues is 10 times less.

"The situation is worrisome," says Alexander Lakshin, standing in his Moscow office against the background of a huge map of a former Soviet Union with small flags indicating where missionaries are active.

The flags are scattered from Belarus in the west to Siberia in the east — and grow denser in the south and northwest of Russia, in Ukraine and in Moldova.

Lakshin, 45, is the main countermissionary activist in the former Soviet Union.

Born in St. Petersburg, the mild-mannered academic emigrated to the United States in 1992.

He returned to Russia with his wife and two children at the invitation of one of the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Lebanon denies Al Qaida report

Lebanon's prime minister dismissed reports that the Al Qaida network is trying to move its base of operations from Afghanistan to Lebanon. The Israeli and American newspapers are waging campaigns against Lebanon to tie it to global terrorism," Rafik Hariri said in a speech Monday to Parliament.

Citing intelligence sources, the London Times newspaper reported last Friday that a senior operative of Osama bin Laden's network, a Yemeni with the alias Salah Hajir, was believed to have arrived in Beirut about two weeks ago for meetings with leaders of Hezbollah.

Sharon: We won't halt reprisals

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon rejected a Palestinian proposal for Israel to wait 10 days after terror attacks before responding.

In his meeting with senior Palestinian Authority officials last week, Sharon reportedly rejected the proposal, which was intended to give the Palestinian Authority time to take its own measures against terrorists, Israel Radio reported.

New Israeli envoy to Egypt

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak accepted the credentials of Israel's new ambassador to Cairo.

During Monday's meeting, Mubarak asked Gideon Ben-Ami to convey a message to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that the Israeli and Palestinian people should live together in peace. Ben-Ami is Israel's seventh ambassador to Egypt.

Palestinians wound rights activist

A field researcher for the B'Tselem human rights group was wounded by Palestinian gunmen in the West Bank. The researcher, an Israeli Arab from Umm el-Fahm, sustained moderate to serious chest wounds in Monday's attack.

country's two chief rabbis, Berel Lazar, to fight missionary activity.

In May, Lakshin established, with the help of the Lubavitch, a group called Magen — Hebrew for "shield" — to coordinate anti-missionary activities throughout the former Soviet Union.

The group operates like an anti-missionary ambulance: When there is an appeal for help from a region where the messianics are increasing their activity, Magen offers immediate organizational, informational and legal assistance to local Jewish communities.

In December, for example, a rabbi from the Russian city of Perm said the messianics came to his synagogue and offered humanitarian help to people there — and a community leader from Yakutsk in Siberia asked for help after a messianic community was established in his city.

In both cases, Magen advised the communities not to accept any help from the missionaries, but to gather the Jewish community and explain the groups' real goals — converting Jews.

The communities were also told to advise local Jews not to take part in any missionary activity.

In November, when appeals from Ukraine multiplied, Lakshin went to Kiev to establish a branch of the organization.

Given the usual fractiousness of Jews in the region, the result was a bit unexpected: Dozens of rabbis and Jewish officials representing most of Ukraine's major Jewish organizations united and agreed to establish an all-Ukrainian Magen League dedicated to fighting missionaries.

In addition, the group issued a stern warning to Jews that "people who systematically participate in the events organized by the missionaries" would be denied any help from the Jewish communities.

The conference also called on the Israeli Embassy in Kiev to deny these people the right to make aliyah under the Law of Return.

This law guarantees immediate Israeli citizenship to anybody with at least one Jewish grandparent.

According to Ukrainian Jewish activists, these statements are a necessary reaction in Ukraine, where in some cities half of the local Jews reportedly participate in messianic Jewish activities.

Last December, Magen members went to Kishinev, the capital of Moldova, where missionaries reportedly have established themselves in virtually every region.

Despite his group's efforts, Lakshin is pessimistic, in part because of a lack of money.

The combined annual budget of Jews for Jesus and Hear, O Israel — the two main messianic Jewish bodies operating in the former Soviet Union — total millions of dollars and is comparable to the budgets spent in the region by such major Jewish organizations as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Federation of Jewish Communities.

Magen's annual funding comes from a private sponsor and doesn't exceed \$100,000 for the entire region, according to Lakshin.

Organized Jewish groups have unified behind the cause, but have not provided much money for the effort, he said.

"We are probably fighting an uphill battle," he added.

Though underfunded and understaffed, the anti-messianics have in Russia a strong ally — the Russian Orthodox Church, which in many places means de facto state support.

"We are viewing the so-called messianic Jewish organizations as sects, which means we are definitely against them," Father Vsevolod Chaplin, a Moscow-based church official, told JTA.

In fact, bans on missionary activity that are in place in several cities in the region have proved effective.

But the most powerful source of support for the anti-missionary fighters is the near-unanimous backing a wide range of Jewish groups are giving the effort.

"We strongly oppose the missionaries' activities and believe they must be countered in all possible ways," said Joel Golovensky, the head of the Moscow office of the JDC.

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JEWISH WORLD

Terror probe focuses on Tampa

The United States and Israel are cooperating in a probe of suspected terrorists in Florida.

Investigations have focused on individuals suspected of raising funds for Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Tampa, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported. Since the Sept. 11 attacks, cooperation between Israeli security and the U.S. Justice Department has intensified.

Motorola: We erred on Palestine

A reference in its user manuals to "Palestine" as a country was a mistake, mobile telephone maker Motorola said. The reference, which appeared in user manuals sent to some European countries, has been altered, the company said in an apology last Friday.

Company officials said an employee inadvertently allowed Palestine in a list of countries with customer service centers and eliminated a reference to Israel. Israel was not listed because it does not have a Motorola service center and customers deal directly with local telephone carriers for problems, according to Motorola, which has had operations in Israel since 1964.

Motorola said it learned of the error in December after receiving hundreds of e-mail complaints.

Sept. 11 rescuers to visit Israel

Twelve members of the New York Police Department and U.S. Army are slated to visit Israel next week.

The 12, who were involved in rescue efforts following the Sept. 11 terror attacks, will visit for a week as part of a program organized by the Israeli Consulate in New York and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

Delegation members were selected because of their composure and determination during the rescue.

Conservatives ordain Ethiopian

The Conservative movement recently ordained its first Ethiopian-born rabbi.

Rabbi Yafet Alemu, who lives in Jerusalem, will formally become a member of the group's Rabbinical Assembly at the Conservative movement conference, which will be held Feb. 10-14 in Washington.

Ghetto doctor dies at 87

Dr. Arnold Mostowicz, who treated fellow Jews in the Lodz Ghetto during World War II, died Sunday night at 87.

Mostowicz, who chronicled his experiences in several books, died in a Warsaw hospital after a long illness. Mostowicz played an active role in the Resistance and was deported to Auschwitz after the Lodz Ghetto was eliminated in 1944.

Austrian Jewish leader gets apology, but friction with far-rightist remains

By Toby Axelrod

BERLIN (JTA) — An apology from Jorg Haider, one of Europe's most well-known far-right leaders, has led to a cease-fire in his battle with the leader of Austria's Jewish community.

But comments made by Jewish leader Ariel Muzicant after he agreed to drop a lawsuit against Haider indicate that friction between the two remains — and could lead to future confrontations.

The battle erupted last February — just weeks before mayoral elections were held in Vienna — when Haider made sarcastic remarks about Muzicant that were widely considered anti-Semitic. "I don't understand how someone whose name is Ariel can have so much dirt sticking to him," Haider said at the time, punning on Muzicant's first name, which is also the name of a laundry detergent.

Haider has taken back this and other statements, including an accusation that Muzicant had "declared war against a democratically elected government."

Haider was angry over Muzicant's support for E.U. political sanctions against Austria that were introduced when Haider's far-right Freedom Party, which espouses xenophobic views, entered the country's governing coalition in February 2000.

The sanctions were dropped in September 2000, after an E.U. panel said Austria had not abandoned its commitment to human rights. Haider, governor of the state of Carinthia, has resigned as head of the Freedom Party, but remains its dominant figure.

According to a joint statement issued Jan. 31 by both Haider and Muzicant, Haider recognized the "danger" of certain implications in his words and took back what he had said.

Muzicant said his 14 legal complaints against Haider would be dropped.

Muzicant said he was satisfied with this "sensible solution," which he said came about by mutual agreement. He added that he did not want to have to wait several years for a sentence in the case, nor did he want a personal apology.

"It was not my intention that" Haider "get down on his knees," Muzicant said at a news conference.

Muzicant also told reporters that he and Haider "differ profoundly over many issues," and he expected future confrontations between the Jewish community and the Freedom Party. But the bottom line, he said, is that one must "be careful in one's choice of words so as not to insult" anyone.

Anti-Semitism is not acceptable, even in the heat of an argument, he said, adding that other political parties should watch their words as well.

Muzicant also suggested Haider should augment his written apology with media statements designed to counter stereotypes.

For his part, Haider said he had not wanted to become bogged down in a long legal wrangle. He said it was most important to him that the Jewish community in Austria not feel threatened, and he added that the Freedom Party has a good relationship with the Jewish community.

There are some 12,000 Jews in Austria, most of them living in the Vienna area.

Haider has a history of making controversial statements.

Several years ago, Haider praised Hitler's "decent employment policies" and described Nazi Waffen SS troops as "men of character."

In November 1999, shortly after his party won second place in national elections on a campaign blaming foreigners for Austria's woes, Haider publicly apologized to Austria's Jewish community for these remarks. □

Israel trip leads to marriage

NEW YORK (JTA) — A couple that got engaged on a free trip to Israel recently married. Stacy Gastwirth and Jason Trager tied the knot at Adat Shalom Synagogue in Detroit.

The two, who met while camp counselors, got engaged while on a Birthright Israel trip. □

THIS YEAR IN SALT LAKE CITY

Skater bears Israel's hopes as she gears up for Olympics

By Jessica Steinberg

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Olga Danilov glides along the ice, one hand brushing the smooth surface, the other tucked behind her back.

Thigh muscles pumping, she skates along a trail of rubber markers placed along the ice, using them as a guide for her daily laps.

Between runs, Israel's Olympic speed skater throws on her blue-and-white warmup suit and skates over to her 3-year-old daughter, Nicole, who is sitting on a stool at the rink's edge, drinking hot chocolate and eating cookies.

Speaking in Russian, her coach, Boris Drabkin, calls out her time: "9.2 seconds."

She grimaces, straps her helmet back on and returns to the ice for another series of laps.

Over the loudspeaker, a tape of Russian folk songs for children is playing, Nicole's favorite music while she watches her mother practice.

Danilov and two figure-skating couples represent the entire Israeli team participating in the upcoming Winter Olympic Games, slated to begin Friday in Salt Lake City, say Israeli officials.

Outside the windows of Metulla's Canada Center, the home of the Israel Ice Skating Federation, snow-capped Mount Hermon can be seen rising majestically in the distance.

"Some say we're not really a winter sports country," said Judith Javor, general secretary of the local council in the town of Metulla, located in northern Israel. "But if you look out the window it sure looks like it."

There's also a clear view of nearby Syria and Lebanon, as Israel's northern border is just an Olympic ski jump away.

"We Jews have to develop our cultural side, and sports is part of culture. It's the life that we immigrants know about," said Drabkin, who pushed for the Olympic-size speed skating rink in Metulla after moving to northern Israel 11 years ago.

Both Danilov and Drabkin are immigrants — Danilov from Ukraine and Drabkin from Russia.

Danilov followed her sister to Israel in 1994. Drabkin came with his wife from Moscow, where he trained the Russian national speed skating team.

They made their way to Israel with hundreds of thousands of other Russian immigrants in the 1990s, not expecting to continue their skating careers in the arid Middle East.

"I had finished school and was thinking about what to do next," said Danilov, a slim 28-year-old with a full mane of curly reddish hair. "All my friends had left Ukraine, and I had been thinking about Israel for a while."

She had heard about Drabkin while still living in Ukraine, and got in touch with him soon after arriving at her sister's home in Netanya.

Drabkin already had been living in Israel for several years. He was instrumental in creating the speed-skating program at the Canada Center and helping Israel gain membership in the Winter Olympics.

"It was hard back then because we didn't have skaters and we didn't have experience," said Drabkin, who cleaned floors in Tel Aviv during his first year in Israel. "I started to build the first roots,

working with local kids. And then Olga came from the Ukraine."

Danilov has been skating since she was three-and-a-half, when she took up the sport on doctor's orders. She moved from figure skating to long-track and then to short-track skating in her teens, competing in international events.

By the time she finished school, politics had changed the face of her country, and she started thinking about moving to Israel.

By 1995, Danilov was living in Metulla to train with Drabkin and prepare for the 1998 Olympics. She needed to be in the top 20 in the world in order to qualify, but only made it to 22nd place.

Missing the 1998 Olympics was devastating, but there were soon some joys to make up for it, including her marriage to Alex Danilov, an Israeli Olympic competitor in shooting, and the birth of Nicole shortly after.

She returned to training in late 1999, making her way through a series of international competitions and moving toward the 2002 Olympics.

But since 1998, her perspective has changed.

"I thought that if I wasn't in the 1998 Olympics it would be the end of the world," she said, rolling her eyes and grinning. "This year it's important, but there are other important aspects of my life as well. In some ways, the Olympics feels like any other competition."

However, for Drabkin and other Federation officials who have been involved in Israel's Olympic trials, Danilov's participation is very significant.

"This is Israel's third time in the Winter Olympics, although it is the first time the country is participating in speed skating," Javor said.

"The Olympic committee is getting used to having Israel participate in winter sports, as is the International Skating Union," she added. "We still have to work very hard, but having Olga helps."

Israel has only one speed skater in this year's Olympics, whereas most countries have at least two, if not an entire team. This makes it harder to earn medals.

Israel did have a male speed skater, Denis Zaslavsky, but he was hurt last winter during the European Speed Skating Championships in The Hague.

"It's a lot of pressure on Olga, but she can do it," Drabkin said. "She knows what to do, and that's a result of her extremely professional work."

There are four short-track events in this year's Olympics, ranging from 500 meters to 1,500 meters. Danilov will have to compete in several heats for each race in order to make it to the semi-finals and then the finals.

Will she earn a medal?

"Hard to say," answered Drabkin. "Speed skating is 95 percent hard work and 5 percent talent."

During last year's European Speed Skating Championships in the Netherlands, Danilov finished fifth out of 29 competitors in the 500-meter race, and seventh out of 27 in the 1,000-meter event.

In the recent Short Track World Cup Competition held in Amsterdam, she made it to the second round in the 1,000-meter event, finishing with the 24th best time.

She finished 28th in the 1,500-meter event, and was 38th in the 500.

She had these disappointing results after the suitcase with her three sets of skates was lost in the airport. She usually carries her skates on board, but had to check the blades because of tightened security in the post-Sept. 11 world. □