



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 80, No. 35

Thursday, February 21, 2002

85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

14 Palestinians killed in reprisals

At least 14 Palestinians were killed Wednesday in Israeli reprisals.

The air, sea and ground reprisals on Palestinian security positions across the West Bank and Gaza Strip followed the killing of six Israeli soldiers at a Ramallah-area roadblock Tuesday night.

Israel's Cabinet ups the ante

Israel's Security Cabinet ordered new measures to deal with the rising tide of Palestinian violence.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would not give any details of what was decided at Wednesday's meeting. His spokesman, Ra'anan Gissin, said the series of air, sea and ground strikes Israel launched Wednesday in the West Bank and Gaza "might be a small example of the kind of operations that would come to end the terror."

Court hears voucher case

The American Jewish Congress is optimistic the U.S. Supreme Court will find school vouchers unconstitutional.

The high court heard oral arguments Wednesday in a landmark case involving a Cleveland voucher program and will decide whether government funds may go for students to attend parochial or private schools. The AJCongress, which was involved in writing the plaintiff's brief, charges that voucher programs result in the channeling of students from public schools into parochial schools at taxpayer expense. [Page 3]

N.Y. cantor arrested in sex case

The cantor at New York's largest Reform synagogue was arrested on charges that he sexually abused a nephew in Pennsylvania. Howard Nevison, 61, of Congregation Emanu-El was arrested Wednesday at his New York apartment after officials in Pennsylvania issued a warrant for his arrest.

Police in Lower Merion, a suburb of Philadelphia, charged Nevison with participating in sexual attacks on the boy from 1993 to 1997 while the boy was 3 to 7 years old.

Two other family members were previously convicted of molesting the boy. Lawrence Nevison, 55, who is Howard Nevison's brother and an uncle of the victim, and Lawrence Nevison's son, Stewart, 30, molested the boy in separate incidents.

Court accepts liberal conversions in Israel; Orthodox vow to fight on

By Jessica Steinberg

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Non-Orthodox Jews both inside and outside Israel are celebrating a historic court ruling recognizing Reform and Conservative conversions as valid and binding upon the Jewish state.

Given the complexity of Israeli society, however, Wednesday's ruling by Israel's High Court of Justice is not binding on the Israeli rabbinate.

The result is that the Interior Ministry must now register Israelis who had Reform or Conservative conversions as Jews on their national identification cards — but the rabbinate will not consider them Jews for issues such as marriage or burial.

Orthodox leaders have condemned the ruling, and it is not clear if the Interior Ministry, which is run by the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, will abide by it.

In addition, efforts are already under way in the Knesset to undermine the ruling through legislation.

Still, leaders of the non-Orthodox streams rejoiced after Wednesday's ruling, which decided some 50 cases that had wended their way through the court system for years.

"The ruling has historical consequence because it strengthens Jewish pluralism in Israel," said Rabbi Uri Regev, head of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, the umbrella agency for Reform and other liberal organizations in 40 countries.

"It effectively repels the Orthodox establishment that holds that Reform and Conservative converts aren't worthy of being recognized because of the liberal identities of the rabbis that convert them," he said.

The conversion issue has sparked vicious fights over the question of "Who is a Jew" and strained relations between Israel — where the Orthodox largely control religious life — and the Diaspora, where the liberal streams are stronger.

It has also threatened the stability of previous Israeli governments, when Orthodox parties vowed to leave the governing coalition if changes to the so-called religious status quo were enacted.

At one point, Israel's non-Orthodox groups had agreed to freeze the court cases while compromise solutions were sought, but ultimately renewed the cases when the standoff continued.

Outlining the court's reasoning in its 9-2 decision, Chief Justice Aharon Barak wrote: "Israel is not a state of a Jewish community, Israel is the state of the Jewish people." The ruling also said, "Our basic concepts grant each individual the liberty to decide his or her affiliation to one stream or another."

"It's obviously a complete and total victory," said Rabbi Andrew Sacks, executive head of Israel's Masorti Movement, as the Conservative movement is known in Israel.

The court's language emphasizes the importance of not enshrining one stream of Judaism above others, Sacks said.

"All those people who converted with us and are listed as Ukrainian or Peruvian or whatever, now they can have Jewish listed on their identity cards."

The ruling pertains to conversions performed in Israel; those converted by non-Orthodox rabbis outside of Israel already are being registered as Jews.

The laminated, light green ID cards, carried in blue plastic billfolds, are a staple in every Israeli's wallet. An Israeli ID number is used for paying bills, receiving insurance benefits, even buying a cellular phone.

Nevertheless, the decision carries no weight with Israel's powerful Orthodox establishment. The court's decision recognizes the concept of religious pluralism in Israel, but Reform and Conservative conversions still are not recognized by the Israeli

MIDEAST FOCUS

Court upholds draft deferrals

Israel's High Court of Justice upheld a draft deferral arrangement for yeshiva students.

An expanded panel of 11 justices unanimously rejected a challenge from secular legislators against a provisional law extending draft deferrals for yeshiva students until March 2003.

The court said Wednesday that a parliamentary committee drafting permanent legislation on the matter is working intensively and there is no need to strike down the temporary arrangement.

The High Court previously declared a Defense Ministry arrangement granting draft deferrals to yeshiva students illegal and ordered the Knesset to legislate on the matter.

U.S. 'troubled' by bloodshed

The U.S. State Department said it was "troubled" by the latest upsurge in Israeli-Palestinian violence.

The Palestinians bear the primary responsibility for ending the violence, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Wednesday. He added that Israeli reprisals for Palestinian terror "work against the overall objective of reducing the violence and achieving security."

Boucher also said the United States has no plans for a fresh diplomatic initiative to help stem the bloodshed.

In another development Wednesday, the director of policy and planning at the State Department, Richard Haass, arrived in Israel to get a firsthand look at the escalating violence.

New Israel Bonds president

Veteran Israeli lawmaker Yehoshua Matza resigned from the Knesset to take up his new post as Israel Bonds president.

Matza, 70, served as a Likud Knesset member for 17 years.



Daily News Bulletin

Ivan Michael Schaeffer, *President*

Mark J. Joffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*

Lisa Hostein, *Editor*

Michael S. Arnold, *Managing Editor*

Lenore A. Silverstein, *Finance and Administration Director*

Paula Simmonds, *Marketing and Development Director*

JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
© JTA Reproduction only by previous arrangement.

rabbinate, which maintains its monopoly on issues such as marriage.

"So what if they have an identity card that says they're Jewish," said Avraham Ravitz, leader of the fervently religious United Torah Judaism bloc. "It doesn't mean they're recognized by Jewish law as being Jewish. It's just bureaucratic."

That raised the prospect of Israelis receiving some of the privileges of being Jewish in the Jewish state, but not others.

"The decision will very much confuse these 'converts' whose conversions, in my view, do not hold," Israel's chief Ashkenazic rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, told Army Radio.

"Their identity cards will be worthless. Tomorrow if they want to register to get married, the day after if they go to the Immigration Ministry to ask for their basket of benefits or citizenship, they'll be told, 'No, you're only thought of as a Jew on the population rolls, while as far as everything else goes, you remain in your goyishness.'"

Indeed, Interior Minister Eli Yishai, head of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, said that he could not bring himself "to register a non-Jew as a Jew." One solution, he said, was to note on the converts' ID cards that they are Reform Jews or Conservative Jews.

Already on Wednesday, Shas' Knesset faction presented a legislative proposal to bypass the court decision. Under the bill, conversions would not be finalized until they received the Chief Rabbinate's approval — even if they were performed overseas.

That seemed to indicate the issue is not yet closed.

Still, for Gary Teasdale, a Conservative convert living in Jerusalem, the ruling is a "real neat thing to have happen."

"This ruling doesn't affect my day-to-day life," Teasdale said. "But I felt like I was on the outside looking in. Now I feel like I'm on the inside."

Teasdale first thought about converting to Judaism when he and his wife moved to Israel a few years ago. Even though he was Christian, he received Israeli citizenship because his wife is Jewish.

After an unpleasant experience with an Orthodox conversion class, Teasdale turned to the Conservative movement and studied for a year with a local rabbi.

He was converted by the Conservative rabbinical court in September and officially became Jewish, but not according to the state — or the rabbinate.

Teasdale didn't care much about the Orthodox rabbinate's approval; he just wanted to be listed as Jewish on his I.D. card.

"I feel vindicated or compensated for what I went through," he said after the ruling. "I have never understood why anyone who has the guts to come to Israel and live here and claim they are Jewish wouldn't be welcomed with open arms."

"Why is there such a division between Orthodox and Conservative? You know they're Jews."

For the Orthodox establishment, however, it isn't so simple.

The decision is "a blow," said Jonathan Rosenblum, director of Am Echad, an Orthodox media organization based in Jerusalem.

"The Supreme Court determined that the word 'Jew' has no meaning whatsoever, there are no standards to govern use of that word. Now anyone who has a printing press can call themselves a Jewish group and start dispensing Jewish certificates."

The fervently Orthodox community views the decision as a critical change that effectively ends the dream of Jewish identity as a glue binding together the Jews in Israel, he said. That kind of reaction gives pause to those in the Reform and Conservative movements.

There could be complications following the ruling, said Nicole Maor, the attorney for the Israel Religious Action Center, the activist arm of the Reform movement here.

"It's historic in that the court has ordered the Interior Ministry to register conversions in Israel," added Maor. "Even though it's symbolic, most government bodies don't look any further than ID cards."

Still she expects the Interior Ministry to try to avoid fulfilling the judgment.

Moreover, the issue of marriage remains unresolved.

Until they are recognized as Jews by the rabbinate, Reform and Conservative converts can't be married by an Orthodox rabbi — the only Jewish marriages legally recognized by the state.

"It's going to change sometime soon, because this is probably the only democratic country in the world where a significant part of its citizenry can't marry," said Sacks, referring to the large number of Russian immigrants whom the rabbinate doesn't recognize as Jews. □

JEWISH WORLD

Supreme Court debates vouchers, but gives no clue to final decision

By Sharon Samber

Mayor rejects anti-PLO resolution

Mayor Michael Bloomberg opposed a City Council resolution to close Palestinian offices in New York.

The resolution, which is still in committee, would declare the Palestinian Authority and the PLO terrorist organizations and close their offices in New York, including the Palestinian Mission to the United Nations.

"As the host city for the U.N., we have to— even when it is painful and disgraceful and disgusting, any term you want to use— we have to be willing to let anybody that the U.N. wants to credit, or visit them, come here," Bloomberg said Tuesday, according to The New York Times.

Ashcroft: Faith fights terror

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft said the war against terrorism is rooted in faith.

Ashcroft, speaking to Christian broadcasters in Nashville, contrasted "the way of God and the way of the terrorists."

In Tuesday's interview, Ashcroft said, "Civilized people — Muslims, Christians and Jews — all understand that the source of freedom and human dignity is the Creator."

Anti-Semitic forgery debunked

A book that exposes the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" as an anti-Semitic forgery was presented to a major Russian library.

"The Lie That Doesn't Want to Die" was written by Hadassah Ben-Itto, an Israeli judge, and it was later translated into Russian.

"The Protocols," which purports to reveal a Jewish plot to control the world, has become increasingly popular in Russia in recent years.

Jewish kids write to Saudi king

More than 400 students at three Chicago-area Jewish day schools wrote letters to the king of Saudi Arabia.

The letters were written as part of a nationwide campaign linked to Purim that was organized by a group known as Mothers against Teaching Children to Hate and Kill.

"Our goal is to raise awareness in Muslim countries," where children are encouraged "to hate Jews and Americans as infidels," said the group's founder, Molly Resnick.

Recalling the story of Purim, Resnick has gotten children involved in the campaign by telling them how Jewish children helped avert the decree by Haman to annihilate the Jewish people.

"Now as then," she recently told a group of students, "you may be part of something that makes a difference in the world."

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Your guess is as good as mine.

That's what observers of the U.S. Supreme Court are saying about how the high court ultimately will rule on the constitutionality of school vouchers.

Oral arguments are never a clear indicator of where the court is headed, but observers seemed particularly reluctant to read the tea leaves following 80 minutes of back and forth Wednesday between justices and lawyers representing families involved in an Ohio voucher program.

The use of vouchers, which provide government funds for students to attend parochial or private schools, remains a divisive issue among Jewish organizations. Many groups oppose them as a breach of church-state separation, but others want to allow such use of government money, which could help parents send children to Jewish schools.

A ruling that vouchers are constitutional could have important implications for education policy and other areas, such as government funding of religious organizations that provide social services.

The case before the Supreme Court addresses whether the state-funded Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program — started in 1995 to rescue the city's failing schools — subsidizes religion. If so, opponents of the program explain, that would violate the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, which prohibits the government from supporting a religion.

"The government is cutting checks to finance religious schools, and that the Constitution does not allow," said Steven Sheinberg, assistant director of legal affairs for the Anti-Defamation League.

Supporters of the program say that because the low-income families eligible for the vouchers can choose between public, private and religious schools — or even tutoring help — the government is acting neutrally toward religion. Also, they say, it is the parents' private choice that determines whether public funds follow their children to non-public schools.

The Orthodox Union noted that, over the last two decades, the high court has issued rulings in support of extending tuition tax credits to parochial school families and for the purchase of supplementary educational materials such as books and computers to all elementary schools, including parochial schools.

"The time has come for the nation's highest court to announce once and for all that the Establishment Clause may not be used as a tool of hostility toward religious families and institutions, but that it guards America's religious liberty by ensuring the state's equal treatment and neutrality toward religion," said Nathan Diament, director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs.

As with many close church-state cases, the outcome is likely to depend on the swing vote of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

The senior associate justice asked questions about community schools and the range of options open to students, but no one pretends to know in which direction she is leaning.

"It's a tug of war for O'Connor's heart," Sheinberg said.

The high court's ruling is expected late this spring.

Whatever the outcome of the case, there has been a sharp shift in the court's take on church-state cases, according to Marc Stern, co-director of the American Jewish Congress' legal department.

Justices are looking at these cases as issues of individual choice and government even-handedness toward religion rather than a strict "no government aid to religious schools" policy, said Stern, who was involved in preparing the plaintiff's brief.

Many of the justices' questions focused on whether the government would appear to endorse religion by granting the vouchers.

Ninety-nine percent of the students in the Cleveland voucher program, which grants tuition vouchers of up to \$2,500, have used the money to attend religious schools.

Justice Stephen Breyer said the government did appear to be endorsing religion, which he found problematic.

"Even if that's not what was intended, that's the effect," he said. □

U.S. Jews pledge to help combat increased anti-Semitism in Europe

By Simon Carroll

LONDON (JTA) — American Jewish organizations have pledged greater support for European Jewish communities that are facing a rising tide of Muslim hostility and anti-Israeli media bias.

They also declared themselves “surprised and pleased” by the high level of behind-the-scenes support they encountered during meetings with European government leaders for firm American-led policies against terrorists and the states that support them.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations ended meetings Tuesday night with more than 100 Jewish leaders from 23 European countries. The Jewish leaders also held high-level political talks with European officials.

“Especially after Sept. 11, many European Jewish communities feel very isolated and intimidated,” said Mortimer Zuckerman, chairman of the umbrella group of 52 organizations. “We need to make them feel they are not alone in their foxhole.”

Though no formal structure was envisaged, he said his organization had discussed “creating a mechanism to work much closer with the European Jews” and to use “our resources and information and mutual support.”

The American Jewish leaders are increasingly seen by their European counterparts as being far ahead in their ability to lobby and motivate governments, educate public opinion and combat media bias, Zuckerman said.

“We can shine the light of public attention on issues, we know how to mobilize,” he said.

The Americans intend to help the Europeans establish a strong lobbying capacity in Brussels, the headquarters of the European Union, said Malcolm Hoenlein, the Conference’s executive vice chairman. But he said the group would be “sensitive not to tread on toes. We have no imperialistic aims, and we will not speak in the name of Europeans; we will do nothing without local clearance.”

He said one priority would be to coordinate with European Jewish organizations a strategy to resist the onslaught against Israel expected at two upcoming U.N. conferences, one on human rights next month and one on the environment, slated for July.

“We were all taken aback by the way the Durban conference last year was turned into a racist conference targeting Israel and became blatantly anti-Semitic,” said Hoenlein, referring to last summer’s U.N. Conference against Racism and Xenophobia.

He said anti-Semites, especially those encouraged by Arab states, were “given legitimacy” by these onslaughts, which he said laid the groundwork for anti-Jewish political and physical attacks in Europe and also affected the policies of European governments.

“We need to put in place mechanisms to anticipate the problems better, and to deal with moderate Muslims,” Zuckerman said.

The Americans and Europeans agreed that strengthening the link between the communities had become more important since the Sept. 11 attacks against America.

The two communities needed to share tactics on handling the fallout from the American-led war on terror, he said.

“We can contribute a lot to the European Jews, but they can teach us a great deal about strengthening security for Jewish communities,” Hoenlein said.

He said that because the threat from anti-Semites, Muslim extremists and anti-Israeli activists has existed in Europe far longer

and more intensely than in the United States, the European communities had developed advanced systems for protecting Jews and Jewish institutions from attack.

“In this respect, we are way behind,” said Hoenlein.

American delegates said they were impressed, for instance, by the Community Security Organization that looks after the safety of British Jews.

“The heightened measures they take here were brought home to us when the security guys escorted us from one conference venue to another and warned us not to congregate too long in one place to avoid being a large target,” said one delegate.

In listening to leaders from the European nations, a new trend emerged — that most Eastern European Jewish communities feel safer than before and found more support from previously unhelpful governments.

This was in stark contrast to the heightened anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli sentiment pervading much of Western Europe.

France, which hosts Western Europe’s largest Jewish community, has since last September’s events been facing “increasing acts of violence against schools, synagogues and against rabbis in the streets,” reported Roger Cukierman, president of France’s umbrella group for secular Jews in France, CRIF.

Especially in poorer areas where Muslims and Jews live in close proximity, he said Arabs had been “causing fear, through insults and sometimes even petrol bombs.”

Cukierman said that even beyond the anti-Semitism found among recent Muslim immigrants and the extreme right wing, each comprising some 10 percent of the population, France had a very volatile electorate with “fluctuating ideas.”

He said the French people were being subjected to an unprecedented wave of anti-Israeli media propaganda. This could create anti-Jewish sentiment among “normal” people, he said.

A statue of the 19th-century French Jewish soldier, Alfred Dreyfus, wrongly imprisoned for disclosing secrets to the enemy and then exonerated, was recently sprayed with the slogan: “Dirty Traitor!”

However, Cukierman said French Jews maintained good relations with and access to the government, except for what he called the traditionally anti-Israel Foreign Ministry.

And while France’s Protestant churches had become virulently anti-Israeli, the Catholics were more moderate, he said.

Both French and British community leaders reported that since Sept. 11, their relations with Muslim representatives had come to an abrupt halt. Before then, French Jews had been helping the mainly Algerian recent immigrants to feel more integrated, Cukierman said.

And the British delegates spoke of a temporary end to work with Muslim communities, mainly from south Asia, over common goals such as protecting rights to state-supported religious schools and the ritual slaughter of animals to meet both Jewish and Muslim dietary restrictions.

A strong British Jewish activist, Lord George Weidenfeld, a book publisher, said he had noted in his extensive travels across Europe that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had become “the most demonized leader in the world,” and that Israel and Jewish communities in Europe had severely failed in the dissemination of *hasbarah*, or information.

However he said that the anti-Jewish threats in Europe would rapidly decline should America prevail — as it had done so far — in its war against terror. He told the Americans and Europeans: “Nothing succeeds like success.” □