



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 80, No. 45

Thursday, March 7, 2002

85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel retaliates for rocket attack

Two Israeli soldiers were killed in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday as the army retaliated for a Hamas rocket attack a day earlier on a Negev city.

First Lt. Pinchas Cohen, 23, of Jerusalem, and a second soldier whose name was not immediately released were killed in fighting in Khan Yunis. Three other soldiers were wounded.

At least seven Palestinians were reported killed in a series of Israeli air, sea and ground offensives in Gaza that came in retaliation for the missile attack on Sderot in which three Israeli children were wounded. Israel also launched attacks at Palestinian security targets in the West Bank.

Powell questions Sharon policy

The United States questioned Ariel Sharon's plan to bring the Palestinians back to negotiations through military force.

"If you declare war on the Palestinians and think you can solve the problem by seeing how many Palestinians can be killed — I don't know that leads us anywhere," Secretary of State Colin Powell told a congressional hearing Wednesday.

In another development, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan believes Israeli-Palestinian violence "has clearly got completely out of hand," a spokesman said Wednesday.

Slur mars primary race

Charges of anti-Semitism marred a Democratic primary for a congressional seat in Chicago.

Controversy erupted after a supporter of candidate Nancy Kaszak, who is Polish, lashed out at her opponent, Rahm Emanuel, a former senior adviser to President Clinton.

Emanuel cried foul after Edward Moskal, president of the Polish American Congress, made a speech Monday in which he erroneously accused Emanuel of having dual Israeli citizenship and of having served in the army of Israel, a nation that "continues to hurl insults at the Polish people."

Emanuel, whose father is Israeli, brought out a coalition of religious leaders to publicly attack what they called the introduction of bigotry into the race.

Kaszak later said she rejected Moskal's endorsement. "We're all here to stand against anti-Semitism," she said.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Even after landmark court ruling, Israel struggles with convert issue

By Jessica Steinberg

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It's been six years since Ora and Michael Magen adopted their daughter Tal from abroad and converted her under the auspices of the Reform movement.

Now the Magens, with the Reform movement's backing, are trying to register Tal as a Jew in Israel's Interior Ministry.

Joined by Carmen Avrouskine, another Reform convert, the Magens sat with an Interior Ministry clerk last week who accepted their conversion certificates and told them it would take "a couple of days."

The two parties were not so easily placated.

"I would expect a minister in the State of Israel to accept the ruling of the High Court," said Ora Magen, referring to Interior Minister Eli Yishai, who also leads the fervently Orthodox Shas Party. "This is a democracy."

They may finally have some satisfaction, after Yishai this week announced — under pressure from the attorney general to implement a High Court of Justice decision recognizing Reform and Conservative conversions as binding — that he will register the converts as Jews. But the matter is still not black and white.

Yishai said he will list the converts as Jews on their Israeli ID cards, with a qualifier noting that the Jewish designation is only according to the High Court.

Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg, who has previously negotiated with the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox parties over the conversion issue, then offered a compromise solution Wednesday.

He proposed that the "nationality" designation — in which citizens are designated as Jew, Arab, Russian or other — be taken off Israeli identity cards, Israel Radio reported.

"We are not for deleting the nationality clause in the Israeli ID card," said Rabbi Ehud Bandel, president of the Conservative movement in Israel. "As a Jewish state, this is an important symbol that people should be proud to have on their ID."

Burg's proposal also follows a response to the recent High Court ruling sponsored by a fervently Orthodox politician from Shas, Yair Peretz. The Knesset may vote on a new version of the conversion law that would validate conversions only if authorized by the Chief Rabbinate.

"Any future compromise that may or may not be achieved has nothing to do with the fact that Mr. Yishai must register the converts as the court ordered, without any tricks," Bandel said. "This is a question of the democratic character of the state."

Nevertheless, both the Reform and Conservative movements welcomed the tone of Burg's compromise.

Israel Radio said both sides had agreed to grant Burg a week to formulate the details of his compromise solution, which would skirt the debate over non-Orthodox conversion.

"His intention is praiseworthy, but the final product is a little problematic," said Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Israel Religious Action Center. "It doesn't address the right under the Law of Return of those converts who are already Israeli citizens."

In the nearly two weeks since Israel's High Court of Justice recognized Reform and Conservative conversions as valid and binding, converts from both movements have tried to put this ruling into action, with little success.

In the High Court case, there were 50 converts seeking to be identified as Jews on

MIDEAST FOCUS

Hamas member dies in Gaza

A Hamas member died Wednesday in a blast in his Gaza City home. Hamas officials said Abdel-Rahman Ghazal, 20, had been killed by an Israeli helicopter missile. Israel denied any knowledge of the incident.

Soccer games booted from Israel

Israel is protesting a decision by the European soccer federation to move games out of Israel because of security concerns. Israeli Cabinet minister Matan Vilnai was slated to travel to Switzerland on Thursday to protest the decision, effective with the March 14 match between Hapoel Tel Aviv and AC Milan.

Suicide bombing prevented

Israeli soldiers prevented a suicide bombing Wednesday at a roadblock near the West Bank city of Kalkiya. The soldiers opened fire when a Palestinian man threw a firebomb at their position.

Peres: Sorry to be in government

Shimon Peres was quoted as having strong misgivings over having joined the Sharon government. The Israeli foreign minister voiced the misgivings after the Security Cabinet voted Tuesday to intensify Israel Defense Force operations against the Palestinian Authority, according to the Jerusalem Post. "If I would have known the reality would get this bad, I would not have joined this government in the first place," Peres reportedly told a confidant.

More Israelis want handguns

Israeli officials report a dramatic rise in requests for handgun permits since the intifada began. Last year, there were 7,790 requests, of which 4,588 were granted, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz. In 2000, by comparison, there were 4,417 requests and 2,550 authorizations.



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.

their ID cards. For many, their only issue was registration. For others, there also was the matter of the Law of Return, which grants automatic Israeli citizenship to all Jews. These converts were already Israeli citizens through a family member, but couldn't reap the benefits of returning to Israel as a Jew.

The court only addressed the registration issue, and said it would rule at another time regarding the question of the Law of Return for converts.

Last week, in fact, a representative of the Chief Rabbinate asked the Knesset Law Committee to revise the Law of Return to exclude all converts — including those who converted outside Israel — from receiving new immigrant rights until approved by the rabbinate. Yishai initially had expressed vehement opposition to the High Court ruling, saying that he would not honor it.

"I will not act against my conscience, and I won't do anything that will destroy the Jewish people," he told Israel Radio. "I would rather go to jail than register converts who aren't Orthodox."

On Tuesday, Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein ordered the Interior Ministry to register citizens who underwent Reform or Conservative conversions on Jewish population lists, according to Israel Radio.

For some of the converts and their families, however, it's already been a long wait.

In 1991, Jaime Glottman, originally from Colombia, moved to Israel with his four children, who were born to his former wife, who is not Jewish. After converting them at birth in Reform and Conservative ceremonies, Glottman reconverted them in Israel in a Conservative ceremony.

Five years later, when Glottman's son Ya'akov reported for army service, he was told by the Israel Defense Force that he would be enlisted as a volunteer because he wasn't Jewish.

"It was a huge blow to him, to his identity," Glottman said. "He didn't want to go to the army; he didn't want to go to synagogue anymore; he talked about marrying a non-Jew."

Now Glottman is fighting the conversion battle in court, with the help of the Conservative leadership. But the entire issue has saddened him.

"I came to this country with four Jewish kids and now one daughter is married to a non-Jew and another is living with a Christian," he said. "Coming to Israel, instead of making them more Jewish, it's made them less so."

The Magens see their involvement in the issue as a fluke. They converted Tal outside of Israel, but were later told by the Interior Ministry that it wasn't acceptable.

"It's all a big bluff," Ora Magen said. "They play all these games with you."

At that point, they decided to reconvert her through the Reform movement in Israel.

"We believe we're not less Jewish because we're Reform," she said. "This is our world outlook."

That's similar to the outlook of Avrouskine, the daughter of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, who immigrated from Romania at age 19.

Now 35, Avrouskine began her conversion process through the rabbinate, studying twice a week for three years with an Orthodox rabbi. When she began to feel that he might never convert her, she gave it up.

After meeting her husband, an Israeli who introduced her to the Reform movement, Avrouskine began studying two to three times a week for one year with a local Reform rabbi.

She's been Jewish since 1996, but not according to the Interior Ministry. Now that she has a 3-year old daughter and another child on the way, she feels it's time to clarify matters.

"This is the only place where Jews can't practice Judaism freely," said Avrouskine, who found out that she wasn't halachically Jewish only when she arrived in Israel. "It's a very strange reality."

The Chief Rabbinate's current attempt to change the Law of Return is a sign that the rabbinate is trying to get around the High Court decision and eradicate any shred of religious pluralism in the State of Israel, Regev says.

"It's clear to me that the Jewish people is back to dealing with the 'Who is a Jew' question and is again being asked to relate to the question of what the State of Israel is all about," Regev said. "One is a narrow sectarian position, and the other is a decision of diversity and pluralism. This is about whether Israel is going to be a democracy or theocracy." □

JEWISH WORLD

Belgian court sets hearing date

A Belgian court said it would postpone until May a hearing to decide whether the country can try Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for war crimes.

The appeals court made the announcement Wednesday, saying the new date will give lawyers time to review the relevance of a ruling last month from the International Court in the Hague.

The Hague court ruled that Belgium cannot prosecute former and current world leaders because they have diplomatic immunity.

Sharon faces lawsuits filed by Palestinians and Lebanese accusing him of responsibility for the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, which was carried out by Lebanese Christian militias allied with Israel.

Belgium has a 1993 law on "universal jurisdiction," which enables Belgian courts to judge atrocities committed elsewhere, regardless of whether or not they involved Belgians.

Anti-Semitism rises in Scotland

A Scottish Jewish leader reported a rise in anti-Semitism because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Stephen Kliner, president of the Jewish Representative Council in Glasgow, told the Glasgow Herald that Jewish civic and business leaders in the Scottish city recently noticed the spread of anti-Semitic sentiments among "respectable people who should know better."

Kliner also claimed that a synagogue in the city of Aberdeen had periodically received threatening phone calls that usually coincided with new violence in the Middle East.

Virtual Israeli shopping spree

A Web site was created to give Diaspora Jews a chance to support businesses in Israel.

The site, www.shopinIsrael.com, enables people who cannot come to Israel the chance to buy Israeli products.

Online shoppers can choose from an array of categories, including Judaica, ritual objects, art, books, clothing, cosmetics and music.

Friday the rabbi made drinks

The oldest Orthodox synagogue in Sydney, Australia, hosts a pre-services cocktail party in a bid to attract visitors.

Rabbi Mendel Kastel of the Great Synagogue has let the concierges of the city's major hotels know that he personally makes the daiquiris and would be delighted to serve them to any Jews visiting Sydney. Along with snaring more locals, the cocktails have attracted visiting Israelis, Americans, British and French.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

In ironic twist of history, Spain now attracting Argentine Jews

By Hillel Landes

MADRID (JTA) — It was standing room only in the B'nai Brith office that Madrid's tiny, rabbi-less Conservative synagogue uses for its Kabbalat Shabbat services.

After concluding prayers on a recent Friday night, Bet El's congregation remained seated to talk about reports that tens of thousands of Argentine Jews — most of them members of the Conservative movement — wanted to emigrate to Spain.

A veteran member of the eight-year-old congregation called for people to volunteer as host families.

Others proposed helping arrange jobs and residence permits and renting apartments that immigrants could stay in while getting their papers in order.

"If we don't act now, we will be missing a huge opportunity," said Mario Stofenmacher, Bet El's prayer leader, himself Argentine-born.

It is estimated that as many as 40,000 of Argentina's 200,000 Jews will leave Argentina as a result of the economic crisis that has decimated the savings of middle-class families. Many have been forced to take their meals in soup kitchens sponsored by Argentine Jewish communities.

Significant numbers of Argentine Jews are moving to Israel and America. But — in an ironic twist of history — cultural similarities, a common language and economic prosperity are drawing many others to Spain.

Spain's medieval Jewish Golden Age came to an abrupt halt with the 1492 expulsion decree by Isabel and Ferdinand, whose inquisition turned the Iberian peninsula into a bastion of anti-Semitism and religious intolerance for centuries to come.

Only after the legalization of non-Catholic faiths in the 19th century did Jews begin to trickle back to Spain. Today's community numbers around 14,000, mostly Moroccan Jews who immigrated in the 1950s, along with expatriates from the Americas and some Spaniards rediscovering their Jewish roots.

As some three-quarters of Argentine Jewry is said to belong to the Conservative movement, the influx would be a boon for Bet El, which is dwarfed by the Sephardic Orthodox synagogue a few blocks away on Balmes Street.

In the last year, Bet El has gone from struggling to raise a minyan for its weekly services to filling the rows of office chairs in the small room of a gray high-rise building in Madrid.

Edgardo Einhorn is one of the new faces. The 32-year-old political scientist moved to Spain a year ago from western Argentina because his girlfriend had relatives here.

Plus, he said, "I tried living in Israel for a year, but it wasn't for me."

Like most Argentine Jews, Einhorn knows of at least a dozen Jews back home planning to move to Spain. After enduring years of dictatorship and waves of hyperinflation, Argentine Jews have seen their savings wiped out by the steep devaluation of the peso and tight restrictions on bank withdrawals.

"The latest measures are really affecting the middle class, and the Jews in Argentina are mostly middle class," Einhorn said. "The upper class already got their money out."

Stofenmacher, who is also Bet El's director, said the crisis was threatening "40 years of efforts" in Argentina by Rabbi Marshall Meyer.

Stofenmacher should know. He studied with Meyer, who created Argentina's Conservative movement almost single-handedly in the 1950s and 1960s, setting up a rabbinical school and teacher training center and guiding an expansion of synagogues from one to 20 in the Buenos Aires area alone.

Einhorn said the pattern of Argentine Jewish emigration follows the money.

"The people with money go to Spain or the United States. Those with no money go to Israel," where the government has made generous financial and social benefits available to new Argentine arrivals.

Earlier in the week, the president and executive vice president of the World Council of Conservative/Masorti Synagogues visited Madrid to see how the council could help future immigrants. Alan Silverstein and Rabbi Joseph Wernik toured the Madrid Jewish community's day school in a northern suburb and met with Stofenmacher and the rabbi of the Orthodox synagogue. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Jewish groups want more details before deciding on Saudi proposal***By Matthew E. Berger*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — With attention focused on the Saudi Arabian peace initiative, American Jewish groups are trying to determine if the plan is in Israel's best interest — and are trying to keep international expectations in check.

Most Jewish groups are saying they need more details before determining whether Crown Prince Abdullah's outline is a window of opportunity for the peace process or a nonstarter. Whatever their viewpoint, the groups say it's impossible for them to lobby actively until they know more.

Those specifics won't come out before an Arab League summit in Beirut in late March — and Saudi Arabia has threatened not to present its plan at the summit unless Israel allows Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to attend the meeting.

Until then, Jewish groups are acting cautiously — and sending a message to the Bush administration to take its time as well before the administration makes a move on the issue.

"We are urging the administration to go slow and carefully assess the details," said David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

The administration is under growing pressure to back the Saudi proposal. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is calling on Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to meet in Sharm el-Sheikh to discuss the Saudi proposal. Vice President Dick Cheney is expected to hear a great deal about the plan when he travels to the Middle East later this week.

A week loaded with casualties makes the prospects of any peace initiative all the more enticing — or, some would say, more implausible.

Abdullah has not even formally presented a plan, instead telling New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman that he had intended to make such a proposal — but then shelved it because of Israeli policy.

That hasn't stopped world leaders and media from hailing the initiative as a window of opportunity for Mideast peace, perhaps because the alternatives right now are so few. But American Jewish leaders believe there is not enough tangible information about the initiative for the Bush administration to decide how to proceed, or for their groups to determine their positions.

"It's hard to lobby for something that doesn't really exist on paper," said Lewis Roth, assistant executive director of Americans for Peace Now, which praises the idea that a leading Arab state supports the peace process.

In principle, the initiative calls for normalized relations between Israel and the Arab world, provided that Israel returns to the borders it had before the 1967 Six-Day War.

Some see that idea as a positive step toward peace from one of the most influential Arab states, and as a basis for discussion. Others see it as a step backward from long-standing U.N. Security Council resolutions, which call for Israel to withdraw to secure and recognized borders, but not necessarily for complete withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights.

In addition, the initiative is mum on several key issues, including the "right of return" that Palestinian refugees demand to their former homes inside Israel.

"A lot of Jewish groups have a wait-and-see attitude until the

prince gets in front of the Arab League," said an official with a Jewish organization. "There's not much that can be done until we see what the prince articulates."

Some Jewish groups are sending editorials and background information to their memberships, informing them of the complex issues involved in the initiative. Specifically, they are highlighting the perceived faults in the proposal, and noting what issues people should look for if a real plan is ever unveiled.

In addition, they are expressing wariness about Saudi Arabia's motives. Historically, Saudi Arabia has hindered the peace process more than helped it, and many Jewish leaders openly question whether the Saudis' real goal now is to redeem the country's image in the wake of the Sept. 11 terror attacks, which were carried out primarily by Saudi citizens.

Some even speculate that the Saudis want to push Israel into a corner by offering a peace deal it can't accept, thus painting the Jewish state as obstructionist.

But other Jewish groups say that, whatever Saudi Arabia's motives, the initiative could be a step in the right direction.

"There's no reason to stop" the proposal's momentum, said Martin Raffel, associate executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. "Let's engage the Saudis and see what role they are going to take."

Stephen Cohen, national scholar for the Israel Policy Forum, said the details are not as important as the overall message, which is that Arab states are seeking an end to the conflict that includes recognition of Israel.

"It's defining the Arab vision of peace, not pre-empting the negotiating process," he said.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations has not yet endorsed a strategy. The group held a conference call last week with Dore Gold, a senior adviser to Sharon.

Until Israel takes a clear position on the Saudi initiative, it's hard for the American Jewish community to mount a strong push either for or against the plan, one Jewish leader said.

"All we need is one definitive statement from the prime minister," the official said. "The U.S. Jewish community cannot be out in front on this because, in the end, we are not the Israeli government, we are not the Israeli electorate."

Morton Klein, national director of the Zionist Organization of America, said he is starting to contact Israeli ministers, explaining why he believes the Saudi initiative would put Israel in a worse position than do United Nations resolutions.

Israeli officials have issued differing opinions on the proposal. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres has praised it, while Sharon has said that a retreat to the borders would endanger the country's security.

Considering the Bush administration's measured reception to the initiative, Jewish groups are making their opinions known subtly, hoping the White House will not take a definitive position until the plan is fleshed out.

"There are always those who are going to jump ahead and say this is the best thing since sliced bread and others who will dismiss it out of hand," said the AJCommittee's Harris. "The prudent approach is to take a more nuanced middle course."

Cohen said the American Jewish community and Israel should take the Saudis at their word and embrace the initiative — but he realizes that people are afraid to do so.

"People are afraid of a yes. They don't want to have their hopes dashed again." □