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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S. Jewish community launches new solidarity with Israel initiative

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — As Israel grapples with a war of spirit and terror, the organized Jewish community is launching a new plan to show solidarity with the embattled nation.

"Jews in the United States need an opportunity to give expression to the broad-based support and solidarity they feel with Israel at this difficult time, and I think the people of Israel need to know and have it reaffirmed that American Jewry is standing with them," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

The program is an initiative of the Conference of Presidents, which is partnering with the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella group of the federation system.

The cornerstone event is slated for March 24 under the billing "We stand with Israel." The flagship event will be held in New York, with simultaneous gatherings in 50 to 100 communities across North America.

Although still in the planning stages, the gatherings will include a satellite broadcast that organizers hope will feature Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and other top Israeli politicians, along with terror victims and American political leaders.

As the Palestinian intifada intensified last fall, Jewish communal leaders had planned a major pro-Israel rally in New York. But with the date set for soon after Sept. 11, it was canceled for security reasons.

Organizers say the March event will be "very different" — in part because it is meant to be a somber event, in part because of security concerns.

For one thing, the gatherings will not be public events, but will limit the numbers in attendance, with member organizations issuing tickets to their constituencies.

In addition, rabbis from all religious streams are being asked to devote their Shabbat sermon before the event to a message of unity with Israel and to incorporate a prayer on behalf of Israel into the Passover Yizkor, or mourner's service.

The Conference of Presidents was also preparing a statement of unity this week to be signed by all of its member organizations, but had not yet gotten the approval of its member agencies by late Tuesday.

Nearly all of the more than 50 Jewish organizations in the conference are behind the initiative, which is intended to be nonpolitical.

The solidarity statement, currently in draft form, relates to "the fundamental principles in which there is a clear consensus," according to Hoenlein.

Those principles, according to those familiar with the document, include a condemnation of terrorism, a statement of solidarity between American Jews and the Jewish state, and a belief in Israel's right to defend itself.

The language of the document is still being fine-tuned, but most Jewish leaders say there is little debate about its content — or the focus of the gatherings.

Arthur Naporstek, director of the UJC's overseas pillar, which is helping to coordinate the local events, says there is "tremendous consensus." He said no one is objecting to a speech by Sharon, whose approach has been questioned by some in the Jewish community, or debating the nitty-gritty of Israeli policy.

The "point of this rally is not to make a political statement, but to show support for the people of Israel," he said.

"I think the whole idea of having communities together on one day in support of Israel couldn't be more important than it is now," said Naporstek, who canceled a business trip to dedicate himself to the project. He described a "real sense of urgency"

Six Israelis killed

Six Israelis were killed and seven wounded Tuesday while traveling close to the Lebanese border. The six were shot by terrorists who opened fire on vehicles traveling a highway in the Western Galilee. It was not clear whether the terrorists had infiltrated into Israel from Lebanon or were Palestinians.

In another incident Tuesday, one Israeli was killed and another moderately wounded in a shooting attack near a West Bank settlement. The man who died, a building contractor, was traveling with a security guard when Palestinian gunmen opened fire. The gunmen escaped.

Israeli troops enter Ramallah

Five Palestinians were killed in clashes with Israeli soldiers who entered Ramallah early Tuesday.

The Palestinian Authority called on the people of Ramallah to fight the Israeli forces. The army said the offensive was aimed at smashing "bases of terror."

Some 150 tanks pushed into Ramallah, making it the biggest tank operation since the intifada began in late 2000.

Two Israeli ministers resign

Two Israeli Cabinet ministers submitted their resignations on Tuesday. Tourism Minister Binyamin Elon and National Infrastructure Minister Avigdor Lieberman said they were pulling their National Unity — Israel, Our Home bloc out of the government after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced he was freeing Yasser Arafat from his Ramallah headquarters.

The resignations, which go into effect Thursday, mean Sharon will now have to rely on the support of the Labor Party and the fervently Orthodox Shas Party to stay in power until the next round of elections are held late next year.

Annan criticizes Israel

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan called on Israel to end its "illegal occupation" of Palestinian lands. Annan also said the actions of the Israel Defense Force "gravely erode Israel's standing in the international community."

Speaking Tuesday before the U.N. Security Council, Annan added that the Middle East death toll had soared to appalling levels and urged leaders on both sides to "lead your peoples away from disaster."

MIDEAST FOCUS

Settlers rally in Tel Aviv

An Israeli crowd estimated at more than 100,000 called on Ariel Sharon to dismantle the Palestinian Authority.

Held Monday night in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, the rally was organized by the Yesha Council, which represents settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The demonstrators called on the prime minister to end Palestinian terror.

More than 1,600 police protected the protesters.

Arafat compares IDF to Nazis

Yasser Arafat claimed that Israel tattooed numbers on the arms of Palestinians the army rounded up in refugee camps.

"Is that not what they say the Nazis did to the Jews?" the Palestinian Authority president told Abu Dhabi television. "Is this not a new Nazi racism?"

An Israeli military source said Palestinians detained in Tulkarm had been given numbers to facilitate the questioning process, but that these were written on their arms in ink that would wash off.

After Israeli officials also criticized the practice, the Israel Defense Force's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz ordered the IDF to stop "immediately."

Calls for fasting, prayer

Orthodox groups in the United States are calling for a day of prayer and fasting Wednesday as a response to the mounting violence in the Middle East.

Among the several groups calling for the fast are the Rabbinical Council of America and the Orthodox Union, which said in a joint statement that the situation in Israel is "truly bewildering, discouraging and even depressing not only for our brothers and sisters who reside there, but also for all Jews no matter where they live."

Israel's Orthodox Chief Rabbinate has called for similar prayers Wednesday at the Western Wall.

for American Jews to show support for the Jewish state, express themselves and show that position to their political leaders.

Betty Ehrenberg, director of international and communal affairs for the Orthodox Union, echoed the sentiment of urgency and broad-based support for the plan.

"I don't know if this is a time for distinctions between Jewish groups as far as support for Israel is concerned," she said, and described an "obligation" to participate in "Jewish peoplehood by doing as much as we can to support Israel at this time."

That could mean visiting the state, meeting with political leaders or prayer, she said.

Both the Orthodox Union and Agudath Israel of America slated Wednesday for special prayers and fasting for Israel. Despite the general consensus, a couple of the member organizations aren't convinced that any language on the subject can rise above politics.

Americans for Peace Now has expressed reservations about the initiative because it appeared to be "more of a blank check for the Sharon government," said the group's spokesman, Lewis Roth.

On the other side of the political spectrum, Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of the America, said that unless the rallies bear the explicit themes of Israel's right to defend itself with "whatever means necessary" and "exposing the lie" of Israeli occupation, "it won't have nearly the political impact to help Israel."

But David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, said, "You're never going to achieve full consensus in an organization that spans such a broad spectrum of organizations from the left to the right, from the religious to the secular." But, he said, he was "confident there are core principles that can be articulated and agreed upon by most, if not all, the member agencies."

"Israel is faced with an unprecedented situation, and American Jews should stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel today as never before," he added.

"And everything else flows from that."

For their part, Israeli officials are welcoming the initiative.

"Every expression of solidarity with Israel is welcome by the people of Israel," said Ido Aharoni, spokesman at the Israeli Consulate in New York. "And in this time of difficulty and terror, every display of support is highly appreciated by Israelis." □

In Tasmania, man with a car transfers remains for proper burial

By Henry Benjamin

SYDNEY, Australia (JTA) — Workmen excavating a building site recently in Tasmania have exposed the remains of some of the 90 Jews buried there between 1828 and 1872.

The site in Hobart, Tasmania — an island off of Australia's southeastern coast — was last used as a Jewish cemetery 130 years ago. None of Hobart's Jewish population of about 100 is descended from those buried in the Harrington St. cemetery.

The Tasmanian government's Housing Commission, which is redeveloping the block of land, made clear that the remains must be treated with dignity and handled only by religious Jews.

David Clark, a 61-year-old Orthodox member of the Hobart Hebrew Congregation — which hosts both Orthodox and liberal services on Shabbat — is using his car to move the remains to their new resting place at the current Jewish cemetery.

The government has offered to contribute a small coffin for each set of remains, and a ceremony is being planned for the reburial. About 42 sets of remains await reburial, Clark said, and an archaeologist has been hired to help identify the remains.

The Hobart Synagogue is the oldest in Australia. Founded in 1846, special benches still exist that were built for Jewish convicts who had been given permission to worship by the authorities.

As Clark makes his daily drive from the old cemetery to the new, he says he feels the presence of the past in the back of his car.

"I don't find it gruesome, although I am more than aware of the passengers I am carrying," he said. "Rather, it's a solemn task and a special mitzvah." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Students rally for Israel

An estimated several thousand high school students attended a pro-Israel rally in New York.

Many students — most of whom were from New York-area modern and centrist Orthodox day schools — carried pro-Israel placards, Israeli and American flags and signs with photos of Israeli victims of terror.

The rally included speeches, mostly by teens, prayers, music and presentations of gifts to representatives of the New York Police Department, Fire Department and Mayor's Office, as well as the Israeli Consulate and the Israel Defense Force.

Britain wants Farrakhan ban kept

British officials are seeking to maintain a ban preventing Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan from entering the country.

The officials claimed before an appeals court Tuesday that a Farrakhan visit could stir up racial tension.

Farrakhan was banned in 1986 because Britain said he had expressed views that were racist and anti-Semitic.

But last July, the ban was overturned by London's High Court.

B'nai B'rith leader honored

The president of B'nai B'rith International received the highest decoration given a non-Argentine civilian.

Argentine President Eduardo Duhalde presented Richard Heideman on Monday with the "Great May Order" to recognize his efforts on behalf of Argentina.

B'nai B'rith, in conjunction with the Pittsburgh-based Brother's Brother Foundation, sent Argentina \$1.2 million worth of medical supplies to help the nation, which is suffering a grave financial crisis.

In recent weeks, Heideman wrote letters to various U.S. officials and international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund requesting increased aid for Argentina.

B'nai B'rith has also opened its humanitarian disaster relief fund for a new campaign, "Disaster Relief/Communities in Crisis," with Argentina as the first recipient.

Holocaust novel wins top prize

A book about a Holocaust survivor searching for his parents' identity won a prestigious literary prize.

"Austerlitz," by W.G. Sebald, an acclaimed German-born novelist who wrote about the Holocaust and memory, won the National Book Critics Circle fiction prize, awarded Monday in New York.

Sebald died last December in a car crash in England at 57.

U.S. considers adding Arafat group to list of foreign terror organizations

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The U.S. State Department is close to adding a group associated with Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement to its list of foreign terrorist organizations.

"If they've committed the actions they've claimed, they are definitely worthy" of the list, a State Department official said of the group, the Al-Aksa Brigades, which is considered Fatah's military wing.

The terrorist designation would be a significant move by the United States, which took the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Palestinian Authority President Arafat off the terrorist list as part of the Oslo peace process.

Although President Bush has refused to meet with Arafat, the administration has been reluctant to issue new sanctions against Palestinian groups, despite congressional pressure, fearing it would hurt U.S. mediation efforts.

But State Department officials are currently reviewing whether the organization actually is responsible for the suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks against Israel for which it has taken credit.

It is also investigating exactly whom the organization is led by, where it receives its financial support and what affiliations it has to other terrorist groups.

An announcement could come as early as next month, when the State Department's annual Patterns of Global Terrorism report is released.

The Al-Aksa Brigades would join several other Palestinian groups, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, on the State Department's list. Because of the organization's close ties to the Palestinian Authority, some Jewish organizations view the potential designation as the first step toward designating the militia groups within the Palestinian Authority as terrorists.

"These are groups tied to Arafat very closely," said Leah Odinec, senior foreign policy analyst for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

"Designating Al-Aksa sends a strong message to Fatah that they could be next."

Adding the group to the Foreign Terrorist Organization list would freeze the organization's U.S. assets and make it illegal for the group to raise funds in the United States.

It is also expected to be designated as a terrorist group in a White House executive order, which would request foreign banks to freeze its assets or risk having the bank's U.S. assets frozen. That announcement is likely to come first, because it requires less of a legal bureaucratic process.

In November, the Martyrs of Al-Aksa was listed as a terrorist organization by Attorney General John Ashcroft, a move that increased the Justice Department's ability to monitor members and prevent entry into the United States.

The State Department is currently investigating whether this group is the same as the Al-Aksa Brigades, which some Palestinian analysts have claimed.

The Justice Department and White House designations are part of the continuing crackdown on terrorist groups in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks.

The Al-Aksa Brigades has claimed responsibility for the deaths of 33 Israelis in the past week, according to AIPAC. The group, which first gained attention in January 2001, has claimed responsibility for dozens of attacks, including the death of six Israelis during a Bat Mitzvah this January and a roadside shooting that killed 10 people.

"It is impossible for the State Department not to act on them because they particularly target civilians," Odinec said.

More than 200 lawmakers have signed a letter to Bush, urging him to place the Al-Aksa Brigades on the terrorist list.

The letter, co-sponsored by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), is expected to be sent to the White House this week.

It also asks the Bush administration to designate Tanzim, another Fatah militia group, and Force 17, Arafat's presidential security force, as terrorist groups.

State Department officials say that while they have been considering including other groups, it is less likely that Tanzim and Force 17 will be included in the next list of foreign terrorist groups. □

New Holocaust council head wants to put 'focus back on the museum'

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — When you need things fixed, call in someone who's known as an organizational expert.

That seems to have been President Bush's thinking when he named Fred Zeidman to be the new chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, which oversees the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

A Houston businessman involved in several Jewish organizations, Zeidman has helped improve operations at companies and institutions, such as Texas Southern University.

The council has been dogged by controversies in recent years, and Zeidman, who was appointed last Friday, wants to change that.

Zeidman, a venture capitalist, wants to "just get everyone's focus back on the museum and not on their own agendas," he told JTA.

Although he has just started in his new position, Zeidman says he is already impressed by the talents of museum leaders.

He also believes that much of the recent problems among council members has stemmed from communication difficulties, and he hopes to improve channels of communication.

Zeidman, 55, will be the first chair from the post-Holocaust generation.

Noting that historical significance, he says he carries "a particular responsibility" to "ensure that the history of the Holocaust is appropriately preserved."

Zeidman is still developing his own vision of the museum.

But he is an extremely committed and knowledgeable Jewish leader who will have the benefit of the guidance and presence of survivors who can help with and participate in the transition, according to Menachem Rosensaft, a council member.

"He is ideal in guiding the museum at this critical time," he said, as the Holocaust generation dies out.

The museum must ensure that the memory of the Holocaust stays alive, Zeidman said.

"I'm scared of the Holocaust becoming a footnote in the history of our people," he added.

Zeidman combines management skills with the sensitivity and commitment to Jewish and historical concerns that are central to the museum's mission, Rosensaft said.

The president and director of an industrial service company in Houston, Zeidman holds leadership positions in the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston and the American Jewish Committee.

An old friend of the president, Zeidman plans to split his time between Houston and Washington.

Jewish leaders don't seem to be concerned that Zeidman is not a Holocaust scholar and has not been very involved in Holocaust issues. Jewish leaders say scholarship is less necessary for the council chair than good administrative skills and pragmatism.

Zeidman, whose five-year term will expire in January 2007, says he will follow Bush's managerial style and not micromanage the museum's affairs.

There are 11 more appointments to be made and it's unlikely that any of the current council members whose terms are now expiring will be asked to stay on, as Bush has shown a willingness to keep previous administrations' appointees only in rare situations.

The council has had some troubles in recent years, especially as a crisis in confidence developed over the leadership of chairman Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg. A longtime council member, Greenberg is an Orthodox rabbi well known in the Jewish community for his writings on the Holocaust.

Greenberg came under fire after it was disclosed that he had sent a letter on museum stationery in December 2000 asking President Clinton to pardon fugitive financier Marc Rich. Some council members called for Greenberg's resignation, but a majority ultimately stuck by him.

But Rosensaft sees no leftover troubles plaguing the new chair. "There are no lasting clouds that in any way negatively impact the museum," Rosensaft said. "We are now in the position to move ahead under Fred Zeidman's leadership to implement the museum's mission and the national commemoration of the Holocaust." □

Holocaust denier goes bankrupt, but won't give up on latest lawsuit

By Simon Carroll

LONDON (JTA) — The man who is arguably the world's most famous Holocaust denier has been declared bankrupt.

But David Irving is pressing ahead with his fight to "revise" history.

In a highly publicized case in London in 2000, Irving lost his lawsuit against Deborah Lipstadt and her publisher, Penguin Books, who had accused him of being a Holocaust denier.

In what was a crushing defeat for Irving, Britain's High Court ruled in April 2000 that he was a racist who had deliberately misrepresented and distorted historical evidence about the Holocaust. The court found that Irving had portrayed Hitler in a favorable light for ideological reasons.

Irving was ordered at the time to pay Lipstadt's legal costs, estimated at nearly \$3 million. The ruling ruined him financially.

Irving, based in London, was served with bankruptcy proceedings in January when he came back from the United States. He indicated he had no chance of paying the sums involved.

His defeat in the Lipstadt lawsuit has not deterred the disgraced historian from pursuing his libel action against the writer Gitta Sereny and The Observer newspaper, even though that case hinges on many of the same issues. The law allows bankrupt individuals to sue for libel and they can keep any money awarded from such lawsuits.

Now it's expected that Penguin Books, which hired lawyers to defend against Irving's long-running libel action, will try to seize Irving's property.

Eighteen months ago, his apartment in central London was estimated to be worth several hundred thousand dollars.

But the house, which Irving, 63, shares with his partner, Bente, and their 7-year-old daughter, Jessica, reportedly has had no fewer than five simultaneous mortgages on it.

Soon after he lost the libel action, Irving was quoted in The Guardian newspaper as saying: "Undoubtedly they will come for their pound of flesh, but will find I'm made of British beef. I've always suspected they were into money and gold, with a capital G."

Mark Bateman, a lawyer for Penguin Books, said at the time: "He knew what the consequences would be — professional and financial ruin — and he brought that on himself. He doesn't deserve an element of compassion. I can't see how we won't get his house." □