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85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Fact-finding panel may disband

Kofi Annan may call off a U.N. panel's fact-finding mission to the Jenin refugee camp.

A key deputy who briefed the Security Council on Tuesday said the U.N. secretary-general was "leaning heavily" toward disbanding the fact-finding team because of Israeli concerns that the panel would not be even-handed, The Associated Press reported.

Earlier Tuesday, Israel refused to cooperate with a U.N. fact-finding panel seeking to visit the Jenin refugee camp.

A statement issued after a meeting of the Security Cabinet said Israel had raised with U.N. officials the issues it considers essential to a fair investigation, and until those conditions are met, Israel will not cooperate with the mission.

Israel: Jenin evidence falsified

Palestinians have been moving bodies already buried in a cemetery next to the Jenin hospital to inflate the number of dead in the refugee camp, Israel said.

Israeli military officials said this was but the latest instance of Palestinian efforts to show greater damage than actually was inflicted by Israeli troops in the refugee camp, before a U.N. fact-finding committee arrives.

In addition, the army said, members of the Palestinian Authority ordered families and aid workers to stop searching for bodies trapped under rubble, so they will be found only when the team arrives.

London-area shul desecrated

Vandals attacked a London-area synagogue over the weekend.

After forcing their way into the synagogue in Finsbury Park, the vandals defiled holy books, splattered paint on the Holy Ark, threw prayer shawls and yarmulkes on the floor, and stamped on an Israeli flag.

They also daubed a swastika and smashed windows.

"Tension in the Middle East leads to tension on the streets of Europe, but this is one of the worst incidents of anti-Semitism we have seen in recent years," said Mike Whine, a spokesman for the Community Security Trust, an organization that deals with Jewish security issues.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Tunisian Jews celebrate tradition in shadow of recent terrorist attack

By Judith Fein

JERBA, Tunisia (JTA) — Jews here persevered with their annual Lag B'Omer celebration this week in spite of a recent terrorist attack that rocked their tiny island community.

The numbers were down from past celebrations, but still hundreds of tourists came to join the 1,000 Jewish Jerbans for the pilgrimage festivities.

"The first moment I heard about the bombing, it was catastrophic for me," a Tunisian Jew who had come from Paris said of the April 11 blast at the historic synagogue here.

But after discovering that the authorities "were doing everything they could to make it safe, I came here two days later. Believe me, I feel safer here than I do in France."

The explosion of a gas truck — fatalities now number 18, including 13 German tourists — was first dismissed by Tunisian authorities as an accident.

But then it became clear it was a deliberate act of terrorism, officials say, and the government has moved quickly to denounce the violence and contain the damage.

Tunisian authorities quickly paid to restore the El Ghriba synagogue, which traces its roots back more than 2,000 years.

The government also encouraged and promoted the Lag B'Omer festivities, even inviting foreign journalists to see the reaction, both private and public, of this Muslim nation that prides itself on being a peaceful country.

As they do every year, Jews sang and danced in the streets. They set a huge menorah on a cart, lovingly draped it with multicolored scarves, sprayed it with perfumes and wheeled it through the streets.

Their Muslim neighbors came out of their houses to watch and show support.

"The Jews are our brothers," a young Muslim man said proudly, even though he asked that his name not be used. "No matter what our religion, we're all Tunisians."

Jews from all over the world — and especially Tunisians who live in France and Israel — come in droves to celebrate the pilgrimage festival that takes place at El Ghriba, the oldest and most famous synagogue in North Africa.

The Jewish tourist frenzy reached a peak in the year 2000 when more than 8,000 people arrived for the festivities.

Lag B'Omer comes on the 33rd day of the period between Passover and Shavuot.

In Israel, Jews make pilgrimages to the northern Galilee site where a revered ancient rabbi is believed buried.

It is difficult to pin down the exact origins of the Jewish community in Jerba, a popular tourist site for Europeans off the coast of Tunisia.

Most people concur with the legend that it was first settled by Jews who fled Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. They settled in two separate communities: Hara Kabira and Hara Seghira.

Their descendants still live there today, engaged in a thriving and observant Jewish community, replete with Jewish schools, synagogues and kosher food.

Most make their living as jewelers and shopkeepers.

Tunisian Jews — another 1,000 live in Tunis — for the most part have fared better than in other Arab countries. Emigration was always tolerated and there was little, if any, state-condoned anti-Semitism.

Outbreaks of violence and harassment have periodically upset the peaceful co-existence between Jews and Muslims here. Often the tensions were a reflection of the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel withdraws from Hebron

Israeli troops began withdrawing Tuesday from Hebron. The move came one day after the Israel Defense Force moved tanks and troops into the West Bank city to search for terrorists and arms caches.

The IDF commander in Hebron said the withdrawal would be completed by Tuesday night.

Powell supports continued aid

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed support for continuing aid to Israel and Egypt.

"To start to punish either Egypt or Israel by withholding funds or in some way sanctioning them because they're not doing enough, I don't think will achieve the objective," Powell said Tuesday in testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee. Powell also expressed support for additional aid to the West Bank and Gaza, to help rebuild Palestinian infrastructure.

26 leave Bethlehem church

At least 26 Palestinian civilians and policemen emerged Tuesday from Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity. It was the largest number to exit the church compound since a standoff between Israeli troops and Palestinian gunmen began nearly a month ago.

The two sides still are trying to resolve the fate of some two dozen suspected terrorists holed up with the remaining Palestinians in the church. On Monday, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said an agreement to end the Bethlehem standoff is likely soon.

American aliyah increases

There was an increase in the number of American Jews who made aliyah during the first three months of the year.

Despite the ongoing crisis, 370 Americans made aliyah, a 15 percent increase over the same period last year, according to the Jewish Agency for Israel.

situation in the Middle East. The bulk of Tunisian Jews, which once numbered 100,000, emigrated in waves.

The first wave came with the establishment of Israel in 1948, then with the end of French rule in 1956, and again in 1967, when the Six-Day War sparked anti-Jewish rioting, despite the relative moderation of the country's then-president, Habib Bourguiba.

In the early 1990s, with the start of the Oslo peace process, Jews here were optimistic about their future.

Indeed, Jerba's Jewish population grew dramatically as many who had gone to France or Israel returned home.

Tunisia, once the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Yasser Arafat, was among the Arab countries that established low-level diplomatic relations with Israel in the mid-1990s.

It has since cut those ties.

Still, Jews are cautious about talking openly about the situation. They clearly have strong roots here and appreciate the government's support. But there's an insecurity that is reflected in their reluctance to give their names when talking to journalists.

While Tunisia has expressed support for the Palestinian people, it has also lent public support to its Jewish community.

On Sunday, the minister of culture, Abdelbaki Hermassi, hosted a dinner for the media, foreign dignitaries, Tunisian Jews, and others who had gathered for the Lag B'Omer events.

At the end of the traditional Tunisian meal, he stood up and spoke about the artistic collaboration between Muslims and Jews — in cinema, art, and literature.

He affirmed that Tunisia loves and honors its Jews and greatly appreciates the contributions they have made to Tunisian society.

The next day, the minister of tourism, Mondher Zenaïdi, hosted another dinner. He, too, expressed his personal horror at the attack in Jerba.

This year's pilgrimage was a "victory against obscurantism and fanaticism," he was quoted as saying as he pledged that Tunisia would protect religious freedoms.

He acknowledged that Tunisia had cut off official diplomatic relations with Israel because of the current strife in the Middle East, but he insisted that this had nothing to do with the situation of Jews in Tunisia.

"Jews and Muslims are brothers," he said. "They are both Tunisians." □

Pebbles fashioned into monument to Czech Jews who died in Shoah

By Pavla Kozakova

PILSEN, Czech Republic (JTA) — The 60th anniversary of the Nazi deportation of the Jews here has been commemorated by inscribing thousands of pebbles with the victims' names.

Several local citizens, and even some relatives of the victims, turned out to write the names of those who died on 2,600 small stones. They finished laying the pebbles recently in a gravel landscape among the ruins of Pilsen's Old Jewish School, next to the town's Old Synagogue.

In January 1942, Pilsen's 2,604 Jews were sent to Terezin, a Nazi transit camp north of Prague, from where they were sent to concentration camps in Poland and Germany, including Auschwitz. Only 204 survived.

Even relatives of victims who were not from Pilsen asked if they could inscribe their family members' names on the stones. That explains why there are 200 more stones in the Old Jewish School than the number of Jews who died in the Pilsen transport.

The pebble-stone memorial is part of the project "Year 2002 — Year of Memories," in which the town is hosting various events to commemorate the Holocaust, and in particular the Jewish transport to Terezin, also known by its German name of Theresienstadt.

The stones are lined alphabetically in a structure designed by Petr Novak, an artist and professor at the local art school.

The pebbles are laid out on gravel between wooden beams, evoking a city or ghetto, according to Radovan Kodera, the founder of the project. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Court upholds Farrakhan ban

Britain's Court of Appeal upheld the government's right to bar Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan from the country. The court said Tuesday the ban was based on reasonable fears that Farrakhan's "notorious opinions" were a threat to public order.

The court also said that Farrakhan would not be allowed to appeal the decision to the House of Lords, which is Britain's highest court.

UJC, Reform combine campaigns

The North American federation system and the Reform movement are merging their Israel emergency fund raising efforts.

The Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations will discontinue its Israel campaign, which has raised nearly \$160,000, asking members to donate instead to the United Jewish Communities campaign, which has raised over \$100 million so far. The funds will go for a variety of social service needs in Israel, including nearly \$1 million to the Reform movement in Israel to provide secure programs for Israeli youth this summer.

AJCommittee meets with Annan

Leaders of the American Jewish Committee expressed their concerns about treatment of Israel and Jews to Kofi Annan on Monday.

AJCommittee leaders told the U.N. secretary-general and his senior staff of their concerns about the U.N. fact-finding mission to Jenin, anti-Israel treatment in the world body and a revival of worldwide anti-Semitism.

While listening and taking notes throughout the 45-minute meeting, Annan positioned himself as a diplomat who understood the concerns of each side, describing the complexities of the United Nations and distancing himself from its anti-Israel member nations.

Orthodox deliver Torahs to IDF

The National Council of Young Israel delivered nine Torah scrolls to Israeli soldiers.

The 16 members of the North American Orthodox group's delegation sang and danced with the scrolls in hand when they presented them recently at a military base near Ramle.

Toronto vigil presses France

A Jewish group has begun a series of daily vigils outside the French Consulate in Toronto, calling on France's government to crack down on the perpetrators of anti-Semitic attacks.

Members of the group, Solidarity With Jews at Risk, are calling on passers-by to sign a petition in support of French Jews.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Idea of Mideast monitors raised as group oversees militants' jailing

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Among the questions under debate in the foreign policy community is whether to send American troops or monitors to serve as peacekeepers in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The proposal does not have widespread support, but the idea of supplying either armed or unarmed observers has been mentioned repeatedly this month as other approaches have failed to achieve a lasting cease-fire.

The first American and British monitors are expected to arrive in Ramallah this week as part of a deal to end the siege on Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's compound. U.S. and British officials will make sure that six wanted men who have been holed up with Arafat are kept in jail in Jericho.

Some are speculating that the mission may be the first step toward a larger U.S. presence on the ground.

"One would have to take this on a case-by-case basis," a White House official said. "We all learn from past experience, and if in the future monitors is something to talk about, having a positive experience may be helpful."

Administration officials say the force heading to Ramallah has a specific goal and will not be expanded.

Plus, while Israel agreed to an international presence to end the Ramallah siege, it remains staunchly opposed to a full-fledged monitoring force.

But Palestinians, who long have argued for international intervention to "protect" them from Israel hope the monitors will become part of an overall strategy for deeper U.S. and international involvement.

Palestinian Authority officials believe any monitoring group would focus on Israeli military incursions and "targeted killings" of Palestinian terrorists — and would be hard-pressed to link the Palestinian leadership to terror attacks against Israel.

Israel claims that international monitors can do little to curb violence in the absence of a true peace agreement, and will focus on Israeli retaliations because they are more easily monitored than the terror attacks that precipitate them.

"The rationale is that terror organizations are mainly invisible to this kind of observers," an official with the Israel Defense Force said. "They might see their outcomes, such as suicide bombings, but they will not see the activities on the ground. In contrast, Israeli activities are very visible for such monitors."

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell broached the idea of unarmed monitors on a visit to the region almost a year ago, saying a small group of enforcers from the United States and perhaps other countries could assess any implementation of a cease-fire.

That would conform with the work plan written by CIA Director George Tenet and the "confidence-building" phase of the peace plan drafted by former Sen. George Mitchell.

Observers would be needed "to see what's happening on the ground, to serve as interlocutors, to go to points of friction and make an independent observation of what has happened," Powell said at the time. He stressed that the makeup of such an unarmed monitoring force still was undetermined, but later said any force would need the approval of both sides.

The Bush administration has never advocated sending an armed force to the region. Such a suggestion would be controversial, considering that Pentagon officials are attempting to minimize U.S. participation in other peacekeeping missions, including the multinational force in the Sinai Desert.

But that has not stopped speculation about a possible armed peacekeeping force, fueled mostly by Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), who said he has been told by U.S. envoy Anthony Zinni that the United States plans to send some type of force to the region.

"Our interests are so major there to stop this idea of suicide bombing from becoming a common practice which could threaten us, so that if it comes to having a U.S. involvement, I think they ought to be armed and I think they ought to be military, whether you call them monitors or peacekeepers," Specter said April 3 on CBS' "Early Show." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Rabbinic students await word: Will Israel study go on as usual?

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, David Novak reassessed his life and decided to become a rabbi.

The 39-year-old Novak, who lives in Los Angeles, opted to leave his longtime career in public relations and was accepted to the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

But immediately he was plunged into another decision affected by terrorism — what to do about the school's mandatory year in Jerusalem, a city devastated by suicide bombings.

With HUC-JIR considering whether or not to move the required program elsewhere or allow students not to go, Novak, like many of his classmates, feels conflicted about the coming year.

On one hand, he's apprehensive at the prospect of living in Jerusalem and never knowing whether it is safe to get on a bus or go to a cafe. And his entire family is urging him not to go.

On the other hand, he says, "I don't want to sound like I'm a whiny American unsympathetic to the people who live in Jerusalem and Haifa and Netanya, for whom Israel is their home. I'm being asked to go study in Israel. I'm not being asked to go fight."

HUC-JIR is the only North American seminary to require all students to spend their first year in Israel. It also is the only one with such a centrally located campus — close to downtown Jerusalem and many of the spots that have been targeted by bombers.

In December, while students were in morning prayer services, a suicide bomber blew himself up outside the hotel next door to the college.

Like their counterparts at other liberal seminaries, HUC students have a mix of views about the year in Israel. Some say they need to show solidarity with Israelis, while others fear they will not be able to focus on their work if the suicide bombings continue.

But unlike students at the other seminaries, such as the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College or the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, where rules about Israel study are more flexible and exemptions easier to obtain, the HUC-JIR students are awaiting word from the administration.

There are a number of rabbinical training programs in the Orthodox world.

Most, like Yeshiva University, do not require Israel study, but it is fairly common for students to attend yeshivot or other special programs there anyway, and that has not been affected by the intifada.

HUC-JIR has already postponed the start of its fall semester to late August from July.

The delay gives the institution more time to "monitor events," according to its president, Rabbi David Ellenson.

The school expects to announce in early June whether the program will be in Jerusalem, as usual; at another Israeli location, such as a kibbutz; or at one of the HUC campuses in the United States.

HUC leaders are well aware of the potential fallout if they move their program out of Israel.

The Reform movement came under fire from many Israelis

and other Jewish groups last year for canceling its summer teen trips to Israel.

The movement, which had previously been the largest provider of teen trips, is resuming these trips this summer, but with different programming and, like all similar programs to Israel, a significant decline in participation.

But HUC is also facing pressure from the other side, with many incoming students and their families expressing strong reservations about going to Israel.

One student even opted for another seminary in order to avoid the Israel requirement, Ellenson said. "We have a commitment to stand in solidarity with the people of Israel and the State of Israel, and a moral commitment to be concerned for the lives of our students and their families," he said.

Among this year's incoming students are several with young children, Ellenson added.

"We're not only asking students to spend a year in Israel, but we're asking their husbands and wives and children as well."

Shortly after the suicide bombing at a Passover seder in Netanya, the seminary allowed this year's students to come home early, a few weeks before the semester's end. One-third of the 60 students opted to accept the offer.

All of the liberal Jewish seminaries have been affected to some extent by the situation in Israel.

- The Jewish Theological Seminary, which is Conservative, sent 16 rabbinical students to Israel this year, and granted exemptions to nine.

Like HUC, it offered students the option to come home early over Passover, but none did. It is not clear how many rabbinical or cantorial students will request exemptions this year — they have until mid-May to file such requests.

- The University of Judaism's rabbinical school, which is also Conservative, issued a letter in April allowing students to choose whether or not to spend their third year in Israel or to defer their year in Israel to the following year.

This year, all 10 third-year students went to Israel and stayed for the entire year. None of next year's 11 students have opted to defer yet, although the school is not expecting final decisions until July and August.

- The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College sent 13 students to Israel this year, one of whom came home early, and is not certain how many will go next year. Rabbi David Teutsch, RRC's president, said the administration allows students to file for an exemption if they "have overwhelming fear for their safety."

RRC also recently decided to pay for students to take cabs in Israel, rather than buses. It has also offered to pay relocating costs if students opt to go to Israel, but then want to return home if the situation worsens.

This year, JTS had to cancel its cantorial program in Israel, due to a large number of students requesting exemptions after the suicide bombing at Sbarro's pizzeria.

And the program, which is for first-year students, is in peril next year as well — with only five students signed up to go and a number of them undecided.

"Our hope is something will happen in the next few weeks that will encourage those people who are sitting on the fence," said Cantor Henry Rosenblum, the dean of JTS' cantorial school.

"We're holding off as long as we can. We haven't said no program. We haven't said the program is a definite go. We're in a holding pattern." □