



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 80, No. 198

Friday, October 25, 2002

85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

3 Iranian Jews released

Iran released three of eight Jews imprisoned on charges of spying for Israel.

U.S. Jewish activists declined to speculate on the timing of the release, but said they hoped the remaining five would be freed soon.

Israeli officials deny that the men were its spies. [Page 1]

Moscow Jews beef up security

Jewish organizations in Moscow beefed up security measures after hundreds of Muscovites were taken hostage by Chechen rebels.

About 50 heavily armed Chechens, many of them women believed to be widows of Chechen fighters killed during an ongoing war with Russia, stormed a Moscow theater Wednesday night and took an audience of several hundred people hostage.

But one Jewish leader said Jewish organizations had no more reason to be concerned about their safety than did anyone else.

"Any institution in Moscow can become the next target" of terrorists, said the president of the Russian Jewish Congress, Yevgeny Satanovsky. "Synagogues and Jewish institutions are at no bigger risk than any other place." [Page 3]

Envoy calls on P.A. to fight terror

A visiting U.S. official demanded that the Palestinians fight terrorism and reform their government if they want to have a state. The U.S. assistant secretary of state, William Burns, met in Jericho on Thursday with senior Palestinian Authority officials.

At earlier talks in Tel Aviv, Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer told Burns that Israel would oppose elements of a new U.S. peace plan that he said curtail Israel's right of self-defense.

Burns was due to meet later in the day with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Hezbollah spy case detailed

Charges were filed Thursday against Israeli suspects, all of whom are Bedouin, in an alleged Hezbollah espionage affair.

Eleven Bedouin, including a high-ranking officer in the Israeli army, were arrested earlier this year on suspicion of passing sensitive information to Hezbollah in Lebanon in exchange for drugs and money.

Three Iranian Jews released; hopes raised for five still held

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Three of eight Jews imprisoned in Iran on charges of spying for Israel have been released, raising hopes that the remaining five will be set free soon.

Released Thursday were sporting goods merchant Javid Beit Yakov, 42, who had been sentenced to nine years in prison; and religion teachers Farzad Kashi, 32, and Shahrokh Paknahad, 24, who had received eight-year sentences.

The men had served only three and a half years of their sentences on charges of aiding the "Zionist regime." Israel has said the charges are baseless.

U.S. advocates for the Jewish prisoners, who over the years have been outspoken in their defense — and harshly critical of the Iranian government — were tight-lipped about the release.

That seemed to stem from hope that the other five would be released soon, and fear that gloating might discourage Tehran from freeing them.

There was no official word from Iran on the release. Analysts said the release might be due to a supposed power struggle between relative moderates in the Iranian regime who favor detente with the West and conservative clerics who have maintained a grip on power since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

"Due to the extraordinary circumstances surrounding this release, we at this time choose not to make a comment," Pooya Dayanim, spokesman for the Council of Iranian American Jewish Organizations in Los Angeles, said in a prepared statement. "We are in contact with the U.S. State Department — which has shown a great commitment to human rights and religious freedom in Iran — to formulate a response over the next few days."

Even more reticent were two other activists at the forefront of the campaign to free the Jews: Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and Sam Kermanian, secretary-general of the Iranian American Jewish Federation in Los Angeles.

Both refused to comment.

Israeli President Moshe Katsav, himself Iranian-born, also was said to be muted in his reaction to the release.

Recently, the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz reported that Katsav had said, "To my delight, no evidence has been found against them, and most of the" imprisoned Jews "will be released in the near future."

There was no official statement from Katsav on Thursday, however.

Analysts for months have suggested that several factors may be pressing Iran: That President Bush lumped Iran with Iraq and North Korea in his "axis of evil," by the prospect of a U.S.-led war against Baghdad and by the possibility that Iran may be the next target of America's year-old war on terrorism.

It's not only from Washington that Iran is feeling the heat.

Europe, a significant economic partner, reportedly has cited Iran's disregard for human rights and its treatment of minorities as impediments to improved economic and diplomatic relations.

Some U.S. activists had hoped that the eight Jews would be pardoned on the eve of the Jewish New Year in early September, but that failed to materialize.

According to analysts, the tension between Iranian hardliners and reformers influenced the original arrests, and may determine the fate of the five still in jail.

Thirteen Jews were arrested in January and March 1999, but three were found innocent of the espionage charges and released. The other 10 were sentenced in July

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israeli hotels prepare for war

Hotels in outlying areas of Israel are readying for an influx of guests in the event of war with Iraq.

During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, residents of the Tel Aviv area fleeing Iraqi Scud missile attacks temporarily moved into hotels outside the center of the country.

Hotels in areas considered at less risk of an Iraqi missile attack, such as Jerusalem and southern Israel, said they had received inquiries about the possibility of making down payments to secure space, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

At the same time, the paper said some Tel Aviv hotels had signed deals with foreign media organizations for rooftop broadcast rights.

Activist's killer still in jail

Israel's Supreme Court overturned a ruling allowing the release of a man convicted in the 1983 murder of a Peace Now activist.

The court ruled Thursday on an appeal filed by the state, which maintained that Yona Avrushmi still poses a threat to public safety.

The state said some critical factors had not been taken into account by the special parole board committee that approved Avrushmi's release, which was scheduled to have taken place this week.

The court instructed the parole board to review the decision.

Settlers stone rights activists

Israeli settlers threw rocks at Palestinians and human rights activists in a West Bank olive grove on Thursday.

The settlers fled when Israeli troops arrived at the scene.

The rights activists, who accompanied the Palestinians to their olive groves, filed a police complaint, Israel Radio reported.

2000 to jail terms of four to 13 years. The men appealed, and in Tehran reduced the sentences from two to nine years in September 2000.

Two men already were released after serving out their terms.

Israel has flatly denied that the Jews were its spies. Advocates for the men say that what really bothered Iranian authorities was the men's increasingly fervent brand of Orthodox Judaism.

Most of the men were religious leaders from the southern Iranian city of Shiraz, a bastion of religious conservatism.

The arrests were perceived as a warning to the rest of the community, and there was initial fear that the men might be executed.

In addition, observers say, inciting the public against the "Zionist enemy" and "collaborators" in their midst is an easy way for the mullahs to distract the masses from economic hardship and lack of freedom.

In May 2000, after more than a year in solitary confinement, the 13 gave "confessions" for Iran's Revolutionary Court.

But their advocates — and media, diplomats and human-rights experts from around the world — pronounced the closed trial a fraud. Only 22,000 to 25,000 Jews remain in Iran today, of a community that stood at about 100,000 before 1979. □

Liberal Jewish group in Prague to merge with Orthodox community

By Katka Krosnar

PRAGUE (JTA) — For years, Prague's Bejt Praha liberal Jewish community felt isolated from the official Orthodox community.

But now, Bejt Praha is set to become affiliated with the Orthodox establishment.

Bejt Praha was organized eight years ago to provide what it called a "more welcoming" alternative to the official Orthodox community.

It reached out to assimilated couples and to Czechs keen to explore their long-hidden Jewish roots after the fall of the Communist regime. Its driving force was American expatriates living in the city.

Bejt Praha's executive director, Peter Gyori, admits that relations between the two groups were initially stormy.

"When we started, we did not have an excellent relationship with the Prague Jewish community and there were many difficulties. We were seen as something unknown, and sometimes we had problems. For example, it was often difficult for us to use the synagogues," he says.

The two sides were brought together via the diplomatic skills of the leader of the Prague Jewish community, Tomas Jelinek. Gyori says that without Jelinek and his experience as a former economic adviser in President Vaclav Havel's political department, the move may not have been possible.

"Jelinek has played a major role in this, and I am grateful for what has been achieved," Gyori says.

Jelinek says the move was sparked after some members of Prague's Orthodox community expressed the wish to have access to a Conservative rabbi.

"This is a way to satisfy the needs of some members of the Prague Jewish community who would like a Conservative rabbi. But it is in everyone's interest to work more closely together and be united," Jelinek says.

For Gyori, the move is a major milestone in the association's history.

"We are happy that we have achieved this. This is an incredible step and one of Bejt Praha's biggest achievements. We have been receiving practical and financial support from the official community more recently, but now we will have open and friendly cooperation."

As a result of the move, Bejt Praha will have access "to all members of the official community, including marketing and use of facilities and premises such as synagogues and cemeteries," Gyori adds.

The affiliation has already been approved by the Bejt Praha board and is set to be ratified by the Prague Jewish community's board later this month. □



Daily News Bulletin

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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.
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JEWISH WORLD

Returned looted painting for sale

A Jewish-owned Dutch masterpiece that was stolen by the Nazis has been found and will be put up for auction. "Maria Magdalena," by Dutch artist Anthony van Dyck, belonged to the late Dutch-Jewish art collector Jacques Goudstikker, part of a 1,400-piece collection he left behind when fleeing Nazi-occupied Netherlands in 1940.

Nazi leader Hermann Goring took the painting, but in April the London-based group Art Loss Register discovered that the work was about to be sold by the Van Ham auction house in Cologne.

Together with an unnamed collector who assigned the work to Van Ham, the auction house and Goudstikker's sole heir, Marei von Saher, agreed she would reclaim ownership of the work and auction it this fall.

ADL concerned about France

The Anti-Defamation League is expressing concern that France "conferred legitimacy" on the leader of Hezbollah.

In a statement, the ADL said that it appreciated French President Jacques Chirac's words at a recent Francophone Summit in Lebanon, but was disappointed that Chirac spoke while Hezbollah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, sat on the podium.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Jewish Congress blasted Prime Minister Jean Chretien for attending the summit.

Reform missions to Israel

The Reform Movement will sponsor eight week-long solidarity missions to Israel over the next 18 months.

The missions, sponsored jointly by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and ARZA/World Union, North America, will begin in February.

Each mission will be open to anyone, but some trips will be tailored to appeal to specific groups, such as converts or those interested in social action.

Belarus rabbi blasts legislation

A Reform rabbi in Belarus said a proposed new law on religion is "reminiscent of the days of the Soviet Union."

Speaking in New York on Wednesday, Nelly Shulman said she is "mildly concerned" about the legislation, which, among other provisions, requires all religious groups to register with the state.

The bill also mandates that all religious officials who are not citizens of Belarus, including Shulman and some other rabbis in the former Soviet republic, must register with the government each year.

A similar law passed in Russia in 1997 has not been used against Jewish groups.

Jewish groups step up security as Moscow hostage drama unfolds

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Jewish organizations here have beefed up security measures following the beginning of a hostage drama in a Moscow theater.

The incident began Wednesday night, when about 50 heavily armed Chechens, including many women, took some 700 people hostage.

Several dozen people — primarily children, Muslims and foreigners — were released from the theater at intervals throughout the night and the following day. One woman apparently was killed by the hostage-takers when she tried to escape.

Jewish officials stressed that the community was not more at risk than other ethnic groups, but they took precautions nonetheless.

"We have taken some special measures to ensure extra safety for our institutions," Pavel Feldblum, executive vice president of Moscow's Jewish community, told JTA.

The attackers demanded that Russian troops pull out of Chechnya immediately. They claimed to have wired the building with explosives and said they were ready to die if their demands were not met.

Moscow authorities stepped up security throughout the city, and the Kremlin reportedly was mulling declaring a state of emergency in the capital.

Moscow never has seen hostage seizure of such scale, and many ordinary Muscovites expressed fear for their safety.

"Any institution in Moscow can become the next target" of terrorists, said the president of the Russian Jewish Congress, Yevgeny Satanovsky. "Synagogues and Jewish institutions are at no bigger risk than any other place."

Jewish religious leaders joined spiritual leaders of other faiths in offering a prayer for the hostages' safety.

"In the current situation we can only help by praying for the safety of the innocent people," Berel Lazar, one of Russia's two chief rabbis, said in a statement. Lazar called on Russians of all faiths to "unite at this time in a prayer for the well-being of our fellow citizens."

Russian President Vladimir Putin linked the hostage crisis in Moscow with recent terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists in Bali and the Philippines.

Lazar warned against identifying the attackers with any faith or ethnic group.

"In no holy book of Islam, I'm sure, is there any justification for terror against peaceful, innocent people," Lazar told the Interfax news agency.

The hostage-takers so far have agreed to speak only with two public figures — Irina Khakamada, a liberal lawmaker, and Josef Kobzon, an independent member of the Russian Parliament. Kobzon, a popular singer, is Jewish.

No Israelis have been reported among the hostages, who were attending a sold-out performance of the hit musical "Nord-Ost," or Northeast. Several Americans and Britons are believed to be inside.

Satanovsky said the hostage crisis has placed Russia on a par with the United States, Israel and other countries targeted by terrorists. "Like these countries, Russia has now entered into an all-out war against terrorism," he told JTA.

Russian special services were in consultations on Thursday with their foreign colleagues, the head of the Federal Security Service told reporters.

Satanovsky said Russians have a lot to learn from Israel's experience in fighting terrorism and coping with hostage crises. □

Einstein exhibit opens in Taiwan

NEW YORK (JA) — An exhibit on Albert Einstein that was canceled in China because it discussed his Jewish background recently opened in Taiwan.

The exhibit was not shown in Beijing after the Chinese government demanded that any references to Einstein's Judaism and Zionism be removed. "You cannot deny the fact of Einstein's being a Jew," Menashe Zipori, an Israeli official in Taiwan, told the Taipei Times this week. □

Canadian Jewish group tussles with government over legal status

By Bill Gladstone

TORONTO (JTA) — A Canadian group that raises money for emergency health relief in Israel is fighting to preserve its status as a registered charity.

The Montreal-based Canadian Magen David Adom, which has operated since 1976, launched a court action after the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency threatened in 2001 to revoke the group's charitable status.

A federal court last month rejected the CCRA's main argument for revoking the group's charitable status, but accepted a second argument related to how the charity supervises funds handed over to Israel.

"The court ruled that we were correct in our proposal to revoke the charitable status, but did not agree with all of our reasons for doing so," CCRA spokeswoman Colette Gentes-Hawn said.

Arthur Drache, a lawyer for Magen David Adom, said the CCRA imposed new requirements "out of a clear blue sky" and that it had not given the group sufficient time to comply before another letter arrived declaring that the group's charitable status would be revoked.

The charity will not lose its status immediately because it intends to appeal the case to the Supreme Court.

The court is expected to decide in mid-November whether to allow the appeal.

An independent Internet petition already has gathered thousands of signatures, said the group's national executive director, Shirley Moscovitch.

Despite the setback to the charity, Jewish observers have welcomed the court's dismissal of a key argument the CCRA has used to disqualify many Jewish charities over the past 10 years.

Despite the lack of a clear policy from the country's Foreign Ministry, the customs agency has contended that Jewish charities operating beyond Israel's pre-1967 borders, including the Old City and other annexed sections of Jerusalem, violate Canadian government policy and should be deregistered.

According to Drache, the CCRA had objected to the possibility that a Magen David Adom ambulance might cross the Green Line, as the pre-1967 border is known, when responding to an emergency call in a Jerusalem suburb.

"They had said it was against Canadian policy for Canadians to help in the building of any Israeli infrastructure beyond the Green Line, and they interpreted that to mean delivering any charitable service," he said.

The CCRA has used this argument against "a couple of hundred charities," some of which already have been deregistered or threatened with deregistration, he said.

Among the many Jewish organizations that have been denied charitable status are a school near the old Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem and an organization that puts handwritten prayers into cracks in the Western Wall, Drache said.

At the same time, Christian and Muslim charitable organizations have been allowed to work both sides of the line, Drache said.

In dismissing the CCRA's Green Line rule, the court ruled that there was "no logic in the proposition that the provision of emergency medical assistance can be a charitable activity in downtown Tel Aviv but not in the" West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"In my view, there is in the charities directorate an anti-Israel bias," Drache said. "I don't think it's official government policy, but some of the documents they put forward to the court suggest that among some people there, there is a strong anti-Israel bias."

The CCRA declined to address the allegations of bias.

Jack Silverstone, executive vice president and general counsel for the Canadian Jewish Congress, acknowledged a sarcastic tone to some of the CCRA's statements about Israel, but said he did not perceive overt bias.

"I can't speculate on what's driving their sarcasm," he said.

But Frank Dimant, executive vice president of B'nai Brith Canada, said there was a clear bias in the fact that the government would not register Magen David Adom while recognizing the social wing of Hezbollah — as distinct from its military wing — as a legitimate charity.

Theoretically, he said, "Canadians can get a tax receipt for supporting an educational system that teaches hate and encourages suicide bombing, but you can't have a Canadian-funded, tax-receipted ambulance coming to help the victims of that terror."

Drache told the court that the Canada-Israel free trade agreement of 1995 covers the flow of goods on both sides of the Green Line, indicating no prohibition of activity in areas beyond the Green Line.

The CCRA began insisting last year that the Canadian Magen David Adom needed an "agency arrangement" to maintain closer supervision of how its funds are used in Israel. Among the group's intended grounds for appeal is the argument that it was not given sufficient time to put a new arrangement into place.

The Canadian Jewish Congress is awaiting the outcome of the appeals process before beginning any lobbying activities on the Magen David Adom issue, but B'nai Brith already has contacted several government ministers.

"We've made our position amply clear," Dimant said.

In an unrelated incident, customs agents recently seized a box of newsletters, entitled "In Moral Defense of Israel," as they were entering the country. The agents claimed the material "may constitute obscenity or hate propaganda."

After an uproar in the media, the material, which was published by the Ayn Rand Institute of California, was quietly released. □

Yiddish theater stalwart dies

NEW YORK (JTA) — Seymour Rexite, a longtime Yiddish theater performer, died Oct. 14 in New York at 91.

Rexite, a child sensation as a singer in Poland, began appearing in theaters on New York's Second Avenue soon after he came to the United States in 1920.

He and his wife, actress Miriam Kressyn, had their own radio shows on New York's WEVD for 50 years.

During World War II, he entertained U.S. troops serving overseas. Kressyn died in 1996. □

Terror survivors celebrate

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A special Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremony was held Monday for children of Israeli families who were victims of terrorism.

The event was organized by the Jewish Agency for Israel's Fund for the Victims of Terror. □