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85th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Netanyahu may join government

Benjamin Netanyahu gave conditional acceptance to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's offer to become Israel's next foreign minister.

Netanyahu said in a statement Sunday he would accept the post if Sharon calls early elections.

It was not immediately clear if Sharon would accept the proposal.

Netanyahu has been expected to challenge Sharon in Likud Party primaries before the next elections. In other developments, representatives from Sharon's office are meeting with members of the far-right National Unity-Israel, Our Home bloc to discuss joining the coalition.

As part of its demands, the bloc wants Sharon to take stronger retaliation for Palestinian terror attacks.

Mofaz named defense minister

Retired army chief Shaul Mofaz is expected to become Israel's next defense minister.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon informed the Cabinet on Sunday of his plans to present Mofaz's nomination for Knesset approval Monday.

AJCongress warns of boycott

The American Jewish Congress urged the U.S. government to take action against firms that respect an Arab boycott of Israel.

Eighteen members of the Arab League pledged last week to reactivate a decades-old ban on trade with Israel that had lapsed in recent years.

The AJCongress asked the U.S. Commerce Department's Office of Boycott Compliance to move "vigorously" against any American firms that join the reinstated boycott in order to do business with the Arab world.

Communities approve action plan

Jewish community leaders meeting in New York passed a draft plan to fight anti-Semitism. At the final session last Friday of the Anti-Defamation League's Global Conference on Anti-Semitism, Jewish community representatives from 17 countries approved the plan of action.

The plan calls for working with diplomats and international organizations, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, to address anti-Semitism.

Rabbis serve as curiosity items as they meet mullahs in Kazakhstan

By Lev Krichevsky

ALMATY, Kazakhstan (JTA) — Some passers-by looked bewildered late last month as a group of bearded men in black hats got off a bus in this former Soviet republic.

Those are "Jewish muftis," one local explained to his friends.

The curbside attention was just some of the publicity showered on an international gathering of rabbis in this predominantly Muslim republic in Central Asia.

All major television channels and newspapers provided extensive coverage of the founding conference of the Rabbinical Council of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress.

The widespread coverage wasn't surprising, since the rabbis also met with Kazakhstan's authoritarian leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev.

The opening of the congress, which drew 20 Orthodox rabbis, represented more than the formation of just another

Jewish group in the former Soviet Union, where Jewish organizations have proliferated in recent years.

An international Jewish-Muslim dialogue also was launched at the meeting.

Alexander Mashkevich, 48, a local industrialist and financier who sponsored the rabbinical visit, believes Kazakhstan has the potential to become a center of international Jewish-Muslim dialogue.

"Kazakhstan is a unique example of cooperation and peaceful coexistence between various people and religions," he said.

Up to 20,000 Jews live in Kazakhstan, out of a total population of 15 million people.

Kazakhstan has one of the most liberal religious freedom laws in the former Soviet Union and provides state funding to minority schools and newspapers. The Jewish community hardly needs to be on the recipient list, however, because of Mashkevich's deep pockets.

A tycoon with interests in mining, banking and mass media, Mashkevich emerged a few years ago as one of the most generous donors to Jewish life in the former Soviet Union. Surrounded by rabbis he invited to Almaty, Mashkevich announced the creation of the rabbinical council.

The EAJC, the council's parent organization, was set up six months ago as part of the World Jewish Congress.

The group represents Jewish communities from 28 nations in the Far East, the Pacific region, Australia and the former Soviet Union.

Mashkevich, the group's president and major donor, is believed already to have spent \$1 million on its activities.

The location for the rabbinical conference reflected Mashkevich's personal priorities.

But the visiting rabbis — who came from the former Soviet Union, England, France, Australia and Israel, among other countries — also felt it was important to hold the meeting in a Muslim country.

Some of the rabbis said the meeting had the potential to improve tense relations between world Jewry and Islam.

"Centers of anti-Semitism have moved from the Christian nations to the Muslim ones," said Rabbi Sha'ar Yishuv Cohen, chief rabbi of Haifa, who attended the two-day

The Jews of Kazakhstan Part 1 of a Series

MIDEAST FOCUS

Belgian envoy: I was misquoted

Belgium's ambassador to Israel was summoned to a meeting with a top Israeli official to discuss comments attributed to him in an interview.

Wilfred Geens met Sunday with Israeli Cabinet Secretary Gideon Sa'ar after Geens was quoted, among other things, as calling Israel infrastructure minister, Efraim Eitam, a "fascist." Geens told Sa'ar that he had been misquoted and that he plans to publish a statement clarifying his comments.

Later Sunday, Geens sent a letter to Eitam saying he was sorry if the incident had harmed Eitam's reputation.

Israeli soldiers foil attack

Israeli soldiers operating Saturday in the West Bank foiled a suicide attack. Soldiers detained the alleged bomber and his dispatcher near Nablus, the army said.

Islamist party may win in Turkey

A new party with Islamic roots appears poised to win Turkey's national elections. Polls show the new Justice and Development Party will get about 30 percent of Sunday's vote.

The party has its origins in Turkey's pro-Islamic movement, but says it is not pushing an Islamic agenda. Israeli officials are closely watching the election. For several years, the two nations have conducted joint military exercises and used each others' air bases and air space for military training.

Thousands remember Rabin

Tens of thousands of Israelis attended a memorial rally Saturday night at the Tel Aviv square where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated seven years ago. During the gathering, pre-recorded messages from President Clinton, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah were shown.



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conference. The central event was a two-hour meeting between the visiting rabbis and five leading Kazakh Muslim clerics. The Jewish participants saw the meeting as a launching pad for ongoing dialogue.

The Muslim clerics addressed the issue of terrorism, and appeared willing to talk about the two religions' common historic roots and the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

"We share so much in common with the Jewish people that we should be careful not to divide people along religious lines," Murat-Haji Mynbaev, dean of the Islamic University of Kazakhstan, told the gathering, in front of Kazakh TV crews.

Yet the imams avoided a direct response when the rabbis asked their opinion of Palestinian terrorism.

The rabbis said the meeting would be a success if the Muslim leaders engaged in meaningful follow-up.

"It's not so important what" the imams "say in a meeting with us. What matters is what they will be saying when they are back in their congregations," Cohen said.

Rabbi Aba Dunner, the Britain-based secretary-general of the European Conference of Rabbis, was cautiously optimistic about the future of such interfaith endeavors.

"What we have to do is cultivate people like those who were in the meeting with us," he said.

Mashkevich, who grew up in the neighboring former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, which also is Muslim, said the meeting was just the beginning of a long process.

"We have to start the dialogue somewhere," he said. "First it's very important to show the entire world that there is no conflict between the Jewish and Muslim worldviews."

Kazakhstan's geopolitical circumstances and Nazarbayev's close personal ties to many world Muslim leaders afford Kazakhstan extraordinary access to the world of Islam. But the newly established rabbinical association sees its agenda as transcending politics.

Yeshaya Cohen, the chief rabbi of Kazakhstan, who was elected president of the Rabbinical Council, said the group would coordinate the search for rabbis to serve in local congregations and could help raise funds for member communities.

Officials said the group also wants to start a Jewish summer camp in Kazakhstan for children in the group's region, which covers a vast area from Central Asia to Australia.

Absent from the meeting was a large group of Lubavitch rabbis who work in the former Soviet Union under the auspices of the Federation of the Jewish Communities of the C.I.S. Most of the rabbis in the former Soviet republics are emissaries of the Chabad Lubavitch organization.

On the eve of the conference, Lubavitch authorities in Russia, Ukraine, Western Europe and Israel urged their rabbis not to participate.

A spokesman for the Chabad-sponsored Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia told JTA that the organization's opposition was based on the fact that Cohen, a former Lubavitch emissary in Kazakhstan, had refused to obey a rabbinical court's decision to vacate his post.

Following the Kazakhstan event, the rabbinical delegation had planned to meet with Israeli President Moshe Katsav in Jerusalem. But the meeting was canceled, reportedly because of pressure from Chabad Lubavitch and its major benefactor in the former Soviet Union, Israeli diamond merchant Lev Levayev.

Some observers, in fact, say the situation reflects a power struggle between Levayev and Mashkevich, who are believed to be the two biggest sponsors of Jewish life in the former Soviet Union. □

U.N. panel blasts Egypt

NEW YORK (JTA) — A U.N. panel said Egypt is breaching an international human rights treaty by printing anti-Semitic newspaper articles.

The panel last Friday also criticized Egypt's treatment of suspected terrorists and gays. Egyptian authorities must clamp down on anti-Semitic articles in the country's newspapers because they breach the treaty's ban on "advocacy of racial or religious hatred and incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence," the panel said. □

JEWISH WORLD

Report eyes Polish massacres

Ordinary Polish citizens killed their Jewish neighbors in at least 24 places during World War II, according to a new report.

The 1,500-page, two-volume report details incidents that have shaken many Poles' view that they were only victims during the war.

Pawel Machciewicz, the editor of the report, told The Associated Press it was hard to determine the number of Jews killed by Poles because of conflicting testimony and lack of other evidence.

Law could hurt Belarussian Jews

Jews in Belarus are worried by a new law enshrining the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church.

On Oct. 31, President Alexander Lukashenko signed the law, which also restricts the activities of smaller religious groups.

The law bans organized prayer by religious communities of fewer than 20 citizens and prohibits religions that have been in the former Soviet republic for fewer than 20 years from publishing literature or setting up missions.

Chief Rabbi Sender Uritsky criticized the law, saying it could create serious problems for Jews in the former Soviet republic.

Canadian blasts anti-Israel bias

The head of Canada's largest newspaper chain criticized world media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel Asper, founder and chairman of CanWest Global Communications Corp., said Oct. 31 that anti-Israeli bias is a "cancer" destroying the media's credibility.

He criticized The New York Times, CNN, BBC and others for spreading Palestinian propaganda. "Dishonest reporting tells you that" the intifada is "about territory, and Jerusalem, and Palestinian statehood, and alleged refugees," Asper said.

"Honest reporting would tell you that it is a war to destroy Israel and kill or expel or subjugate all the Jews."

Israeli Air Force commander dies

The first commander of the Israeli air force died in a Tel Aviv hospital last Friday.

Israel Amir, 99, was head of the underground Haganah's information department and was sent to Europe to recruit and train thousands of young Holocaust survivors for combat upon their arrival in the nascent Israeli state.

He later was appointed to head the country's fledgling air force and then worked for many years in the Defense Ministry.

Jewish leaders focus on scourges that confront Jews in post-Oslo era

By Ruth E. Gruber

PRAGUE (JTA) — The 1990s seemed to be a golden decade for European Jewry. Jewish communities re-emerged following the collapse of communism, and the Oslo accords appeared to point the way toward peace in the Middle East.

European Jews, celebrating the end of the Communist era, began taking tentative steps to chart their future and develop a role as a third pillar of world Jewry, alongside American Jews and Israel.

Since then, however, a grim litany of global challenges has erupted to confront Jews worldwide.

These include rising anti-Semitism, global terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, Holocaust revisionism, widespread support for the Palestinian side in the Middle East conflict and the consequent demonization of Israel.

What impact do these challenges have on European Jews and their attempt to forge a new sense of pan-European Jewish identity — and how should Jewish communities react and confront them?

These questions formed the focus of heated debate here Sunday among Jewish leaders from more than 40 countries. The communal leaders were attending a three-day conference of Jewish community presidents sponsored by the European Council of Jewish Communities.

A five-person panel from France, Italy, the United States, Portugal and Russia set the stage by noting specific challenges that have emerged in the two years since the failure of the Middle East peace process and the onset of the Palestinian intifada.

"What strikes me is the speed with which everything collapsed," said David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee. "It is almost as if Oslo and Camp David never happened. Sadly, perhaps the goodwill we had in the 1990s was broader than it was deep."

Harris outlined 10 specific challenges for the Jewish community. These ranged from attempting to strengthen E.U. support for Israel to exposing the "lethal and deadly" anti-Semitism now rampant in the Islamic world.

He also said Europe must encourage democracy in the Arab and Muslim world to create a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism.

Roger Cukierman, president of CRIF, an umbrella organization for secular Jewish institutions in France, went so far as to speak of a "state of war against the Jews in the world."

The spate of violent attacks on synagogues and other Jewish sites in France earlier this year, he said, was "clearly related to the situation in the Middle East."

French authorities have since cracked down, and there has been a sharp decrease in such violence, he said. But "the general atmosphere has not changed — we feel it in our schools, on our campuses, in the media."

A spark, he said, such as a U.S.-led attack on Iraq, could touch off a new cycle of violence against Jews and Jewish institutions.

Threats to the Jewish world, he said, come from the traditionally anti-Semitic extreme right, the pro-Palestinian and anti-globalization extreme left, and the growing Arab and Muslim minorities.

"The French people are not anti-Semitic," he said. "The French generally hate the Arabs more than they do the Jews, but they are afraid of taking them on."

Panelists and audience members also debated how to prevent legitimate concern over current events from blurring into paranoia.

"One of the biggest problems is how to maintain our specificity as Jews without closing ourselves into a ghetto mentality," said Portuguese panelist Marta Mucznik, executive director of the European Union of Jewish Students.

"We are concerned how to build a positive Jewish identity that is not just based on the Middle East. This is part of our identity, but it should not be all."

Michael Brenner, a professor at the University of Munich, agreed.

"We still tend to let the others set our agenda," he said. "Shouldn't we get a little beyond bashing Islam or seeing the liberal left as the enemy?" □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**For N.Y. man, concern for roots leads to cemetery plan in Poland***By Ruth E. Gruber*

WARSAW (JTA) — For decades, the abandoned Jewish cemetery in Karczew, a small town near Warsaw on the banks of the Vistula River, languished as an eerie and disconcerting wasteland.

Dozens of tombstones stood broken or eroded or lay toppled haphazardly on dunes of pale river sand, scattered with debris that included human bones exposed by wind and rain.

All that is changing now, thanks to cooperation between local townspeople, Polish Jews and a new volunteer organization aimed at cleaning up and restoring the hundreds of abandoned Jewish graveyards in Poland. A recent ceremony marked the completion of the first stage of restoration.

"There are new walls and a metal gate," said Norman Weinberg, executive coordinator of the new Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project, or PJCRP. "Dogs can no longer enter here and chew on the bones."

The next stage will involve planting trees and shrubs to stabilize the sand, he said.

Weinberg, a retired research chemist who lives near Buffalo, established the project in June after successfully organizing the restoration of the Jewish cemetery in Ozarow, the small Polish town where his parents were born.

The organization aims to restore as many as possible of Poland's devastated Jewish cemeteries; document the restoration process through words, pictures and video; translate the inscriptions on all the monuments; and put all the material on the Internet, Weinberg told JTA in an e-mail interview.

"We want to build awareness and show others how cemetery restoration can be done," he said. "Realistically, of course, we will do this one" cemetery "at a time as funds become available."

There are more than 1,000 Jewish cemeteries in Poland, most of them abandoned, overgrown and often devastated. Many, ravaged by the Nazis, were confiscated under communism.

They all are expected to be given back to the Polish Jewish community under Poland's restitution law, as was the cemetery in Karczew. But Poland's Jews do not have the financial resources to restore or maintain them.

That's where the restoration project comes in.

"The PJCRP can advise, raise some funds, gain support from governments and organizations," Weinberg said.

About 80 percent of North American Jews trace their ancestry to Poland. The PJCRP actively targets associations of Jews and their descendants from individual towns — known as *landsmanschaften* — for funding and other support. The project already has begun exploring cemetery restoration projects in more than a dozen Polish towns.

Except for the actual workers and contractors who restore the cemeteries, the PJCRP consists of a group of volunteers.

"We're trying to create a framework that will enable people who want to help to do so," said Michael Schudrich, the American-born rabbi of Warsaw and Lodz who is the PJCRP's executive coordinator for halachic affairs. Schudrich makes sure that halachic standards are observed in carrying out the restoration. Work supervised by the PJCRP is never done on Shabbat or Jewish

holidays. For Weinberg, last year's Ozarow project was a life-changing experience.

It also provided him with a model for involving Jews, local Poles and official institutions that could be applied to other cemeteries. "It started off about eight years ago with the birth of our first grandchild," he said. "What could I tell him some day about his family, his ancestors and his heritage?"

"From a growing interest in family genealogy and learning about Ozarow came the realization that our ancestral cemetery there was a shambles, most of the monuments gone, the walls all but demolished, and that 120 Jews were rounded up after most were deported to Treblinka, forced to dig their own grave and then murdered by the Nazis," he said.

Weinberg retired from his business on May 1, 2001.

"On May 2, I was determined to try to restore the Ozarow cemetery," he said.

With the help of the Israel-based Ozarower Rebbe, Rabbi Tanchum Becker, Weinberg and some friends began contacting associations of Jews from Ozarow to raise funds.

They also contacted individuals and organizations including Schudrich, the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and the Washington-based U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad.

A non-Jewish Polish businessman, Andrzej Omasta, became the Poland-based project manager and met with the mayor, priest and townspeople in Ozarow.

"The town became immediately supportive when they realized what we wanted to do," Weinberg recalled.

About a month after taking on the project, "We announced that the dedication ceremony would be barely five months away," on Oct. 15, 2001, he said. "Ozarowers were very responsive, and within about two months we had raised or had commitments for all the funds we needed.

"Ozarowers paid for the work, but thanks are due also to the generosity of many Poles, who gave freely of their time," he said.

A tour bus full of Jews from Ozarow and their families traveled to the town for the emotional dedication ceremony. There they were greeted by more than 500 townspeople dressed in their best, including school children, the mayor, town priest, contractors and representatives from the American and Canadian embassies, Weinberg said.

Tears flowed freely as the priest, in Polish, and Becker, in Hebrew, intoned Psalm 79 before the commemorative monument at the mass grave.

In January, Weinberg said, pupils at the Ozarow High School decided to put on an evening of Jewish heritage and remembrance.

Two weeks later, he received a letter from the headmaster, informing him that students would take on the responsibility of maintaining and cleaning the cemetery. The Weinberg family subsequently endowed an annual scholarship for a senior student writing the winning essay on Ozarow's Jews and Polish-Jewish relations, with the winner chosen by high school staff.

"Restoration of the Jewish cemeteries of Poland is about remembering and honoring the dead and the many hundreds of thousands murdered and buried in mass graves in many of the cemeteries and in nearby forests," Weinberg said.

But, he added, "It is also about life and living, about doing mitzvot and about reconciliation of Poles and Jews." □

For more information, see the Web sites www.pjcrp.org/index.html and www.ozarow.org.