



Daily News Bulletin

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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel denounces Belgian ruling

Israel denounced a Belgian Supreme Court ruling that left open the possibility for trying Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for alleged war crimes once he steps down. [Page 3]

Houston federation criticizes UJC

The Jewish federation in Houston is considering suspending its dues to the United Jewish Communities, federation insiders have confirmed.

In a letter circulated to 20 large- to intermediate-sized federations last month, the Houston federation said the national system "had lost its way," according to the Forward, which first reported the letter.

Houston cited what it said were flaws in decision making and overseas allocations.

Officials there also questioned whether UJC had "thrown away" \$6 million on the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Study, results of which were shelved in November due to lost data.

The letter comes as federation leaders of large cities prepare to meet during the first week of March to examine the role of the national system. Stephen Hoffman, the president and CEO of the UJC, would not comment to JTA about the development.

Court upholds Papon's release

A Paris appeals court upheld Thursday an earlier decision to release Nazi-era war criminal Maurice Papon on health grounds. However, Papon, 92, could still be returned to prison if future medical checks find that his condition has improved.

Papon, convicted for his role in deporting more than 1,500 Jews during the war, was released after a court ruled he was too ill to complete his sentence.

Israel raises war readiness

Israel's army is raising its level of preparedness in anticipation of a possible American attack on Iraq.

Beginning next week, the army's defensive missile batteries will be put on full operational deployment in case Iraq responds to a U.S. attack by firing missiles at Israel.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, Feb. 17.

NEWS ANALYSIS

As peace moves quicken, is it sincere, or just politics?

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — After more than two years of a downward spiral in Israeli-Palestinian relations, the prospect of a new regional balance after an anticipated American war on Iraq is already affecting Israeli and Palestinian minds.

Both sides want to be ready for any new American demands after the dust settles in Baghdad. And so, after months of icy silence, Israeli and Palestinian officials have started talking again — and the upshot could be a new cease-fire.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon says his aim is to create a basis for a major peace initiative later in the year. His critics, however, aren't so sure: They accuse Sharon of going through the motions to keep the international community happy and to lure the Labor Party into his coalition.

Talks have been taking place on three levels:

- Sharon himself met Ahmed Karia, the speaker of the Palestinian Parliament, to discuss renewing the peace process and what it could offer the Palestinians.
- Sharon's bureau chief, Dov Weisglass, has been discussing cease-fire terms with the Palestinian Authority's interior minister, Hani Hassan, who is in charge of Palestinian security affairs.
- Ohad Marani, director general of Israel's Finance Ministry, negotiated with P.A. Finance Minister Salam Fayyad the transfer of \$60 million in Palestinian tax money that Israel had withheld since the intifada began in September 2000.

In addition to those cynics who say Sharon's recent flurry of moves are only and intended to attract the Labor Party to the government, others say Sharon simply recognizes that the overthrow of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein will create a window of diplomatic opportunity in the region, and is signaling to the international community that he is prepared to move toward a Palestinian state as envisaged by President Bush.

But Sharon doesn't want to be rushed. Therefore, he recently set up a team under dovish Likud Party legislator Dan Meridor to coordinate future moves with the United States, pre-empting pressure on Israel from the international community, especially the European Union.

Meridor is said to be working on a new Israeli-American peace plan based on understandings reached by Sharon and Bush in a number of recent conversations.

Sharon also invited Fayyad to his farm, where he outlined reforms the Palestinian Authority must make before serious peace talks can resume.

Sharon's main demand is that P.A. President Yasser Arafat be stripped of his executive powers and pushed into a ceremonial role, with real power transferred to a prime minister. Fayyad is a leading candidate for the job — and would probably be the first choice of Israel and the United States.

In the few months since he took charge of Palestinian financial affairs, Fayyad has proven himself competent and trustworthy, sincerely committed to Bush's vision of Israeli and Palestinian states living as peaceful neighbors and cooperating economically.

With Fayyad as prime minister, Israeli and American officials believe Bush's two-state vision could become a reality.

But it's not clear whether Fayyad has sufficient standing among the Palestinian public to win the job. Nor is it clear whether American and Israeli support will hurt Fayyad's chances of taking power.

Most pressing, however, is a cease-fire, without which nothing will go forward. In

MIDEAST FOCUS

3 Palestinians killed in Gaza

Three Palestinian terrorists were killed Thursday by Israeli troops in the Gaza Strip. The three were killed near the settlement of Netzarim while planting bombs, according to Israel Radio.

One of the gunmen was killed after firing at the soldiers, and the two others were shot dead during a chase. A fourth terrorist was arrested.

Israel's Labor leader softens

The head of Israel's Labor Party softened his refusal to hold contacts on joining a Likud-led government.

In a TV interview this week, Amram Mitzna said he is prepared to meet again with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon if Sharon pledges to evacuate isolated Gaza settlements and reallocate funds from settlements to the unemployed.

Arafat OK'd prime minister?

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat reportedly agreed last month to appoint a prime minister to run day-to-day Palestinian affairs.

According to unnamed officials and diplomats cited by Reuters on Thursday, Arafat gave his consent in a letter to British Prime Minister Tony Blair before Blair met with President Bush last month. Even though Arafat gave his approval, no moves to select a Palestinian prime minister are imminent, the report said.

Suicide attacks most worrying

Israelis are more concerned about suicide bombings than Scud missile attacks, according to a survey published Thursday.

The poll, commissioned by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, reported that 43 percent of those surveyed describe suicide attacks as their biggest concern, compared with 12 percent who consider Iraqi Scuds their major worry.

talks with Hassan, Israeli officials are reviving the idea of a "rolling" cease-fire that would begin in a limited geographic area and, if it holds there, would spread until it encompasses the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip.

At that point, Israeli troops could withdraw to positions they held before the intifada began, and more comprehensive peace talks could begin.

The trouble is that similar ideas have been tried before and failed. Apparent cease-fires in Gaza and the West Bank cities of Bethlehem and Hebron failed to hold when the Palestinian Authority declined to confront terrorist groups.

Hassan suggests that things will be different this time. Speaking in Nablus last weekend, he said he soon would present a detailed Palestinian proposal for a cease-fire beginning in Ramallah, where Arafat has been holed up in his battered headquarters for more than a year.

This time, Hassan says, a cease-fire would be respected by all parts of Arafat's Fatah movement, including Al-Aksa Brigade terrorists who have carried out dozens of bombings and other attacks against Israel.

Hassan acknowledges that one of the main reasons for the Palestinians' newfound seriousness is the anticipated war on Iraq, which he believes will radically change the rules in the Middle East.

The Palestinians must change course, he believes, by stopping terrorism and turning to political moves. "It is time to harvest the political fruits," Hassan says, "and we cannot afford to make any mistakes this time."

Both Jordan and Egypt are actively involved in the efforts to revive the political process. On Sunday, Weisglass went to Amman to brief the Jordanians, while the new chief of Israel's National Security Council, Ephraim Halevy, has been keeping Egypt updated.

Jordan and Egypt also are motivated by visions of a changing Middle East: Egypt especially hopes to impress a presumably victorious United States by helping to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

Egypt has made a major effort to get all Palestinian terrorist organizations to stop attacking Israel, and risked losing face when the radicals refused.

Undeterred, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak invited Sharon for talks in Sharm el-Sheik, the first invitation by an Arab leader since Sharon was first elected prime minister in February 2001.

Still, some pundits argue that Sharon is only feinting toward a peace deal to entice Labor into his coalition. If so, it's not working.

Labor Party leaders say they don't believe Sharon has any real intention of moving toward peace. In a recent meeting with Amram Mitzna, they note, Sharon lectured the Labor chairman on the importance of Netzarim and Kfar Darom, two Gaza Strip settlements that Mitzna says should be evacuated.

Mitzna maintains that Sharon's attitude to the settlements shows he isn't ready to make peace, and that he wants Labor in his coalition so he can drag his feet indefinitely.

Sharon aides retort that the prime minister sees a post-Iraq situation in which peacemaking with the Palestinians will be a real possibility: After Saddam falls, Sharon reckons, Arafat will be the next to go. Then, says Sharon, people like Karia, Fayyad and Hassan, who want a new deal for the Palestinians, will be able to make reciprocal moves toward peace without hindrance. □

(Leslie Susser is the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report.)

Vatican to make some papers available

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Vatican plans to make available on Saturday some documents about its relations with prewar Nazi Germany.

These include diplomatic documents in the Vatican secret archives dating from 1922 to 1939, when Eugenio Pacelli, who became Pope Pius XII, served as Vatican ambassador in Berlin and Vatican secretary of state.

The documents also include a set of records from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which in the prewar period compiled numerous confidential studies.

The Vatican announced a year ago that it would begin opening archives relating to Pius XII, beginning with the prewar years before he became pope in 1939. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Canada adds 3 to terror list

Canada outlawed three more terrorist groups, including the pro-Palestinian Abu Nidal group.

The addition of the Abu Nidal Organization — as well as the Al-Qaida-linked Abu Sayyaf Group and the Peru-based Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path — brings the number of banned groups on Canada's anti-terrorism list to 19. As a result of the ban, the 19 organizations' assets in Canada can be seized, and anyone belonging to or helping the groups faces a possible 10-year prison sentence.

The Abu Nidal Organization has carried out attacks that killed hundreds in pursuit of its goal of destroying the State of Israel.

Despite Thursday's move, critics say the government is acting too slowly. The Canadian Jewish Congress has been lobbying the government to add two Palestinian groups, the Tanzim militias and the Al-Aksa Brigade, to the list.

C. Asians, Jewish leaders meet

Leaders of six Muslim nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus adopted a declaration that stresses the importance of inter-religious dialogue among nations and rejects the misuse of religion by terrorist groups.

The accord reached Thursday in Kazakhstan also affirms the right of every individual to freely practice their religion and calls on the international community to join efforts to promote tolerance and fight extremism and terrorism.

Among those present Thursday were the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and top officials from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey.

They met in the Kazakh capital of Almaty with a delegation from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress.

Undercount of Britain's Jews?

About 267,000 Jews live in England and Wales, making them slightly less than 0.5 percent of the total population, according to 2001 census data released Thursday.

However, researchers at London's Institute for Jewish Policy Research said the figure might be as much as one-third too low because the religion question on the census was voluntary. Barry Kosmin and Stanley Waterman of the institute said the total figure could well be above 330,000.

ADL presses Greek leader

The Anti-Defamation League called the recent desecration of a Holocaust memorial in the northern Greek city of Salonika "alarming." In a letter Wednesday, the ADL urged Prime Minister Constantine Simitis to publicly denounce anti-Semitism.

Israeli officials lash out at Belgium after court opens door to Sharon trial

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel issued stinging criticisms this week against Belgium following a controversial court ruling there.

Belgium's Supreme Court ruled Wednesday that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon cannot be tried while in office for alleged war crimes — but it left open the possibility of a trial once he steps down.

The court also ruled that investigations could proceed against former Israeli army commander Amos Yaron, who now serves as director general of Israel's Defense Ministry. Along with Sharon, Yaron was named in the original complaint filed with Belgian prosecutors two years ago.

Following Wednesday's ruling, Israeli Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recalled Israel's ambassador to Belgium, Yehuda Kenar, for consultations. Netanyahu also summoned the Belgian ambassador to Israel for an urgent meeting.

Sources in the Foreign Ministry said they are planning to launch an international diplomatic campaign to get the court ruling changed, Israel Radio reported.

There are no immediate plans to sever diplomatic relations with Belgium, according to the Jerusalem Post.

The Belgian Supreme Court issued its ruling Wednesday following an appeal by Palestinian plaintiffs.

The plaintiffs want Sharon and other Israeli officials prosecuted for the killing of Palestinians by Lebanese Christian militias in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps during the 1982 Lebanon War, when Sharon was Israel's defense minister.

Belgian courts rejected the case last June, saying Belgian law does not allow for the prosecution of defendants who aren't in Belgium.

Last month, however, the Belgian Senate adopted amendments to the country's 1993 war crimes legislation, known as the "universal jurisdiction" law. The amendments allow Belgian prosecutors to investigate suspected war criminals even if they don't live in Belgium.

Following his meeting with the Belgian ambassador Thursday, Netanyahu declared that Israel would not accept another European "blood libel against the Jewish people."

Netanyahu said that the Belgian court's decision was based on political interests and "dealt a blow" to global efforts to fight terrorism.

Netanyahu accused Belgium of "distorting the facts" about Israel "and permitting anti-Semitic speeches, which deny the rights of Jews to self-defense."

He also said the ruling "will amount to granting a prize to terrorists."

Israeli President Moshe Katsav also weighed in.

In a letter to Belgium's King Albert II on Thursday, Katsav rejected Belgium's moral right to bring Israeli leaders or army officers to trial.

Justice Minister Meir Sheerit expressed his outrage in a scathing statement Thursday. "It is unacceptable that this small and insignificant nation would be the judge for the whole world," he said. "It is a disgrace for the legal system in that country. It has the clear scent of a personal hunt for Prime Minister Sharon, which originated from a deliberate Palestinian initiative."

In its ruling Wednesday, the court upheld Sharon's diplomatic immunity, but did say that charges could be brought against nonresidents of Belgium. This means that there could be further legal moves once Sharon retires.

The court also ruled that investigations can now proceed against former Israeli army commanders who do not have diplomatic immunity, including Yaron.

Yaron, who was commander of army forces in Beirut during the Lebanon war, lashed out at the court's decision, which he called "dangerous."

"Belgium is taking upon itself the mission of world judge," Yaron told Army Radio. "This is an attempt to rouse disorder in the world, in an inexplicable manner."

Former legislator Rafael Eitan, who was army chief of staff at the time of the war in Lebanon, said he was not worried or threatened by the Belgian court's decision.

Meanwhile, Jews in Belgium also attacked the decision, with some saying they may bring war crimes charges against Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. □

ACROSS THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

In southwestern Ukrainian city, Jewish life isn't what it used to be

By Lev Krichevsky

CHERNOVTSY, Ukraine (JTA) — Once, local residents say, every street sweeper in Chernovtsy could speak five languages, including Yiddish.

This anecdote, whether true or not, illustrates the city's cosmopolitan past.

A Jewish visitor also learns that the song "Hava Nagilah" apparently began in Czernowitz — as the city was once known in Yiddish — and is actually based on a local folk tune.

Today, Chernovtsy — or Chernivtsi in the modern Ukrainian spelling — is a provincial town in southwestern Ukraine. The city's streets stay dark at nights — a sign of Ukraine's continuing energy crisis.

But during the day, a visit through town sheds a lot of light on its past.

For nearly 150 years, Chernowitz — to use the German spelling — was the capital of Bukovina, the easternmost province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. For its many architectural gems and rich cultural life, this city earned itself the nickname "Little Vienna."

About one-third of the local Jewish population of 50,000 survived the Holocaust because the Romanian forces that occupied the region did not seek to annihilate the entire Jewish population.

Since the emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel and the United States began in the 1970s — and especially as a result of the mass aliyah of the 1990s — the story of Chernovtsy Jewry is the tale of an ongoing demographic decline.

"I remember how walking along this street on a weekend evening would take me a couple hours — I saw Jewish friends on every corner," says Bronislav Tutelman, 52, a local artist, standing on Kobylanskaya Street, the city's main drag.

Some would take a stroll for other reasons. Even in the 1970s, many Chernovtsy Jews already had relatives abroad. The weekend promenade was their fashion show, Tutelman recalls.

"People were showing off the clothes their relatives sent them from abroad," he says.

Jews are still leaving Chernovtsy, though in more modest numbers.

"Some leave just to move elsewhere, doesn't matter where. It's mostly because of the bad economy," says Noah Kofmansky, the town's only resident rabbi and a native of Chernovtsy. "On a recent visit to Germany, I had a feeling I was in Chernovtsy — there are so many people that came from here."

Kofmansky, 57, holds a degree in physics from Moscow State University. He defected from the Soviet Union 20 years ago while attending an academic event in the United States.

Seven years ago, when it became clear that not everyone would leave, he came back to his hometown with a rabbinic diploma.

Today, Chernovtsy has about 3,000 Jews out of a total population of 190,000.

The community is served by one active synagogue with a minyan of mostly elderly Jews.

Although three major Chasidic dynasties hail from the area — Vizhnitser, Sadagorer and Boyaner — Chernovtsy's Jewish history is primarily a secular one, led by German-speaking Reform Jews

whose main synagogue, known as Tempel, was among the most magnificent buildings in town.

By the middle of the 19th century, Czernowitz was known as the community with the highest proportion of assimilated Jews among the major Eastern European communities.

Despite efforts to revive Judaism as a religion in post-Soviet Ukraine, the majority of Jews here remain secular.

Most of those who take part in Jewish life participate in social and cultural programs.

On a recent Sunday morning, two boys romped around the Chernovtsy Jewish center.

Zhenya Vasilenchuk, 5, says he and his 4-year-old cousin, Lesha Shmukler, come here every Sunday.

The boys are among the couple dozen preschoolers whom parents bring to the center once or twice a week to play, watch videos or celebrate Jewish holidays.

On weekdays mothers can drop their kids here for a few hours to go shopping or do household chores, says Tanya Kantemir, 27, who runs a kindergarten-type project called Mazel Tov.

There is also a full-time kindergarten, called Chaverim, at a separate location. Twenty-six children are currently enrolled in the program.

These projects are among many programs run by the Hesed Shushana welfare center, the leading Jewish organization in Chernovtsy.

The center, which operates on funds it receives from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, opened few years ago with a primary goal of supplying the impoverished elderly Jews that constitute about one-third of the community with meals, medical care, home visits and library programs.

As the community matured, the Chernovtsy center — like many other similar centers throughout the former Soviet Union — developed a number of programs to encourage social ties among the largely secular and unaffiliated Jewish population.

"People can come with virtually all their needs," says Vladimir Zatulovsky, director of community programs at Hesed Shushanah. "We try to build programs that speak to the entire family, like a family-type kindergarten or a family club."

If many adults still do not always feel comfortable taking part in social programs, "the kids are adjusting easily and quickly," Zatulovsky says.

But in fact, Jewish kids are becoming a rarity in Chernovtsy.

In that sense, the month of November was exceptional for the Jewish community — although few people are aware of that.

"One of our Jewish families just had a child," says the director of Hesed Shushana, Leonid Fuks. "This is good news for us. That doesn't happen too often lately."

He added that his organization records four to five deaths among its elderly clients each month.

The Jewish community's problems reflect the general demographic decline in this part of Ukraine.

The town, known as a rich and leisurely community in the past, has virtually no industry. Most of the industrial plants that were opened here under Communist rule have significantly downsized in post-Soviet years. Some were closed altogether.

Recent research by Gallup shows that Ukraine will need more than a decade and over \$50 billion in investments to return to the economic level it had in 1990, its last year before independence.

"If we had a better economy, many young Jews would have stayed," Kofmansky says. □