



Daily News Bulletin

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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Hamas member killed

Israeli troops on Monday night killed a Hamas member wanted for involvement in terrorist attacks. Israeli troops operating near Hebron surrounded the house Mohammed Muhr was hiding in and opened fire when he refused to surrender.

On Tuesday, Israeli forces moved into the Rafah refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Soldiers demolished two buildings the army said had been used to store arms and explosives.

Likud selects candidate

Israel's Likud Party elected Cabinet minister Reuven Rivlin as its candidate for Knesset speaker.

Rivlin, who has the backing of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, is expected to be unopposed when the Knesset votes in secret ballot Wednesday for the next speaker.

UJC names new official

The United Jewish Communities named Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman to serve as vice president of its Jewish Renaissance and Renewal pillar. Zimmerman will oversee one of UJC's four main areas of focus, developing programming for the North American Jewish federation system to strengthen and enrich Jewish life.

Zimmerman most recently served as executive vice president of Birthright Israel. He was also a former president of the Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion.

He resigned from the HUC in December 2000 amid reports of sexual impropriety that occurred before he became HUC's president.

Screening reduces Tay-Sachs

Genetic testing has virtually eliminated a Jewish genetic disease in the United States.

According to The New York Times, an aggressive 30-year effort has reduced the number of babies born with Tay-Sachs in the United States to five per year.

Ashkenazi Jews are more prone than the general population to carry the gene that leads to Tay-Sachs, a progressive neurological disorder.

Most children born with Tay-Sachs die before they are 5 years old. Doctors and others who worked in the effort now want to eliminate other genetic diseases that are found among Ashkenazi Jews.

Israeli Cabinet OKs mass aliyah for 18,000 Falash Mura in Ethiopia

By Matthew Gutman

TEL AVIV (JTA) — The Israeli Cabinet's decision this week to find the swiftest way to bring thousands of Ethiopians to Israel has reignited a controversy over how — and if — to deal with the potential immigrants.

On Sunday, the Cabinet approved a plan to immediately bring to Israel some 18,000 to 20,000 Falash Mura, the majority of whose ancestors converted from Judaism to Christianity.

In recent years, thousands of Falash Mura left their homes in outlying areas of Ethiopia and moved to camps run by immigration activists in Addis Ababa and the northern city of Gondar, where they wait to be cleared for immigration.

Activists concerned about the fate of the Falash Mura applauded the Cabinet's decision, which opponents condemned for being unrealistic, impossible to implement and contrary to Israel's Law of Return.

The plan, initiated by Interior Minister Eli Yishai of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, could cost cash-strapped Israel \$2 billion — or about 5 percent of the government's total annual expenditures.

When Israel began carrying out large-scale immigration operations of Ethiopian Jews in the early 1990s, many Falash Mura attempted to join the wave, claiming they were Jewish by ancestry.

The number of Falash Mura continued to grow, leading the Israeli government to believe they were not Jews, but just wanted to leave famine-plagued Ethiopia.

Ethiopian Jewish activists have been lobbying for the Falash Mura, maintaining that many of them were forced to convert or never really abandoned their Jewish faith.

In 1998, after bringing a group of 4,000 Falash Mura, most of whom had relatives in Israel, the government changed its policy, reviewing each Ethiopian immigration request on an individual basis.

According to Absorption Minister Yuli Edelstein, the Falash Mura have no right to immigrate to Israel. "Not one of them is eligible" under the Law of Return, "which itself is often considered too liberal," he said.

A spokesman for the Shas Party, Itzhak Sudri, reacted angrily.

"Since when does the Absorption Ministry decide who is a Jew?" he said.

Shas initiated its plan to rescue the Falash Mura more than a year ago, when the party's spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, issued a ruling calling for "saving the souls of Israel."

Unable to prove any lineage to Judaism, many Falash Mura have begun to study Hebrew and Judaism.

The government has suggested circumventing the Law of Return with regard to the Falash Mura, indicating that the group could be brought over under the seldom-used Law of Entry. In the past, the government used the Law of Entry to grant citizenship to foreigners for humanitarian reasons and for family reunification.

Israel's Law of Return allows immigration for anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent, along with his or her spouse, children, grandchildren and their spouses.

Knesset member Adisu Massala, himself an Ethiopian immigrant, concedes that the Falash Mura are not Jewish according to halachah, or Jewish law.

But he maintains that family reunification is reason enough to bring them over.

"Anyway," he said "the arguments about the Law of Return are baseless. Some have children here. Others are linked by blood to Ethiopian Jewry."

Because many Ethiopian immigrants often arrive in Israel with only the clothes on

MIDEAST FOCUS

Belgian law comes under attack

Israeli officials called on American Jews to help turn U.S. public opinion against a Belgian law that has been used against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

U.S. Jews should tell American officials that the Belgian law is not just a problem for Israel, but potentially for the United States as well, Israeli Foreign Ministry official Nimrod Barkan told the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations' annual mission to Israel. The lawsuit against Israeli officials "is just the tip of the iceberg, but the real problem is the iceberg," Barkan told JTA.

The politicization of the Belgian law "makes a mockery of human rights law," Malcolm Hoenlein, the Conference's executive vice chairman, told JTA.

Court: P.A. responsible for masks

Israel's High Court of Justice on Tuesday rejected a petition calling on the state to distribute gas masks to all Palestinians.

The petition, brought by human rights groups, argued that the army is in full control of the territories and is therefore obliged to provide gas masks for all Palestinians in case of an attack by Iraq.

Poll: Arabs not trusted on Israel

Most Americans do not believe that Israel's Arab neighbors are ready to accept Israel's right to exist, a new poll says. The poll, conducted by the Institute for Jewish & Community Research, says most Americans believe the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia all refuse to accept Israel's existence.

According to Gary Tobin, the research firm's president: "Perhaps it should not be surprising, given the virulently anti-Israel atmosphere that prevails in the Middle East, that even Jordan and Egypt — the countries that have signed peace agreements with Israel — are viewed by most Americans as being hostile to Israel."



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their back, must enter conversion institutes and training courses, and receive 95 percent grants on housing, their immigration and absorption costs are very high.

The Finance Ministry estimates that the process costs \$100,000 for each Ethiopian immigrant. Ever since Yosef issued the ruling, Shas has been lobbying for a government decision on the fate of the Falash Mura.

Yishai had sought a decision before the nation's Jan. 28 elections.

But Attorney General Eliyakim Rubinstein, concerned that a decision could constitute a form of political propaganda, ordered Yishai to postpone the issue several times in recent months.

Sudri, the Shas spokesman, contends that despite pronouncements by the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Absorption Ministry to the contrary, "the Falash Mura are Jewish."

"They led double lives" after their conversion to Christianity, "but they remained Jewish on the inside," he said.

Shas is concerned that the ministerial committee appointed to find a way to bring the immigrants to Israel, though headed by Yishai, is filled with those staunchly opposed to the Falash Mura's mass emigration, he said.

Shas also charges that "there is certainly a racist motivation" among those opposing the emigration, he said. "At least that is how the Ethiopian community feels."

Massala echoed the sentiment.

If 20,000 French, American and British people were waiting to immigrate, he asked, "Do you even think we would be having this debate? No, but since we are talking about black Ethiopian Jews, the situation is different."

Edelstein dismisses the claims of racism as preposterous. "There needs to be something that ties the Falash Mura to the Jewish people," he said.

"If a line is not drawn, there will always be Ethiopians desiring to leave the terrible conditions of Ethiopia for life in Israel," he said.

Mike Rosenberg, director general of the Jewish Agency's Aliyah and Absorption Department, described the wretched conditions in which the Falash Mura live.

"They are in worse condition since they left the rural areas," where they lived as subsistence farmers before coming to Addis and Gondar.

"In the cities, they live in mud huts with up to 15 people packed into each room. There they suffer malnutrition and disease."

Some Israeli officials say Yishai's call for the immediate emigration of the Falash Mura is unrealistic. They say it runs up against two formidable obstacles — budgetary constraints and tacit agreements between Israel and Ethiopia that there would be no more massive airlifts such as those of Operation Solomon in 1991, when 14,400 Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel during a 24-hour period.

In its contacts with Israeli officials, the Ethiopian government has indicated that it will only allow the Falash Mura to emigrate if they are brought over "quietly."

Since 1998, the Jewish Agency has treaded lightly in order to soothe the skittish Ethiopian government. Weekly flights from Addis Ababa have brought a steady flow of between 50 and 100 immigrants per week.

Sunday's Cabinet "decision will definitely cause damage in terms of our relations with Ethiopia. We must not start airlifts," Edelstein said.

Meanwhile, there are already concerns within Israel's Ethiopian community that the government will fail to enact Sunday's decision.

"The government must act. People are starving there. They are abused by the Christian majority, treated as traitors," Massala said. "If the government fails to back words with deeds, it could be a historic mistake." □

Groups square off in Budapest

BUDAPEST (JTA) — A Jewish group confronted fascist demonstrators in Budapest.

About 200 neo-Nazis gathered Saturday in front of the city's Parliament building to commemorate Nazi and Hungarian troops who defended Buda Castle against Soviet forces in February 1945. They were countered by more than 1,000 participants of a demonstration organized by the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities.

Police separated the two groups. □

JEWISH WORLD

Hatemongers use shuttle disaster

Holocaust deniers and Israel bashers are promoting conspiracy theories on the Internet about Jewish or Israeli involvement in the Columbia space shuttle disaster, according to the Anti-Defamation League.

Several conspiracy theorists suggest that the shuttle accident was staged by Israel and America to distract attention from events in the Mideast.

Others suggest that Col. Ilan Ramon, the Israeli who perished along with six NASA astronauts on the mission, was really a spy who was collecting information on Iraq, according to the ADL.

"Even in times of tragedy for the American people, the anti-Semites and hatemongers never let up," said Abraham H. Foxman, the ADL's national director.

"The anti-Semites and the bigots are quick to contort the facts to suit their own purposes."

Group files brief with high court

The American Jewish Committee is filing a brief with the Supreme Court supporting the University of Michigan's affirmative action program. Two cases involving the school mark the first time in 25 years that the high court will examine the constitutionality of affirmative action in higher education.

"Diversity not only provides all students with a richer educational experience, but also prepares them for participation in our pluralistic democracy," says the AJCommittee's brief, filed on behalf of a coalition of religious and civil rights organizations.

Youth group hears from Israelis

Students attending the North American Federation of Temple Youth biannual convention in Washington heard from Israeli leaders by phone.

Israeli legislators Collette Avital and Avraham Burg spoke to 1,300 high school students by phone on Monday, the same day they were sworn into the Knesset.

The theme of the weekend conference was "Libi B'Mizrakch," Hebrew for "My Heart is in the East." Because of a blizzard, several outdoor events had to be canceled and many students experienced problems heading home from the convention.

Dead Sea Scrolls in Michigan

The Dead Sea Scrolls went on display Sunday at a Michigan museum.

Rarely seen outside of Jerusalem, the scrolls will be on view at the Public Museum of Grand Rapids' Van Andel Museum Center through June 1.

The exhibit includes fragments of 12 of the scrolls, along with artifacts from the ancient Dead Sea settlement of Qumran that was located near the caves where the scrolls were discovered in 1947.

Jews raise their voices against war as rallies draw throngs around the world

By Mica Rosenberg

NEW YORK (JTA) — "The World Says No to War" read one Hebrew message on signs held during this weekend's massive peace protest here.

Although posters supporting Palestinians were in evidence during Saturday's rally, the focus was on opposition to an impending war in Iraq.

"What I was most heartened by was the fact that it was an international day of protest and in New York, the crowd was unbelievably diverse," said Ruth Messinger, the president and executive director of the American Jewish World Service, who spoke at the rally.

The antiwar message that was on display in New York and major cities around the world over the weekend has been tinged with anti-Israel sentiment.

In Germany, the Berlin Association Against Anti-Semitism accused the German peace movement of anti-Semitism following Saturday's rally there, which was attended by an estimated 500,000 protesters.

From the start of the Berlin demonstration, it became clear that groups were involved whose worldview includes nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism," said a letter, signed by about 100 scholars, Jewish religious and communal leaders, and activist groups from Germany and abroad.

"Revisionist banners and anti-Israel chants were heard. Israel was depicted as pulling the strings in the Iraq conflict; its politicians were cursed as 'child killers,' and a few flags of the Islamic extremist Hamas and Hezbollah groups were waved," the letter added.

But in New York, Jews stood side by side with an estimated 100,000 to 400,000 protesters, who lined New York's East Side in wintry weather to listen to speakers ranging from singer Harry Belafonte to Messinger to South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Messinger, who said she had been turned off by some of "the anti-Zionist signs in Washington" at a Jan. 18 protest, said she believes her presence as a speaker here on Saturday sent a different message.

At an interfaith prayer service before the rally, she read a Hebrew prayer for peace — and at the rally itself, she quoted Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Amit Mashiah, a sergeant in the Israeli army and a co-founder of a conscientious objector group, also spoke at the New York rally.

"If Bush really wants to spread democracy and peace around the world today he can start with Israel," he said. "Everyone can learn from our experience that violence doesn't solve conflict."

Mashiah said that although he thinks that terror needs to be condemned and terrorists brought to justice, "to really eliminate terror you have to deal with the reason for hatred. You cannot get rid of terror just by force."

Mashiah dismissed the anti-Israel sentiment in the anti-war movement.

"I oppose every movement that is against Israel's right for existence," he said.

The protest movement's anti-Israel side came into focus days before the rally in San Francisco, where Rabbi Michael Lerner, the editor of Tikkun Magazine, was prevented from speaking because he was deemed too "pro-Israel."

On Sunday, several hundred marchers began the San Francisco rally by gathering for an interfaith prayer vigil.

After a Muslim call to prayer and words from a Methodist minister and a Buddhist priest, Rabbi Pam Frydman Baugh of Or Shalom Jewish Community in San Francisco greeted those assembled in both Hebrew and Arabic. While praying for peace in both Israel and Palestine, she focused most of her attention on the people of Iraq.

The Jewish renewal rabbi prayed that Iraqi civilians are able to "escape the violence perpetrated by Western military forces, and are free from the violence perpetrated by their own people." □

(JTA correspondent Toby Axelrod in Berlin and Alexandra J. Wall of the Jewish Bulletin of Northern California contributed to this report.)

Resolution on settlements unlikely to pass at policy forum

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Numerous Jewish organizations are lining up to defeat a resolution to be debated next week at an American Jewish policy conference that calls on Israel to freeze settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Reform movement has submitted a resolution on Israel for debate at the annual plenum of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, which is slated to be held early next week in Baltimore.

The JCPA is the umbrella organization of 13 national Jewish organizations and 123 local Jewish community relations councils.

As such, it is considered an important forum to get national and local input — and consensus — on policy issues important to the organized Jewish community.

The resolution, which expresses solidarity with the State of Israel and the Israeli people, says Israeli settlement expansion “complicates” the chances for Middle East peace and calls for a freeze on all settlement growth in the West Bank and Gaza.

Reform leaders, who have criticized Israel’s settlement policy for 20 years, say it is time for the American Jewish community to debate the controversial expansion of Jewish settlements because the violence in the region is continuing unabated and they believe a revision of the settlement policy could open the door to reviving the moribund peace process.

“It’s natural to have this debate that affects Israel,” said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

“Israel lives and dies by the decisions it makes, but these decisions can be informed by debate in the United States.”

While Reform leaders privately acknowledge that it is unlikely the resolution will pass as worded, the debate itself represents a departure from the position of the mainstream organized Jewish community, including the Reform movement, not to criticize Israeli government policies while it is facing Palestinian terrorism.

Martin Raffel, associate executive director of the JCPA, said he expected that the debate would focus both on Israel’s settlement policy itself and whether it is appropriate for the American Jewish community to debate it at this time.

The Conservative and Orthodox communities, as well as several communal organizations and local community relations boards, are mounting a campaign to get the section relating to settlement freezes deleted.

Opponents say that it is inappropriate for American Jews to make a judgment on Israeli policy during this time of intense conflict with the Palestinians.

Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president and CEO of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, said he believes it would be inappropriate to discuss a topic of negotiations at this time, while Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is forming a government and international leaders are planning a “road map” for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

“Our reaction right now is that this is not the right time for that resolution,” Epstein said. “It may never be the right time, but certainly this is not the right time.”

Epstein suggested that Jewish groups could debate the policy at a later date, even within the next few months. He also hinted that the conservative movement’s policy on settlements could change.

“Up to this point, we have supported the government position on settlements and we may once again, but we’re not tied to that,” he said. “We’re open to looking at it. That’s the only reasonable position to take.”

In addition to opposing the settlement language, the Orthodox Union is contesting two other sections of the resolution, which was introduced by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform movement’s congregational arm.

The O.U. opposes the statement supporting a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a second that calls for efforts to relieve the humanitarian suffering of the Palestinian people.

“Our overall objective is that, given the critical challenges that Israel confronts with deadly terrorist attacks, it is not the time for the organized Jewish community to do anything but express its solidarity with Israel,” said Nathan Diamant, director of the O.U.’s Institute for Public Affairs.

The JCPA will debate several other controversial resolutions at their plenum, including:

- A resolution calling for increased dialogue between the American Jewish community and evangelical Christians. The Jewish community has often officially shunned the religious right because of its differences on domestic issues such as school prayer. But the bonds have grown stronger in the past few years, given that community’s vocal support for Israel at a time of crisis.

- A resolution that supports U.S. efforts to confront terrorism and anti-Semitism, but calls for the preservation of constitutional rights and due process. A stronger, alternative version, submitted by the Boston community, “deplores the compromise of fundamental freedoms and civil liberties being carried out in the name of the war on terrorism.”

- A call for Jewish organizations to reconsider the use of boycotts as a political tool because it is deemed counter-productive and can be seen as hypocritical, given the fact that other groups boycott Israeli goods.

But the Israel resolution is likely to counter the most resistance.

Already, the American Jewish Committee and Hadassah have joined several local community relations councils in officially requesting that the paragraph about the settlements be cut.

“For JCPA to call for a settlement freeze would give comfort to terrorists who believe they can extract concessions from Israel by using violence,” said Kenneth Bandler, a spokesman for the AJCommittee.

The Jewish community relations councils of Chicago and Philadelphia have suggested alternative language that is considered more subtle.

“While it is clear that Palestinian terrorism predated the construction of settlements and the Israeli government has never allowed settlements to stand in the way of entering into peace agreements, we believe Israel’s policies, including those affecting settlement construction in the territories, should reflect the long-term goal of achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians,” the proposed revision states.

But Reform leaders stand behind their wording, saying it is a tool to invoke debate within the American Jewish world.

The settlement policy, Saperstein said, is an important policy to discuss because the vast majority of American Jews do not support it. “It’s a mistake to limit ourselves to the ‘least common denominator’ discussion,” said Mark Pelavin, the Religion Action Center’s associate director. “We need to be able to discuss more than standing in solidarity with Israel.” □