

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Deadlock in redeployment talks

The Israeli and Palestinian defense chiefs failed to make progress on security issues.

Shaul Mofaz and Mohammed Dahlan met for four hours on Wednesday night near Jerusalem, but Dahlan rebuffed Israeli demands to crack down on terrorism. In addition, no agreement was reached on West Bank cities to be handed over to Palestinian security control.

Israel criticizes resolution

Israel criticized a U.N. resolution praising the Lebanese government's control of its border area with Israel.

Israel's U.N. ambassador, Dan Gillerman, condemned the language in a U.N. Security Council resolution, which was passed on Thursday, that extended the mandate of the U.N. interim force in Lebanon.

The resolution, which "welcomes steps taken by the government of Lebanon to ensure the return of its effective authority throughout the South," does not correspond to reality, Gillerman said.

He noted that the Hezbollah militia completely controls Lebanon's southern border region. Gillerman also singled out Syria, which will head the council in August.

"With one hand Syria votes for the UNIFIL mandate and with the other hand it allows Hezbollah to operate freely in the south of Lebanon," he said to reporters following the resolution's passage.

Hebrew U. marks bombing

Hundreds turned out to memorialize the victims of last year's bombing at Jerusalem's Hebrew University. Two memorial ceremonies were held to mark the one-year anniversary of the bombing, which killed nine and injured 90.

University officials, friends and family gathered at the site of the attack, along with Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupoliansky, U.S. Embassy representative Richard LeBaron and diplomatic officials from the European Union, Turkey, Japan, Italy and Ireland.

Five Americans were killed in the attack, which occurred at the university's Nancy Reagan Plaza on July 31, 2002.

Other memorial ceremonies were held in eight U.S. cities.

Israel's new settlement policy: Move Jews to Arab areas of Galilee

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel is launching a drive to settle Jews in a region awash with Arabs — but its plans are not for the West Bank or Gaza Strip.

For the first time in the history of the World Zionist Organization, the group's settlement department is planning settlements inside the Green Line, the boundary that divides Israel proper from the West Bank. The goal is to build 30 new settlements in the Negev and Galilee.

Both regions have large numbers of Arabs. The agency aims to bolster the Jewish population in the Galilee and Negev by 10 percent within the next five years, part of the ongoing struggle to fortify Israel's Jewish majority.

"For the first time, the WZO returns to the Green Line. This is a significant political statement," Shai Hermesh, treasurer for the Jewish Agency for Israel, told JTA. "If we do not change the entire settlement scene within five to 10 years, we will lose the battle."

As the WZO's partner organization, the Jewish Agency is the driving force behind the plan, which is designed to relieve a sense of isolation among Jewish residents in parts of the Galilee.

Adopted last October by the Jewish Agency's board of trustees, the program is called "The New Challenge: A Zionist Majority in the Negev and Galilee."

A special task force, headed by the incoming chairman of the board of the United Jewish Communities, Robert Goldberg, is charged with working out details of the new settlement drive.

With the exclusion of Haifa and other cities along Israel's northern coast, Arabs comprise 75 percent of northern Israel's population. Hermesh said the settlement drive is the only way to ensure that Israel remains a Jewish state.

In the past, the WZO has served as a kind of subcontractor for the government, building settlements over the Green Line — but with money from the government, not the Jewish Agency.

The new operation will be the largest settlement effort since the establishment of a chain of Jewish outposts throughout the Galilee 25 years ago. At the time, the Galilee was almost exclusively Arab.

This time, the settlement drive also will include the Negev, with special emphasis on single-family farms that will encompass large plots of land. The aim is to offset the rapid growth of the Bedouin population in the area.

Three new Negev settlements — Gvaot-Bar, near the Gaza Strip; Merhav-Am, in the central Negev; and Tzukim, in the Arava — already have been established.

Some Arab leaders, like Knesset member Azmi Bishara, are denouncing the new settlement plan as an indirect way to promote the "transfer" of Arabs out of Israel, Jewish Agency officials said.

The agency has not concealed its aim of tipping the demographic scale in favor of Zionists — not only Jews, but also Druse and Circassian communities in northern Israel.

But agency officials say their mandate is to serve the Jewish people.

"The government of Israel is the government of all its citizens," Hermesh said. "The Jewish Agency is the government of the Jewish people."

For 15 years, Hermesh served as mayor of a regional council in the Negev before taking the Jewish Agency post about a year ago. He now is trying to reverse the agency's decision — taken six years ago — to get out of the settlement business.

The new settlement drive in the Galilee will focus on strengthening the "heart of the Galilee" region — the district of Carmel, Upper Nazareth, Ma'alot, Migdal Ha'emek

MIDEAST FOCUS

Law curbs Palestinian citizenship

The Knesset approved a law preventing Palestinians who marry Israelis from receiving automatic Israeli citizenship. The law, which critics call racist and inhumane, passed Thursday by a vote of 53-25.

The government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon halted "family reunification" requests after an April 2002 bombing by a Palestinian who had obtained an identity card by marrying an Israeli Arab.

Under the law, Israel's interior minister still has the discretion to grant citizenship to Palestinians.

Sharon criticized on Pollard

The wife of convicted spy Jonathan Pollard said Ariel Sharon did not want to secure her husband's release.

In an interview Thursday with the online edition of the Yediot Achronot newspaper, Esther Pollard reacted to news that the Israeli prime minister did not give President Bush a petition calling for Pollard's release.

However, Israeli officials said the petition was not ready in time for Sharon's White House meeting on Tuesday. Instead, they said, it was given to Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Texas), the majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives who visited Israel this week, to give to Bush.

Voice of Peace revived

The Voice of Peace radio station will broadcast again, this time from Ramallah.

The popular radio station, which was launched decades ago by Israeli activist Abie Nathan, was closed several years ago, due to financial difficulties and the illness of its owner and operator.

The radio station, which specialized in popular music, had broadcast from a ship off the Israeli coast. Most of the annual budget of \$500,000 will come from the European Union.



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and Afula — where Arabs constitute 78 percent of the population.

In the Negev, settlement efforts will focus on the "arc," which begins in the northwestern Negev, the seam line with the Gaza Strip, and runs to the Hebron region.

The Jewish Agency is expected to spend \$40 million in each of the project's first two years, and officials hope Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will make good on his promise to provide \$5 for every Jewish Agency dollar. The project is part of Partnership 2000, a Jewish Agency program that links Diaspora Jewish communities with Israeli communities.

The program will focus on building the necessary infrastructure for new settlements and paving new roads in the western Negev.

Environmentalists also oppose the new program, arguing that massive construction projects in the region will cause irreparable damage to the environment. They also fear that a new settlement drive will weaken existing towns and settlements, spur increased use of private cars and require large investments in infrastructure, waste water and energy.

According to the Ministry of Environment, a crowded country like Israel simply cannot afford dispersed settlements like those called for in the Jewish Agency's plans.

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel also announced its objection to the new settlements.

"Whatever open space is left in Israel, they try to put new settlements in," said Yohanan Darom, director of the society's northern branch office.

Darom said there was no justification for the establishment of new settlements while many existing settlements are suffering from social and economic difficulties.

Hermesh disagreed, however.

"The 'Greens' must decide whether they prefer a Jewish majority with the problems of single-family farms, or no such farms with an Arab majority," he said.

To attract Jewish families to Arab regions, the Jewish Agency plans to invest heavily in local educational resources. Already, about \$1 million has been allocated to draw better teachers, enable longer school days, build student dormitories and upgrade regional colleges. "Education and higher education play a special role in influencing the younger population, whether as working persons whose career is greatly affected by their level of education or as parents seeking the best education system for their children," Hermesh said.

Funding also will go toward infrastructure development, bolstering existing settlements and providing incentives for small businesses.

"Small businesses will lead to further business," Hermesh said. □

Swiss police raid the offices of local group linked to Hamas

By Fredy Rom

BERN, Switzerland (JTA) — Swiss police have raided the branch office of a pro-Palestinian organization.

The police recently searched offices and apartments where the organization, known as Pro-PLO, was operating in Schaffhausen, a city 30 miles east of Zurich.

Police arrested several people and confiscated a computer and other materials, said Patric Illi, founder of the group.

A Swiss police spokesman confirmed the investigation, but declined to give further information. A spokesman for the Swiss prosecutor declined to comment on the status of the investigation.

The group supports terror attacks against Israeli civilians and boasts of its close relationship with Hamas leaders.

In a phone interview with JTA from Egypt, Illi said Swiss intelligence agents have been following him and that he has been warned not to travel to the Gaza Strip.

Last week, Illi and one of his associates were prevented from entering Gaza, where they were to meet with Hamas representatives. Israeli officials briefly arrested and interrogated Illi.

Israel's refusal to allow him to enter Gaza was an "American-Jewish terror act," Illi told JTA. □

JEWISH WORLD

Democrats heading to Israel

Almost 30 Democratic members of Congress are traveling to Israel, the largest delegation ever.

Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), the minority whip of the U.S. House of Representatives, is leading the delegation, sponsored by the American Israel Education Foundation, a group affiliated with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

The group will meet with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas. AIEF will bring a group of Republican lawmakers to Israel in August.

Romania to study Holocaust

Romania's president agreed to establish a Holocaust commission and develop a Holocaust program in Romanian schools.

Ion Iliescu told Daniel Mariaschin, executive vice president of B'nai B'rith International, who was traveling in Romania, that the country would take steps to educate the population about the Holocaust, and that he was sending his education minister to Israel to develop a school curriculum. Romania also will create a special day for Holocaust remembrance.

Israel recently chastised Romania after Iliescu said the Holocaust was not unique to Jews and the government denied that the Holocaust occurred in Romania.

Plot to bomb Israeli embassies?

An Australian will stand trial for allegedly plotting to blow up Israeli diplomatic missions in Australia.

Muslim convert Jack Roche, who says he was trained to use explosives by Al-Qaida, was ordered Thursday to be charged with conspiring in 2000 to bomb the Israeli Embassy in Canberra and the consulate in Sydney, according to Agence France-Presse.

ADL opposes anti-Arab bias

The Anti-Defamation League is backing a congressional resolution condemning bigotry against Arab Americans and Muslims.

"In the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the frequency of hate crimes against these groups has increased dramatically and our message must be consistent and clear — no one should be singled out for hatred, prejudice or blame because of his or her ethnicity, national origin or religion," the ADL's national director, Abraham Foxman, wrote in a letter to Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Resolution 234 is awaiting floor consideration in the House after passing the Judiciary Committee last week. The Senate approved a similar measure in May. The resolution also condemns bigotry against Americans of South Asian or Sikh background.

Israeli ambassador returns to Austria as country mends fences with the Jews

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — The iciness that has marked relations between Israel and Austria for the last three and a half years appears to be thawing.

In a move that pleased both Austrian Jews and the Austrian government, Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom announced this week that Jerusalem would return its ambassador to Vienna for the first time since February 2000.

"We welcome the decision," Jewish community president Ariel Muzicant said. "What's good for Israel is good for the Jewish community. Politically speaking, it would even have been better sooner."

Israel recalled its chief envoy in 2000 to protest the inclusion in Austria's coalition government of the far-right Freedom Party.

The party was led by Jorg Haider, a populist notorious for playing on xenophobic fears, and who once praised Hitler's policies.

Fourteen of Austria's fellow European Union members imposed diplomatic sanctions on Vienna, but they lifted the strictures after seven months.

It took Israel nearly three more years to follow suit.

In the interim, Haider stepped down as Freedom Party leader and the party suffered heavy losses in elections late last year.

Shalom announced the decision to return Israel's ambassador to Vienna during a visit to Israel by Austrian Foreign Minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

It was the highest-level visit to the Jewish state by an Austrian official since 1998.

Explaining the decision to resume full relations, Shalom said that over the last three and a half years "Austria has conducted a fair and balanced policy toward Israel, while reiterating its condemnation of terrorism against innocent people and its support for the peace efforts in our region."

Ferrero-Waldner also had attempted to improve relations between Israel and the European Union, Shalom said.

During her meeting with Shalom, Ferrero-Waldner — who is from the Freedom Party — emphasized that Austria accepted its responsibility for Nazi crimes during the Holocaust and pledged to fight anti-Semitism.

"My country attaches great importance to relations with Israel and welcomes the restoration of normalcy to our diplomatic relations," she said.

Shalom stressed that Israel "will continue to follow events in Austria and elsewhere, and will maintain its policy of shunning politicians of any political party who espouse anti-Semitic positions or ideas."

He said, "As the cradle and home of the Jewish people, the State of Israel has the moral obligation to fight any manifestations of anti-Semitism, wherever they may appear."

These days, even Haider, governor of the province of Carinthia, has been taking pains to demonstrate sympathy for Jews and Jewish causes — possibly to change his image ahead of a new drive to re-enter national politics.

He recently attempted to reassume the position of Freedom Party leader.

In early July, he hosted a group of Carinthian-born Israelis who fled Nazi persecution.

"This country is not indifferent to the fate of its Jewish citizens, even decades later," Haider told the visitors, the Austrian Press Agency reported. Haider was quoted as saying that Austria was working to confront "the dark history of national Socialism and the persecution of Jews."

An editorial in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz echoed Shalom's words of caution and urged vigilance.

"Israel, which is trying to take advantage of the new atmosphere generated by the road map to improve its relationship with the European Union, decided that it could no longer ignore the developments in Austria and the world," the editorialists wrote.

"That does not mean that Israel is ignoring the specter of Haider, who continues to threaten the integrity of the Austrian government," they wrote. □

Violence and uncertainty impel wealthy Jews to leave Colombia

By Larry Luxner

MEDELLIN, Colombia (JTA) — It's 7:15 on a Friday morning at Congregacion Bet-Or in Medellin, a city known more for drug-smuggling than praying.

The Jews of Latin America Part of a Series

Yet davening is exactly what 12 Jewish men, mostly in their 60s and 70s, are doing here in this Orthodox synagogue tucked away in an upscale residential area next to the Banco Union Colombiano.

During the Amidah, or silent prayer, the sounds filtering into the empty synagogue become apparent: birds chirping, a dog barking from an apartment balcony, early-morning traffic whizzing by on nearby Avenida Poblada.

The few elderly worshippers seem as much a fixture in this building as the potted palms around the pulpit, or the beautiful stained-glass windows representing the 12 tribes of Israel.

Medellin, a city of 3 million inhabitants, boasted 1,000 Jews less than 20 years ago — but today the city has only 360.

"The richest ones have already left for Miami or Israel. The rest of us have stayed here," said Moises Milwer, a retired real-estate developer whose father moved here in 1933 from Russia. For years, Milwer has led religious services at Bet-Or; most days, he's lucky to get the 10 men needed for a minyan.

Things aren't much better at the Comunidad Hebrea Sefaradi de Bogota, whose members are mostly of Syrian, Turkish and Moroccan origin. "Two hundred families from our shul have left the country in the last few years because of the situation. This is very sad for the community," Rabbi Shlomo Meir Elharar said. "Before, on Yom Kippur, we had to add chairs because there wasn't enough room for everybody."

The reason for the Jewish exodus is obvious: a rash of kidnappings and murders that has made Colombia, with 41 million people, one of the most violent nations on earth.

Today only 4,200 Jews live in Colombia, about 60 percent of them in Bogota, the capital. The remaining 40 percent live in Cali and Barranquilla, with smaller numbers in Medellin and the island of San Andres. How that compares with years past depends on whom you ask.

Abraham Menashe Fefer, president of the Centro Israelita de Bogota, said that at the community's peak in the 1970s, some 12,000 Jews lived in Colombia.

Alfredo Goldschmidt, chief rabbi of that same congregation and director of the Colegio Colombo-Hebreo, insisted there were never more than 7,200 Jews in the country. Yet the recent election of President Alvaro Uribe — a pro-American politician who has taken a hard line against guerrillas and common criminals — may induce some emigre Colombian Jews to return.

"At this moment, there's a trickle of people returning," said Rabbi Yehoshua Rosenfeld, director of Lubavitch Colombia. "There's a feeling of stability with President Uribe, and it's not that easy economically in the U.S. Once upon a time, running to the States was a solution to all your problems. Today, people realize that's not a solution." Even so, it's clear that Colombia's Jewish

community has shrunk substantially in recent years, with many people making new lives in South Florida, Israel or Costa Rica.

"Most people have left precisely because of the uncertainty, economic instability and kidnappings," said Fefer, noting that 10 to 20 Jews were kidnapped by left-wing or right-wing guerrilla groups in the last two decades.

One of them, Peter Lewinsky, was killed by his captors in the 1980s; another one, Benjamin Khoudari, was murdered in 1998.

"I'm an optimist. I don't agree with the Jewish exodus," Fefer said.

"I think that yes, we have problems, but that we'll solve them in the long term.

"Opinion within the community is divided," he continued. "Some people think like me; others think we're crazy for staying here. But I'm very proud to be Colombian, and I'm very proud to be Jewish."

Goldschmidt, 57, an Argentine rabbi who has lived in Colombia for the last 26 years, said Bogota has three large communities: the Ashkenazi, with 500 affiliated families; the Sephardi, with 260; and the German, with 250.

"Each community has its own synagogue, cemetery and cultural life, even though we get along well with each other," said Goldschmidt, noting that around 20 percent of the country's Jewish population has left in the last three years alone.

"In a lot of cases, the man stays here but sends his wife and kids overseas," he said.

"In Israel, the main concentration is in Ra'anana, where in 1998 they celebrated the 50th anniversary of our school, and 200 alumni showed up."

The Colegio Colombo-Hebreo, located in northern Bogota, has 310 students, down from 570 in the early 1970s.

About 70 percent of Jews here can be considered upper middle-class, while 10 percent are "very rich" and the rest are poorer.

"Yet even the lower-class Jew here lives better than the average middle-class Colombian," Goldschmidt said.

Despite the emigration, Bogota alone has six rabbis, an astonishing number considering the tiny Jewish population.

The intermarriage rate is 10 percent, said Goldschmidt, and in those cases, the non-Jewish spouse nearly always converts to Judaism.

Bogota has four synagogues, Cali two, Barranquilla two and Medellin one.

In addition, Bogota's 70-year-old Cementerio Hebreo de Bosa has 800 graves and is considered a national monument.

"I think the emigration will continue," Goldschmidt said. "On the other hand, the positive side of emigration is that those who stay participate much more, and there are less internal divisions. There used to be divisions between rich and poor."

One bright spot in an otherwise bleak picture is the Casa Lubavitch, a five-story building in northern Bogota built in 1999 with funds from wealthy Colombian Jews now living in Miami.

A second Casa Lubavitch now serves the Jews of Barranquilla.

"We run a little preschool with 30 or 40 kids, but there's no davening here as a matter of principle," he said. "We don't want to compete with the community. We do have big Shabbatons, couples' nights and university nights on Tuesday. We want to give young Jews a chance to know their heritage in a home-like atmosphere, without preaching." □