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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Loan guarantees safe — for now

The Bush administration will not deduct, for now, the cost of Israeli settlements from U.S. loan guarantees to Israel.

The State Department was expected to notify Congress on Tuesday of the amount it would deduct from the loan guarantees because of Israeli spending on Jewish settlements and towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

But a State Department official told JTA that the Sept. 30 deadline in the law was for a report to Congress, not for a determination of the deduction.

The memo, which is likely to reach Congress on Tuesday evening, will say that the Bush administration has not yet reached a figure for the deduction.

The administration earlier announced that it would not deduct the cost of Israel's security fence from the guarantees.

Russia ends 'fowl' policy

Trade restrictions imposed on Russia because of the treatment of Jewish dissidents during the Soviet era may be lifted.

Russia has agreed to ease quotas on poultry imports from the United States, which increases the chance that Congress will lift the 1974 Jackson-Vanik trade restrictions on Russia.

Many Jewish leaders want the restrictions eased to acknowledge that Russia has loosened emigration restrictions.

U.N. report blasts Israel

Israel's security fence in the West Bank is an act of conquest, according to a U.N. investigator.

The official, John Dugard, said in a U.N. report released Tuesday that the international community should condemn the fence, which he called a *de facto* annexation.

Ariel Milo, the communications director of Israel's Mission to the United Nations, sharply criticized Dugard's report.

"This report is another example of how the United Nations, instead of dealing with the fundamental problem of the region, which is the terrorism perpetrated by the Palestinians, chooses to pick on Israel, which it sees as an easy target in light of the clear anti-Israel majority at the United Nations General Assembly," he said.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jewish soldiers in Iraq celebrate holidays in Saddam's former palace

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — When Rabbi Mitchell Ackerson blew the shofar this past Rosh Hashanah, it reverberated throughout one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces.

More than 100 Jewish members of the U.S. forces stationed in Iraq attended the High Holiday services at the former Iraqi dictator's Baghdad compound.

They seemed shocked and awed, not least by the echo.

"It was a 25-foot ceiling, so it really goes," Ackerson said, describing the shofar's blast in a telephone interview from Baghdad on Monday.

Many of the young Jews also "kept looking at all the marble, the gold, the fancy chairs," the rabbi said. "It was rather magnificent."

Then under a late afternoon sun, the group performed the customary Tashlich ceremony outside the palace, casting pieces of bread representing sins into a private lake once owned by the Iraqi dictator's sons, Uday and Qusay.

"It was a gorgeous setting," said Ackerson, who is from Baltimore. "It tells me we can actually put these places to good use."

For Jews serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the High Holidays began on a sweetly ironic note: They made history by celebrating a new year in unusually elegant fashion, in the heart of Saddam's turf, which now serves as a U.S. military base.

As the senior rabbinic chaplain for the U.S. operation in Iraq, Ackerson said he wanted this High Holiday season to start with a spiritual bang for the estimated 500 Jews among the 130,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and Kuwait.

It seems to have worked.

"One sergeant told me it was the most meaningful Rosh Hashanah he's had in 20 years," Ackerson said of the palace services.

There were also services for Jewish service personnel in Tikrit, which drew some 50 people, and two services in Kuwait, where U.S. forces also are stationed.

American donors enhanced the holiday celebrations for the Jews serving in the Gulf.

Four American synagogues — three from New York, one from Maryland — donated four Torah scrolls, each insured for \$10,000, for the holiday events, which will include Yom Kippur and Sukkot services.

The Torahs capped a months-long civilian grass-roots effort dubbed "Operation Apples and Honey" by the Jewish Educators Network of New York.

The group also sent 1,200 kosher dinners and 800 bagel-and-lox lunches to the troops to complement their usual ready-to-eat meals, along with prayer books, books on Judaism and ritual objects such as kiddush cups.

Meredith Weiss, president of the Jewish Educators Network, said she decided to organize the aid effort after corresponding by e-mail with a Jewish Marine and was shocked to discover how many Jews serve in the U.S. armed forces.

"I decided that we need to take care of them," said Weiss, of Nanuet, N.Y.

Armed with the blessings of the Jewish Welfare Board's Jewish Chaplains Council, which oversees the military's rabbinic chaplaincy, Weiss began corresponding with Jewish troops, chaplains, U.S. pulpit rabbis and others.

One key request kept surfacing: real Torahs rather than the standard-issue paper version.

"We had real sifrei Torah to use, and that had a tremendous impact on the soldiers," Ackerson said. "Many had never seen a real Torah scroll — and they couldn't believe

MIDEAST FOCUS

Jewish extremists sentenced

Three Israeli Jewish extremists were sentenced to between 12 and 15 years in jail. The three men sentenced Tuesday were found guilty of attempting to set off a bomb at an Arab girls school in eastern Jerusalem in April 2002.

Sharon weighs in on strike

Israel's prime minister called on workers at Israeli ports to return to their jobs.

Ariel Sharon's call came Tuesday as a public sector strike threatened to paralyze the country. The action was declared to protest cuts in the 2004 budget. Government ministries have suspended services and customs officials at Ben-Gurion Airport are causing massive backlogs by insisting on checking the baggage of all arriving passengers.

Left-wing group targets IAF

Conscientious objectors want a probe of the Israel Air Force's killing of a top Palestinian terrorist.

The Yesh Gvul group, backed by several Israeli intellectuals, petitioned the High Court of Justice on Tuesday to order Israeli Air Force chief Maj. Gen. Dan Halutz investigated for the July 2002 strike in Gaza that killed Hamas mastermind Salah Shehada, his lieutenant and 14 civilians.

Temple Mount wall collapses

Part of a wall of Jerusalem's Temple Mount has collapsed, exposing dirt and fill in an area above the Western Wall.

The wall, which is part of the Islamic Museum on the Temple Mount, collapsed last week, an Israeli radio station reported.

Archaeologist Eilat Mazar said the collapse results from illegal construction being carried out on the Temple Mount by the Muslim Wakf, or religious trust, which administers the area.



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people would ship Torahs to Iraq for them to use."

After the Baghdad service, Ackerson said one soldier "asked me to send a note to his mother, saying he went to Baghdad for Rosh Hashanah — and he had an aliyah," the honor of being called up to recite the blessing before the Torah reading.

Rabbi Jacob Goldstein, chief chaplain of the New York National Guard, carried one of the Torahs along with Sukkot supplies with him to Kuwait, where he led services at Central Command in Doha, Qatar. Other military chaplains leading services during the High Holidays include Rabbis Carlos Huerta, a former West Point chaplain, and David Goldstrom, based in Fort Hood, Texas.

Others pitched in. A Chabad center in Millburn, N.J., donated candlesticks and Stars of David chains. Children from an Orthodox synagogue in Palm Beach, Fla., sent cards and Sukkah decorations. "No one said no to me," Weiss said.

Maj. David Rosner, a U.S. Marine who served in the first Gulf War in addition to the current conflict, said Jewish troops deeply appreciate such efforts.

Rosner, whose tour of duty ended in time for him to make it home for Rosh Hashanah, remembers attending Passover seders in Kuwait in April, which featured "the bare minimum of supplies: matzah, gefilte fish, and tuna fish."

He called Weiss "a mitzvah meidele."

When the Jewish troops weren't attending discussion groups and reading books such as "The Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Survival Kit," Ackerson said they slept relatively comfortably in Saddam's former house.

But not all Jewish armed personnel made it to the holiday services.

One Jewish GI who had planned to attend the Baghdad service on Rosh Hashanah was Spc. Matthew Boyer, 24, a member of the field artillery unit of the Army's 101st Airborne Division, 3rd Brigade, which is guarding oil fields north of the city.

But Boyer — who participated in the mission that hunted down Uday and Qusay — was called to a special mission instead. During that mission, a friend was fatally shot in the neck. "Other than give him CPR and try to save him, there was nothing he could do," his mother, Judy Ledger of Atlanta, told JTA. "He's pretty distraught."

Ledger said her son, who managed to attend a recent Shabbat service by hitching a helicopter ride from his position, was unable to divulge many details of the raid on Saddam's sons.

"He was driving a Humvee, trying to duck low, with attack helicopters overhead and shooting all over the place," she said. "He said he was never so terrified in his life."

Other Jewish servicemen were able to come home, at least briefly, for the High Holidays. Kayitz Finley, 21, a marine corporal from Los Angeles, is at home on 30 days' leave.

The son of ex-Marine Rabbi Mordecai Finley of Congregation Ohr HaTorah in Los Angeles, the young Finley said he has encountered all kinds of hostilities in Iraq.

In his first of many firefights during the war, Finley recalled lying in a ditch and watching a rocket-propelled grenade fly over his head "so close you could see the engravings on it. But I wiped away all the fear, picked up my rifle and just went to work."

After the war, Finley was stationed in Hilal, 40 miles south of Baghdad, where he helped train police, repair basic services and visit schools.

Generally Iraqis welcomed the U.S. forces, he said, and he made a point of telling many of them he was a Jew who "put my life on the line to free their country."

Typically, he said, that declaration met a "sour" reception, with many Iraqis blanching and walking away or asking him to leave a house where he had been welcomed moments before.

Finley, who last April had held an impromptu seder in the former Iraqi secret police headquarters in Baghdad, said he asked one 35-year-old school teacher how he felt about Jews before divulging his identity. The teacher told him that the Koran taught him to kill Jews.

"So I showed him my dog tags," which identified him as Jewish, "and said, 'Here's my knife, do your mission, kill me!' I was ready," Finley said, "but he couldn't."

Finley told the teacher that life is too short for such bigotry, before the man walked away. The teacher returned the next day, Finley said, and told the Jewish soldier "life's too short to hate."

"I felt at least I could change one life," Finley said. "It was ironic, you know?" □

JEWISH WORLD

Israeli elected to U.N. committee

An Israeli was named to serve on a U.N. legal committee.

Tal Becker's election this week to the General Assembly's Sixth Committee, which deals with legal affairs, marks the first time in more than 40 years that an Israeli has been elected to such a post in the U.N. system.

Becker's election was made possible by Israel's membership in the Western European and Others Group at the United Nations, membership that was won after a long struggle.

Le Pen campaign protested

Jews are protesting after far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen set up campaign headquarters in their Marseille apartment block.

According to a report in last Friday's edition of the Jewish weekly *Actualite Juive*, the families — which include the brother of France's chief rabbi — were taken by surprise when Le Pen chose their block as the headquarters for his campaign for the presidency of the Provence-Alpes Cote d'Azur region in next March's regional elections.

East German assets ID'd

The Claims Conference published a list of Jewish property owners from the former East Germany.

The Claims Conference published a list of 59,198 Jews entitled to file claims for property in the former East Germany.

Heirs may also file claims at the www.daimskon.org Web site.

The original deadline to claim property expired in December 1992, but these claims could be covered under a Goodwill Fund for later requests.

The new deadline is March 31, 2004, but the Claims Conference warned that "only a small minority" likely will be approved by German officials.

U.S. asks to revoke citizenship

The Justice Department is asking a judge to revoke the citizenship of a former Nazi concentration camp guard living in Wisconsin.

The department's Office of Special Investigations says Josias Kumpf, 78, served as a guard at Sachsenhausen near Berlin during the early years of World War II.

He later was transferred to Trawniki in Nazi-occupied Poland.

In a complaint filed Tuesday, the government alleges that Kumpf entered the United States in 1956 after lying about his past and became a citizen eight years later.

He admitted his role at Trawniki to Justice Department officials earlier this year.

The president discusses his faith at New Year meeting with rabbis

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Bush marked the Jewish New Year by telling a roomful of rabbis about his faith and how it helped make him a better man.

Some 15 rabbis representing the three main denominations spent an hour at the White House on Monday discussing a range of topics, including Iraq, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, poverty and faith-based initiatives.

Rabbi Steven Pruzanski of Teaneck, N.J., said Bush twice became emotional: while discussing his recent trip to the site of the Auschwitz death camp and when he talked about how people pray for him.

Bush spoke openly about his former drinking problem, telling the rabbis that faith played a role in his quitting. He made the remarks in a discussion about faith-based initiatives. Some of the rabbis described the president as warm and engaging and said he had a firm grasp on the issues. "I was so impressed by the candor of the president," said Rabbi Irving Elson, a chaplain and commander in the U.S. Navy. "He exuded confidence in his love of America."

Elson said he told Bush that Jewish servicemen support his efforts in Iraq. "The message I was asked to bring was 'Stay the course,'" he said.

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, of Falls Church, Va., said she was disappointed that more of the participants did not challenge Bush on some of his policies, although she said she was grateful for the opportunity to meet with the president.

"I did feel I was sitting with a group who was supportive of the president, who came to praise the president and not to challenge him," she said.

Schwartzman talked with the president about the recently announced increase in poverty in the United States, saying the rising numbers were of great concern to Jews. When Bush said new jobs would help alleviate poverty, Schwartzman countered that affordable childcare was also needed to allow more working parents to pursue jobs.

"We had a dialogue," she said.

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, of Farmington Hills, Mich., said he did not feel it was his place to debate the president.

Bush told the rabbis that a new Palestinian leadership would be judged on the "simple formula" of its ability to dismantle terrorist organizations and fight terrorism. Until then, he said, "everything's on hold."

The president reportedly made no mention of the "road map" peace plan, which he has pushed for more than a year and which was co-authored by the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia.

Bush also said he supported the security fence Israel is erecting in the West Bank, which the Palestinians have called a land grab. But he said the fence's route should not preclude later territorial negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Two rabbis broached the subject of Jonathan Pollard, a former U.S. Navy intelligence analyst who is serving a life sentence for spying on behalf of Israel. Bush said he would look into Pollard's case, but offered no comment about the chances of him receiving a presidential reprieve.

The White House sought out various pulpit rabbis for the event, instead of leaders of Jewish organizations. The rabbinical organizations were asked to submit names, and the White House selected some participants.

Nevins said Bush was straightforward. "He didn't pander," he said. □

Israel population over 6.7 million

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's population has grown by 1.8 percent since last Rosh Hashanah. Some 6.7 million people live in Israel, of whom 5.1 million are Jews, according to the Israeli government.

Some 27,000 new immigrants arrived in Israel during 5763, a drop of 7,000 from the previous year. More than 50 percent of those immigrants came from the former Soviet Union. □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Shoah insurance funds are slow to come, but is there a choice?

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Survivors are suing the commission on Nazi-era insurance claims, a commissioner has called for the resignation of its chief and Jewish officials handling the claims acknowledge serious problems.

But they also say there probably isn't a better way to dole out the claims.

The anger and frustration some lawmakers and survivors feel toward the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims peaked last week when several survivors filed suit, claiming the organization was delaying payments.

California's insurance commissioner, John Garamendi, a member of the commission, later joined the suit and called for the resignation of the commission's chairman, former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger.

Survivors Jack Brauns, Manny Steinberg and Si Frumkin, all Los Angeles area residents, charged that the ICHEIC improperly delayed or denied payments totaling more than \$1 billion on policies held by the survivors or heirs of those who perished under Nazi rule.

"This is a commission that is supposed to help survivors," said William Shernoff, the plaintiffs' lawyer. "But from what we see, they are helping the insurance companies more than survivors."

They also are seeking Eagleburger's resignation, saying his salary — which they estimate at over \$300,000 — is paid for by the insurance companies. The plaintiffs believe Eagleburger is working in the insurance companies' interests.

"This is blood money stolen from survivors," said Frumkin, chair of the Southern California Council for Soviet Jewry.

For his part, Eagleburger says he has no intention of resigning. His aide, Anais Haase, told JTA that time and resources planned for investigating claims would be diverted to defending against the lawsuit if the survivors persist in fighting them.

"We don't believe we are mistreating survivors or their heirs," Haase said. "We offer the only option available at no cost to survivors and their heirs."

The plaintiffs are asking the ICHEIC to place more pressure on Italian insurance company Assicurazioni Generali to divulge more unpaid life insurance policies.

The ICHEIC has published 9,000 names of Generali policyholders, but the claimants suggest the list could exceed 100,000 policies.

Shernoff said Holocaust survivors and their heirs should also maintain the right to use litigation to gain money owed them, rather than working through the ICHEIC.

The suit was filed under California's Unfair Business Practices statute, but it's unclear whether the ICHEIC can legally be defined as a business.

A Generali official in New York called the lawsuit baseless and misleading, saying that thousands of claimants "have and will continue to be paid and offered generous amounts through ICHEIC, which is supported by leading Jewish Holocaust restitution organizations and the State of Israel."

Stuart Eizenstat, a special representative for Holocaust issues

in the Clinton administration, said the lawsuits could wreck the ICHEIC system if the suit nullifies the agreements the commission has reached with the insurance agencies.

"It continues to cast a cloud of debate over the exercise," he said. "It diverts energy and attention from filling claims."

Eizenstat said he appreciates that the suit is an expression of frustration over the slow process of paying claims.

But he and others contend that the insurance companies, not the ICHEIC, have made the process more difficult by withholding names.

Israel Singer, the chairman of the World Jewish Congress, agreed.

"There is no bad faith here," he said of the ICHEIC. "There is bad information after 50 years."

Singer acknowledged that the organization has had trouble completing its mission.

"ICHEIC has a mammoth task, and it's bigger than we ever thought it was going to be," Singer said. "We couldn't have known it at the time."

He suggested an ombudsman might be able to bridge the gap between the ICHEIC and the Holocaust survivors.

The ICHEIC, founded in 1998 by the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, has had some problems in the past two years.

Eagleburger threatened to resign last year after difficulty securing cooperation from German insurance companies.

Congressional representatives and others also have chastised Eagleburger and the commission for its slow progress, especially considering the dwindling number of Holocaust survivors.

The ICHEIC also has been criticized for spending \$56 million in five years, and Eizenstat agreed that the organization cannot be considered a model of efficiency.

But both Eizenstat and Singer defended Eagleburger.

"Larry has earned every nickel and then some," Eizenstat said. "He's had to undergo hell to bring the parties together."

California Gov. Gray Davis issued a statement Saturday accusing the ICHEIC of "not meeting its mission."

"The system does not work, claims are not being investigated and survivors are not being paid," Davis said in the statement. □

(JTA correspondents Edwin Black and Tom Tugend contributed to this report from Los Angeles.)

Bereaved father drives for peace

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli man whose son was killed in a terrorist attack is marching for peace.

Amiram Goldin, whose son Omri was killed in an August 2002 bus bombing in northern Israel, is leading a peace march of vehicles from the site of the attack to Jerusalem.

Goldin is calling on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to stop Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Goldin is being accompanied by other parents whose children have been killed during the three years of the Palestinian intifada, including the father of an Israeli Arab killed during October 2000 riots.

But another family whose son was killed in the same bombing criticized Goldin and tore down posters advertising the event.

The procession is expected to arrive at Jerusalem's Mount Herzl on Wednesday evening. □