



Daily News Bulletin

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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.N. to debate fence

Arab countries called an emergency session of the U.N. General Assembly for next Monday to make demands on Israel. Arab states seeking to stop Israel from building its security barrier plan to propose a resolution to condemn the Jewish state for not complying with a resolution adopted last month calling on Israel to dismantle its West Bank security fence.

The new resolution also will call on the International Court of Justice in The Hague to assess the fence's legality, according to Arye Mekel, deputy permanent representative of Israel to the United Nations. Mekel said Israel is "working very actively on the highest levels," especially with European states, to urge countries to vote against the resolution or pressure the Palestinians to remove the Hague portion.

"It will introduce a new element into the Middle Eastern equation, namely the ICJ, which would only make it more difficult to make any progress in the peace process," Mekel said.

Colorado voucher program nixed

A Colorado school-voucher program was declared unconstitutional. A District Court judge in Denver ruled Wednesday that the program illegally strips local school boards of control.

The Colorado program was the first new program involving school vouchers since the Supreme Court declared last year that vouchers do not violate the constitutional separation of church and state.

School vouchers provide government funds for students to attend parochial or private schools. Liberal Jewish groups are opposed to vouchers but Orthodox groups favor their use.

Bush, Abdullah to meet

King Abdullah II of Jordan will discuss Israeli-Palestinian peace with President Bush. The Jordanian king is in the United States on a private visit and will meet the president on Thursday. He and Bush also will discuss developments in Iraq.

Israeli alert lifted

Israel lifted a high terrorist alert Wednesday after it said it foiled a suicide bombing. Israeli officials said they arrested two Palestinians at a West Bank mosque, one wearing an explosives belt, who were planning to attack a school in northern Israel.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Advocates for missing Iranians decide to go public with struggle

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — After years of low-profile pressure led nowhere, families and advocates of 11 missing Iranian Jews went public with criticism of Iran.

The 11, including several teenagers, reportedly disappeared in separate groups from 1994 to 1997 while trying to flee illegally over the Iran-Pakistan border.

"The families have lost patience, and we've lost hope that those responsible elements in Iran will release these prisoners voluntarily," said Sam Kermanian, secretary-general of the Iranian American Jewish Federation. "We are therefore in need of international support."

Kermanian said his Los Angeles-based group would try to build a coalition that would include other Jewish organizations, human-rights watchdogs, the United Nations and foreign governments to exert pressure on Iran's ruling mullahs.

According to the Iranian American Jewish Federation's latest information, Kermanian said, the 11 men were spotted alive earlier this year in a Tehran prison.

Iran's representation in the United States, the Iranian Mission to the United Nations, did not return a call seeking comment.

The missing Jews have been identified as Babak Shaoulin Tehrani, who would now be 28, and Shaheen Nikkhou, 29, both of Tehran, who left together and went missing along with their Muslim smuggler, Atat Mohamad Rigi, in May 1994.

Behzad Salary, 30, and Farhad Ezzati, 31, both of Kermanshah, traveled together and disappeared Sept. 21, 1994.

Homayoon Balazadeh, 45, Omid Solouki, 24, and brothers Reuben and Ebrahim Kohen-Masliikh, 26 and 25 respectively, all of Shiraz, disappeared Dec. 8, 1994.

Nourollah Rabizadeh-Felfeli, age unknown, and brothers Cyrus and Ebrahim Ghahramani, 64 and 66 respectively, also of Kermanshah, went missing Feb. 12, 1997.

A 12th Jew, Eshagh Hassid, 66, of Hamadan, last spoke with his sister in February 1997 and reportedly indicated he would try to leave the country. His fate is unclear, however, and he hasn't been included among the list of those missing.

Flight across Iran's southeastern border with Pakistan is common and was even more so during the mid-1990s, when emigration rules were more stringent, Kermanian said.

"Everybody chooses this route for different reasons, but thousands of Jews and millions of non-Jews have left Iran through these means," he said.

The restrictions on Jews in Iran were particularly tough during the mid-1990s. For example, entire families were forbidden to emigrate; at least one member had to remain behind.

Emigration restrictions have been eased somewhat since then.

That reportedly was the case with the Tehrani family. Most of the family was given permission to leave and, with two younger children to consider, the parents decided that their 19-year-old son, Babak, would remain in Iran as the token family member.

It was only when the family arrived in Vienna for the processing of their U.S. visas that they learned that Babak had disappeared while fleeing on his own, Kermanian said.

Some have suggested that Iran wants at least some Jews to remain in the country as "virtual hostages" to deter any potential attack from Israel. Others say they fear a wholesale Jewish exodus would damage Iran's image.

Indeed, whenever Iran's human rights record is criticized, as in a recent

MIDEAST FOCUS

Jerusalem construction stirs pot

Israeli riot police scuffled with activists trying to block construction of a new Jewish neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem.

At least one man was injured Wednesday as Israeli and Palestinian protesters from Peace Now tried to block a bulldozer that was working on the site, known as Nof Zahav.

Construction of the neighborhood began earlier this week and will include 550 homes, a hotel, a school, a preschool and a synagogue.

Save your popcorn

Israel's highest court blocked screenings of a controversial film on Israel's April 2002 invasion of the Jenin refugee camp. The High Court of Justice injunction prevents "Jenin, Jenin" from being shown in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem this week.

The court previously had ruled in favor of director Mohammed Bakri's appeal that a ban on the documentary-style film violated free-speech rights, but the decision against screening the film came after new appeals were made against it.

A U.N. investigation determined that no massacre took place in Jenin and found no evidence to support charges sounded in Bakri's film, including one that the Israeli army dug a mass grave in the camp.

Israeli army detains 30 Arabs

The Israeli army detained 30 wanted Palestinians. Seventeen of those detained Tuesday night were members of Islamic Jihad.

Israel, P.A. to share energy?

Israel and the Palestinian Authority signed an energy cooperation agreement. In a rare act of cooperation, Israel and the Palestinian Authority signed an Italian-sponsored declaration Tuesday to share electrical networks, Ha'aretz reported.



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Canadian-sponsored resolution proposed at the United Nations, Iranian officials counter by noting that several of the country's main minority groups — Armenians, Assyrians, Zoroastrians and Jews — have elected representatives in Parliament.

Nevertheless, since Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, the Jewish community has dwindled to between 20,000 to 25,000, down from 100,000 in 1979.

"This would be the first government in Persia in 2,500 years to make the country devoid of Jews, and that would not reflect well on the regime," Kermanian said.

In the first few years after the men disappeared, advocates hoped Iran's new president, Mohammed Khatami, would prove to be as moderate as he portrayed himself.

But the moderation — especially vis-a-vis the Jews — never materialized, they say.

The first public word of the 11 came in September 2000, when Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, broached the subject with Mehdi Kharroubi, speaker of Iran's Parliament. Kharroubi, who was visiting New York, reportedly said he'd look into it.

But that contact came amid more intense, public lobbying efforts to win the release of 10 of the original "Iran 13" — Jews jailed in 1999 on charges of spying for Israel. Since then, little has been heard publicly about the missing 11.

That changed a month ago, when the mother of Shaheen Nikkhou held a highly publicized meeting in Tehran with Ambeyi Ligabo, the U.N. special rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression.

Ligabo's visit, said to be the first to Iran by a U.N. human rights envoy in seven years, focused mostly on the detention of numerous political dissidents. Ligabo's public criticism of Iranian policy since then has included no mention of the missing Jews.

Once Nikkhou's mother went forward and the Iranian media seized on it, advocates in the United States say they decided to take their activism public.

"The families made the decision that they feel they have nothing left to lose, and I agree," said Hoenlein, who was expected to deliver a letter to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan on behalf of the missing Jews this week. "After nine years with little progress, we still haven't been able to even verify if they're alive or in prison."

Kermanian defended his decision to work until now behind the scenes.

"There is no doubt that had we gone public before having sufficient evidence, the first reaction by those holding them, out of fear they would be held responsible internally, might be to get rid of 'evidence' — killing the prisoners and getting rid of their bodies," Kermanian said. "They've done that before, where the bodies of reporters, political dissidents and others surfaced months later."

At this point, Kermanian said, activists have heard multiple eyewitness accounts from those who saw the missing men in Zahedan, the city where they reportedly were first detained, then in prison in Tehran. Those reports have been corroborated by Iranian judiciary and intelligence sources, he said.

The plan now is to ramp up public pressure, Hoenlein said, though few seem optimistic about their fate.

"These sightings always give some hope," Hoenlein said. "But we don't know if they're real, or deliberate misinformation by those who have ulterior motives." □

French comedy off-color

PARIS (JTA) — A leading French comic performed a controversial sketch on prime-time television.

Dieudonne, a comedian of African origin well-known for provocative performances, appeared dressed as a fervently-Orthodox Jew on a live broadcast Monday evening of "You can't please everybody," a popular weekly talk show broadcast on the publicly-owned France 3 channel. Speaking in the voice of his one-time comic partner Elie Semoun, who is Jewish, Dieudonne declared himself "a Zionist fundamentalist" before telling the audience that he had "not converted to Judaism for political reasons, but for professional reasons, if you see what I mean" — a reference to the widespread belief that Jews control the entertainment industry.

Apart from a comment from the show's presenter, Marc-Olivier Fogiel, that "It's Dieudonne with all his excesses," no other guests reacted to the sketch in a negative light. The sketch was cut from a rerun of the show Tuesday night, however. □

JEWISH WORLD

Settlement in reburial case

The largest funeral company in the United States settled a class-action lawsuit brought by Jewish families in Florida.

Service Corporation International agreed to pay \$100 million to Jewish families in Broward County in a lawsuit that included accusations that Jewish bodies were dug up and reburied.

The settlement still needs to be approved by a judge. A similar lawsuit in Palm Beach County is pending.

Baker or Clinton redux?

Sen. John Kerry said he would appoint an envoy for the Middle East peace process if elected president.

The Democratic presidential candidate said Wednesday that former U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter and former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker are among those he would consider for the post.

French committee addresses hate

French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin announced the creation of a Cabinet committee to address racism and anti-Semitism.

Raffarin will chair the committee, which also will include top ministers and a representative from President Jacques Chirac's office.

The creation of the committee is one of a series of measures promised by Chirac following a suspected arson attack on a Jewish school near Paris last month, which Jewish officials said was an act of anti-Semitism.

Blair blasts anti-Semitism

British prime minister Tony Blair condemned anti-Semitism and called on Muslim leaders to do the same.

"We have just got to make it absolutely clear there will be no toleration" of attacks on synagogues, Blair said in his monthly news conference Tuesday. "We are proud in this country to have a strong Jewish community, as well as a strong Muslim community, and I am quite sure that certainly all the Muslim leaders I speak to condemn these attacks fiercely and believe that they represent absolutely nothing to do with the true spirit of Islam."

Ithaca goes pro-Israel

A city in upstate New York is calling for an end to terrorism and a permanent Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire.

The proclamation by the city of Ithaca, slated to be presented by the city's mayor Wednesday night, makes Ithaca the 19th U.S. city to pass such a resolution. The resolution also expresses sympathy for Israeli victims of terrorism.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Adoption issue new battleground for divisive 'Who is a Jew' debate

By Dina Kraft

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli government has 45 days to respond to a court challenge by the Reform movement questioning a policy that gives Orthodox families the exclusive right among Jews to adopt non-Jewish children born in Israel.

In the latest battleground in the emotionally charged Israeli debate over who is a Jew, the Reform movement says the policy discriminates against non-Orthodox families.

"This is about maintaining the monopoly of Orthodox conversion in Israel," said Rabbi Uri Regev, executive director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and one of the lawyers who submitted the petition to the Israel's Supreme Court.

The questioning by Israel's religious establishment of Reform and Conservative Jews' legitimacy has caused a rift between Diaspora Jews — many of whom belong to the more liberal streams of Judaism — and Israel's fervently Orthodox community, which dominates religious life in the Jewish state.

At a court hearing Wednesday, a panel of judges led by Chief Justice Aharon Barak said the government must explain the policy of the state's child welfare office.

A small number of non-Jewish children are adopted every year by Jewish families in Israel — 16 last year, the state said in its submissions to the court.

Most Israelis who adopt children do so overseas, a process that can cost tens of thousands of dollars. In contrast, adoptions in Israel — though limited and with a five-year waiting list — are free.

According to Israeli law, the adoptive family and the adopted child must be of the same religion.

The Social Affairs Ministry, which oversees the child welfare office, defended the policy, saying it was for the child's own good to be adopted by an Orthodox family. That way, the ministry said, the child's conversion would not be questioned later, when the Rabbinate requires both partners in state-recognized marriages to be Jewish.

Israel does not allow civil marriage. For Jewish marriages in Israel to be legally recognized, they must be performed by an Orthodox rabbi.

"Our job is to consider the welfare of the child," said Nachum Iddo, spokesman for the Ministry of Social Affairs. "There is also the issue of the child's identity card. The Ministry of Interior does not recognize a non-Orthodox conversion conducted within Israel as legitimate."

"We don't want problems later when the child will not understand why he is not registered as a Jew," Iddo said. "We don't want the child to go through that experience."

Families involved in the adoption process stated in affidavits submitted by the Reform Movement's Israel Religious Action Center that when they approached the Rabbinate about Orthodox conversions, they were told the conversions would remain valid only if the families maintained a kosher home, sent the child to Orthodox schools, observed the Sabbath and joined a synagogue.

"It is misguided and politically motivated and part and parcel of the 'Who is a Jew' debate, which does not want to recognize Reform and Conservative conversions for civil purposes," Regev said.

The Reform movement argued in its petition that the policy is illegal not only because it allegedly discriminates against non-Orthodox families, but because it is inconsistent with previous Supreme Court rulings maintaining that the Rabbinate has no authority in the civil arena. Adoption, they argue, is a civil matter.

Sally Klein-Katz, who immigrated to Israel from New York in 1985 and later adopted two children in the United States, said she was outraged by the policy.

"As an adoptive parent, I think it is horrifying that someone might be refused access to being a parent" because of their level of religious observance, Klein-Katz said. "It gets to the basic issue in this country that we don't have a separation of religion and state." □

FOCUS ON ISSUES

On World AIDS Day, Jewish groups affirm commitment to fight disease

By E.B. Solomont

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish groups from across the denominational spectrum are calling on the Jewish community to help fight AIDS in Africa and other places hit hard by the pandemic.

An open letter to the Jewish community issued by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, together with Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Jewish leaders, called on “synagogues and rabbis to renew and affirm our commitment to ending the AIDS crisis in Africa and elsewhere around the world.”

“For the sake of our shared humanity, we cannot afford to fail,” the letter said.

The letter was issued Monday, the 16th annual World AIDS Day.

Jewish leaders across North America spoke out this week to affirm their commitment to fighting the deadly disease. Worldwide, 40 million are infected with AIDS or HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

“In the case of AIDS, we think that these are preventable deaths. There are few mandates in Judaism as clear as *pikuach nefesh* and to not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor,” said Ruth Messinger, president and executive director of the American Jewish World Service.

AJWS helped found the Jewish Coalition Responding to AIDS in Africa, a coalition made up of 18 organizations and congregations in the United States.

The AIDS epidemic has continued to spread since the first case was diagnosed in the early 1980s. According to World Health Organization statistics, 5 million people were newly infected and 3 million people — or about 8,000 a day — died from AIDS this year alone.

Humanitarian efforts so far have focused on funding research to find a cure for the disease and getting care to those who need it.

In his State of the Union address last January, President Bush asked Congress for \$15 billion over several years to fund AIDS relief. Last week, Congress allocated \$2.4 billion for the first year of that commitment.

On Monday, Jewish leaders focused on those still waiting for care.

All evidence points to the need for increased care, especially among people suffering from HIV and AIDS in poor and developing countries.

In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, where 2.4 million people died of AIDS in 2002, only about 50,000 people are getting treatment, according to UNAIDS, the United Nations program on HIV/AIDS.

Of the 5 million to 6 million people in developing countries who are infected with HIV and need access to drug treatment programs like anti-retroviral care, only 300,000 have access, according to the UNAIDS Web site.

Part of the letter’s intent was to make people aware of how seriously the Jewish community is taking AIDS, said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center.

“Now we hope the letter will be distributed to synagogues and

rabbis across the country and lead them to do more educational programs and look for ways to be helpful in expanding the response to this issue,” Saperstein said.

Jewish organizations are not newcomers to the AIDS fight.

Jewish groups have been involved for the last 15 years in confronting the epidemic, from reaching out to sick community members to working on legislation that would relieve developing nations of their debt so they can use resources on education and health care instead of paying off loans, Saperstein said.

On one level, there is a moral imperative in Judaism to intervene to save lives and help people, he said. On another, Jews especially have seen what happens when people stand by as others are dying.

AJWS has been a driving force in AIDS relief efforts within the Jewish community. The relief organization spends more than one-third of its \$3 million international development and relief budget on AIDS relief programs.

Over the past three years, AJWS has supported 47 grass-roots organizations that focus on AIDS prevention, education and care.

“We don’t fund large international organizations; we fund on the ground, like a group in Zimbabwe that trains peer educators to alert their peers to the threat of AIDS and the danger of sexually transmitted diseases,” Messinger said.

The Jewish Coalition that AJWS helped create works on an advocacy level in Washington to make sure Bush’s allotted \$15 billion gets to those who need it.

At a recent conference on faith-based initiatives and the president’s emergency plan for AIDS relief, AJWS spoke to hundreds of delegates at Georgetown University.

Faith-based groups in particular have distinguished themselves as likely candidates for humanitarian aid in fighting AIDS. In a WHO press release issued on World AIDS day, the organization singled out Bush’s \$15 billion dollar pledge and the “groundbreaking work of NGOs and faith-based organizations.”

“Faith-based organizations have specific expertise and capacity in dealing with the issue of human suffering, like AIDS,” said Anya Guyer, program officer in the department of international programs at AJWS, who described the “visceral” moral imperative that faith groups have on AIDS relief.

“It’s a natural fit for faith communities to be engaged not only in pastoral counseling, but also in efforts of prevention, care and support,” she said.

Excluding organizations that proselytize as they serve soup, Messinger noted that faith-based groups that do humanitarian work often are not religious but merely have roots in world faiths.

AJWS, for example, prides itself on working as a Jewish group in the non-Jewish, developing world.

“We follow what we believe are the obligations of Judaism: *tikkun olam*,” or repairing the world, Messinger said, and an obligation “to reach out to the stranger and to intercede where possible to save a life, which is the case with AIDS.” □

Israeli headed organ ring

NEW YORK (JTA) — Brazilian police reportedly broke up an organ-selling ring they say was headed by an Israeli.

The ring allegedly sent people from the city of Recife in northeastern Brazil to South Africa, where they had a kidney removed and then sold for between \$6,000 and \$10,000. □