



Daily News Bulletin

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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli strike fails

A Hamas man in the Gaza Strip survived an Israeli missile strike Tuesday.

Israeli officials said the strike was aimed at Hamas member Jamal Al-Jarah, who suffered moderate injuries. His brother Rami, who was in the car with him, was lightly injured. Five bystanders also were hurt.

Israeli military officials said Al-Jarah was planning attacks against Israelis and had been firing Kassam rockets from the Gaza Strip. Hamas said Israel "would pay a heavy price" for the attack.

Border spies

Two Arab residents of a town on Israel's border with Lebanon are being held as Hezbollah spies.

On Tuesday, Israel's Shin Bet domestic security service announced the arrests in Ghajar, whose Alawite townspeople enjoy Israeli residency rights but largely vow allegiance to Lebanon or Syria.

Bisected by the border set after Israeli forces withdrew from southern Lebanon in May 2000, Ghajar is a site of regular drug and arms smuggling. The Shin Bet said the two arrested are suspected of giving Hezbollah information on Israeli military deployment in exchange for drugs.

Female pioneer dies

Esther Leah Ritz, a female pioneer in the Jewish organizational world, died last Friday in Milwaukee at age 85.

A president of Milwaukee's Jewish federation from 1978-1981, Ritz also served as vice president of the Council of Jewish Federations and as a board member of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

She also was president of the World Confederations of Jewish Community Centers, and served on the board of directors of other Jewish organizations. She was also active in Democratic politics and Israeli peace groups.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Thursday, Jan. 1, and Friday, Jan. 2. Watch for a whole new look in 2004!

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Despite cold shoulder from Iran, Jews and Israelis aid quake victims

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — Beggars apparently can be choosers — or so the Iranian government seems to believe.

The Islamic fundamentalist regime in Iran, which is struggling to recover from a Dec. 26 earthquake that killed at least 20,000 people and wrecked an entire region, has announced that it will not accept humanitarian aid from the "Zionist entity."

But American Jews and Israelis still are finding ways to help the victims.

And one of the few U.S. non-governmental organizations running relief on the ground is led by an Iranian-American Jew.

Farshad Rastegar formed the Los Angeles-based non-sectarian Relief International 14 years ago to aid victims of an earlier earthquake in Iran.

As an Iranian-American Jew working in his native country, it's "very emotional," he told JTA from Los Angeles.

Rastegar, who was planning to leave for Iran in the coming days, said his group has raised more than \$150,000 for relief work in Iran, \$65,000 of which already has been routed to a bank there.

Like other Jewish humanitarians working in Iran, Rastegar tries to keep politics out of the picture.

"Pain is the same everywhere, whether you're in Bosnia in Sarajevo and somebody's shooting at you or whether you're in Chechnya," he said. "A bullet is a bullet, a child is a child and pain is pain."

He added, "The religion, the ethnicities, the national differences really dissipate in the face of these kinds of tragedies."

Rastegar's religion is known to Iranian government officials, and his group, which worked with professionals in Iran before the earthquake, continues to be well received, he said.

Despite the Iranian government's hostile attitude toward Israel and Jews, there should be no problem in routing Jewish funds to those in distress, Haroun Yeshaya, head of Iran's Jewish community, said Tuesday in a phone interview from Tehran.

"All Iranian people are going to be glad" to receive funding from anyone in the world, Yeshaya said through Kamram Broukim, a translator in California.

Through his organization — the Fariborz "Fred" Matloob unit of B'nai B'rith, named in memory of an Iranian Jewish boy — Broukim has raised more than \$50,000 since Friday for earthquake victims.

The funds will be directed to Iran's Jewish community, which plans to use the money to set up a medical clinic in Bam, the center of the disaster.

Broukim is working with Iranian Jews in New York and London to raise additional funds.

About 18,000 of Iran's 30,000 Jews live in Tehran; another 8,000 live in Shiraz. There are no known Jewish casualties of the earthquake.

Despite Iran's rebuff to Israel, at least one Israeli NGO is addressing the tragedy.

"I have a direct and open line to Iranians," said Ra'anana Amir, project manager of Latet, an Israeli humanitarian group that provides domestic and international relief. Latet has sent "tens of thousands of dollars" to earthquake victims, Amir said.

"We are welcomed, and we have the routes to come and work in Iran," he said.

Amir wouldn't say whether Latet has people or equipment on the ground in Iran,

MIDEAST FOCUS

Settler boom

Israel's settler population reportedly has grown by 16 percent since Ariel Sharon became prime minister in 2001.

Citing Interior Ministry findings, Army Radio on Tuesday put the Israeli population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip at 236,000.

Some of the largest increases were in isolated settlements that are likely to be removed under the "road map" peace plan.

Likud diplomacy

An Israeli Druse lawmaker reportedly is traveling to Cairo to meet Syrian lawmakers to confer on resuming peace talks.

The Likud Party's Majallie Whbee is making the trip to explore recent Syrian overtures on renewing peace talks with Israel. Israeli government spokesmen would not confirm the report.

Syrian President Bashar Assad recently told The New York Times newspaper that he is willing to renew peace talks with Israel from where they left off a few years ago.

But Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Israel would not agree to any preconditions before negotiations.

Rifles found at Jihadist's place

Stolen Israeli guns were found in the home of a senior Islamic Jihad terrorist.

Ahmed Obeidi, who allegedly masterminded a deadly suicide bombing in Haifa, is in custody for allegedly plotting the Oct. 4 bombing at Maxim restaurant, which killed 23 people.

The 28 M-16 rifles had been stolen from the armory of Kibbutz Manara in March 2001.

A former Israeli intelligence officer was jailed for 20 years for his role in the robbery, in which the kibbutz's security guard was killed.

and he admitted he has encountered patches of anti-Israeli resistance along the way. However, he said, such resistance in Iran and elsewhere comes from politicians or government officials, not individual citizens.

According to the New York Sun, Iranian citizens criticized their government's refusal to accept aid from Israel, which has highly trained disaster relief teams that have assisted victims around the globe.

Asked if he thinks humanitarian goodwill will help bridge political or religious divides, Amir said he doesn't "fool with idealism."

"In the first few days of every disaster like this one, nobody thinks about any of these topics. People are just looking for a place to put their head at night, to get covers, to get something to eat, to get something to drink and to find their relatives," he said.

If his presence happens to change some Iranians' views of Israelis or Jews, that's great, he said.

But he doesn't know whether Latet's clients even know of the group's origins — or what effect, if any, such knowledge would have.

"I'm not going and carrying the flag with me," he said.

Rastegar expresses similar sentiments. "The agenda is the humanity of it," he said.

Like other Jewish humanitarians, he said he is driven by his faith. "We're the chosen people not for privilege; we're the chosen people to serve," Rastegar said.

Ronni Strongin, spokeswoman for American Jewish World Service, agreed.

"The Jewish people are compelled to step above hatred, and we cannot stoop to the level of others," she said. Jews must "provide humanitarian need to those that are in deep distress."

The agency raised some \$7,000 over the weekend for quake victims. The money will be used to purchase medical supplies, which will be dispersed through Direct Relief International.

Direct Relief International, which is not related to Rastegar's group, is seeking an Iranian partner to handle efforts on the ground.

Strongin said her group received several angry e-mails from Jews who felt that Iran, which is implacably opposed to Israel and has persecuted its Jews, doesn't deserve humanitarian aid from Jewish groups.

For its part, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the largest U.S.-based Jewish relief and welfare organization, has not begun a fund for the earthquake victims.

"We haven't been active and don't have a presence to be able to extend any kind of direct assistance, so we would have to work through outside NGOs," said Will Recant, the JDC's assistant executive vice president.

In any case, he noted, "we haven't had a response from the American Jewish community" inquiring about the quake or asking if the group was accepting funds. □

(Contributions to the relief organizations mentioned above can be sent to Relief International at www.ri.org/iran/donation.htm; to the American Jewish World Service at www.ajws.org; to Latet at www.latet.org.il; and to the Fariborz "Fred" Matloob unit of B'nai B'rith at Citibank account no. 7830122912.)

Israeli envoy thanks Italy

ROME (JTA) — Israel's ambassador to Rome thanked Italy for the positive role it has played on Middle Eastern issues in the European Union.

Ambassador Ehud Gol published what amounted to a thank-you letter Tuesday in the leading Italian newspaper, Corriere della Sera, to mark the conclusion of Italy's six-month tenure in the rotating E.U. presidency.

"Italy's efforts were not always crowned with success, but if the mechanisms of coordination with Italy could serve as a model for the future collaboration with Europe, this would be a great success for everyone," Gol wrote.

He added, "For the first time, we saw a presidency that was totally freed from the megaphone politics that characterized its predecessors."

Among other things, he wrote, Italy was instrumental in getting the European Union to include Hamas on its list of terrorist organizations and in speaking up for Israel at the United Nations. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Go to Israel, young man

Aliyah from North America rose by 20 percent in 2003. Some 2,400 people from the United States and Canada moved to Israel during the year.

Support for Israel during the intifada, cash grants to new immigrants, poor economic conditions in North America and improved coordination between the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Jewish state account for the increase, said Michael Landsberg, director of North American aliyah for the Jewish Agency.

Swastikas a felony in N.Y.?

A bill that would make swastika graffiti a felony was introduced in the New York state assembly.

The bill, which would make the crime punishable by one to four years in jail, was introduced earlier this month following several anti-Semitic acts in Brooklyn and Queens in the past two months, the Brooklyn Papers newspaper chain reported. Such graffiti currently is considered a misdemeanor.

French lawmakers back 'Geneva'

French lawmakers formed a committee in support of the "Geneva accord" Middle East peace proposal.

The group, which consists of members of both the upper and lower chambers of the French Parliament, includes members of the center-right governing UMP Party as well as representatives from the opposition Socialist, Communist and Green parties. The unofficial proposal has drawn strong criticism from Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon; Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat has offered the plan muted support.

Nazi-building Web site blasted

Swedish public television is being criticized for a Web site that allows users to place Nazi monuments in Swedish cities.

The feature on the SVT site is part of a project on Nazi architect Albert Speer, who will be the subject of a play on the network on Jan. 12. The network defended the game as a way to gain perspective on Nazi "megalomania." But the network agreed to remove a section that asked users what they would do in ethical situations, for example, if they saw someone forgetting to pick up their cash from an ATM.

Critics said the game trivialized Nazi atrocities.

Mexican Jews get new leader

One of Mexico's central Jewish organizations elected a new leader for 2004-2005.

Benjamin Speckman, a longtime Jewish activist who chairs the financial committee of the World Maccabi Union and is a former vice president of the Maccabi Latin American Confederation, recently was elected leader of the Jewish Central Committee of Mexico's Council of Presidents.

In familiar ritual, Israel struggles to pass budget by end of the year

By Dan Baron

JERUSALEM (JTA) — New Year's cheer probably will elude Benjamin Netanyahu this week, but Israel's finance minister is thinking well ahead.

His mind is on a 2004 budget that may make or break his political career.

Netanyahu yanked his austerity budget package last week in frustration at last-minute funding demands by Likud's partners in the government coalition. The pressure in his political home compounded ongoing wrangling with the Histadrut labor federation and cast doubt on whether the \$59 billion draft budget, with its \$2.3 billion in public-spending cuts, would be approved as required when the year ends Wednesday.

On Tuesday, as the budget deadline loomed, Netanyahu made some concessions to try to save the budget. But the budget's passage remained uncertain as schools in Israel closed while teachers went on strike to protest education-related budget cuts.

Missed deadlines are nothing new in Israeli fiscal dealings. If a budget isn't passed by Dec. 31, spending continues at the previous year's level and the new budget invariably is settled by March 31; otherwise, by law, the government falls.

The speaker of the Knesset, Reuven Rivlin, predicted Monday that the budget would not be approved until mid-January.

But Netanyahu, a former prime minister who hopes to regain the post, has a vested interest in keeping to schedule. Having displayed tough resilience in the face of four months of Histadrut sanctions, he is unlikely to allow members of the government in which he serves to hobble his economic streamlining program.

"There is a lack of restraint on the part of coalition partners," Netanyahu said, referring to the National Religious Party, National Union bloc and Shinui Party. "The way they want to inflate this budget, I have no intention of presenting it."

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was expected to weigh in on Netanyahu's behalf, trying to convince ministers to back the budget in the Knesset.

Meanwhile, the NRP sought to rescind planned cuts to religious authority funding and demanded special tax breaks for Jewish towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The latter demand was backed by the National Union, which also called for new immigrants to get greater housing perks.

On Tuesday, Netanyahu agreed to about \$45 million in grants for yeshivas, new immigrants and settlement security, as requested by the NRP and the National Union.

"I was surprised and disappointed to hear the finance minister's remarks on what he called unbridled behavior by coalition factions," said the head of the NRP, Housing Minister Effi Eitam, before the announcement Tuesday. "All we seek is to preserve the Jewish character of the country and to allow hundreds of thousands of citizens to maintain their traditional way of life."

Such talk is exactly what raises hackles in Shinui, which is pressuring Netanyahu from the other side of the socioeconomic spectrum. The secularist party has been lobbying for student stipends and cultural spending to be boosted.

"Netanyahu can give yeshivas 65 million shekels, but not to culture?" Justice Minister Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, Shinui's chairman, told reporters after meeting the finance minister Dec. 26. "Culture enthusiasts and students are the public we represent, and I believe our chances of reaching an arrangement with the Treasury are good."

Netanyahu and Lapid met again Monday night. Netanyahu then agreed to Shinui's demand for \$45 million in assistance for university tuition.

Yet after agreeing earlier in the week to restore about \$230 million in spending on education, welfare and health care, Netanyahu has little cash left to maneuver with.

And precedent indicates it's worth gambling on intransigence.

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, who long grumbled that cuts to the defense budget endangered national security, quietly has been making ends meet. The same goes for Education Minister Limor Livnat, who now is hinting at privatizing the teaching profession to save costs and increase quality.

"None of the ministers will resign because of budget cuts, or because their demands were met or not," columnist Avraham Tal wrote in Ha'aretz. □

Kosher butchers: Our beef safer from mad cow disease

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — New signs spice up the meat section of the Hungarian Kosher Grocery in Skokie, Ill., one of the nation's largest kosher food supermarkets.

They reassure customers that, in light of the recent scare and media hoopla over mad cow disease, kosher beef is safer than non-kosher meat.

"Some people are paranoid. You tell them something on television, and they think that's the way it is," says Sandor Kirsche, the supermarket's owner. Kirsche posted the placards in response to customer inquiries about meat safety following the reports of mad cow disease in the United States a week ago.

Kosher-food wholesalers, retailers and certification agencies agree with Kirsche's assessment that kosher beef is much less likely to be infected with mad cow than are non-kosher cuts.

Kosher food industry sources say that a combination of safeguards — ranging from traditional kosher slaughtering practices to beef-purchasing policies — make kosher beef safer.

Some predict that the mad cow scare could create greater demand for kosher beef from Jews and non-Jews alike.

Menachem Lubinsky, president of Integrated Marketing Communications, which produces the annual Kosherfest trade show, says he expects that the mad cow scare will boost sales of kosher beef the way several outbreaks of salmonella in the past few years sent kosher poultry profits soaring.

Still, industry sources caution that kosher meat isn't immune to contamination with mad cow disease.

"I don't want to overstate the case. Some of the procedures related to kosher mitigate against MCD, but there are no guarantees," says Rabbi Menachem Genack, rabbinic administrator of the Orthodox Union's kashrut division.

His comment came after the union and Star-K, both major kosher-certification agencies, issued statements seeking to reassure consumers about mad cow.

Those reassurances came after a Holstein cow imported along with dozens of other cows from Canada tested positive for bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE, a fatal brain-wasting disease similar to the human variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, or CJD.

Most reports of humans contracting CJD from eating diseased beef occurred in the 1990s in the United Kingdom. So far, 139 cases have surfaced worldwide. As in the United States, not all countries have strict testing regimens in place.

In June 2002, a cow in Israel's Golan Heights was found to be infected with mad cow, but Israeli health officials said the animal was isolated and no infected meat reached consumers.

Last week, the first instance of mad cow in the United States was reported in Washington state. Health officials believe the animal got sick from infected Canadian feed before arriving in the country. But U.S. officials say tough new measures against mad cow protect the domestic feed supply and that the U.S. beef supply remains safe.

Still, ground meat from the infected cow has been recalled from supermarkets in eight Western states and Guam.

Kosher food experts maintain that there is every reason to believe people should have no beef about eating kosher meat.

While some of the dozen kosher slaughterhouses in the country

buy their cattle at the same auctions that supply non-kosher producers, a shochet, or ritual slaughterer, would never accept a visibly sick cow such as the infected bull found in Washington, industry insiders say.

"An animal that is a 'downer' — that cannot walk to the slaughtering place on its own — would not be used," says Rabbi Avrom Pollack, president of the Baltimore-based Star-K.

If the animal were sick, it could not be considered kosher.

Among other anti-mad cow measures announced Tuesday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture declared a new ban on the use of such "downer" cows in meatpacking plants.

Kosher slaughterhouses also typically use younger cows — between 18-24 months old — while the diseased cow in Washington is believed to be six and a half years old.

Kosher slaughter also prohibits shooting or stunning cows in the head, "which may cause brain matter, where the disease resides, to be scattered to other parts of the body," the O.U.'s Genack says.

Kosher slaughter mandates that the animal's throat be slit, and potentially contaminated blood is drained away from the carcass.

These kashrut experts and others also say that about 50 non-kosher slaughterhouses use a machine called the Advanced Meat Recovery System, which scrapes every bit of meat from a carcass — including from areas near the brain and spinal column where BSE could reside — and some scraps go into packaged ground meat.

"In the case of some of the treif beef that's out there, they use anything," says Rabbi Sanford Abramowitz, using the Yiddish word for non-kosher.

Abramowitz has his own beef to hawk. He is president of Zalman's Glatt Kosher, a wholesaler of premium kosher cuts to supermarkets in the East and Midwest that claims a 25 percent stake in the kosher beef market and is one of only two meat producers in the country. The other is Agree Processing, owned by the Rubashkins, a Chabad-Lubavitch family with a large operation.

Zalman's uses "muscle meat" taken from the forequarter and geared for roasts and steaks. Those cuts are taken only from steers and heifers, rather than the type of retired dairy cow that contracted mad cow, Abramowitz says.

His company uses meat from cows raised by International Glatt in Wyndham, Minn., Abramowitz says.

Others, such as Star-K's Pollack, say kosher slaughterhouses import much of their meat from Latin American nations like Costa Rica and Uruguay, where no cases of mad cow have appeared.

Asked what kind of inspections those countries conduct for mad cow, Pollack laughs. "You don't want to know," he says.

Other factors point to kosher beef being safer. Pollack says that only 35 percent to 40 percent of the cows that arrive at kosher slaughterhouses end up being used, as many do not meet kashrut standards because of other health issues, such as diseased lungs.

Kirsche, in Skokie, says he had expected a drop in demand for kosher beef because of the mad cow scare but that he still is seeing his typical \$25,000 in weekly sales.

Abe Hollander, manager of the meat department at Supersol in Lawrence, N.Y., another major kosher outlet, says he, too, has fielded questions from worried customers.

But if the mad cow outbreak remains confined to a few states, he says, "it should have no affect whatsoever" on the kosher beef industry.

"I don't pay any attention to it," he says. "It's the mad butchers you have to worry about." □