

IN THE NEWS

E.U. meets on anti-Semitism

There is no place for anti-Semitism in Europe, a top E.U. official said. Romano Prodi made his comments Thursday at a historic meeting on anti-Semitism organized by the European Commission and the European Jewish Congress.

Prodi admitted there are vestiges of age-old anti-Semitism in Europe but denied that the situation is comparable to the one that existed on the Continent in the 1930s.

Sharon meets envoys from U.S.

Israel's prime minister met with U.S. officials to go over Israeli plans for disengagement from the Palestinians.

On Thursday, Ariel Sharon told the U.S. envoys in Jerusalem that the U.S.-backed "road map" peace plan is the only acceptable plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace and that the country was committed to it.

Sharon did not seek financial assistance from the United States for the cost of withdrawing settlements from the Gaza Strip.

Mel Gibson's father attacks Jews — again

Film star Mel Gibson's father said the Holocaust was a "fiction" and that Jews are conspiring to take over the world.

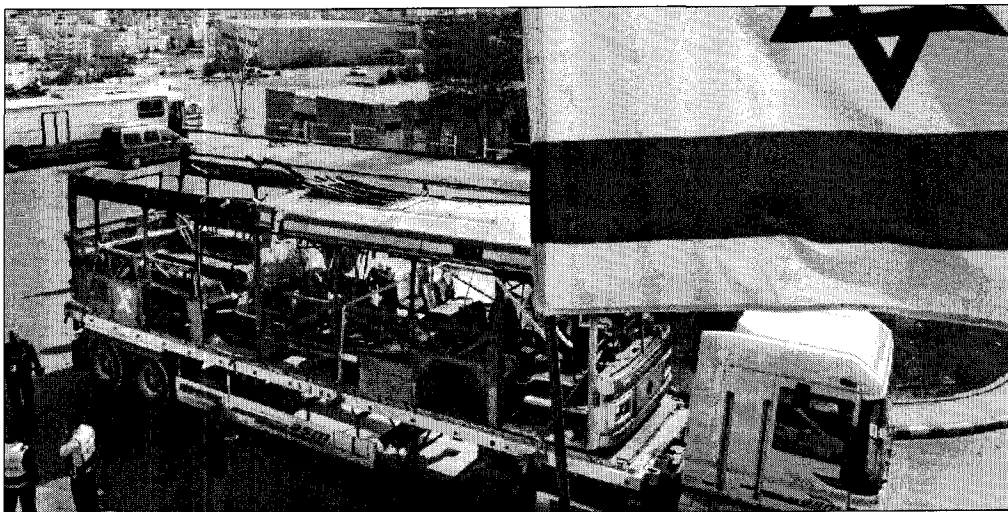
Hutton Gibson, 85, said the Nazis could not have exterminated 6 million Jews, because "they simply got up and left. They were all over the Bronx and Brooklyn and Sydney, Australia, and Los Angeles," according to the New York Daily News.

Gibson made his remarks to a radio interviewer a week before the premiere of his son's controversial film, "The Passion of the Christ," which critics say blames the Jews for Jesus' death. In a TV interview this week, son Mel Gibson said he does not espouse his father's views on Jews.

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WORLD REPORT

PUBLISHED WEEKDAYS BY JTA—THE GLOBAL NEWS SERVICE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE • WWW.JTA.ORG



Brian Hendler

BUS TO THE HAGUE

An Israeli group is bringing this charred wreckage of an Israeli bus — destroyed Jan. 29 by a suicide bomber, killing 11 — to the International Court of Justice for next week's hearings on Israel's West Bank security fence. The group seeks to demonstrate Israel's need for the fence.

With Kerry's go-it-alone decisions some Jews worried about Israel

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Now that he's running for president, Sen. John Kerry's openness to a broad range of Jewish opinion is making some in the pro-Israel community nervous — and others hopeful.

The very quality that attracted Jewish voters to him as a longtime Massachusetts senator is now earning the candidate closer scrutiny across the Jewish spectrum.

Kerry's Jewish supporters accurately cite his solid voting record in the Senate, his frequent readiness to meet leaders of Washington's main pro-Israel lobby, the American

Israel Public Affairs Committee, and his activist philosophy when it comes to Middle East peacemaking.

Detractors inevitably — and just as accurately — mention Kerry's closeness to critics of U.S. foreign policy who say U.S. Middle East policy is a dog wagged by Israel's tail. They include the former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Joseph Wilson.

The variegated palette of advice Kerry has drawn upon over the years — and the fact that he ultimately keeps his own counsel — has made pinning down the candidate's positions that much harder.

Now, as Kerry's views, both foreign and

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■ *Kerry known for soliciting many views, but who has his ear on Jewish issues?*

Continued from page 1

domestic, are put under the microscope, the question abounds, as one pro-Israel official put it: "Where is he getting his advice?"

On the one hand, Kerry's campaign has recruited Wilson, who has likened the legality of Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait to that of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Wilson also has said that close U.S.-Israel ties hinder U.S. engagement in the Arab world.

On the other hand, Kerry's top foreign policy adviser is Rand Beers, a former top Bush counterterrorism adviser who made headlines last year when he quit because he said the war in Iraq was doing major harm to the war on terrorism. Beers' views on Israel are unknown, but he has said he believes the Saudis should do much more about support in Saudi Arabia for terrorist groups, including Hamas and Hezbollah.

■
"The pattern of how he does things is to get as many opinions as he can," says Candy Glazer, a Kerry supporter from Longmeadow, Mass., who also is on AIPAC's executive committee. "He'll listen to every side of the story, and he'll make the final decision."

Seeking such diversity of opinion is in stark contrast to President Bush, who is much more likely to make foreign-policy decisions by relying on his advisers, many of whom are seen as solidly in the pro-Israel camp.

Israel advocates across the political spectrum are quick to say that Kerry's

voting record is "stellar."

On the domestic issues Jews care about, Kerry's record is unchallenged. He actually may be one of the few leading legislators who excites Orthodox and Reform Jews alike.

"He's very good at navigating the waters of the diversity of the Jewish community — the Orthodox, the Reform, the Jewish defense organizations," said Nancy Kaufman, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council in Boston.

Kerry's record on church-state issues lands him solidly on the liberal side of the Jewish community. He opposes government aid to religious schools and for faith-based charities.

But his status as a powerful Democrat who has taken on teachers unions as overly powerful endears him to Orthodox Jews who advocate for greater parental voice in the schools.

■
All sides say they like Kerry's lead role in trying to push through Congress the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, which encourages employer flexibility in areas of religious observance. For Jews, this translates into easing Sabbath and holiday observance.

"He has shown great sensitivity toward religion and religious minorities and religious observance," said Abba Cohen, who heads the Washington office of Agudath Israel of America, an organization that awarded Kerry its Religious Freedom Award in 2000.

Cohen said he was especially impressed that Kerry took on the workplace freedom initiative himself, not at anyone's behest.

Yet the notion of going on his own unnerves some Israel activists who wonder how Kerry comes to his policy decisions.

For example, Kerry's vision of how to jump-start the dormant Israeli-Palestinian peace process has taken some in the pro-Israel community off guard. Particularly, Kerry cites negotiations in Taba, Egypt, in January 2001 as a starting point for returning to the table.

"That's not where we want to be," said one Jewish organizational official in Washington.

Taba represented the last-ditch effort by the Clinton administration and the

Israeli government of Ehud Barak to salvage the peace process after the launching of the Palestinian intifada.

The outline for a deal envisioned there, which would have set Israel back to its pre-1967 borders, alarmed many. It was vague about the right of return of Palestinian refugees to Israel, and critics said that it gave away too much to the Palestinians as a starting point for negotiation, rather than its culmination.

Still, supporters speak highly of Kerry's engagement and knowledge of the issues.

"An engaged president and an engaged United States is what

would provide the greatest amount of security to Israel," said Ken Sweder, a past president of the Boston JCRC, who accompanied Kerry on a visit to Israel in 1986.

The tendency to go it alone worries some admirers who wonder if Kerry will heed their advice as president.

"He has made statements that have been disturbing and indicate a lack of real understanding of some of the issues relating to Israel," said Cohen of Agudath Israel. Nonetheless, he called Kerry's record of support for Israel "exemplary."

Kerry's suggestion that he would consider former President Carter and former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker as Middle East envoys has especially worried some in the pro-Israel community. Both Carter and Baker are unpopular among many pro-Israel activists. A top Jewish Kerry supporter, New York Assembly speaker Sheldon Silver, told the Forward recently that Kerry has backed down from that consideration.

That has not stopped anonymous opponents from circulating e-mails citing the Baker and Carter references as a reason not to support Kerry.

Kerry's supporters say he will survive such attacks as it becomes clear that while he listens to a broad range of opinion, in the end he relies mostly on pro-Israel opinion, diverse as it is, in his assessments of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

"I'm one of the people who call on his office," said Glazer, of AIPAC, "and he'll come and meet with us personally. Most people will send their foreign policy adviser, but John takes quite a lot of time to take questions." ■

The tendency to go it alone worries those who wonder if a President Kerry will heed their advice.

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JTA WORLD REPORT is published five days a week, except holidays by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For more information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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Group works to mend U.S.-Europe rift

By PHIL CARMEL

BRUSSELS (JTA) — On many issues, the Bush administration and European governments do not speak the same language.

Now, an American Jewish group is offering to translate between the two sides.

Last week, the American Jewish Committee launched its Brussels-based Transatlantic Institute to strengthen bilateral relations between the powers — and benefit Jews in the process.

The creation of the institute, the first think tank of its kind run by a non-governmental organization in Brussels, comes as the European Union is set to expand to 25 countries later this year.

But the institute's creation also underscores the sentiment that the European Union and the United States increasingly are acting as competitors.

Soured relations peaked during the lead-up to the war in Iraq, when many European governments, most notably France and Germany, opposed U.S. military intervention.

As mass demonstrations across the continent against the war have shown, those differences have mirrored other differences over U.S. policy toward the Middle East in general, and toward Israel in particular.

At the same time, anti-Semitism in Europe has increased noticeably since the

start of the Palestinian intifada in the fall of 2000. According to the AJCommittee's international relations director, Jason Isaacson, the group "recognizes that a long-distance relationship between the organization and European government institutions is not in the best interests of Jewish concerns."

"We have to be on the ground where European decisions are being made," Isaacson told JTA.

Some of those decisions — particularly where they concern Israel and anti-Semitism — mirror similar views expressed by leading U.S. diplomats in Europe.

Speaking at the institute's inaugural dinner last week in Brussels, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, Nicholas Burns, said, "Europeans need to resist creating a united Europe in competition or as a counterweight to the United States."

His remark reflects U.S. concerns that the European Union represents a threat to NATO in formulating and implementing global security and foreign policy.

The AJCommittee, too, is worried by any threats to NATO control over defense policy in Europe, particularly since NATO's line is dominated by the United States, which is more pro-Israel than Europe.

David Harris, AJCommittee's executive director, said, "NATO must remain a vital collective security post."

Explaining the importance of the new

trans-Atlantic organization, Harris said the AJCommittee had for "decades been a trailblazer in building bridges between the United States and Europe." Therefore, "when cracks in the foundation have been revealed and younger people in particular question the ties that bind us, the work of bridge-building becomes more important."

Indeed, as many Jewish leaders in Europe note, the AJCommittee generally has avoided the kind of public spats that have become almost the norm between leading U.S.-based Jewish organizations and the European Union.

Those relations hit a new low last month when the leaders of the World Jewish Congress and the European Jewish Congress accused the European Commission of anti-Semitism.

The Transatlantic Institute's inaugural meeting, which included senior politicians and diplomats from both the United States and Europe, showed that the AJCommittee has its work cut out for it.

"There is one issue that we can work on together," U.S. ambassador to the European Union, Rockwell Schnabel, told the gathering, pointing to anti-Semitism in Europe, which he said is reaching levels not seen since the 1930s.

E.U. foreign policy chief Javier Solana agreed that anti-Semitism in Europe was a very real problem, saying, "The burning of synagogues and the physical and verbal abuse of Jews in the street are absolutely unacceptable."

Gay students protest Conservative movement's policy

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Gay Jews too often have had to keep their identities in the dark, so during this Havdalah service, the lights were kept on.

About 50 gay and lesbian Jewish college students met at a recently restored synagogue in Washington's Chinatown district Saturday evening and, arm in arm, chanted prayers marking the end of the Sabbath. It was the culmination of a weekend of discussion and entertainment at the annual conference of the National Union of Jewish LGBTIQ Students — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and questioning Jews.

At issue was the current policy of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Conservative movement's rabbinical arm, not to ordain gay rabbis or marry gay Jews. The policy, the students said, is emblematic of their status as outsiders — as gays in the Jewish community, and as Jews in the gay community.

"Knowing that you are not officially welcome provides a stigma

that can last for years," said Nathan Weiner, co-chairman of the conference.

The Conservative movement's official policy is to bar declared homosexuals from its two main rabbinical seminaries, and rabbis are told not to perform gay or lesbian commitment ceremonies. Rabbis who have come out publicly as gay have been forced to leave the movement's seminaries. It is up to individual rabbis to determine whether gays and lesbians are fit to be leaders in other capacities, as youth group leaders or trustees of synagogues.

The movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards is expected to begin debate on the gay marriage issue at a retreat next month, and the movement has been holding forums on the issue over the past year.

Several students here, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said they are struggling with whether to apply to rabbi-training schools like the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. It would mean a five-year commitment to hiding their true identity.

For Kalkilya, a cage. For Kfar Saba, a lifesaver.

By DINA KRAFT

KALKILYA, West Bank (JTA) — On one side there is no escaping the wall: hulking, concrete and towering almost 28 feet into the sky.

Where it's not a wall, the barrier is a mesh fence topped with barbed wire and cameras, looping around the entire Palestinian city of Kalkilya.

Just across the boundary and only a little over a mile away, in the Israeli city of Kfar Saba, the barrier is welcomed.

But has anyone in Kfar Saba actually seen the barrier? Shrugs, shakes of the head — no.

Kalkilya is surrounded on all sides by what Israel calls the separation fence, a barrier the government says it must build to protect its citizens from suicide bombers, snipers and other Palestinian terrorists.

Residents of Kalkilya say it has turned their city into a ghetto.

But Kfar Saba residents are solidly behind the wall.

"I think we need it. It's for our security," says Dafna Subai, walking down Kfar Saba's main shopping street with her family. "If the worst is that they have to live behind a wall and the worst for us is that we are blown up, then I say let them live behind a wall for now."

The differing views of the security fence are coming to a head as Israel and the Palestinians prepare for a Feb. 23 hearing on the barrier's legality at the International Court of Justice at The Hague.

Palestinians say the fence is a land grab, taking territory they want for a future state. Israel claims the fence is necessary for security — and the least invasive step Israel can take after three years of Palestinian terrorism have left nearly 1,000 Israelis dead and thousands injured.

In most places the fence hews roughly to the Green Line, the armistice line from Israel's 1948 War of Independence, which served as a de facto boundary until the 1967 Six-Day War. But parts of the fence are projected to bow into the West Bank.

The fence is altering the landscape and Israeli-Palestinian relations.

The Israeli army says five suicide bombers from Kalkilya have carried out attacks in Israel. Among them was the

bomber who blew up Tel Aviv's Dolphinarium disco in June 2001, killing 21.

Last year, a sniper circumvented the wall by crawling through a drainage pipe, shooting at an Israeli car traveling on the nearby Trans-Israel Highway and killing a baby girl.

A portion of the concrete barrier that is now part of the greater fence project was built in late 2001 to protect Israeli vehicles on the Trans-Israel Highway from snipers in Kalkilya. Several road workers had been fired upon during the highway's construction.

The decision to build the wall almost 28 feet high was calculated to ensure that buses would not be hit by sniper fire, says Jacob Dallal, an Israeli army spokesman.

The main problem in Kalkilya is that it is adjacent to the Trans-Israel Highway, "and therefore Israel had no choice but to build a concrete wall, which is very different from most of the rest of the fence," says Dore Gold, an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

"It's also important to recall that throughout the world you have acoustic walls next to a highway, and they don't look much different" than the wall near Kalkilya, he adds.

In Kalkilya, the fence looms large as both a physical and practical nuisance. Opposition to it is unanimous. Locals dismiss Israel's security argument, saying attacks will continue with or without the fence.

"Peace has to come from within. Peace cannot be established through fences and walls," says Abdullah Shreem, a Kalkilya farmer who is among those whose land is located on the Israeli side of the fence. "If a tiger is kept in a closed room, you can imagine how it will act when it is out of its cage. This apartheid wall only shows Israel thinks of us as animals — another reason for Palestinians to resist."

Before the Palestinian intifada started in September 2000, the residents of Kfar Saba, a palm tree-lined suburb of Tel Aviv, thronged to neighboring Kalkilya on weekends for humus lunches, bargain shopping and cheap automobile repair.

But those days are barely a memory at the Israeli military checkpoint where, until the fence was built, soldiers guarded the only way into and out of Kalkilya.

Now the checkpoint is dominated by cement blocks topped with sandbags. A nearby watchtower is draped in camouflage netting, and army trucks and jeeps whiz in and out.

In an effort to improve the quality of life in Kalkilya, the Israeli army downgraded its presence at the checkpoint in recent weeks.

Soldiers now visit only sporadically and Palestinians pass the checkpoint freely in donkey carts, trucks and on foot.

Jessica Montrell, who heads the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, says that by opening up the entrance to Kalkilya, Israel is disproving its own argument about security risks.

"I think it only strengthens the argument that most of the suffering of the Palestinian population is needless and not necessarily for security," she says.

With a population of 40,000, Kalkilya serves as a center for surrounding Palestinian towns and villages.

Many of the Palestinians in Kalkilya work as shopkeepers or in agriculture. Unemployment has soared, partly because of new Israeli limits on the number of Palestinian workers allowed into Israel.

Kalkilya is a Palestinian hub for citrus fruit. Nicknamed the "City of Orange Gold," Kalkilya's fortunes have suffered because of intifada violence, which has limited the transport of produce.

In August 2002, Israel's Cabinet approved the first stage of the security fence, including the area around Kalkilya near Israel's narrow waist. The plans made Kalkilya and neighboring Palestinian villages of Habla and Ras Atiya into enclaves enclosed by the fence.

According to B'Tselem, the decision to enclose the three Palestinian towns was made in part to appease pressure from nearby Jewish towns in the West Bank to be included on the fence's Israeli side.

Although Habla is only 218 yards from Kalkilya, the fence construction means that residents of one area will have to

'This apartheid wall only shows Israel thinks of us as animals.'

Abdullah Shreem
Kalkilya farmer

ON THE
FENCE

drive about 7 miles to reach the other.

There is a gate between Kalkilya and Habla for farmers to use, but residents say it opens sporadically. Construction reportedly is underway on an underground passage between Kalkilya and Habla to ease the fence's impact on Palestinians.

Farmers like Shreem who have land beyond the Kalkilya fence must receive special permits to visit their property.

Shreem surveys the rows of cedar, kumquat and olive-tree saplings bordering his greenhouses.

Shreem's property rests along the edges of the concrete wall that stretches for 1.8 miles on the western side of the city.

He says army officials told him he can no longer use the six acres closest to the fence. If he does not remove them, he says he was told, the army will demolish the greenhouses because they are too close to the wall.

Israeli officials did not relate specifically to Shreem's claim, but Israel has said it will compensate Palestinians whose property is destroyed or expropriated because of the fence. Some Palestinians have sought and received compensation, Israeli officials say.

Shreem has refused to request compensation because receiving it would mean signing away his right to the land. "That is something I will never do," he says.

■
In Kfar Saba, a city of about 80,000 where the first Jewish settlers planted citrus groves and harvested almonds and peanuts, most residents today work in hi-tech or commerce. Many commute to jobs in nearby Tel Aviv.

About 10 percent of the city consists of immigrants from the former Soviet Union or Ethiopia. It's a homey city with ice cream shops and a city hall of white stucco and dark wood that dates back over 100 years, when it was a Turkish inn.

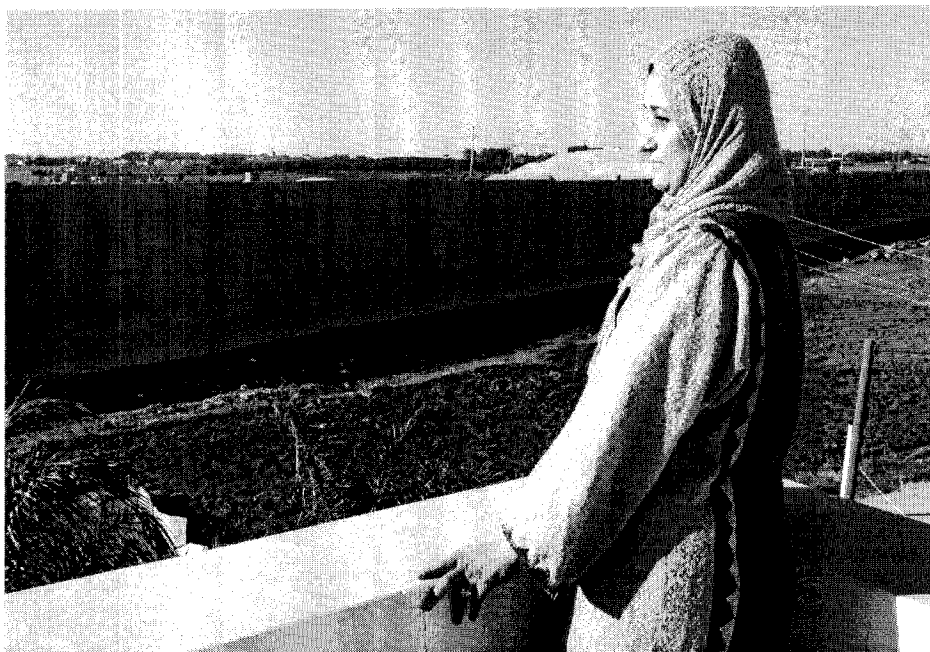
Kfar Saba has not been attacked as much as other Israeli cities that border the West Bank, such as Netanya or Jerusalem.

But intifada violence indeed has reached Kfar Saba's streets.

On March 17, 2002, a Palestinian gunman opened fire across from a Kfar Saba high school, critically wounding an 18-year-old student and wounding 16 others.

On Nov. 4, 2002, a suicide bomber came to the city's main mall but was stymied by a security guard who asked to check his bag. The bomber killed himself and the guard.

Miri Horvitz, a cosmetics saleswoman



Brian Hendler

Nuhaila A'Wainat surveys the West Bank security barrier from her home in Kalkilya.

at the mall, was there the day of the attack. "If the fence brings us quiet than I think it's the best thing," she says. "I feel freer now, more relaxed."

Horvitz becomes subdued when she talks about the aftermath of the mall attack. "I was scared to leave the house for a long time," she says.

Her daughter Hila, 24, shared her mother's fear of attacks. Only now, after a two-year hiatus, has Hila returned to riding city buses. She also favors the fence.

"I saw the fence on television," she says at the trendy boutique where she and her mother are shopping. "It's not a ghetto; it's a security fence. I don't think it's as drastic as people say, suggesting it's a ghetto and we are the Nazis."

■
At the open-air mall where the attack took place, there are balconies and a stone plaza with fountains where children roll with in-line skates, skateboards and bikes.

"We feel more secure, though we know it doesn't totally take away the risk," says Ruhama Sarussi, a teacher. "We don't want to put anyone in a ghetto, including them, but when will they let us feel secure so we don't have to fear them?"

Inside the mall, Shlomo Shabo, a salesman at the electronics store a few feet from where the suicide bomber exploded, recalls the attack — the flesh that clung to his shirt, the thick, choking smoke and the crashing sound as television sets and appliances exploded.

"People are ripped into pieces because of these bombers. I saw it right here,"

Shabo says. The Palestinians "are paying the price for those wreaking havoc here. If there was no terrorism, there would be total freedom."

But the only long-term solution, Shabo said, is not a fence but a peace agreement.

In the Kalkilya neighborhood that faces the concrete wall, Nuhaila A'Wainat, a Palestinian homemaker and mother of five sons sits in her spacious new home. It has high ceilings, a staircase with wooden railings, stone pillars and overstuffed red velvet couches. But she laments the view.

"My dream was to have a house like this. This is what we worked for all our lives," she says.

A'Wainat and her husband built the house with money saved during several years of work in Kuwait. They moved in 18 months ago, and enjoyed being so close to Kfar Saba.

"I enjoyed seeing the lights," she says. "It is Israel, but it is Palestine to me."

Now, however, she can hardly bring herself to look at the wall, which is some 15 yards from her house. Her family feels alienated, because relatives and friends fear visiting a home so close to the wall.

In Kfar Saba, the closest neighborhood to Kalkilya has a view of white squat houses on Kalkilya's sloping hillside. A verdant green field separates the two cities. From here, the wall can't be seen.

Hussia, a Moldovan immigrant, says the Arabs do not want peace, and only a fence that climbs to the heavens would be high enough. As for the security fence, she says, "Where is it? I have not seen it." ■

Hillel steps up outreach in former Soviet Union

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — In its 10 years of operating in the former Soviet Union, Hillel has reached thousands of Jewish students.

Now it's trying to reach more.

The move comes as an official recently appointed to head the international Jewish campus group's operations in Russia offered a frank assessment of Hillel's success at reaching students.

"I cannot say we have been that effective in engaging students," said Anna Purinson, director of Russian Hillel, arguably the largest and the most-established group here that works with Jewish college students. "Even today we come across Jewish students to whom Judaism is a shock."

Purinson, who at 26 is a veteran of the movement, made her remarks earlier this month to participants of Hillel's annual conference in Moscow.

Amid the festive mood of the conference, which marked Hillel's 10th anniversary in the former Soviet Union, Purinson and other activists painted a picture of the challenges the group faces as it works to reach out to the former Soviet Union's largely unaffiliated Jewish youth.

Hillel's presence in the region — brought here with support from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation in partnership with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee — generally has had a positive impact.

The movement has a network of 27 full-time centers and a dozen affiliated youth groups devoted to bringing Judaism and Jewish experiences to young and mostly assimilated Jews in seven of the former Soviet republics.

More than 10,000 Jewish students participate annually in Hillel's activities in the region, according to Yossi Goldman, the outgoing Jerusalem-based director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union, who is credited with creating the network of Hillel centers in the region.

But the number of those who participate regularly in the group's regular activities still is relatively small — and only a fraction of the 10,000 annual participants.

Osik Akselrud, who has headed Kiev's Hillel since its founding in 1995, said his

group has about 100 active members, and about 400 more regularly attend holiday events.

But there are perhaps just as large a number of Jewish students in Kiev who are not involved Jewishly in any way, Akselrud said. He recently was appointed director of Hillel in six formerly Soviet countries.

To attract more students, Hillel now is adopting a more aggressive outreach strategy.

"We are coming out into a bigger world, we will be coming to campuses, clubs and museums. We will be going to all those places where we can find Jewish students to engage more of them," Purinson said at the opening of the conference in Moscow on Feb. 4.

Unlike in the United States, where most Hillel chapters work with Jewish students on specific campuses, Hillel in the former Soviet Union operates community-based centers that reach out to a broader student population from multiple colleges.

Avraham Infeld, president of Hillel, attended the Moscow conference. He told participants there that the Russian experience can enrich the Hillel leadership in the United States.

"After these 10 years, there is something your American counterparts can learn from you," he told conference-goers. He made mention of a commuter college in Florida where Hillel is planning to implement a "Russian-type" operation based on the experience of Hillels in the former Soviet Union.

Ironically, the religious freedom that all of the ex-Soviet republics acquired during the past decade has translated into a challenge for Hillel: Jewish students have many more attractive options for their free time.

"A nightclub versus Hillel. This is a dilemma for many of these unaffiliated students that we should be talking about," said Yevgenia Mikhaleva, the first direc-

tor of Russian Hillel, who was replaced by Purinson in a major staff overhaul that affected most branches of the movement's leadership in the region.

"That is why the in-place, like Moscow or St. Petersburg Hillel, has already begun to bring some

of its activities to the clubs popular with local students."

Yasha Moz, 19, a Hillel leader in the city of Yekaterinburg in the Urals, said Hillel activists are scouring universities in his region looking for potential members.

"If they come across what they think is a Jewish-sounding name,

they try to get in touch with the person to at least let them know they have this option to be in Hillel," he says. "And if a newcomer isn't ready yet to come for Shabbat, then he can play soccer or go skiing with us, or study English."

Many of those who participate in various Hillel activities — from English classes and sports to creative workshops and Jewish holidays celebrations — have to go an extra mile to become part of the movement.

Purinson recalled how a Moscow student recently came to the local Hillel office wanting to join the group.

"She found us in the Yellow Pages," Purinson said.

But those who already are active believe that taking the extra step is well worth it.

"I'm getting a huge emotional charge in Hillel," Moz said. "But I know that in my city there is a huge number of kids who can't get this, who can't share this sense of pride with me."

The answer, Purinson said, is to make the group more effective in attracting new members.

"And to meet these new challenges Hillel should be more resourceful in turning professional. It simply has to improve, or it will lose out to other non-Jewish options that exist," Purinson said.

'A nightclub versus Hillel: This is a dilemma for many of these unaffiliated students that we should be talking about.'

Yevgenia Mikhaleva

Russian Hillel

FIRST PERSON

Aliyah connects me to my roots, but severs some, too

By JONATHAN UDREN

JERUSALEM (JTA) — My weekly phone call with my parents brought some sad news recently, when I was told my grandmother's dementia was forcing her into a nursing home.

The wonders of technology let me hear the sadness in my mother's voice from across the globe, but I feel the distance between us. My grandmother is fading away, and the only thing I can do is talk on my cell phone as the Jerusalem bus makes its way past the walls of the Old City.

No matter how much I speak with my family on the phone, I'm just not physically there to help in this time of need.

This family crisis is making me realize now more than ever the full impact of my choice to make aliyah.

In choosing Israel, I have excluded America. Of course I can go back to visit, but the opportunities to make quick impromptu visits are gone. I feel as though I've partially severed the connection between my family and me.

■

I'm so caught up in my dreams of being the first in my family in 2,000 years to replant our roots in Israel that I almost forgot that I'm making this journey alone, without any family at all.

There have been other moments recently when I've started to feel this sting.

Of course, my intention was to get closer to my roots. But that seems to be the irony: In my quest to reconnect to my roots, somehow I have disconnected from some of them.

I've also felt the loss of connection with my close friends in America. So many of the relationships that I put so much energy into have fallen by the wayside. I see that making the dream of Israel a reality has cut important people out of my life.

This distance from family and friends may be the biggest drawback of making aliyah.

I guess that's the nature of dreams — that when they come out of the clouds and become reality there always are challenges that come with them. ■

JCPA plenum to address issues from fence to gay marriage

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Jewish Council for Public Affairs is once again taking its considered, consensual approach to issues that stir profound divisions and heated debate.

The umbrella organization for national Jewish groups and local community relations councils meets in Boston Feb. 21-24 for its annual plenum.

It will consider matters far — Israel's West Bank security barrier — and near — the battle over gay marriages is playing out down the street in Massachusetts courts and legislature — that divide American Jews. Presidential election-year politics are also pushing divisive issues to the forefront.

JCPA plenums often are a forum for the diverse segments of the American Jewish community to come together, debate the hot topics of the day and, at times, reach a consensus opinion.

Last year, the conference focused heavily on the impending U.S.-led war against Iraq and its implications on the Middle East, the battle over the separation of church and state, and Israel's settlement policy.

The involved — some would say tortuous — debates often lead to common-denominator opinions. Last year, the group was unable to come to a consensus on settlements, or to back a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Richard Foltin, legislative director of the American Jewish Committee, said the process allows everyone an opportunity to speak out, even if some national groups cannot sign on to the resolutions.

"There are contradicting points of views," he said. "I don't think that anybody can come here and say they are drowned out and their voice is not heard."

This year, the plenum will address several hot national topics, although at least one appears to offer the prospect of consensus — human cloning.

The Orthodox Union and the Union for Reform Judaism have joined forces to draft a resolution supporting stem-cell research and therapeutic cloning.

The issue represents a rare split between Orthodox Jews and conservative streams in other faiths. The O.U. holds that cloning research follows the Torah's command to treat and cure the ill, and that embryos are not equal to human beings.

Some Jewish groups, such as the Anti-Defamation League, had been hoping to put the Jewish community on record on hate crimes. In the past, Orthodox opposition to draft resolutions that explicitly acknowledge crimes against gays and lesbians has stymied such efforts.

Debate also is expected to focus on civil liberties issues arising from the USA

Patriot Act, passed shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and outside Washington.

Several bills this year will address the Middle East situation.

One denounces the upcoming hearings on the security fence at the International Court of Justice at The Hague, calling it a

reflection of a "long campaign by Israel's detractors to manipulate and abuse the U.N. system to isolate and demonize the Jewish state."

A draft resolution on the Middle East backs Israel's efforts to prevent "vigilante actions" — a veiled reference to the security fence it is building — but also "strongly encourages both sides to avoid acts of provocation that could render the task even more difficult."

A substitute resolution, written by JCPA's Israel Strategy Group, removes all of the potentially controversial language.

Beyond the resolution debate, the plenum is expected to hold forums on a wide variety of issues. They will open Saturday evening with a screening of clips of "The Passion of the Christ," the controversial new Mel Gibson movie that some Jews worry could fuel anti-Semitism.

Tuesday's discussions will focus on the upcoming presidential elections.

Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, said that at the convention, "there is not this hesitation to take positions on these issues from local leaders that you sometimes have from national leaders." ■

The conference will close with a screening of 'The Passion of the Christ.'

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Jet set

Israel received the first of a fleet of advanced U.S.-made war-planes that will put Iran's atomic reactors within reach.

Two F-16I planes landed at a gala reception at the Ramon air base in Israel on Thursday, having flown in from their manufacturer in Texas.

A hundred more of the jets are to be delivered by the end of the decade. The F-16I features enlarged fuel tanks, which give it an estimated range of 1,000 miles, as well as advanced electronic warfare systems.

Those advantages all help make the jets ideal for any theoretical strike on Iran's atomic reactors. Planes from an earlier generation of the F-16 were used by Israel in 1981 to destroy the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak.

Olmert pushes Gaza plan

Israel's plan for unilateral disengagement will deprive the Palestinians of a public-relations tool, Ehud Olmert said.

Addressing a mission of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in Jerusalem on Thursday, the Cabinet minister defended Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to evacuate most Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip — and, Olmert said, many in the West Bank.

The result of the withdrawal, he said, would be that "this conflict will not be as sexy to the international press; it will cease to be front-page news everywhere — and the Palestinians are dreading that."

World Court to show hearing on Web

The International Court of Justice will use the Internet for a live broadcast of its hearings on the West Bank security barrier.

Next week's hearings, which begin Monday, will be broadcast on the court's homepage, www.icj-cij.org. The broadcast will be available in English and French.

Bush: Parties 'stuck' in Middle East

President Bush said he believes some of the parties are "stuck" in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Speaking to the Middle East Television network Wednesday, Bush said he still believes in the "road map" peace plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace, and "there needs to be a commitment to fight terror." He also called on Israel "to worry about the plight of the average Palestinian citizen."

Haifa attack planners jailed

The Islamic Jihad members who dispatched a female suicide bomber to a Haifa cafe received multiple life terms in jail.

An Israeli military court Thursday sentenced Amajad Abeidi, 36, an Islamic Jihad leader in the West Bank city of Jenin, to 23 life sentences and another 50 years in jail, Ha'aretz said. The court also gave Sami Jaradat, 36, a close relative of the bomber, 21 life sentences and 50 years in jail.

The suicide bomber struck the Maxim Cafe outside Haifa in October 2003, killing 21 people.

Syria claim

Israel denied receiving a new peace overture from Syria. Israeli officials made the denial Thursday after Syrian Vice President Abdul Haim Khaddam said his country had made an offer via Turkey to restart peace talks stalled in 2000.

In the past, Israel has welcomed the idea of resuming negotiations but rejected any preconditions by Damascus.

WORLD

Queen honors Wiesel

Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal has been given an honorary knighthood by Britain's Queen Elizabeth II.

The award was made in recognition of a "lifetime of service to humanity."

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Thursday that Wiesenthal had been "untiring in his service to the Jewish communities in the U.K. and elsewhere by helping to right at least some of the awful wrongs of the Holocaust."

Wiesenthal, 95, will receive the award from the British ambassador to Austria, where he lives.

European Christians vow to back Israel

European Christian leaders pledged to double their support for Israel.

The vow made by 60 European Christian leaders came last week during a visit to Israel.

"Standing up for Israel during this time of hardship has nothing to do with politics but is simply a matter of being true to biblical promises and principles," said the Rev. Willem Glashouwer, chairman of the newly formed European Coalition for Israel. Israel's Keren Hayesod organized the event.

Spielberg backs Krakow museum

Steven Spielberg's foundation announced it will give \$40,000 to a museum on the Krakow Ghetto.

Spielberg reportedly responded to a request from Polish-born film director Roman Polanski, who survived the Holocaust in the ghetto. Parts of Spielberg's Academy Award-winning film, "Schindler's List," were filmed in the city.

The museum is slated to open this summer.

Le Pen out in French election

Jean-Marie Le Pen cannot run for the presidency of a key region in southern France, the region's senior government official said.

The prefect of the Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur region — which includes sizeable Jewish communities in Marseille and Nice — said Wednesday that the controversial far-right leader does not meet the necessary residence qualifications to allow him to run in next month's elections.

Le Pen topped the poll in first-round voting in the region in presidential elections in 2002 and was regarded as a strong candidate for the presidency of the region.

Le Pen's party, the National Front, filed an appeal against the decision in a Marseille court.

NORTH AMERICA

Kids helping kids

A U.S. schoolteacher donated \$10,000 Thursday to improve security at Jerusalem's kindergartens.

Jane Grauer, a teacher at the Westchester Day School, a Jewish school, collected some \$300 from children in her kindergarten class, who each gave up one day's worth of Chanukah gelt.

She then collected additional donations from other schools and local synagogues.

Americans love Israel — after eight

Israel is ninth on a list of Americans' favorite foreign countries.

According to a survey reported by Israel Radio on Thursday, Australia, Britain and Canada top the list.