



IN THE NEWS

Gaza raid leaves 14 Palestinians dead

Israeli forces killed 14 Palestinians during a raid on Hamas strongholds in Gaza.

Witnesses said at least seven of those killed in Sunday's raid on the Bureij and Nusseirat refugee camps were gunmen from the Islamic terrorist group.

The army called the action early Sunday a retaliation for Palestinian rocket and mortar attacks on Gaza settlements.

Six Palestinians died in a series of failed attacks on Israelis at a Gaza border crossing last Friday. The attackers tried to use vehicles disguised as Israeli army jeeps to attack Israeli soldiers, but were unsuccessful.

Mubarak, Bush to meet at the ranch

President Bush will discuss Israeli-Palestinian peace prospects with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on April 12.

Mubarak will stay at Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas. Bush wants Mubarak's assistance in promoting his plans to bring democracy to the Middle East.

Additionally, the United States reportedly has agreed to offer Egypt incentives to help secure the Gaza Strip once Israel withdraws.

Extremists mark Goldstein massacre

Jewish extremists marked the 10th anniversary of the "Hebron massacre" by Baruch Goldstein.

Dozens of far-right settlers and Kach activists gathered in the Jewish enclave in Hebron and nearby Kiryat Arba for Purim celebrations in which praise was offered for Goldstein, who gunned down 29 Palestinians at the Tomb of the Patriarchs on Purim in 1994.

The celebrations, which included toasts with a wine named after Goldstein and poetry readings, were meant to have been held at his grave site in Kiryat Arba but were relocated after the Israeli army barred entry there.

WORLD REPORT

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As Russia prepares to vote, Jews are ambivalent about Putin's edge

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — Alexander Sakov is of two minds about President Vladimir Putin's imminent re-election.

"As a Jew, I should feel comfortable with the choice of Putin," says Sakov, a Jewish leader and journalist from the Siberian city of Omsk. "He is no anti-Semite and I cannot say there are reasons for any special Jewish concerns associated with him. But as a citizen, I have no reason to be happy."

Like Sakov, many of Russia's estimated 600,000 to 1 million Jews are pleased with the way Putin has handled anti-Semitism. But they are uncomfortable with his apparent disregard for democracy, as evidenced by his use of state-run media to fuel his election campaign and his refusal to take part in any televised debates.

"You turn on the iron, and again you hear what you just heard on the radio and television," Sakov jokes.

The state-controlled mass media are "full with praise for Putin," he says.

Putin has shown a great ability to maintain his grip on power, and Sunday's vote is unlikely to be an exception.

Most observers believe Putin will receive between 70 and 85 percent of the vote for another four-year term. The only question seems to be what would happen if more than half of Russia's 110 million voters don't show up at the polls. If that happens, the results of the vote could be constitutionally invalidated.

Russians — Jews included — seem to be accepting Putin's limits on democratic re-

forms because he has brought stability to the country.

Russian Jews were given another reason to back the incumbent last week when Putin appointed a Jewish man as prime minister. Mikhail Fradkov, who was Russia's envoy to the European Union, is an unknown figure in Russian politics.

Last Friday, Fradkov's appointment was approved by the pro-Putin majority in the Russian Parliament.

Russian Jewish leaders said Fradkov has had no interaction with the organized Jewish community.

Those who are running against Putin in the election represent all segments of the political spectrum — from staunch liberals to pro-Kremlin politicians to Communists and moderate nationalists.

The race even has a bodyguard for ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy running. The bodyguard, a former boxer, is substituting for his boss in a no-win situation.

By Western standards, the campaign is an odd one. There are no issues being discussed and election posters are nonexistent.

"This election is void of even minimal elements of democracy," says Tankred Golenpolsky, the founder of the International Jewish Gazette, an independent Moscow news weekly.

Putin's record during his first term in the Kremlin is considered to have been mixed.

The economy boomed during the last four years due mainly to high oil prices, but many of Russia's acute social problems — low salaries for government-paid workers and

Continued on page 2

ACROSS THE
FORMER
SOVIET
UNION

■ *As Russians prepare to vote, Jews ambivalent about Putin's victory-to-be*

Continued from page 1

heating problems in parts of the country — remain unsolved.

It's generally quiet on the Chechen front, where Russia fought a nearly decade-long battle with separatist Muslim guerrillas.

Free-market reforms have continued, but the director of one of Russia's business giants, the Yukos oil company, was jailed last year in what many believe is a Kremlin-orchestrated case.

Yukos' Jewish founder, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, remains in jail, allegedly for tax evasion and theft of state property.

Putin's popularity is largely explained by Russians' yearning for order and a strong hand, skillfully wielded by the Kremlin's political advisers.

Another important factor is Putin's ability to use federal resources to do away with his serious political challengers or critics.

■

Some Jews, especially those in urban areas, do not have strong praise for the Russian president.

Many are liberals and want their country to become a European-style democracy with a guaranteed transfer of power through fair elections.

Before he left office in late 1999, former President Boris Yeltsin appointed Putin as his handpicked successor. Putin is expected to do the same before he leaves office.

Despite the bleak electoral perspectives, many of these people will cast their vote in the election for Irina Khakamada of the liberal party known as SPS. Sakov,

who earns his living as a manufacturing engineer, says he did not see any changes for the better in his industry during Putin's rule.

"I want to work normally, earn normally and live normally, and I don't have any of this," he says, explaining that much of the industrial enterprises in his area are "half-dead."

As if echoing this concern, Putin dismissed his entire Cabinet two weeks ago in a surprise move that many believe was meant to place blame for unpopular economic and social policies on his ministers. Some of those ministers, including outgoing Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, represented the vestiges of Yeltsin's regime.

"The president has become the most powerful symbol for Russians," says Pyotr Schelisch, an independent Jewish member of the State Duma, the lower house of parliament.

"We had a president who was the symbol of all things evil," he says, referring to Yeltsin, who was very unpopular late in his term. "Now we have a president who is the symbol of all things good."

Jewish leaders, who are remaining apolitical ahead of the election, say its outcome will not have an immediate impact on Russian Jews.

"Most of the issues of concern for Russian Jews — such as anti-Semitism or the well-being of our elderly — have nothing

to do with this election," says Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the Russian Jewish Congress.

Other Jews support Putin, often echoing a common sentiment that Russians cannot handle democracy and are better off under a strong-handed leader like Putin.

"Democracy — as it is understood by the liberals — is not suited for Russia," Gennady Khazanov, a popular comedian and president of the Jewish Community of Moscow, told those attending a small private Jewish community dinner in early February while he proposed a toast to Putin.

'I cannot influence the outcome of the election . . . which can be called anything but democracy.'

Moscow Jewish student, 19

While some Jews are not strongly pro-Putin, they believe that he is an acceptable choice.

"I cannot say I'm happy that we will have an election with no choice, but the choice we are being offered is probably not that bad. At least, we can see some stability in the next four years," says Valery, a middle-aged teacher of economics at a Moscow university who asked not to have his last name published.

And those who do not think they have a real choice in the elections are free to choose at least one other form of protest.

"I will not go to polls at all," says Alexei, a 19-year-old student at a Moscow Jewish university. "I cannot influence the outcome of the election, and I don't want to play this unfair game, which can be called anything but democracy." ■

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Russian Jewish leader gunned down

MOSCOW (JTA) — The motive behind the killing of a prominent Jewish leader from the Caucasus Mountains is unknown.

Zaur Gilalov, a successful businessman and the head of the World Congress of Mountain Jews, was shot dead here last Friday. He was killed in broad daylight by two unidentified gunmen not far from his office.

Jewish leaders and Gilalov's friends say anti-Semitism was not the motive of the crime.

Many believe that Gilalov, 29, was a victim of a contract murder related to his

business operations.

"This is a great tragedy for the Jews of Caucasus and for the whole Jewish community," said Pinchas Goldschmidt, Moscow's chief rabbi and a friend of the slain Jewish leader.

Gilalov had emerged in recent years as one of the most active donors in the Jewish community both in Russia and in Azerbaijan.

Last year, Gilalov helped to set up the World Congress of Mountain Jews, an umbrella organization representing an estimated 250,000 Jews living in Russia, Azerbaijan, Israel and North America. ■

THIS WEEK**MONDAY**

■ Activists from the National Council of Jewish Women gather in Washington for meetings with political leaders through Wednesday, with discussions focused on judicial nominations and their impact on the upcoming elections.

WEDNESDAY

■ The United Jewish Communities committee charged with making overseas allocations meets to discuss its allocations plan. Insiders expect the committee to endorse a deal reached last month that maintains the 75/25 percent split between the Jewish Agency for Israel and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of an expected \$187 million for overseas funds.

■ Secretary of State Colin Powell continues his testimony before the House appropriations subcommittee that pays for the State Department. Powell is expected to address demands that the Bush administration name a single senior envoy with broad discretionary powers to negotiate an end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Senate Finance Committee also will hear testimony on U.S. trade policy in the Middle East.

■ The Middle East Institute releases previously classified Palestinian refugee information from the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine. History scholar Michael Fischbach uses the documents to trace the question of property ownership back to the Ottoman period.

■ The U.S.-Israeli Science and Technology Foundation brings together U.S. and Israeli officials in Washington to discuss integrating environmental management with security requirements.

THURSDAY

■ Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz meets with top U.S. administration officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser. Mofaz will brief the U.S. officials about Israel's plans to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank. Some Bush officials have expressed frustration with the slow progress in detailing a plan.

FRIDAY

■ "Broken Wings," a film about a middle-class Israeli family trying to survive the father's death, opens in New York and Los Angeles. The film won the Israeli Academy Award in 2002 and has won prizes at the Berlin and Tokyo film festivals.

■ Israeli art week begins in New York. The week of events will include an Israeli documentary film festival, public lectures, performances and an auction of Israeli art at Sotheby's on Thursday, March 18.

Insurance fight goes to Congress

By JOE BERKOFSKY

NEW YORK (JTA) — The U.S. Congress is the latest battleground in the fight over insurance companies blacklisting travelers to Israel from life insurance coverage.

An Illinois Democrat, Rep. Rahm Emanuel, is drafting legislation to prevent life insurance companies from redlining Israel travelers.

Emanuel, a member of the House Financial Services Committee, which oversees insurance issues, is working on the first nationwide law aimed at underwriters that have rejected applicants with Israel travel plans or experience because the Jewish state is listed on a State Department travel advisory.

The congressman plans to introduce the legislation within a few weeks and so cannot discuss details of the proposed bill, Emanuel's spokeswoman, Cecilia Prewett, said.

Prewett said Emanuel, who is Jewish, is pursuing the bill because he was "alarmed" at the policies on Israel.

"It doesn't treat an American ally, Israel, very well, and it doesn't reflect our values," Prewett said.

When a JTA report earlier this year found that several life insurance companies were denying coverage to individuals who had traveled to Israel or planned on traveling to Israel, several New York legislators pledged to fight those policies in the halls of the New York State Assembly.

So far, bills on the issue are in the works in the New York State Assembly and the Illinois State Senate.

"This is clearly a major step forward," said Adam Segal, 26, a senior associate at Rabinowitz Media in Washington who was denied life insurance by Fidelity Investments of Boston because he honeymooned in Israel in 2002.

The insurance redlining has the potential to affect many Americans; about 200,000 Americans visited Israel last year.

Fidelity is among several major underwriters that routinely deny life insurance not only to Israel travelers, but also to visitors of other hot spots with a State Department travel advisory.

The list, which is continually updated in line with changing political and social

conditions in each country, currently has 27 countries, including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Columbia, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia as well as Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Jules Polonetsky, a former New York state legislator who proposed legislation that insurance companies not take travel into account when determining coverage, said Israel draws more U.S. visitors than the other countries and so Jews get unfairly victimized.

"There is clearly a disproportionate impact on Jews," Polonetsky said.

Several Jewish groups, including the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, have urged the passage of legislation to block the practice of insurance redlining.

In 1996, New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver co-sponsored legislation on the matter when he was informed that the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company was denying coverage to frequent Israel travelers. At the time, Met Life reversed its policy and the bill never passed the state senate to become law.

This week, Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, met with Emanuel to discuss the redlining policies. Hoenlein said he also has met with other Congressmen, including Reps. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.), Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and Peter Deutsch (D-Fla.), to urge federal legislation on the matter.

While states regulate the practices of local insurance companies, the fact that many firms conduct trade across state lines may allow federal legislators to step in.

A national bill would "also avoid a lot of the confusion of trying to do it state by state," Hoenlein said.

Despite the criticism, an insurance industry spokesman defended the practice as sound insurance policy.

Jack Dolan, a spokesman for the American Council on Life Insurance, said the group was aware of Emanuel's efforts and would oppose any such legislation.

"The issue of getting intimately involved with the underwriting of insurance companies — obviously we'd have a problem with that," Dolan said. ■

Congressmen say travelers to Israel are being treated unfairly.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Purim attack foiled

A major terrorist attack planned against Purim revelers in Jerusalem was foiled.

According to the Shin Bet, a raid on a Palestinian terror cell in Ramallah prevented a suicide bombing in Israel's capital on Saturday.

Further details were not immediately available, but the reported arrests allowed Israel to lower a high alert in Jerusalem.

U.S. denies delayed withdrawal

U.S. officials denied that they are encouraging Israel to delay a proposed withdrawal from Gaza until after U.S. elections. State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said the report of such pressure, originating in Israel, "doesn't sound right to me."

Last Friday, Israel's daily Ma'ariv said that the reports originated with Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, who has made known his displeasure with the prospect of unilateral withdrawal.

Powell, Fayyad meet

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell encouraged the Palestinian finance minister to increase accountability.

"What they talked about was improving the transparency and accountability of Palestinian finance, with a recognized goal of making sure the money didn't go to the terror — none of the money ended up in the hands of the terrorist groups," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said last week after Powell met Salam Fayyad.

Less suspect

Israeli businessman Elhanan Tannenbaum is no longer suspected of divulging state secrets while in Hezbollah captivity. Israeli officials said Sunday that Tannenbaum, who has been under Shin Bet interrogation since being repatriated in a prisoner swap with the Lebanese militia in January, could still be charged with criminal misconduct after he admitted he traveled to Abu Dhabi for illicit business deals.

According to Ha'aretz, Tannenbaum told his interrogators that Hezbollah said it would try to recruit him as an agent after his return to Israel. On Sunday, Israel's state comptroller ordered an inquiry into the prisoner swap after it was revealed last week that Tannenbaum's father-in-law used to work for the family of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Cairo cold shoulder

An Egyptian official snubbed Israel's invitation to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Camp David accords.

The London-based daily A-Sharq Al-Awsat reported over the weekend that Fathi Srur, speaker of Egypt's Parliament, had turned down an invitation by Israeli counterpart Reuven Rivlin to address Israel's Knesset. The event was to have taken place at the end of this month, on the anniversary of the Israeli-Egyptian peace deal.

According to A-Sharq Al-Awsat, Srur said he would only accept Rivlin's invitation "when Israel withdraws from all occupied Arab lands and full peace is achieved."

WORLD

Bombing at Moscow school

A small homemade bomb shattered windows at a Jewish educational center in Moscow. The attack at the Mevor Haim Institute occurred last Friday night. The bomb was planted inside a vacant building next to the Jewish facility that belongs to the institute. The building was given to the Jewish community in 2002 and was eventually to be torn down and replaced by a larger Jewish educational

and community complex. Police opened an investigation. A police spokesman told JTA that investigators had no evidence so far that the explosion was motivated by anti-Semitism.

Rallies on war criminal banned

Weekend demonstrations planned in Italy regarding a pardon for a convicted Nazi war criminal were banned for fear of violence. After supporters of former Nazi officer Erich Priebke announced they would stage a rally urging an amnesty for the former SS officer, the Rome Jewish community and an association of World War II deportees had planned counterdemonstrations.

Rome Prefect Achille Serra cited the "climate of tension" in the city over the planned rallies, which would have taken place simultaneously in the same part of the city. He said he decided to ban the rallies because of the possible repercussions on public order and security.

Priebke, 90, is serving a life sentence for his role in the massacre of 335 Italians, including 75 Jews, in March 1944.

AMIA action wanted

Argentine Jewish leaders pressed for action on a still-unsolved bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

The leaders met March 4 with government official to express their concern that not enough progress is being made in the probe into the July 18, 1994, bombing on the AMIA center, which killed 85 people.

The lack of progress comes despite support from Argentine President Nestor Kirchner, who has attended a commemoration of the attack, to solve the case. In addition, secret files from the government and intelligence regarding the case were unveiled.

Forced emigration marked in Poland

The 36th anniversary of the forced emigration of 20,000 Polish Jews in 1968 is being remembered.

The emigration took place during the Communist government's "anti-Zionist" campaign. Warsaw's mayor attended a wreath-laying ceremony Saturday at a memorial plaque at a Warsaw train station. Other events this week include a concert and panel discussion on contemporary Jewish identity in Poland, sponsored by the Israeli Embassy and the Beit Warszawa Jewish Cultural Association.

NORTH AMERICA

Anti-Semitism higher in N.Y.

Anti-Semitic incidents in New York spiked sharply during the last three months of 2003, a new report says.

There were 57 such incidents during the last three months of 2003, as opposed to 31 during the same period in 2002, said the report released by Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.).

But anti-Semitic incidents fell overall in 2003 compared with 2002. There were 108 such incidents last year, as opposed to 114 the year before, according to the New York City Police Department.

Canada moves against alleged Nazi

Canada began denaturalization proceedings against a man accused of being a wartime concentration camp guard.

Jura Skomatchuk's unit was involved in hundreds of anti-Jewish operations, including the "Harvest Festival" massacre of more than 40,000 Jews in the Poniatowa, Majdanek and Trawniki concentration camps in October 1943.

Skomatchuk, 83, was living in St. Catharines, Ontario. The Canadian government alleges that Skomatchuk covered up his past as an armed SS guard after entering Canada in 1952.