

IN THE NEWS

Settlers protest withdrawal plan

Tens of thousands of Israelis who oppose Ariel Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan are forming a human chain between the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem.

More than 100,000 people took part in Sunday night's event, running from the Gush Katif settlement bloc in Gaza to Israel's capital.

Many members of the Israeli Knesset took part in the event, which included a rally that took place in Jerusalem.

Jewish groups gather with the Democrats

Jewish delegates to the Democratic national convention gathered in Boston.

Several Jewish organizations, including the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the United Jewish Communities, the National Jewish Democratic Council and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston joined together Sunday evening for a reception also attended by congressional leaders and Cameron Kerry, the Jewish brother of Sen. John Kerry, the presumptive Democratic candidate for president.

Jewish organizations will be holding meetings and receptions throughout the upcoming convention week.

Earlier in the day, Boston-area Jews met at a city park to remember victims of recent terrorist attacks in Israel and those who died in attacks on Argentine Jewish sites in the 1990s.

Six Palestinians killed in West Bank

Israeli soldiers killed six Palestinians in the West Bank. Two of those killed in the operation conducted Sunday evening in the city of Tulkarm were believed to be local commanders of the Al-Aksa Brigade. Earlier Sunday, six Israeli children were wounded when Palestinians fired an anti-tank missile at a community center in the Gaza Strip.

WORLD REPORT

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Claims Conference agrees to centralize Holocaust efforts

By URIEL HEILMAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — Was it a revolution or a resolution? After a stormy few weeks leading up to last week's annual board meeting of the Claims Conference, the main group charged with Holocaust restitution, an agreement was reached to centralize world Jewry's restitution efforts.

"Instead of sitting here and fighting about the pie, let's go out and get a bigger pie," Amir Shaviv, assistant executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, said of the new strategy to bolster worldwide restitution efforts. The JDC is a member of the Claims Conference.

The meeting may also have quelled — for the time being — the controversy surrounding the distribution of unclaimed funds left from the \$1.25 billion Swiss banks settlement.

A presentation by Claims Conference officials showed there actually may be no funds left over from that settlement once all claims have been resolved.

Depending on whom one talks to, the agreement on centralizing restitution either marked a historic revolution against Claims Conference control, or resolved criticism against the restitution group and signaled that the organization is more successful and influential than ever.

For now, both sides are claiming victory.

On July 22, toward the end of the two-day meeting in New York, board members approved a resolution to create a panel to "discuss coordination of restitution efforts outside Germany and Austria" that

"should include the participation of all relevant groups involved in the restitution of funds."

It was not immediately clear which groups would be included outside of the Claims Conference and the World Jewish Restitution Organization.

The Claims Conference deals with Germany and Austria, while the WJRO is charged with securing restitution elsewhere.

The resolution came on the heels of a call by some Claims Conference board members, and by Israeli Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to create a "blue-ribbon panel" to examine how to "increase efficiency, transparency, relevance and coordination in restitution efforts."

Critics have charged that the Claims Conference, created in 1951 to press Jewish material claims against Germany, is not sufficiently representative of today's Jewish world and does too much of its work behind closed doors.

One of the conference's most vocal critics described Thursday's agreement as a "remarkable transformation."

"The bottom line is, a revolution has occurred," said Elan Steinberg, executive vice president of the World Jewish Congress and a Claims Conference board member.

Steinberg told JTA in January that the conference "should be restructured" and that its handling of the distribution of unclaimed Holocaust-era assets runs "contrary to the very principles of democracy, accountability and transparency."

After the meeting on July 22, Steinberg

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said the new resolution would open up the restitution process to the entire Jewish world.

He said the panel would deal with restitution for every country, including Germany and Austria, which until now have been the exclusive domain of the Claims Conference.

"All we are saying now is that a roundtable has been established. The participants will, of course, be talking about restitution from everywhere," he said.

But the Claims Conference's chairman, Julius Berman, said the decision to create the panel was not a revolution but a move to expand the group's involvement in restitution efforts worldwide.

The move would constitute a sign that Jewish groups want to make use of the group's expertise in seeking restitution from other European countries involved in the Holocaust.

The WJRO has had limited success in getting Eastern European countries to return Jewish assets, seized by the Nazis or their allies, to their rightful Jewish owners.

"Somebody is saying the WJRO needs adrenaline, and we have to revamp it," Berman said.

The creation of the panel "really is the Claims Conference's effort to help the WJRO in its present form or a restructured form to engage in the restitution effort."

Berman added: "We're not talking about a merger. As far as Germany and

Austria, we're not asking for help and they're not suggesting we need help."

Steinberg said, "I think Julius Berman comes to the table with a different notion than others have, and that is the purpose of having a roundtable."

The July 22 resolution stated that the panel would deal only with coordinating restitution efforts outside Germany and Austria.

It also stipulated that the "independence and autonomy of the Claims Conference shall be maintained in any such process and that any recommendations arising out of such a panel that affect the legal status, structure, or board-approved policies of the Claims Conference shall be brought to the Board of Directors for review and action."

Participants said the clause was meant to ward off any effort to wrest control of Holocaust restitution for Germany and Austria from the Claims Conference itself.

Bobby Brown, senior adviser on Holocaust-era property at the Jewish Agency for Israel, hailed the resolution as a landmark development.

"This will be the first real and open discussion on the restitution issue that has taken place since the early 1950s," he said. "It will be based on inclusion, the rights of survivors, as well as the rights of service providers to needy Holocaust victims. I hope and I believe that these meetings will address the issues that are of concern to everyone, and in a transparent fashion provide answers for all."

Part of the impetus for creating a panel to centralize restitution efforts arose out of the divisiveness engendered by the distribution of unclaimed funds from the 1998 Swiss banks settlement.

According to the settlement's terms, once all the owners of Holocaust-era Swiss bank accounts are located and compensated, U.S. District Court Judge Edward Korman will decide how to distribute any remaining money.

Korman has indicated that he will use a formula that would send most of those unclaimed funds — an estimated \$650 million — to survivor organizations in

the former Soviet Union, with smaller portions going to survivors in Israel, North America and elsewhere.

That has incensed many survivor groups in the United States and Israel, which say they're not getting a fair share.

More recently, Israeli government officials have weighed in on the case, saying that Israel should have a greater say in how the money is distributed since Israel is home to the largest survivor population in the world.

"There is unanimity across the board that those first entitled to this money are legitimate claimants," Brown said. "But pretty much across the Jewish world there's also agreement that

if there are any unclaimed funds, they must benefit Holocaust survivors wherever they are."

The Claims Conference — which has not had a role in the Swiss case except to help find claimants — now warns that the fight over the funds is premature.

On June 10, the Claims Conference reached an agreement with the U.S. court and Swiss banks to publish an additional 5,000 names of Holocaust-era Swiss account owners, allow the Claims Conference limited access to search certain bank records, and check Jewish claimants against records of 4.1 million Swiss bank accounts. The effort would likely take 12 to 18 months.

That deal, which still needs Swiss government approval, could use up all the money in the settlement because it would find more account holders, conference officials said.

That assessment may render moot or at least defer the debate over who should get the leftover money, a debate that some say has turned ugly in recent weeks.

"I think we're way too soon on this issue," said Avram Lyon, executive director of the Jewish Labor Committee and a Claims Conference board member. "It leaves a very bitter taste in your mouth to see this kind of bickering over something which may not be there altogether. It's not right." ■

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Bobby Brown
Jewish Agency for Israel

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THIS WEEK**MONDAY**

■ The Democratic Convention begins in Boston and runs through Thursday. Jewish groups have planned a variety of events during the convention, including receptions with leading legislators, a forum on the relationship between American Jews and Indian Americans and a critique by a far-left group of what it considers a pro-Sharon slant in the Middle East policies of presumptive presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.).

■ Colin Powell leaves for a tour of Hungary, Poland, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Much of the U.S. secretary of state's time in Egypt will be spent discussing that country's role in Israel's Gaza Strip withdrawal plan. Israel is counting on Egypt to help provide security in Gaza after Israel withdraws in 2005.

■ The chairman of the executive of the Jewish Agency for Israel meets with leadership of the United Jewish Communities. Sallai Meridor will be meeting in his capacity as chair of the World Zionist Organization to discuss the UJC-WZO relationship, said Jewish Agency secretary-general Josh Schwarcz. The Jewish Agency, which receives a good deal of funding from the UJC, is currently negotiating its funding for the WZO.

■ The fast day of Tisha B'Av, commemorating the destruction of the Holy Temples and other calamities throughout Jewish history, begins at sundown Monday night and continues until nightfall Tuesday.

■ The Anti-Defamation League joins the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Washington Archdiocese to launch a five-day Holocaust education program for Catholic educators from across the United States.

WEDNESDAY

■ Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili is slated to arrive in Israel.

■ The United Jewish Communities board of trustees is expected to approve the recommendation of Howard Rieger as its next president and CEO during a conference call. Rieger, the longtime president of the United Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh, is slated to take office Sept. 1.

SUNDAY

■ The United Jewish Communities' eighth annual Jewish Leadership Forum takes place through Tuesday in Aspen, Colo. The forum's programs will explore cutting-edge philanthropic strategies and sessions with industry experts on how to translate business initiatives into giving opportunities to help Jewish communities around the world. Attending will be socially engaged Jews under age 45.

9/11 hijackers eyed Jewish sites

By **MATTHEW E. BERGER**

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Long before the Sept. 11 attacks, Al-Qaida was planning terrorist attacks against Israeli and American Jewish sites.

That, at least, is one conclusion of the 9/11 Commission report, which was released July 22.

The report shows that American intelligence agencies received signals that Al-Qaida was looking to attack Israel or U.S. Jewish sites in the months before the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

It also shows that several of the hijackers, as well as Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, were motivated in part by hatred of Israel and anger over the support it receives from the United States.

While much of the information already had been released through public testimony and media stories, the report emphasizes the ties between the terrorist attacks in the United States and U.S. policy in the Middle East.

It also paints a chilling portrait of what might have been, by detailing Al-Qaida proposals to attack Israeli and U.S. Jewish sites that the group either rejected or postponed.

The report shows that Khalid Sheik Mohammed, considered the mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks, was motivated by his "violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel," according to his own admission after being captured in March 2003.

Mohammed was interested in attacking Jewish sites in New York City, and sent an Al-Qaida operative to New York early in 2001 to scout possible locations.

He also brought a plan to bin Laden to attack the Israeli city of Eilat by recruiting a Saudi air force pilot who would commandeer a Saudi jet.

Bin Laden supported the proposals, but they were put on hold while the group concentrated on the Sept. 11 plan.

American intelligence officials believed throughout the spring and summer

of 2001 that Abu Zubaydah, a Palestinian member of Al-Qaida, planned to attack Israel.

The terrorist leaders also considered playing off developments in the Middle East.

Mohammed told investigators that bin Laden had wanted to expedite attacks after Ariel Sharon, then leader of Israel's opposition, visited Jerusalem's Temple Mount in September 2000, and later when Sharon, who by then had become Israel's prime minister, met with President Bush at the White House.

Mark Regev, spokesman for the Israeli Embassy in Washington, said the report doesn't provide information that is new to Israeli intelligence officials.

"There's very good intelligence cooperation between the two countries," Regev said, noting that counter-terrorism communication is particularly good.

He said that while Israel is used to facing terrorism, it has

been spared the type of "mega-terrorist attack" the United States suffered on Sept. 11.

The report is being viewed in the American Jewish community as confirmation of what they've been hearing privately for years.

"We didn't need this report to tell us that Jews were and are a target," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "Throughout the years there were evidence and alerts and knowledge of specific times and threats."

The report comes as some Jewish leaders are working to secure federal dollars to make security improvements for Jewish sites. Charles Konigsberg, the United Jewish Communities' vice president for public policy, said the report will "absolutely help us to make the case" for federal funding.

Other Jewish groups and some lawmakers fear that giving federal aid to houses of worship at risk of terror attacks would violate the separation of church and state. ■

A report on the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks paints a chilling portrait of strikes that were planned against both Israeli and Jewish targets.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

AIPAC praises Iran resolution

The American Israeli Public Affairs Committee applauded a Senate resolution opposing Iran's nuclear efforts.

The resolution, passed July 22, urges the International Atomic Energy Agency to report to the U.N. Security Council on Iran's failure to comply with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and urges the Security Council to take action based on the information.

Israel believes Iran poses the greatest potential threat to the Jewish state in the Middle East due to its burgeoning nuclear capabilities and sponsorship of Hezbollah.

AMIA resolution passage prompts elation

The U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed a bill condemning the 1994 bombing of a Jewish center in Argentina.

The resolution sponsored by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), which passed July 22, also calls on the United States, Argentina and the world community to pursue justice for the perpetrators of the attack.

Jewish groups praise Darfur resolution

Several Jewish groups applauded congressional resolutions calling on the United States to fight genocide in Sudan.

The Anti-Defamation League and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism commended Congress for unanimously passing resolutions defining atrocities in the Darfur region as genocide and urging the White House to rally an international effort against them. "Our leaders seem increasingly committed to ensuring that 'never again' will have meaning," said the RAC's director, Rabbi David Saperstein.

Groups condemn anti-gay bill

Three Jewish groups condemned the U.S. House of Representatives' passage of a bill that would ban courts from hearing gay challenges to a marriage law.

The House on July 22 voted 233-194 to approve the Marriage Protection Act, which would ban any court, including the U.S. Supreme Court, from reviewing the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act. The bill effectively would prevent a gay couple who married in a state where gay marriages are legal from forcing another state to recognize their marriage.

The Reform movement, the National Council of Jewish Women and the Anti-Defamation League condemned the bill.

UJC backs school security

The United Jewish Communities agreed to give approximately \$4.7 million to help pay for security guards at Israeli schools.

The money will pay for 550 security guards to protect 50,000 kindergartners around the country. The United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization for North American Jewish federations, has helped raise some \$16.5 million since the request for aid was first made two years ago by the Israeli government.

The Jewish Agency for Israel is helping spearhead the task of providing protection for Israel's schools.

MIDDLE EAST

Temple Mount attack feared

Far-right Jews could attack Muslim shrines on the Temple Mount, Israel's internal security minister warned.

"The threat level against the Temple Mount by Jewish extremists and fanatics in order to disrupt the entire peace process has risen in

the past few months, and especially in the last few weeks, more than ever before," Tzachi Hanegbi told Israel's Channel Two television in an interview broadcast Saturday.

But he added that the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security service, had no hard evidence against any specific suspects, prompting members of Israel's right wing to accuse him of needlessly alarming the Israeli public.

Hamas member escapes

A Hamas terrorist escaped an Israeli airstrike on his home.

At least two helicopter-fired missiles hit the two-story building in Gaza City, Palestinian witnesses said. Four bystanders were wounded, although the homeowner, a Hamas member, was away at the time.

WORLD

Did a New Zealand Jew help the Mossad?

A member of New Zealand's Jewish community was linked to an alleged Israeli spy ring.

Police were seeking Tony Resnick, a 35-year-old paramedic and former member of the Auckland Jewish Council, in connection with two Israelis jailed in the city for passport fraud, the New Zealand Herald reported Saturday.

According to the leading newspaper, Resnick left the country for Hong Kong after Eli Cara and Uriel Kelman were arrested in April. He is believed to have gone on to Israel, where his wife and children later joined him.

New Zealand accuses Cara, Kelman and a third Israeli still at large of a plot to assume the identity of a wheelchair-bound New Zealander in order to obtain his passport for a Mossad operation. According to the Herald, Resnick had previously treated the handicapped man. Jerusalem has not commented on the spy charges in the case.

Israel expels Russian journalist

A Russian journalist was expelled from Israel on spying allegations. Last Friday, Konstantin Kapitonov, a veteran Middle East reporter, was ordered to leave Israel, Russian and Israeli media reported.

Citing an official document issued by the Prime Minister's Office, Israeli media earlier reported that Kapitonov, who has worked in Israel since 2001, was working for Russian intelligence.

Kapitonov, 58, who since 1975 has worked as a journalist in the region, denied the allegations. He says the real cause for his expulsion was a recent article he published in a Moscow daily in which he sharply criticized Israel's treatment of Russians who arrived in the Jewish state during the last wave of aliyah from the former Soviet Union.

JCC dedicated in Russia

A Jewish community center was dedicated in the central Russian city of Tula.

The four-story \$800,000 Tula Jewish Community House dedicated last Friday will house a Hesed welfare center, synagogues, a cultural center and a Jewish Agency for Israel center. The center is being constructed with funds from the Pittsburgh federation, the Posner family, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and local donors.

Construction is expected to be completed within a year. The Tula center is the 16th such project undertaken in the former Soviet Union in the last few years with funds provided by the Pittsburgh federation and Henry Posner III, a Pittsburgh-based railroad magnate.