

IN THE NEWS

Religious party joins Sharon coalition

An Israeli religious party agreed to join Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's new coalition.

United Torah Judaism said it would join forces with Sharon despite objections to his plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank this year.

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Rocket barrage wounds soldiers

Palestinian rocket fire from the Gaza Strip wounded 12 Israeli soldiers.

Hamas claimed responsibility for the Kassam rocket that struck the garrison at Nahal Oz on Wednesday.

Two of the soldiers were in serious condition and the rest were lightly hurt.

Three other rockets, also fired into Israel, struck harmlessly in the Negev Desert.

Before dawn, a Palestinian gunman was shot dead while storming troops at the Erez checkpoint on the Gaza-Israel border.

State Dept. to open anti-Semitism office

State Department officials said an office to monitor international anti-Semitism will be unveiled shortly after Condoleezza Rice is confirmed as secretary of state.

Michael Kozak, the acting assistant secretary of state for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, said Wednesday that discussions of where to place the office are ongoing, as well as a budget for the office, which was mandated as part of the Global Anti-Semitism Awareness/Review Act, which passed Congress in October.

State Department officials say plans are almost completed to incorporate the office into the portfolio of the special envoy for Holocaust issues, but they are awaiting Rice's approval before moving forward.

WORLD REPORT

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After tsunami, an agonizing wait for Chicago family seeking their son

By JTA STAFF

CHICAGO (JTA) — A Jewish family from the Chicago area is going through the excruciating process of waiting and wondering whether their son survived the tsunami that engulfed 10 Asian nations, killing an estimated 150,000 people.

In an Atlanta suburb, a Jewish family awaits word from their daughter, who is believed to be safe — but who hasn't been heard from since the Dec. 26 disaster.

And in Dallas, a congregation was overjoyed after two Jewish community members reported that a fishing boat had rescued them from the deadly wave.

Ben Abels, 33, a real estate salesman from Evanston, Ill., was on Thailand's Phi Phi Island during a two-week trip to Asia when the tsunami hit the bungalow where he and a companion were staying. As of Tuesday, his family did not have any word on his whereabouts.

"We don't know if Ben was trapped under the debris or if he was blown out," said his father, Bob Abels. "We don't know anything."

Bob and his wife, Hope Abels, were joined outside their home Monday by another son, David, and U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.).

They last heard from Ben on Dec. 24, and asked for help from anyone who might have information.

Ben Abels' companion, Libby North of Seattle, had been in touch with the family, they said. North lost one of her hands and suffered a serious leg injury before she was discovered by aid workers.

"She and Ben were sitting in the bungalow talking, and the bungalow just collapsed," Bob Abels said.

Hope Abels added that North "remembers the rescuers taking her away and saying, 'I don't know where my friend is, I don't know where my friend is.'"

Ben Abels loved to travel for extended periods of time, family members said. After extended travel in Central and South America and Europe, this was his first trip to Asia. He already had been in Hong Kong and Cambodia and was about to depart for Bangkok.

According to Schakowsky, the U.S. State Department believes there are Americans stranded on Phi Phi Island. They are working with the Thai government, which has not identified people by nationality.

"There are no American personnel on Phi Phi Island, and as far I can tell there are no plans to go there,"

Schakowsky said.

Schakowsky said the Abels family is well known in Evanston, and belongs to the same synagogue as Schakowsky, Beth Emet The Free Synagogue in Evanston.

Herb Adelstein, a pharmaceutical salesman in Chicago, grew up with Ben and last talked to him about three weeks ago.

Adelstein described Abels as someone who "was always looking to the future. He was an ambitious guy. He had bought his own house in Evanston and was a fixture of the community. He had a very positive outlook."

Adelstein added, "I'm shocked. But I am keeping upbeat about it."

Meanwhile, Ditzza Israeli, 24, of Alpharetta, Ga., reportedly was traveling in India when the tsunami swept across southern Asia.

According to a link on a Web site run by Chabad, Israeli's last e-mail to her parents,

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BEHIND THE HEADLINES

■ Stateside, some Jewish families affected by tsunami

Continued from page 1

sent on Dec. 24, said she was spending the winter holiday in Varkala, Kerala, on India's western coast.

Three e-mails posted on a BBC missing-persons site following an inquiry by Terri Israeli, Ditzza's mother, suggested that the area where Ditzza was traveling wasn't hit hard by the tsunami.

One posting came from a traveler who indicated that Varkala is on high ground, but that Internet and phone access was "hard to find in this area."

Another poster wrote that while he did not meet Israeli, "there was a big wave" on Dec. 26, "but not too serious — no one was washed away, just a few bags and cameras."

The third e-mail, sent by a man writing from Kovalam in Kerala, claimed that "no one was lost" on either Kovalam or Varkala beaches.

"Although the effects of the tsunami were visible, it presented no danger on either of these beaches," the e-mail read.

In Dallas, friends of two longtime community members were relieved to get an e-mail alerting them that Gerald and Bobbie Nehman had survived the tsunami.

The Nehmans said that their biggest fear came when they lost touch with Bobbie Nehman's brother, David, whom they had traveled to visit in southern India.

"We were stranded and protected at the time on a memorial rock at the tip of India, where three oceans meet, and watched the wave hit the shore in front of us," Bobbie Nehman said in a Dec. 27 e-mail to Lynda Nicholson, the music

librarian for Temple Emanu-El's choir. Both Nehmans have sung in the choir for many years and are active in other synagogue programs.

"We were rescued by small fishing boats at night with up to 1,000 others," Bobbie Nehman wrote. "We had left my brother's island resort less than 24 hours before the wave hit, after a beautiful visit of three days. We are worried about my brother because all communications lines are cut to the Maldiv Islands, which were right in the path."

On Dec. 31, however, they reported that David was well.

Bobbie, an artist and certified massage

therapist, and Gerald, an environmental expert, sent another message on Dec. 31.

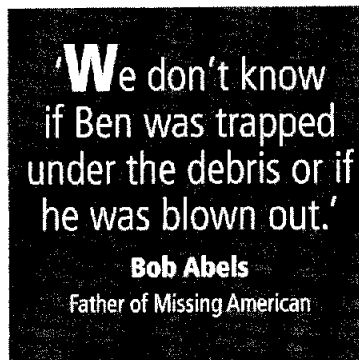
"We are two hours from 2005 and are feeling both our good fortune and the pain for those who have been so devastated," Bobbie wrote.

Temple members were told the good news at Friday night services.

"I gave a sermon on the tsunami, and I was able to mention that the

Nehmans had gotten through it," Rabbi David Stern told the Texas Jewish Post. ■

(This story includes feeds from Daniel Dorfman of the Chicago Jewish News, Steve Israel of the Texas Jewish Post and the staff of the Atlanta Jewish Times.)



Anti-Semitism in Russia unsettles Jews

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — The level of anti-Semitic acts in Russia remained stable and relatively low this year, but three violent cases took place in Moscow within two weeks in December — and all went unreported in the local media.

On Dec. 16, a Jew from southern Russia was stabbed on a Moscow tram.

Mikhail Yusupov, 24, an Israeli citizen and native of Dagestan, was stabbed and wounded in his lung after three young Russians asked him about his ethnicity. Doctors say Yusupov, who underwent two surgeries and is recuperating in a Moscow hospital, is in stable condition.

Yusupov was a member of the Marina Roscha synagogue and community center, the largest Jewish facility in Moscow. A source in the congregation said Jewish officials were following the investigation closely but didn't report the incident to Russian media out of fear it would hinder the investigation.

Two of the three attackers in the case are under arrest, but a local police source refused to tell JTA what charges the men might face.

In another incident Dec. 23, an Orthodox Jew from Israel was beaten up near Marina Roscha.

Ephraim Malov, a teacher at a Jewish college for adult evening education, was beaten

by three young men not far from the shul. Malov doesn't speak or understand Russian, but said he could distinguish the word "evrei" — Russian for Jew — which his attackers kept repeating as they beat him.

In another incident, police verbally and physically assaulted a driver employed by the Jewish community who had a menorah display on top of his car.

The incident took place Dec. 12 when the driver, an Azeri Muslim, was leaving a Moscow airport and heading toward the city. A traffic policeman who stopped the car allegedly pushed the man in the chest while uttering anti-Semitic slurs.

The man reportedly managed to escape in his car and reported the incident, along with the policeman's license plate and badge number, to a nearby traffic police station. To his dismay, however, another policeman backed his colleague's behavior and said it served the driver right, Vladimir Muterperel, a public affairs officer for Marina Roscha, which employed the driver, told JTA.

Muterperel said the spate of anti-Semitic incidents this month involving people connected with his organization was unprecedented. He said he didn't think police could prevent such incidents from happening, and that his organization was considering creating a special security unit to provide additional safety measures in the neighborhood around Marina Roscha, where there is a large concentration of Orthodox Jews. ■



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Boost for Sharon seen as party joins coalition

By DAN BARON

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon took a step this week that appears to boost his plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank.

Ironically, that step was taken when Sharon convinced United Torah Judaism, a religious political party that opposes his withdrawal plan, to join his national unity government.

"I believe that, as early as next week, we will present in the Knesset a new government that will lead the State of Israel," Sharon told members of his Likud Party on Wednesday. "The people chose us to lead it to peace and security, calm and prosperity. The Likud will achieve this mission."

The UTJ's agreement to join forces with Sharon, despite the misgivings of its sages at his withdrawal plan, could not have come at a better time for the embattled former general.

Scuffles that erupted between settlers and soldiers during the evacuation of the illegal West Bank outpost at Yitzhar this week stirred concern that the government may not have the muscle to push through major

withdrawals, as it plans to do this year.

Sharon lost his parliamentary majority last year after removing right-wing nationalist factions and the secular Shinui Party from his coalition.

That raised the possibility of early elections, a possibility that now appears to be unlikely.

Likud was expected to sign a coalition deal Thursday with the UTJ and the main opposition party, Labor, granting Sharon control of 66 of the 120 Knesset seats.

Because Sharon has 61 seats without UTJ, he does not necessarily need the party's five lawmakers to support his withdrawal plan, but having UTJ in the coalition gives Sharon a broader majority.

The UTJ, which caters mostly to fervently religious Ashkenazi voters, said it was joining the government for a three-month probationary period, in order to undo Shinui-sponsored legislation and secure funding for its schools.

"This government has majority support for the disengagement plan without us," UTJ faction chief Rabbi Avraham Ravitz told Army Radio. "We certainly oppose" it, "but we are still joining up."

Meanwhile, Sharon has personally responded to fears of a mutiny in the ranks when the time comes to implement his plan.

"Do not dare raise a hand against soldiers," Sharon said during a visit to a West Bank army base Wednesday, his remarks intended

for restive settlers. "If you want to lay into someone, lay into me. Lay off the Israel Defense Forces."

The prime minister said he ordered the Justice Ministry to toughen laws against those who incite to political violence. In one such case, an off-duty soldier who urged comrades not to evacuate Yitzhar on Monday was sentenced to 28 days in a military prison. ■

'If you want to lay into someone, lay into me. Lay off the Israel Defense Forces.'

Ariel Sharon
Israeli Prime Minister

Berlin Jews threaten a lawsuit against Claims Conference

By TOBY AXELROD

BERLIN (JTA) — Berlin's Jewish community is threatening to sue the Claims Conference over some \$27 million in property values.

Community President Albert Meyer said Monday that the Conference for Material Claims Against Germany, the successor organization to unclaimed Jewish property in the former East Germany, should give profits from unclaimed properties in Berlin to the city's financially strapped Jewish community.

The board of the Jewish community must make the final decision on whether to sue, according to a report in the Berliner Zeitung daily newspaper.

Meyer had no further comment on the matter. But a member of the community assembly, Julius Schoeps, told JTA, "Sure it would be a good idea to get the money, but I don't know whether it's possible."

"At the moment, the Jewish community needs the money," added Schoeps, head of the Moses Mendelssohn Center, a Jewish studies institute at the University of Potsdam.

Gideon Taylor, the Claims Conference's executive vice president, said the conference and other international organizations for more than 50 years have been the successor to the property of those dissolved Jewish communities under Allied and German restitution laws.

"Agreements were reached between the Claims Conference and the German Jewish community, as well as the Berlin Jewish community, which provided for numerous properties and funds to be

turned over to the relatively small Jewish community which was re-established in Berlin after the war for its activities," Taylor said. "The Claims Conference uses the remainder of the proceeds from such properties for social welfare projects for needy Holocaust survivors worldwide and for programs of Holocaust education."

The Claims Conference indeed returned several communal properties to the Jewish community in the early 1990s, after the reunification of East and West Germany.

But those long-neglected buildings need renovation work that the community cannot afford, Meyer said, adding that income from other buildings the Claims Conference sold could help solve the problem and help cover the cost of absorbing some 8,000 members who have joined the community since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The community, which has absorbed many immigrants from the former Soviet Union in recent years, now numbers about 12,000 people.

For some time, Meyer has pressed the Claims Conference to release funds to the Berlin Jewish community, which he said is the legal owner, as the East Berlin community was never dissolved.

He said he had hoped for a resolution before the end of 2004, and wrote to the Claims Conference's president, Rabbi Israel Singer, that he was astonished that the conference rejected opportunities to resolve the conflict up to now.

"Don't destabilize our community by denying us the funds that — at least in the moral sense — belong to Berlin," Meyer wrote.

He also told Moshe Jahoda, the Claims Conference representative in Frankfurt, that small, unclaimed properties should be returned to the community. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Israelis aid tsunami victims

Israelis flocked to a Magen David Adom drive to help victims of the Asian tsunami.

More than 4,000 staff and volunteers from the Israeli relief agency went to Israeli supermarkets this week on a 48-hour drive to raise foods and provisions to be sent to affected Indian Ocean sites.

So far the Israeli ambulance service has collected 2.5 tons of flour, 920 tons of rice, more than 920 quarts of oil, 1.5 tons of pasta and 40,000 quarts of mineral water.

Private Israeli charities have also reported record responses to their appeals for tsunami aid.

British cleric's trial date set

A British cleric alleged to have recruited people to kill non-Muslims, including Jews, will go on trial July 4.

Abu Hamza Al-Masri is an Egyptian-born cleric known for his anti-Western speeches.

He was arrested and charged by British prosecutors last fall.

The prosecutors' action prevented him from being extradited to the United States, where he would have faced terrorism-related charges for activities in the United States.

He was arrested in Britain in May after U.S. authorities charged him with trying to establish a terrorist training camp in the western state of Oregon, involvement in hostage-taking in Yemen and funding terrorism training in Afghanistan.

Swiss Jews angry at 'extremist' label

Swiss Jewish leaders asked government officials to drop references to "Jewish extremism" from a government report.

A reference to the main Swiss Jewish students' group was struck from an updated version of an earlier report on violence, which was originally published in August.

But the inclusion of Jews in the newer report has prompted Swiss Jewish leaders to ask for a meeting with the country's justice minister. That meeting is expected to take place later this month.

Israeli exports to Latin America up

Israeli exports to Latin America rose by 27 percent during the first nine months of 2004, to \$773 million.

Exports to Brazil, the largest recipient, totaled \$351 million between January and September 2004, according to Aurora, a Spanish-language newspaper in Israel.

Among major Israeli goods exported to Brazil are carved stones, minerals, and chemical and petrochemical products.

MIDDLE EAST

Barghouti out of solitary

Jailed Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti will be transferred out of solitary confinement.

The surprise transfer of Barghouti to a cell with other inmates came a few days before Sunday's elections for Palestinian Authority president.

Barghouti has been held in the Ohalei Keidar Prison near Beer-sheba since he was convicted in May of involvement in four terrorist attacks, which claimed the lives of five innocent civilians.

State: Abbas comment 'disturbing'

Mahmoud Abbas' characterization of Israel as the "Zionist enemy" is disturbing and inappropriate, the U.S. State Department said.

The likely winner of the Palestinian presidential elections this

weekend used the term Tuesday after seven Palestinians were killed from Israeli tank fire in retaliation for mortar fire on an Israeli settlement.

"The United States government obviously finds such language disturbing," said State Department spokesman Adam Ereli. "And it is our view that such rhetoric has no place in the process of resuming dialogue and rebuilding trust and confidence between Israelis and Palestinians."

Israeli spokesmen also said they found the comments disturbing, but generally dismissed the comments as campaign rhetoric.

NORTH AMERICA

Holocaust lawyer charged

A lawyer involved in the lawsuit against Swiss banks for Holocaust-era accounts was charged with misappropriating funds from two survivors.

The Office of Attorney Ethics in New Jersey, the investigative arm of the New Jersey Supreme Court, charged last month that Ed Fagan, one of the lead attorneys in the case that resulted in a \$1.25 billion settlement, transferred funds from the survivors' accounts to pay off debts.

Fagan has yet to respond to the charges, which were first reported by the Black Star News.

Senators head to Palestinian elections

Two U.S. senators and two prominent Arab Americans will comprise the official U.S. observer delegation to the Palestinian elections.

Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.), the ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Sen. John Sununu (R-N.H.), an Arab American on the same committee, will be joined by George Salem, who is the chairman of the Arab American Institute and a prominent Republican fund raiser, and Ziad Asali, who is the president of the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee.

The four, who will be joined by David Pearce, the U.S. consul general in Jerusalem, will place special emphasis on observing Israeli-Palestinian cooperation in Sunday's elections.

Another member of Congress, Rep. Lois Capps (D-Calif.), is joining a separate observer mission led by former President Carter.

Reform: Question nominee closely

Alberto Gonzales' nomination to the position of attorney general raises concerns because of his record in shaping the White House's doctrine on war prisoners, the Reform movement said.

The movement wants senators to ask tough questions when the Senate launches confirmation hearings Thursday, two Reform leaders said in a letter Wednesday to the chairman and ranking members on the Senate's Judiciary Committee.

As the White House counsel, Gonzales advised President Bush that some forms of physical pressure were legal and that the Geneva Conventions might not apply when it comes to detainees in the war on terror.

Bundt pan creator dies

H. David Dalquist, the founder of a Bundt pan that was partly the brainchild of Hadassah members, died Sunday at 86.

In 1950, Dalquist, the owner of the Nordic Ware line of baking pans, created the pan after members of Hadassah in Minneapolis asked him to create a heavy aluminum pan for baking.

The pan served as a fund raiser for Hadassah for several years, but only became a national best seller after a cake made in a Bundt pan earned a prize in a Pillsbury bake-off contest in 1966.