



IN THE NEWS

Quiet weekend in the Gaza Strip

The Gaza Strip enjoyed a relatively violence-free weekend. Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz credited the lack of rocket and mortar fire aimed at Israel from Gaza to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' efforts to win an internal truce.

But the Islamist groups were quick to issue denials, saying they would not accept a cease-fire formally unless Israel simultaneously agrees to scale back its military operations in Gaza and the West Bank and frees Palestinian security prisoners.

North American Jews help town under siege

North American Jews contributed \$2 million to help residents of an Israeli town often hit by Palestinian rocket attacks.

The money, raised by the United Jewish Communities, will go for a trauma counseling program to assist people living in Sderot, which has been hit repeatedly by rocket attacks launched from the Gaza Strip.

A task force headed by the Jewish Agency for Israel will oversee the project.

The task force also includes the UJC, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the National Insurance Institute and a "trauma coalition" established by the UJA-Federation of New York.

Yuschenko notes Holocaust victims

Viktor Yuschenko remembered victims of the Holocaust as he made his first public appearance as Ukrainian president.

In his speech Sunday in Kiev's public square following his inauguration, Yuschenko took a "popular oath" and said that in Ukraine "everyone will be able to pray in his prayer house. Everyone will be equal before the law."

The speaker of Israel's Knesset and the U.S. secretary of state attended the inauguration.

WORLD REPORT

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

Jews of Iraqi descent follow election, but few will vote

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — Carole Basri has a few deaths to avenge.

The descendant of Iraqi Jews is close to people whose family members were hung in Baghdad's public square by Saddam Hussein's regime in 1969.

Those who met their death were falsely accused of espionage for the United States or Israel.

That's why Basri, a University of Pennsylvania law professor who has accompanied U.S. officials to Iraq to help fight corruption, registered to vote Wednesday in Iraq's first democratic election, scheduled for Jan. 30.

Voters will determine Iraq's 275-seat Transitional National Assembly, which will draft a constitution and elect a president.

Jews "were persecuted like everyone else under Saddam, except we were the first," Basri said. "I want to strike back against what happened in the past, and the best way to strike back against that is to be for democracy."

But few of the 15,000 Iraqi Jews living in the United States, or the 244,000 in Israel, are expected to cast ballots in the Jan. 30 election.

"We were all raised on decades of enmity with Saddam Hussein and his predecessors," Jacky Hugi, a son of Iraqi immigrants who writes on Arab affairs for the Israeli newspaper Ma'ariv, told JTA. "There's too much water under that bridge."

Even before Saddam became president, he managed to create a secret police force in 1968.

An agent was assigned to watch each

of the country's Jews, who then numbered about 3,500.

Jews were prohibited from traveling more than three-quarters of a mile from home or owning a telephone, Basri said.

Iraqi Jewish expatriates should vote in the upcoming election to honor the memory of Saddam's victims and to stand in solidarity with the new Iraq, Basri said.

Not everyone agrees — or has the ability to vote.

The five U.S. voting centers for Iraqi expatriates — in Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, Nashville and Washington — are far from the main concentrations of Iraqi Jews here in New York and Los Angeles.

Voters must make two trips to the voting centers — one to register, during a weeklong period that ends

Jan. 28, and one to vote between Jan. 28-30.

Iraqi-American Jewish leaders describe mixed reactions in the community to the election.

Some display interest in a democratic Iraq, while others lack the care or motivation to vote — even as one party in the race, led by Mithal Al-Alusi, calls for diplomatic relations with Israel.

Some wonder whether their vote could make a difference, given the small numbers of Iraqi Jews in the United States. Others argue that they owe nothing to a country that kicked them out around the time of the creation of Israel, rendering them penniless refugees.

Turnout from Israel also is expected to be moderate.

Since Iraq still doesn't recognize the Jewish state, the nearest absentee ballot sta-

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BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

■ Jews of Iraqi descent are closely following the Jan. 30 vote

Continued from page 1

tion is in Jordan — not a friendly locale for Israelis since the Palestinian intifada began.

"I know of no Israelis who plan to vote," said Mordechai Ben-Porat, head of the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center, which represents Iraqi expatriates in Israel.

"Anyone who wants to take part would have to travel to Amman twice — once to register, and again to cast a ballot. That's a lot to ask."

According to Ben-Porat, many Iraqi Jews who remember the material and intellectual riches of their native land would like to play a part in or at least witness Iraq's rehabilitation after Saddam's overthrow.

During the 1991 Gulf War, several of Saddam's Scud missiles landed in Ramat Gan, a Tel Aviv suburb home to a huge Iraqi expatriate community.

It was an irony lost on no one, and few Israelis believe the average Iraqi is now ready to embrace them.

"It's not my country anymore," Iraq-born author Eli Amir said.

Other notable expatriates in Israel are Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, a former defense minister who recently rejoined the Cabinet on the Labor Party ticket, and outspoken liberal lawmaker Ran Cohen. Both have publicly downplayed the idea of voting for a democratic government in Baghdad.

That sense of alienation likely will increase with time: Just 29 percent of Iraqi Israelis were actually born in Iraq, while

the rest were born to expatriate parents. This new generation is unlikely to find its interest in Iraq rekindled.

"With all due respect to the Iraqi elections, we are Israelis and have enough local politics to keep us occupied," Hugi said.

In the United States, many Iraqi expatriates say they feel deeply tied to their land of origin and are following developments there closely.

"They want to be connected because this is a big part of who they are," Basri said. "They all still speak the language, cook the food."

The Jewish community in Iraq, which today has dwindled to about a dozen people, is one of the oldest in the world. Jews first arrived there as slaves in 586 B.C.E. after the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple and conquered the kingdom of Judah.

That's why Jews from the area often refer to themselves as "Babylonian Jews," emphasizing their connection to an area that was the center of Jewish scholarship from the seventh to 11th centuries C.E., bequeathing the Babylonian Talmud.

At its modern height in the 1940s, Iraq's Jewish community included some 130,000 people and reached leading positions in business and government.

More than half of Iraq's importers and exporters were Jews, according to Itamar Levin, author of "Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries."

Most lived in Baghdad, with the second-largest population in the port city of Basra.

But the 20th century brought Arab nationalism and anti-Semitism. State-sponsored persecution around the time of the birth of Israel forced all but 7,000 of Iraq's Jews to flee, most with little more than the shirts on their backs.

Iraqi-American Jewish leaders are notifying their communities of the logistics involved in voting — prospective voters must provide documents showing

that they were born in Iraq or to a father who was born in Iraq, along with valid identification — but aren't necessarily pushing it.

"Who am I to tell them what to do?" said Albert Nassim, the chairman of the board of the Babylonian Jewish Center, an Iraqi synagogue on Long Island in New York.

Haim Ovadia, rabbi of Kahal Joseph, an Iraqi synagogue in Los Angeles, says supporting democracy is a "universal duty" and planned to use his Shabbat sermon

last week to urge his congregants to vote.

Ovadia said his community is abuzz over the election, and he has received many e-mail inquiries about it.

"We want to support democracy and liberty and freedom wherever we can, so if we're given an opportunity, we should use it," said Ovadia, who was born in Israel but whose parents were born in Baghdad.

Turnout may not match interest, however.

The Washington-area voting center in New Carrollton, Md., has not been busy, said Maurice Shohet, an Iraqi-born Jew who is one of the center's two field coordinators.

"So far it's less than expected," he said. He wouldn't say how many Iraqi-Americans have registered to vote or speculate about what percentage of registered voters might be Jewish, due to regulations of the International Organization for Migration, which is running the voting.

Winter weather, the Martin Luther King Day holiday weekend and simple distance are deterring Iraqi expatriates from the New York area, for whom Washington is the closest voting center.

For Shohet, president of Congregation Bene Naharayim, an Iraqi synagogue in Queens, voting is not just a Jewish responsibility but a universal one.

"You would like democracy to spread around the world," he said. "I came from Iraq and I would like this process to suc-

With all due respect to the Iraqi elections, we are Israelis and have enough local politics to keep us occupied.

Jacky Hugi

Son of Iraqi immigrants

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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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THIS WEEK**MONDAY**

■ The United Nations will hold a session on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps, formally marking the event for the first time. The session will include remarks by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel and Israel's foreign minister, Silvan Shalom. Israel, in cooperation with Yad Vashem, will unveil a Holocaust exhibit at the United Nations.

WEDNESDAY

■ Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom meets with Condoleezza Rice, one of the first such meetings in Rice's new capacity as secretary of state. Rice said during confirmation hearings that much of her effort would be devoted to getting Israeli-Palestinian peace talks back on track.

THURSDAY

■ The presidents of France, Russia and Israel are expected to attend the 60th anniversary of the Auschwitz death camp's liberation on Jan. 27, Polish officials said. Presidents Vladimir Putin of Russia, Jacques Chirac of France and Moshe Katsav of Israel are due to join their Polish counterpart, Aleksander Kwasniewski, in commemorations at the former Nazi camp in southern Poland. A high-level U.S. representative is also expected to attend.

■ A new monument officially opens in Paris' Jewish quarter to pay tribute to the 76,000 Jews rounded up in France during the Holocaust and sent to Nazi death camps. The Wall of Names is part of a renovated Holocaust memorial.

■ The Montreal Holocaust Memorial Center holds a symposium on Auschwitz. The day will culminate with a ceremony in which local survivors of Auschwitz will light candles in the museum's memorial room.

■ William Burns, the top U.S. State Department emissary to the Middle East, will outline the prospects for peace in a second Bush administration at a U.S. Institute of Peace forum. It will be a rare on-the-record talk for Burns, who is likely to leave the assistant secretary of state post soon for an ambassadorship to Moscow.

FRIDAY

■ Jewish prep school students gather at Choate Rosemary Hall in Connecticut. The conference is sponsored by the Curriculum Initiative, an organization devoted to building Jewish life at private schools.

SUNDAY

■ The United Jewish Communities begins two days of board meetings in Fort Lauderdale. The umbrella group for the federation movement is slated to address the future of the Overseas Needs Assessment and Distribution Committee.

In Quebec, school plan scrapped

By BRAM EISENTHAL

MONTREAL (JTA) — Quebec's premier has curtailed a program to increase funding for private Jewish day schools in the face of mounting public anger.

Announced last month, the new program would have funded the general studies portion of Jewish schools' curriculum at the same rate as that of public schools if the Jewish institutions entered into "associate status" with a public school board. The government now provides \$4,200 per student in public schools, while the Jewish schools previously were eligible for 60 percent of that, according to the Canadian Jewish News.

The initiative also would have funded cultural exchanges between Jewish and non-Jewish schools and would have required them to form an association with an English- or French-language secular school board.

Though the Greek community already enjoys a similar program for its private ethnic schools, the public outcry over the funding for Jewish schools, at a time when public school financing is stagnant, was fierce. At a hastily convened news conference on Jan. 20, provincial Premier Jean Charest announced that the program would continue only until the summer.

In addition, only those schools that already had signed on to the program — about half of the 15 Jewish schools that would have been eligible — will get the funding until June.

"The desire for associate status for our Jewish day schools has been a long-standing request of our community, and we are disappointed in the recent turn of events," said Sylvain Abitbol, president of Federation CJA in Montreal. "Notwithstanding our disappointment, we appreciate the efforts that the government of Quebec has made in support of this policy.

"In moving forward, we remain committed to the principals of rapprochement and will continue to work to build bridges with our fellow Quebecers," Abitbol said.

B'nai Brith Canada was less conciliatory. "What is problematic is the issue that people are showing a disregard for the value of an important integration policy,"

said the group's national legal counsel, Steven Slimovitch. "If you have a multicultural society, you can't just pay lip service to it. You have to attach a dollar value to it as well.

"What I can't understand is why they would cancel a very valid program for Jewish private schools and leave deals on the table for other private schools," such as the Greek schools that already enjoy an associate arrangement with the public school boards, Slimovitch said.

"And the losers are the students on both sides, the Jewish and non-Jewish ones. That's the most disappointing thing about this decision for us," he said.

Reaction to the plan from all except the schools that would have benefitted from it was resoundingly negative. Letters to the editor in Montreal newspapers said it was unfair to give extra money just to Jewish schools.

"While welcoming added provincial funding for Jewish schools, in fact I would welcome any extra finding for our entire educational system," one reader wrote to the Montreal Gazette. "My only concern is that this type of policy will ghettoize schools based on religion."

Quebec's education minister, Pierre Reid, had said he hoped to improve relations between the Jewish community and the surrounding society through the exchange program, so "we can avoid acts," such as the firebombing of the library at Montreal's United Talmud Torah last spring, "that are not representative of Quebec."

But critics say Reid had acted hastily and in effect was proposing to use taxpayers' money to pay off the Jewish community for the damage done by the arsonist. They also said the entire system, especially the public school system, was in dire need of cash.

Marcus Tabachnick, chairman of the English-language Lester B. Pearson School Board, one of the boards that was to partner with Jewish schools, told JTA that "public money should go to public schools, period."

Sending your children to private schools "is a choice you make," he said, "but you have to pay for it." ■

Quebec's leader
cancels a funding plan
for Jewish schools after
an outcry.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDEAST

Girl wounded in Sderot dies

A teenage girl who shielded her brother from a rocket attack in Sderot died of her wounds.

Ella Abuksis, 17, died last Friday at a Beersheba hospital.

She threw herself atop her 10-year-old brother Tamir on Jan. 15 when a rocket launched by Gaza Strip terrorists landed in the southern Israel city.

Tamir also suffered shrapnel wounds in the attack.

Russia: Don't call Syria 'terrorist'

Accusing Syria of ties to terrorism is counterproductive, Russia's Foreign Ministry said.

"It's well known that slapping labels on countries and unilaterally describing certain states as part of the 'Axis of Evil' has not improved anyone's security," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko told the Interfax news agency last Friday in a report carried by Reuters.

"Syria is one of the key players in the region and resumption of talks with Israel on the Syrian question is important in the context of the Middle East peace process."

Syrian President Bashar Assad is visiting Moscow this week.

Russian officials have denied reports that it is planning to sell Syria shoulder-launched missiles more accurate than those now in its possession.

In a telephone call last week, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon conveyed to Russian President Vladimir Putin Israel's intense opposition to the deal.

Tehran sees conspiracy

Iran accused Israel of orchestrating the tough U.S. stance against its nuclear program.

"Iran has always said that Tel Aviv decides U.S. policies and that the Zionist lobby is so powerful in the United States. Therefore we were not surprised by such remarks," Hamid Reza Asefi, spokesman for the Foreign Ministry in Tehran, said Sunday.

He was referring to Vice President Dick Cheney's assertion last week that Iran is a top security priority for the United States, and that Israel could attack Iranian nuclear sites if they are not opened to international inspection.

President Bush also has said the United States does not rule out the option of military action against Iran.

NORTH AMERICA

Kibbutz book stirs Massachusetts passions

A Massachusetts parent wants a book about a Canadian family that moves to a kibbutz removed from school reading lists because he says it is anti-Arab.

George Shamma wants "One More River" by Lynne Reid Banks removed from the Duxbury Middle School curriculum, the Boston Globe reported.

Shamma says the book does not acknowledge the existence of Palestine and contains offensive language against Arabs.

Bronfman son gets Israeli bank

The Israeli government is selling Israel's third-largest bank to a member of the Bronfman family.

Israeli officials said they had reached an agreement to sell 26 percent of the Israel Discount Bank to a group headed by Matthew Bronfman for roughly \$275 million.

The group headed by Bronfman also will have a three-year option to buy another 25 percent of the bank. Bronfman is the son of Edgar Bronfman Jr., the president of the World Jewish Congress.

WORLD

French Jews dedicate Wall of Names

French Jews dedicated a wall honoring Jews deported from France during the Holocaust.

Prayers were read Sunday at the Wall of Names, which honors 76,000 French Jews deported during World War II.

The stone wall is at the entrance to the renovated Holocaust memorial, which will be inaugurated Tuesday by French President Jacques Chirac as part of events commemorating the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

German far rightists stir pot

German politicians and Jewish groups in the country criticized a far-right German political party for refusing to honor victims of the Holocaust.

Some German politicians called for the National Democratic Party to be banned after 12 of its representatives in a regional Parliament walked out of a moment of silence held last Friday for Holocaust victims.

Paul Spiegel, the chairman of the Central Council of German Jews, called the walkout a perversion of history.

Japanese firm charged with slurs

Two employees who filed a lawsuit against a Japanese trading company for discrimination said executives slurred black, Hispanic and Jewish employees.

In their complaint, filed last week in a New York federal court, Kevin Long and Ludvic Presto said that in addition to the slurs, Marubeni America Corp. penalized non-Asian employees and tried to fire pregnant women.

A spokesman for the company, which trades in industrial, agricultural and consumer goods, plus commodities and natural resources, said the allegations were a ploy to get high severance packages.

Group: Anti-Semitism up in Britain

The number of violent anti-Semitic acts jumped dramatically in Britain last year, an Israeli government report found.

Violent attacks against Jews and Jewish property jumped from 55 to 77 incidents in 2004, according to the figures that were released Sunday.

The findings were published in a report by the Global Forum Against Anti-Semitism, a joint project of the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

The incidents included physical harassment, desecration of synagogues and cemeteries, threats and propaganda.

In France, there were 96 incidents, the same as in 2003, the forum said.

The report, based on data collected by government agencies and Jewish groups, found a rise in anti-Semitic acts in Europe in 2004, most of them said to be carried out by Muslims.

The report said many European governments have stepped up efforts to combat anti-Semitism in their countries.

Italian monument to honor gay WWII victims

A monument commemorating gays and lesbians murdered by the Nazis will be unveiled on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The memorial is sponsored by a gay organization with the support of local authorities. It stands at the Risiera di San Sabba near Trieste, the only Nazi death camp on Italian soil, and will be unveiled during ceremonies Thursday and Friday.

The monument, a pink stone atop a black marble pedestal, bears a carved triangle symbolizing the pink triangles gay concentration-camp prisoners were forced to wear.