

IN THE NEWS

Israeli official blasts fence condemnation

Israel's top legal official rejected the International Court of Justice condemnation of the West Bank security barrier as "irrelevant."

In an affidavit filed Wednesday to Israel's High Court of Justice in response to left-wing petitions against the fence route, Attorney General Menachem Mazuz described the July 2004 ruling from The Hague as unfair and based on outdated information.

It was the first time that Israel, which didn't recognize the International Court's right to discuss the security fence, had commented officially on the ruling.

He also criticized the International Court for ignoring Israel's legitimate need to fight Palestinian terrorism.

Another church talks divestment

The World Council of Churches, made up of some 347 Protestant and Orthodox bodies, is discussing divestment from the West Bank and Gaza.

Meeting in Geneva on Tuesday, the council's Central Committee praised the Presbyterian Church (USA), which in July called for "phased selective divestment" from companies that do business with Israel.

Jewish groups criticized the move.

Israeli envoy heckled in Italy

Israel's ambassador to Italy received solidarity messages after pro-Palestinian students interrupted his talk at the University of Florence.

Rome's mayor and other political figures condemned the incident and expressed support for Ehud Gol, who was temporarily interrupted during his talk Tuesday on prospects for peace in the Middle East by about 20 students shouting slogans such as "Free Palestine" and "Sharon assassin."

WORLD REPORT

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Hadassah launches lobbying effort to promote stem cell legislation

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — When Cynthia Kramer lobbied her state legislator in Missouri last year on the potential benefits of stem cell research, she wasn't just talking theory.

"I was basically pleading for my life there," said Kramer, 40, who has a rare form of lymphoma.

She told him she believed such research could lead to better treatments and maybe even a cure. But the response she got during last year's exchange in Jefferson City, the state capital, was discouraging.

"You know what he said? 'I'm sure it's a bitter pill for you to swallow, but we have to follow our constituents and do what's right.'"

His message to her was clear, she said. Because he was a person of faith, he could not support stem cell research. Catholic bishops in the state had been calling legislators that day, urging them to criminalize it.

"He was saying, 'Mine trumps yours,'" she said. "I couldn't help feeling immoral because I didn't agree with this position."

Kramer plans to be back in Jefferson City next week, one of scores of Hadassah members who will be storming their state capitals to lobby for legislation allowing stem cell research and stem cell funding initiatives.

With federal funding for stem cell research ground to a halt, states have become the new battleground for the research that potentially could lead to treatments for cancer, Parkinson's disease and heart disease.

More than a dozen states are consider-

ing legislation that would support stem cell research.

Several other states, including Missouri, are looking at legislation to restrict the research severely.

The discussions increasingly are taking on a religious tone, and Jewish groups are working to highlight a religious perspective that supports research on cells taken from embryos once they have left a woman's body.

At the same time, the issue has become a rare unifier in the Jewish community, with Jews across the religious streams promoting the use of stem cell research.

"The Jewish perception is that anything that can be used for potentially saving a human life should not only be allowed but aggressively pursued," said Rabbi Edward Reichman, a physician and an Orthodox scholar on Jewish medical ethics in New York.

Critics of the research tend to be Christian conservatives, who view embryos as human life and believe that extracting stem cells from them and manipulating them to create different blood and tissue cells destroys life.

They also argue that harvesting adult stem cells could lead to human cloning, which has been banned by most state legislatures.

"The opposition is being driven by folks with a religious agenda," said Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism.

The Reform group is also focusing on the issue. It plans to bring actor Michael J. Fox,

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FOCUS
ON
ISSUES

■ Jews unite to fight for stem cell research

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who has Parkinson's disease, to speak to a center gathering on the subject in Washington next month.

"It is important for policymakers to understand this isn't an issue where religion is on one side and people who do not believe are on the other," Pelavin said.

Kramer, a mother of two, speaks on the subject like an expert, and has testified in front of her state legislature.

She was first diagnosed with cancer in February 2002, when she was participating in the Hadassah Leadership Academy, a two-year training program for regional lay leaders.

After a year and a half in remission, the cancer returned in November 2003, and she tried a stem-cell transfer from her own harvested cells last year.

But because her cells are not trained to fight the cancer, it quickly returned.

The other option is to use stem cells from an unrelated donor, but she has opted against it, saying the side effects caused by rejection are too much to take, and she is worried about her two young children seeing her suffer.

"The hope is that I could grow my own stem cells, but they be genetically manipulated to fight my cancer," she said. "And my

body wouldn't reject them, because they were mine."

A procedure scientists are working to develop, somatic cell nuclear transfer, could do just that. An egg is fertilized with the genetic material of a somatic cell, like a hair or skin cell. Researchers consider the procedure the next wave of research because it can produce stem cells that are genetic matches of the donor patient.

But implanting that fertilized egg would produce a clone of the person who donated the somatic cell. The procedure is how Dolly the sheep was cloned in 1997.

Even as attention shifts to the states, lawmakers in both houses of the U.S. Congress introduced the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act last week. It would override

President Bush's ruling on stem cell research and expand the number of stem cell lines available for federal research.

Bush's decision to ban all federal funding for new stem cell lines after 2001 was not binding on states. Some states, including California and New Jersey, have earmarked

funding for the research, and have been rewarded with an influx of research dollars and top scientists. Other states want to replicate that, and have introduced bills to support and fund the research.

"Scientists are going to go where the money is," said Paula Hollinger, a Maryland state senator and Hadassah member, who introduced legislation to set up a legal framework for stem cell research and underwrite funding for it.

But Christian conservatives are pushing hard against it. They view embryos, including the egg fertilized with a somatic cell instead of a sperm cell, as life, and are lobbying state legislators to ban the procedures, which would restrict both public and private research.

Jewish law has consistently said embryos and fetuses in utero do not have status as full human life.

Some Orthodox groups, which more often side with Christian conservatives than liberal Jewish groups, have advocated for

stem cell research.

In a meeting between House Democratic leaders and Jewish leaders last year, Nathan Diament, the executive director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs, turned the conversation to stem cell research to highlight an issue about which all Jewish groups agree.

"The potential to save and heal human lives is an integral part of valuing human life from the traditional Jewish perspective," the Orthodox Union and its rabbinic arm, the Rabbinical Council of America, said in a letter to Bush in 2001.

"Moreover, our rabbinic authorities inform us that an isolated fertilized egg does not enjoy the full status of personhood and its attendant protections."

Hadassah, a longtime proponent of stem cell research in America and its hospitals in Israel, where pioneering stem cell research is done, hopes that its members ultimately will meet with legislators in all 50 states throughout the spring.

"The future of stem cell research lies in the states," said Shelley Klein, Hadassah's director of advocacy. "We hope to lobby where this is really happening."

Kramer says her goal right now is not to save her own life, but to use her story to show an alternative moral approach.

"Disease takes your dignity," she said. "For me to have to beg senators for my life is distasteful." ■

'The Jewish perception is that anything that can be used for potentially saving a human life should not only be allowed but aggressively pursued.'

Rabbi Edward Reichman, M.D.
Orthodox scholar

Action urged on Lubavitch books

WASHINGTON (JTA) — All 100 U.S. senators told the Russian government to return a collection of religious books to Chabad.

The book collection was seized more than 80 years ago from Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson.

Some were returned in 2002, but the rest remain in the Russian State Library.

Sen. Norm Coleman (R-Minn.) led the effort to have President Bush raise the issue with Russian President Vladimir Putin at their summit Thursday.

"We urge you to return these sacred religious texts, archives and manuscripts to Chabad, which would be a significant example of your government's commitment to justice, human rights and religious freedom," said the letter to Putin, signed by all 100 senators.

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Jewish groups demand apology from WJC

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — The secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress has sparked a firestorm in the Jewish organizational world with public accusations of illegal activity by unnamed communal leaders.

Stephen Herbits' comments, in a New York Magazine story about the WJC that was released this week, have offended communal leaders, who dismissed the allegations and demanded apologies from Herbits and from Edgar Bronfman, the WJC's billionaire president.

"Has the Jewish community become so cutthroat that the only way to advance the interests of an organization is by impugning the integrity of the other organizations?" asked David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

"I think it's a pretty transparent and ugly diversionary tactic. It's also truly irresponsible. In my now 30 years of Jewish communal life, I don't remember another example of a spokesman for one Jewish organization making such mean-spirited, slash-and-burn comments about other organizations, even accusing them of allegedly illegal activity," Harris added.

"I can only hope that Edgar Bronfman will move quickly to repudiate the comments of Herbits," he continued. "Otherwise, they will be a long-term stain on the reputation of the World Jewish Congress."

Bronfman was abroad and could not be reached for comment.

Asked to respond to the demands for an apology, Herbits told JTA, "No comment."

The WJC in recent months has been embroiled in a vitriolic internal squabble over accusations by Isi Leibler, a former WJC vice president, of financial improprieties. WJC officials accused Leibler of using the accusations to try to take control of the organization.

In the magazine story, reporter Craig Horowitz mentions to Herbits that several Jewish organizational insiders said they weren't surprised by news of the WJC's internal imbroglio.

Herbits was quoted in the article as responding: "As you talk to the leaders of the other Jewish organizations, check their accomplishments against their governance. They've got perfect governance and no f—ing accomplishments. If an investigation of Jewish organizational life takes place, I promise you that the last person standing will be Israel Singer."

Rabbi Singer, chairman of the WJC, is at the center of the organization's controversy. He refused JTA requests for comment.

Herbits goes on to say in the article that "there are no illegalities in Israel Singer's behavior, and that is not true of some of the leaders of these other organizations."

"I know it and they know it and they better be careful, because if they cause enough problems in the press, then this organization won't be the only one that has a preliminary inquiry from the attorney general's office. Then you'll see some real fireworks," Herbits said, without naming any specific individuals or organizations.

Late last year, New York state's attorney general, Eliot Spitzer, launched a preliminary investigation into the allegations against the WJC, an umbrella group for more than 100 Jewish communities around the world.

"Is the implication of Mr. Herbits' comments that the New York State attorney general should be working full time investigating every Jewish organization registered in New York State?" Harris asked.

"That's a brilliant idea," he added sarcastically.

According to the article, Herbits went

on to accuse other Jewish groups of falsifying IRS filings, misusing funds, lying to the government and offering bloated benefits packages — though he wouldn't name any group purportedly guilty of such offenses.

"I think it's a sad day for the Jewish community when an institution feels so much under attack or in a corner that it feels the need, in order to defend itself, to strike out and besmirch the rest of the organized Jew-

ish community," Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, told JTA. "I think that the secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress owes the organized Jewish community an apology — or to name names. If he truly believes this is true, either he names the names or apologizes."

Harris said his organization expects to write a letter to Bronfman.

"We are looking to see whether Mr. Bronfman will address the issue," he said. "If he does, we will listen carefully to what he says or writes. If he doesn't, we'll have to consider what comes next."

Foxman said he didn't plan to contact the WJC about the matter.

"I don't need a personal apology," he said. "I think the organized Jewish community deserves an apology." ■

I think that the secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress owes the organized Jewish community an apology — or to name names.

Abraham Foxman
Anti-Defamation League

Ohioans, Israelis to work together

By TAMI KAMIN-MEYER

COLUMBUS, Ohio (JTA) — Research scientists in Ohio will collaborate with colleagues in Israel in the fight against bioterrorism, according to an agreement signed recently by officials of the Ohio Department of Agriculture, Ohio State University and Jerusalem's Hebrew University.

The Cleveland-based Negev Foundation secured a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to fund the project.

"Israel is a leader in security issues and this was a great opportunity to address measures aimed at deterring agroterror-

ism," said Fred Dailey, director of Ohio's Agriculture Department.

Sam Hoenig, president of the Negev Foundation, said the foundation hopes the research will provide two benefits. It can develop methods of protecting food and agriculture from bioterrorism that can be used around the world, and it can provide increased trade opportunities between Ohio and Israel, he said.

The relationship between Ohio and Israel already is strong, state Sen. Eric Fingerhut said.

Fingerhut, a Democrat, said that in 2003 Israel was Ohio's 25th largest export market. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Bracing for the worst

Israel fears Palestinian terrorist groups are preparing major attacks in case peace moves fail.

"There are intensive efforts under way among terror groups to prepare strategic attacks should the calm and diplomatic progress fail," Brig. Gen. Yossi Kuperwasser, head of the Israeli military intelligence research branch, told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday.

"They are continuing to build a terror infrastructure, especially in Gaza."

Back over the Jordan

Jordan urged Israel to accept a "right of return" for Palestinian refugees.

"We differentiate between recognizing the right of return and implementing the right of return," Ma'aruf Bakhit, the new Jordanian ambassador to Israel, told the Jerusalem Post on Wednesday.

"But the implementation of the right of return is something different and it is up to the parties concerned."

Palestinians demand that hundreds of thousands of Arabs who fled the 1948 war when Israel was created — and millions of their descendants — be granted a right to return to Israel.

Israel, which sees the demand as a ruse to destroy the Jewish state demographically, says they should be resettled in a future Palestinian state.

Jordan, which was created in 1922 out of land designated for the Jewish national home in British-ruled Palestine, is home to many refugees who fled the West Bank.

According to the Post, Bakhit is a veteran of diplomatic efforts in the 1990s to resolve the refugee issue.

Go, with regret

A leading Israeli rabbi called on settlers to accept the Gaza withdrawal plan without a fight.

"On the day of the evacuation, we will get up and leave our homes without resorting to force," Shlomo Aviner, chief rabbi of Jerusalem's Ateret HaCohananim yeshiva and a major West Bank settlement figure, told Yediot Achronot on Wednesday.

"Only popular protest can change the prime minister's mind." Increasingly violent protests by Israelis opposed to Ariel Sharon's "disengagement plan" have stirred fears that the prime minister could come under attack.

Aviner stressed that protests that cause public inconvenience, such as blockading junctions, are unacceptable.

Filming at wall controversial

Natalie Portman filmed a romantic scene at the Western Wall, drawing an angry response from Jewish worshippers.

The actress, who is making the low-budget film "Free Zone" in Israel, the West Bank and Jordan, appeared at the Jerusalem shrine Tuesday for an on-camera embrace with Israeli co-star Aki Avni.

Dozens of fervently Orthodox Jews were outraged at the sight and heckled the cast and crew, delaying the production by several hours.

The Jerusalem-born actress, 23, is up for an Academy Award on Sunday for her supporting role in the drama "Closer."

Eitam, Levi join National Union

Two former National Religious Party chiefs formed a new Israeli political faction called Religious Zionism.

Effi Eitam and Rabbi Yitzhak Levy officially broke away from the NRP on Wednesday after months of fighting, and said their new fac-

tion would join the right-wing National Union bloc.

They described Religious Zionism as the new spearhead of efforts to block the government's planned withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank.

"This proud nation finds itself with a divisive and injurious leadership in the form of the prime minister," Eitam told reporters.

NORTH AMERICA

Democrats blast Saudi conference

Jewish Democrats blasted the Bush administration for sending a delegation to a counterterrorism conference in Saudi Arabia where anti-Semitic comments were made.

According to the Middle East Media Research Institute, a Saudi cleric told the conference, "The first to kill and use terrorism in the world were the Jews."

Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and the National Jewish Democratic Council both criticized the administration.

"The president lent legitimacy to this hate-fest, and he should apologize and admit it was a serious mistake," the senator said.

The White House said the delegation, led by homeland security adviser Frances Townsend, did not hear the remarks.

"Had she heard them, she would have strongly denounced them," White House spokeswoman Maria Tamburri said.

Looking to build unity

An upcoming event aims to bolster Jewish unity and learning. Elie Wiesel, U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and actor Josh Malina are among those said to be backing Jewish Unity 2005.

The March 1 event, timed to coincide with celebrations marking the end of a Talmud-reading cycle, will have its flagship location in New Jersey, but events will be held elsewhere in the United States and at U.S. military bases worldwide.

Embalming law under fire

An Alaskan Jew is fighting the state's embalming laws. Dead bodies may not cross Alaska's borders unless they are embalmed, a process that is forbidden under Jewish law.

After Sheryl Weinberg of Juneau had to fight for a waiver to allow her mother to be buried next to her father in Arizona, she has taken the battle to the state legislature.

The regulation may be an artifact from a time when it took longer to ship bodies, a state senator said.

WORLD

Give what you can

Jewish communities in poorer countries are contributing to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's tsunami relief fund.

The fund received \$1,000 from B'nai B'rith of Uruguay and \$180 from the Jewish community of Cuba.

As of earlier this month, the JDC's fund has raised more than \$15 million, with less than a third coming from Jewish federations.

Yugoslav Jews work on property

Jews in the former Yugoslavia are considering how to document, research, claim and manage seized communal property.

Some 40 representatives from Jewish communities in all parts of the former Yugoslavia, except Slovenia, held a seminar in Belgrade this month to exchange information and experience on the restitution and property-management process.

Macedonia and Croatia have implemented restitution procedures, but there is no restitution law in Bosnia or Serbia.