

IN THE NEWS

Jewish cadets uneasy at Air Force Academy

Jewish cadets at the Air Force Academy felt pressured not to participate in religious activities, a report said.

The cadets made the comments in focus groups last month, and are part of a government report released Wednesday on the religious climate at the Colorado Springs, Colo., campus. [Story, Pg. 3]

Postponement delays Jewish Agency election

The election for chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel was postponed.

The move will give both candidates — Israel's former minister of Diaspora affairs, Natan Sharansky, and Ra'anana Mayor Zeev Bielski — time to fortify their support, a World Zionist Organization official said.

The Zionist General Council voted Wednesday to grant both candidates seats on the Zionist Executive.

A candidate must be a member of the Zionist Executive to run for WZO chairman, who also chairs the Jewish Agency.

The election is expected late next week; Sallai Meridor, the current chairman of the Jewish Agency executive, said he will resign during the Jewish Agency Assembly and Board of Governors meetings, which take place June 26-30.

Israel could re-enter Gaza

Israel reserves the right to re-enter the Gaza Strip if Palestinians continue to launch attacks there, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom said.

"Israel will return to Gaza after the disengagement for a few days if this is what is needed to stop the terrorism," Shalom was quoted as saying in a briefing for foreign diplomats Wednesday.

The pledge appeared to be a response to growing assessments that the Gaza pullout could embolden Palestinian terrorists.



WORLD REPORT

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For U.N.'s 60th birthday, Israel, Jewish groups have a few wishes

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — As the United Nations prepares to celebrate the 60th anniversary of its founding in San Francisco, the occasion is bittersweet for Jewish observers.

It was the United Nations that sanctioned the State of Israel's birth in 1948, but it gave the Jewish state the status of an ugly stepchild — constantly singling out Israel for condemnation and excluding Israel, alone among U.N. member-states, from full membership in the regional groupings that apportion key positions at the world body.

That said, Israel recently has made strides at the United Nations.

In the past year, the U.N. Department of Public Information convened a daylong conference on anti-Semitism, devoting more time to the topic than the United Nations ever had before.

In commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps, the U.N. General Assembly held a special session, and a Holocaust exhibit was displayed in the lobby of U.N. headquarters — launched with the playing of Israel's national anthem and the recitation of a Jewish mourning prayer.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan also attended the opening of the new Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem, the first time a secretary-general had traveled to Israel.

This month, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, an umbrella group of 52 Jewish organizations, reported a very friendly meeting with Annan.

And last week, Israel's U.N. ambassador,

Dan Gillerman, became one of 21 General Assembly vice presidents, the first time Israel has held the position in more than half a century.

"All these things, beyond their symbolic importance, are also things that herald a totally new treatment of Israel at the U.N. — and for Israel, a symbolism in this very difficult and hostile environment is also very important," Gillerman told JTA.

The recent Jewish achievements and the 60th anniversary of the United Nations — founded on June 26, 1945 — come as Annan strives to push through a package of reforms for the world body.

Jewish officials praise Annan for backing some critical Jewish initiatives, but say a test of the secretary-general's strength is the extent to which he makes fair treatment of Israel a part of his reform plans.

Annan's reform package doesn't explicitly cite fairer treatment of Israel, but Jewish officials believe that steps he is demanding to streamline the organization bode well for Israel. For example, Annan's idea to make the U.N. Commission on Human Rights into a smaller council — not populated by serial human-rights violators — could change that body's agenda.

In addition, Annan plans to review any committee that has existed for more than five years. That would include special committees devoted exclusively to the plight of the Palestinians that Israel and Jewish officials view as propaganda organs and are eager to close.

"The singling out of Israel is the elephant in the room of the whole U.N. reform debate,"

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BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

■ Jewish U.N. observers hope for changes as body marks 60th birthday

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said Hillel Neuer, executive director of U.N. Watch in Geneva. The anti-Israel agenda "is not a small issue. It's a material issue. It dominates and monopolizes so many U.N. bodies."

As examples, Neuer cited the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which issues more resolutions against Israel than against any other country, and the World Health Organization, which last month held a special session on the alleged damage Israel causes to Palestinians' health and condemned Israel in a resolution opposed by only a handful of countries.

Furthermore, Annan's supportive statements, while positive, need to reach beyond the Jewish community, Neuer said.

For example, in his Jerusalem speech, Annan pressed for Israel's full participation in the Western European and Others Group. Israel has full membership in the regional group at U.N. headquarters in New York, but not at U.N. offices in Geneva, Nairobi, or Vienna.

But when he spoke in April to the Human Rights Commission in Geneva, Annan "didn't mention a word of it — and that's where the change has to happen," Neuer said.

■

On the other hand, Felice Gaer, director of the American Jewish Committee's Jacob Blaustein Institute for Human Rights, praised the fact that Annan told the Human Rights Commission it was not credible and needed to be replaced.

"Kofi Annan has been courageous and has broken with past secretaries-general

in reflecting honestly on the U.N.'s failings when it has come to Israel and anti-Semitism, but he still needs to do more," she said, pointing to entrenched bias at the institution.

"We're finally beginning to get these issues out from the shadows. We finally have the straight talk about anti-Semitism from the front office. What we don't have is it coming from the political bodies," she said. "I would like to see the secretary-general's leadership mirrored by others who serve as top officials of the U.N."

Amy Goldstein, director of U.N. affairs for B'nai B'rith International, had sharper words.

Ever since the United Nations fulfilled the Jewish right to self-determination by granting Israel statehood, it has tried to erode those rights, she said.

"After 60 years, we need to reform the United Nations to return it to the original ideas of the framers and to make it a place where all peoples, including the Jewish people, are treated equally," Goldstein said.

Others feel more optimistic.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Presidents Conference, said the recent meeting with Annan was a success.

The meeting addressed many issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, anti-Semitism, Iran's nuclear program, the ongoing killings in Darfur

and Israel's full membership in its regional grouping.

"He was actually pretty responsive to everything," Hoenlein said of Annan.

Hoenlein noted that Annan "indicated support for the idea of pursuing the 'road map'" — an internationally backed peace plan — and not backing the Palestinian demand to jump immediately to final-status negotiations before the two sides

have met their commitments in intermediate stages.

For his part, Gillerman views the recent advancements as irreversible.

A new world view is taking shape among member states after Sept. 11, Gillerman said, pointing to shifting politics in the Middle East, from Israel's Gaza withdrawal plan to the potential reinitiation of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to Syria's withdrawal of troops from Lebanon.

Israel lobbied diplomats for six months to attain a vice presidency of the General Assembly, where Gillerman said he will try to steer the agenda away from the usual slew of anti-Israel resolutions.

Israel now is working for a coveted seat on the 15-member Security Council, the only U.N. body with binding authority.

"Nothing is impossible for Israel anymore, and whatever position is available, we will fight for," Gillerman said. "The sky's the limit." ■



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Ancient Jewish sites in peril

By TZVI KAHN

NEW YORK (JTA) — An ancient West Bank city and a Serbian synagogue were included on a list of the 100 most endangered sites.

Tell Balatah, located east of Nablus, is suffering from lack of conservation and maintenance, vandalism and heavy rains, according to the list.

The Subotica Synagogue in Serbia and Montenegro, built in 1902 and considered

one of the last remaining examples of Secessionist architecture after World War II, is also in need of restoration work on the roof and facades.

Both sites are on the the World Monuments Fund's 2006 list of endangered sites.

The fund's biennial list of historic architectural and cultural sites in danger is compiled by an international group of experts and seeks to garner world attention and funding to ensure their preservation. ■

Report admits intolerance at Air Force Academy

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA)— Jewish cadets at the Air Force Academy feel pressure to choose their military duties over their religion, and believe the school is insensitive to their needs because of an overtly Christian atmosphere, a report said.

The comments, taken from focus groups last month and included as part of a report released by the military on the religious climate at the Colorado Springs, Colo., campus, suggest that some Jewish students are uncomfortable at the academy because of what they see as an evangelical Christian culture.

The Jewish students interviewed for the report also said the burden is squarely on them to seek out religious accommodations, and that the procedures to do so are often cumbersome.

"Freedom of religion does not exist if you are not a Christian," one Jewish cadet said, according to the report.

The report was released Wednesday after numerous complaints of religious intolerance and proselytizing at the school. The debate has also moved to the halls of Congress, where Democratic lawmakers have faced strong opposition to attempts to seek reform at the academy.

The report was welcomed by Reps. Steven Israel (D-N.Y.) and Lois Capps (D-Calif.), who have complained in recent weeks about religious intolerance at the school. But the lawmakers said they remain concerned the Air Force is not doing enough on the issue.

"We need performance standards, we need benchmarks, we need accountability," Israel said at a news conference.

The report's author, Lt. Gen. Robert Brady, the Air Force's deputy chief of staff for personnel, acknowledged the perception of religious intolerance on campus, but suggested it came more from a lack of awareness of appropriate expressions of faith and inadequate training than overt religious discrimination or anti-Semitism.

"I think there were cases where people have said some things, perhaps from a lectern, that were overreaching, forgetting their position, that put cadets, perhaps, in an untenable position in terms of, 'Gee, am I going to pass Physics 101 if I don't agree with this guy?'" Brady said.

Brady also said he believed the situa-

tion has improved in recent years.

The report maps nine recommendations for change, including training for faculty and staff and increased access to kosher meals. All of the recommendations were accepted by Michael Dominguez, the acting secretary of the Air Force.

"We need to understand better the role of religion and culture more broadly on the way people think and act and make decisions," Brady said. "That's important for us in a diverse force."

In addition, a new position, vice superintendent of the academy, was created. Maj. Gen. Irving Halter Jr. is charged with improving religious tolerance at the school.

For its part, the Anti-Defamation League called the report encouraging, particularly the recommendations for reform.

"If implemented effectively, such programs could provide a model for the entire U.S. military," the group said in a statement.

Few of the reported incidents directly involved Jews. The academy's football coach reportedly placed a "Team Jesus" banner in the locker room last year, and advertisements for the movie "The Passion of the Christ" were circulated around campus.

Cadets also complained about the term "Heathen Flight," used as slang to describe the march back to dorms with other cadets who did not attend worship services.

The Jewish cadets, who were interviewed separately from Christians and other religious minorities, expressed overall positive views on the academy, but acknowledged problems with other cadets, faculty, some leadership officials and several coaches.

They complained of prayers before

mandatory events and an e-mail, sent by Brig. Gen. Johnny Weida, the school's commandant of cadets, promoting National Prayer Day in 2003.

A separate report concluded Weida's message "did not violate any public standard."

They also detailed what was deemed a "cumbersome pass procedure" to attend religious services, and suggested it was accompanied by pressure from cadet leadership to make

"the right choice" and choose participation in academy activities over religious events.

Dining facilities were deemed inadequate for kosher dietary needs by the Jewish cadets. One cadet, who kept kosher, was given a refrigerator in his room because the dining hall was insufficient.

Faculty members also acknowledged that some of the academy's leadership is "extraordinarily aggressive" in their expressions of faith, and hinted at a climate in which religious people promote and hire other devout people.

The Jewish cadets also said they believed Lt. Gen. John Rosa, the academy's superintendent, was making a sincere effort to improve the school. Rosa is expected to leave soon to become president of The Citadel.

Israel and other Democratic lawmakers have tried to seek reforms through congressional action, but have faced strong opposition from Republicans.

On Monday, Rep. John Hostettler (R-Ind.) said Democrats were "denigrating and demonizing Christians" for seeking an amendment on the issue. Hostettler later withdrew his remarks.

Capt. MeLinda Morton, a Lutheran chaplain at the academy, resigned from the military this week. Morton's attorney told The New York Times that she believed it would be difficult to continue at the school because of her outspokenness on the issue.

'I think there were cases where people have said some things, perhaps from a lectern, that were overreaching, forgetting their position, that put cadets, perhaps, in an untenable position.'

Lt. Gen. Robert Brady

Air Force official

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israel ready to hit hard

Israeli forces could bomb Palestinian population centers if the forces come under attack during the upcoming Gaza Strip withdrawal, officials warned.

Eival Giladi, an official in the Prime Minister's Office, said Wednesday that Israel would be willing to resort to heavy weaponry and cause civilian casualties among Palestinians in order to secure a safe pullback.

Getting away with murder?

Israel fails to properly investigate the killing of Palestinian civilians by its troops, an international human rights group charged.

"Most of Israel's investigations of civilian casualties have been a sham," Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, told reporters Wednesday. "The government's failure to investigate the deaths of innocent civilians has created an atmosphere that encourages soldiers to think they can literally get away with murder."

According to the New York-based group, thousands of Palestinian noncombatants have been killed or wounded by Israeli troops, and few of the cases were probed.

The army rejected the charge, saying that during four and a half years of fighting it has investigated 130 cases and issued 28 indictments against soldiers, six of whom were convicted.

Islamic Jihad in the sights

Israel decided to resume "targeted killings" of Islamic Jihad leaders.

The decision was made this week after attacks by the Palestinian terrorist group killed two Israelis, security sources said Wednesday.

Israel suspended its track-and-kill operations against terrorists in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as part of the truce Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon declared with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in February.

In what appeared to be the first attempt to implement the new policy, an Israeli aircraft fired a missile at an Islamic Jihad member in the Gaza town of Beit Lahiya on Tuesday night, but missed.

NORTH AMERICA

Hospital pays in Crown Heights killing

A U.S. court awarded \$1.25 million to the family of the Chasidic man killed in the 1991 Crown Heights riots.

The award made last week came after Kings County Hospital admitted negligence in treating Yankel Rosenbaum.

Rosenbaum was killed in the anti-Jewish violence that erupted in the Brooklyn neighborhood after a Chasidic driver's car accidentally struck and killed a 7-year-old black child, Gavin Cato.

The case was motivated by a need for justice, not by money, said Rosenbaum's brother, Norman.

"No one kills my brother and gets away with it. I know Yankel would have done the same thing. I want to be able to tell my children that I did everything I could to see proper justice done," Norman Rosenbaum told JTA.

Saperstein blasts faith-based initiatives

A Reform movement leader told Congress that a bill to establish a permanent White House office for faith-based initiatives would violate the Constitution.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, blasted the Tools for Community Initiatives Act

on Tuesday, at a hearing of the House Government Reform Committee's subcommittee on criminal justice, drug policy and human resources.

"We believe that direct government funding of houses of worship is unconstitutional, bad public policy and bad for religion," Saperstein said of the bill, according to prepared remarks.

The bill would allow for the creation of a permanent White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

Zionism's quiet supporters

Most Israeli Arabs back the idea of a Jewish state, a survey found.

According to the poll released as part of a Jaffa conference on race relations, 70 percent of the country's Arab citizens said they believed Israel has the right to exist as a democratic Jewish state, and a quarter voiced support for government efforts to maintain a Jewish majority in Israel.

Around half of Arab respondents said they did not trust Israeli Jews, while 60 percent of Jews polled said the same about their Arab compatriots.

According to the survey, 25 percent of Israeli Jews believe Arabs should not enjoy full civil rights.

Seventy percent of Jews polled said they avoid traveling to Arab population centers in Israel.

WORLD

Peace over the Net?

Dan Rather will moderate an interfaith town meeting over the Internet.

Jews, Muslims and Christians from around the world are slated to participate in Sunday's event.

Discussions will take place between participants in Jerusalem and Washington, while people in other venues around the world will gather in public spaces to participate in the event via the Internet.

More information is available at <http://www.adifferentfuture.org>.

Books for the People of the Book

A public Jewish library opened in Poland.

The Rabbi Moses Isserles Remuh Jewish Library, named for the famous 16th-century rabbi and scholar who lived in the city of Krakow, opened Wednesday in the city's Jewish youth club.

The library will house approximately 1,100 books, among them 500 in Yiddish, 200 in Polish and 250 in English. Young people will deliver books to elderly Jews.

Daniela Malec, a leader in Czulent, a Jewish youth group, said that the library will be open to all.

"We think there are a lot of people in Krakow who would like to know more about the Jews who lived here in Krakow with them for a few hundred years and actually live here still," she said.

Religion in the schools, Ukraine style

Jewish officials in Ukraine cautiously welcomed a new initiative to introduce religious education in public schools.

But the officials said they would expect all faiths to be represented in the new curriculum.

Ukrainian public schools soon will teach faith and morals under a new curriculum that is being developed by education and church officials.

Josef Zissels, a prominent Jewish leader, said that the Jewish community would not oppose an ethics and faith class, as long as it is "pluralistic and will include experts representing all religions that exist in Ukraine."