

## IN THE NEWS

**Sharon to have cardiac procedure**

Ariel Sharon is scheduled to have a minor heart operation.

Doctors for the 77-year-old Israeli prime minister, going public with his medical record, said Monday that Sharon's mild stroke last week was caused by a blood clot traced to a hole in his heart.

A common birth defect, the tiny hole will be sealed with a cardiac catheterization in the next two or three weeks, they said.

**Congress gives Israel defense money**

Congress passed \$600 million for U.S.-Israel cooperative defense programs.

The allocation, \$150 million more than the White House requested, passed the House of Representatives on Dec. 22 as part of the Defense Appropriations Bill.

The measure passed the Senate Wednesday.

The earmark includes \$133 million for the Arrow Anti-Ballistic Missile System, \$37.4 million for the LITENING Targeting and Navigation Pod, \$22 million for Reactive Armor tiles for Bradley fighting vehicles and \$17 million for the ITALD aircraft decoy system.

**Jewish Agency to get financial boost**

A Russian Jewish financier is poised to give a \$50-million donation that may prove critical to the Jewish Agency for Israel's activities in the former Soviet Union.

The gift from Arcadi Gaydamak should help the agency, whose budget in the region has decreased over the last few years, to fund "Zionist education" projects.

The 53-year-old billionaire, who divides his time between Moscow and Israel, told JTA that the agreement between him and the Jewish Agency is almost finalized.



# WORLD REPORT

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## After tsunami, group focuses on women's lives in India

By PETER EPHROSS

**C**HENNAI, India (JTA) — In the southern Indian province of Tamil Nadu, time seems to be divided into two eras: before the tsunami and after the tsunami.

"Before tsunami, we weren't dependent on anybody for anything," says Neataraj, a woman in the fishing village of Vel-lakoil. "After tsunami, we didn't have anything at all."

But for some villages supported by the American Jewish World Service, the deadly tsunami on Dec. 26, 2004 — and the outpouring of financial support that followed — has provided an opportunity to accelerate development efforts and focus on improving rural women's lives.

"This disaster has given us a space to create gender equality," says Attapan, the director of Rose. Rose is one of the Indian nonprofit groups supported by the AJWS, which focuses on international development based on the Jewish value of tikkun olam, or repairing the world.

The tsunami shook up rural Indian society, creating an opening for women to take a more prominent role.

AJWS efforts were on display during a recent trip to southern India, a region where 10,000 people died and hundreds of thousands more were left homeless by the storm.

Women from area villages gathered in a thatched-roof meeting hall in the village of Alamarai Kuppam to discuss their successes since they were organized by Guide, another of AJWS' partner organizations in the region.

"We stopped the men from making alcohol in our village," one woman said.

Another explained, "We made demands for relief and got it," referring to tsunami relief.

Says Deval Sanghavi, founder of Dasra, an organization that finds project partners for the AJWS in India: "We try to involve women at every stage of the process" of aid and development in order to promote gender equality.

In a country where male dominance is still the norm and girls younger than 15 are occasionally promised in arranged marriages in rural areas, there's certainly a moral component to the pro-woman effort.

"We have a mandate to look for people who are less well off," and that means "women, children and refugees," says Ruth Messinger, AJWS' president.

Results can be hard to quantify: One measure the AJWS and Dasra employ is how the leaders of their project partners are received when they enter a village.

Still, even just having the women speak out is progress, local leaders say — and for the first time, several women from the region say they will be running as candidates in local elections scheduled for next year.

There's an economic benefit to building a woman's movement in India and elsewhere in the developing world, says Michael Cohen, director of the New School for Social Research's Graduate Program in International Affairs in New York: In post-disaster relief situations, women's groups provide a vital contact for governments and aid groups because they have proven

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FOCUS  
ON  
ISSUES

## ■ *After the tsunami, an opportunity to change lives in rural India*

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to be most effective in organizing local communities.

Working with women, particularly educating them, is probably the “best single investment” that can be made in international development, he says. “It helps on the income side and reduces the family size.”

Both elements are key to reducing rural poverty, still a major issue in India, where hundreds of millions of people live in the countryside.

The AJWS also promotes equality across castes, a complicated goal in a country where the caste system remains a major social force, although it was officially abolished in 1949. The mixture of castes among the women at the meeting in Alamarai Kuppam was striking: It included some participants who are dalit, the group once known as untouchables.

Like much of the world, the Jewish community opened up its pocketbooks after the tsunami, which killed more than 200,000 people. Jews donated to relief efforts by both Jewish and non-Jewish agencies.

Individual Jewish groups, notably the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which raised \$18.5 million, have been active in relief and rebuilding efforts in Thailand, India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

The AJWS' efforts in the region make for a compelling story. First, the group raised tsunami relief money equivalent to more than 40 percent of its entire 2005

budget — more than \$11.2 million in relief as of Dec. 1.

The extraordinary fund-raising effort was just the latest example of the growth of the AJWS, which was formed in 1985 and has grown substantially during the last several years under Messinger.

When President Bush invited 19 nonprofit groups involved in post-tsunami work to the White House in January, the AJWS, which has received the top rating from the Charity Navigator nonprofit evaluation service, was among them.

“We think it's fundamentally Jewish to fight oppression and to meet the needs of the poor and the stranger and to pursue justice,” says Messinger, who has also made the ongoing crisis in Sudan, where tens of thousands of people have died in government-sponsored violence, a focus of the group's efforts.

Until they find out about the AJWS, she says, many Jews don't realize that supporting international relief and development and pushing for involvement in Darfur are things “they could do Jewishly.”

After the tsunami, the AJWS expanded into Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the two countries hardest hit by the storm. But the group had been working in India before the tsunami, and had developed relationships with some nonprofits there.

That prior involvement, AJWS says, helped it not only in distributing initial relief funds but in funneling aid to long-term development projects.

The accomplishments and uncertainties of relief and development efforts can be seen in southern India.

New fishing boats, often carrying the names of two or three relief groups that paid for the vessels, dot the oceanside landscape.

In the months after the tsunami, “that's what everybody was talking about — nets and boats, nets and boats,” says Kate Kroeger, the AJWS' senior program officer responsible for its India projects.

There's no doubt that this work was

vital, and the AJWS did a lot of it. Indian fishing communities generally are self-sufficient — they eat some of what they catch and sell some at market — but their proximity to the water made them the most likely victims of the tsunami.

However, villagers say the tsunami caused changes in ocean and weather patterns, evidenced most recently by heavy rains and floods that have made the ocean waters unpredictable.

“Because of the ecological change, we can't predict how much fish we can catch this month,” says Sambat, 32, who lives in the village of Pudu Kalpakkam.

The influx of international aid has created a climate of dependence in which villagers expect handouts. To counter this dynamic, the AJWS works with nonprofits screened by Dasra, giving small grants in the \$20,000-\$40,000 range per year.

So far the group has distributed about 20 percent of the money it collected after the tsunami. It plans to parcel out the rest during the next few years.

“A lot of donors just come and go after an emergency. But the real work really takes place a few years after the emergency,” Kroeger says.

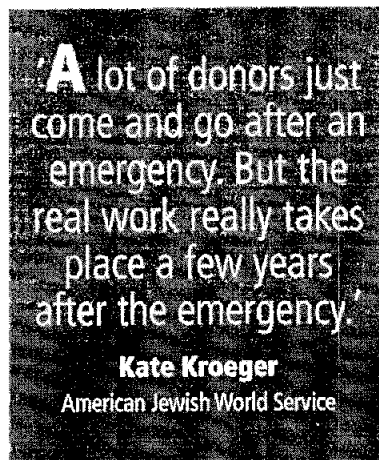
For the AJWS, that real work means supporting women and families, with an eye on the long haul.

On a recent warm evening, as nightfall approached in the village of Devaneri, children sat in small groups on a rooftop. With directions from a staff member from a group known as Dreamcatchers, they're drawing pictures of the sky, and which part of the sky they want to be.

“Now they sleep soundly. As a result of the exercises, the children are very normal now,” said Juliet Mary of Dreamcatchers, which works with at-risk children.

Anushya, 14, certainly seems happy. She holds up a piece of paper on which she's drawn the moon, sun and stars, and imagines herself as a star.

“It was so peaceful there,” she says. ■  
(JTA Foreign Editor Peter Ephross recently traveled to India on a trip sponsored by the American Jewish World Service.)



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# In Russia, poverty leading Jews to cremation

By YASHA LEVINE

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia (JTA) — Alexandra Kerzhenevich, a math teacher in her mid-50s and a lifelong resident of St. Petersburg, was never very religious, but she has always felt a deep connection to her Jewish roots.

So when her father died last year, she wanted to bury him next to her mother in the family plot in the city's historic Jewish cemetery.

Although the cemetery is rundown, severely crowded and overgrown with weeds, it is still, she said, the place in the city that is closest to her heart. "When I come to the cemetery, I feel at home — this is where all my people are," she said.

But like family plots in this and many other Russian cemeteries, the Kerzhenevich area is small and already crowded with the graves of other family members.

In order to add her deceased father to the grave, she had to have his body cremated. She then buried the urn containing his ashes.

Kerzhenevich's dilemma illustrates a nationwide problem.

The practice of adding urns to family plots is common, among both Jews and non-Jews, in the overcrowded cemeteries of the former Soviet Union. But the issue has a special poignancy in the Jewish community: At a time when Jewish identity is on the rise, Russian Jews are becoming aware of the traditional prohibition against cremation but are unable or unwilling to comply.

Years of state-sponsored preference for cremation, combined with financial considerations — it's three times as expensive to bury a body as to cremate one in St. Petersburg — conspire to make it prohibitively difficult to bury the dead according to halachah, or Jewish law.

For most Russian Jews, therefore, there is no other realistic option. And many aren't overly concerned about it.

Kerzhenevich knew that to cremate her father's body was a violation of Jewish law. But "my father was not religious at all," she said.

Although she and her husband sporadically attend synagogue services, Judaism has always been more of a cultural identity to them. Their priority was to keep the family together — even in death.

Ironically, the widespread desire among

Russian Jews to be buried with their families has led to increased cremation.

For many years, interments in St. Petersburg's Jewish cemetery were limited to relatives of those already buried there. New additions could be made only to existing family plots, and the burial of full-size caskets was forbidden.

Cremation was the only way.

Rabbi Menahem Mendel Pevzner, the chief rabbi of

St. Petersburg, is very concerned about the cremation issue, calling it "one of the main problems that the Jewish community in Russia is facing today."

He attributes the widespread practice to ignorance, saying "people do not have the information to make a correct decision" about proper Jewish burial.

Explaining that Russian Jews used to cremate their dead "because it was cheaper," he says that now it's primarily due to families putting a priority on burying their dead together rather than following Jewish law. That, he says, is wrong: It is extremely important to observe Jewish burial laws, even if it means going against the wishes of the deceased.

Many Russian Jews find that position hard to accept.

"When my wife passed away, she wanted to be buried with her aunts and uncles in the family grave in the Jewish cemetery," said Raphael Onikul, a 72-year-old meteorologist. "She was never religious. None of us were."

Although Judaism never played a role in his wife's life, before she passed away she expressed a desire to be buried alongside her relatives. Onikul honored that wish, and cremation was the only way to fulfill it.

"There was a place for her there, and there is also one for me," he said.

Pevzner has 70 years of history working against him: Cremation became widely accepted among Russian Jews after the Russian Revolution of 1917. The ruling Communist Party promoted the practice, partly for sanitary concerns but mainly to discourage religious beliefs.

None of Russia's major faiths, including the Russian Orthodox Church, permit cremation.

St. Petersburg's Jewish cemetery was privatized in 1991, and new plots of land began to be allocated. For the first time in decades, the Jewish cemetery was opened — but only to families who could prove the deceased was related to someone already buried there.

One only has to walk around the cemetery to see that the situation of the Kerzhenevich and Onikul families mirrors that of many others. There are few new grave sites, and it is not unusual to see five or more family members buried in one 25-square-foot plot of land.

Frequently, small stone plaques attached to the fencing of a family plot mark newer graves — there is no more space on the headstones for inscriptions.

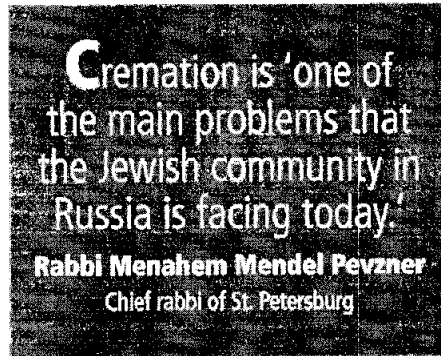
Today the cemetery is owned by the municipality and run by a private firm, the Burial House, which is not associated with the Jewish community. This firm takes care of new plot allocations, cemetery maintenance and funeral services.

Yankel Ben Gersh, the director of funeral services at the Grand Choral Synagogue in St. Petersburg and a member of the chevra kadisha, or Jewish burial society, puts the price of a complete Jewish burial at \$1,500. The chevra kadisha's fee for preparing and watching over the body is just \$50, he noted — it's the other fees, including purchasing a burial plot, that drive up the price.

In contrast, cremation and burying an urn in an existing family plot can cost as little as \$500.

For the city's elderly in particular, who subsist on an average monthly pension of \$100, traditional Jewish burial becomes an impossible financial burden.

According to Ben Gersh, the chevra kadisha will make up half of the difference between a burial with cremation and a proper Jewish burial. This is an important duty that "the Jewish community takes onto itself," he said. "The chevra kadisha tries to convince people to do the right thing and have a proper Jewish burial."



**ACROSS THE  
FORMER  
SOVIET UNION**

# NEWS IN BRIEF

## MIDDLE EAST

### Settlement homes approved

Israel plans to expand two West Bank settlements.

The Housing Ministry issued construction tenders Monday for 150 new homes in Beitar Illit and 78 new homes in Efrat, despite a call in the U.S.-led peace "road map" for a freeze on such expansion.

Both settlements are in the Gush Etzion bloc, which Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has said Israel will keep under any final peace accord with the Palestinians.

### Peretz blasts Sharon

Ariel Sharon's top political rival called the Israeli leader a danger to democracy.

Amir Peretz, who is leading Israel's Labor Party against Sharon in the March 28 general elections, took the prime minister to task Monday for the way he is handling Kadima, his new political party.

"I think it is a great danger and a sign of a deteriorating democracy," Peretz told the Jerusalem Post. "Sharon's party is concerned with handing out political appointments, but ultimately the Labor Party will have the best candidates to offer Israel, because they will look at us as a group and not as a party of one person."

Opinion polls show Peretz trailing Sharon, with the Likud Party under Benjamin Netanyahu a distant third. Peretz has been losing ground amid charges that he has failed to mount an election campaign for Labor.

Discussing his platform with the Post, he said that if elected prime minister he would divert funds from West Bank settlements to underdeveloped areas of Israel.

### Rocket range extended?

Palestinian terrorists in the Gaza Strip claimed to have improved their rockets.

The Al-Aksa Brigade said Monday that it had new rockets with a 16-mile range, capable of reaching the Israeli southern towns of Ashkelon, Ofakim and Netivot from Gaza.

The brigade, a military wing of Fatah, the dominant Palestinian faction, said it would use the rockets if Israel makes good on a threat to declare off-limits areas of northern Gaza used for past launches.

Another Gaza terrorist group, the Popular Resistance Committees, said it had extended the range of its rockets to 10 miles.

Rockets currently fired from Gaza are believed to have maximum ranges of around 6 miles.

### Churches owe millions to Jerusalem

Churches owe more than \$65 million to the city of Jerusalem in overdue property taxes.

The churches owe the money for properties that are not used as houses of worship, which are exempt from tax, city officials said, and estimated the amount owed is 300 million shekels.

The Latin Patriarchate is considered the largest debtor.

The State of Israel and the Vatican are in negotiations over the repayment of the money.

### Kibbutz members suspected in drug ring

A kibbutz in northern Israel allegedly served as a center for a drug-smuggling ring.

Family members on Kibbutz Geshar Haziv, which was settled after Israel's War of Independence with immigrants from North America, were allegedly part of a ring that smuggled cocaine from Argentina into Israel.

Liquid cocaine was smuggled into Israel in wine bottles, police believe, earning the smugglers hundreds of thousands of dollars.

## NORTH AMERICA

### U.S. national menorah lit

The U.S. homeland security secretary helped light the National Menorah in Washington.

Michael Chertoff, who is Jewish, took part in Sunday's ceremony.

Chaya Schreiber, a 12-year-old girl from New Orleans whose home and school were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, addressed the crowd of several hundred people who attended the ceremonial lighting, The Associated Press reported.

## WORLD

### Pope calls for peace

Celebrating his first Christmas as pope, Pope Benedict XVI appealed for peace in the Middle East.

"On this night, when we look toward Bethlehem, let us pray in a special way for the birthplace of our Redeemer and for the men and women who live and suffer there," Benedict said Saturday at midnight mass in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. "We wish to pray for peace in the Holy Land. Look O Lord, upon this corner of the earth, your homeland, which is so very dear to you," he said, in front of thousands of faithful and a worldwide broadcast audience. "Let your light shine upon it! Let it know peace!"

### Israeli group launches photo exhibit

An Israeli aid group helped launch a photo exhibit in tsunami-ravaged Sri Lanka on the first anniversary of the deadly tidal wave.

Along with an international group known as Project Galle, IsraAid is launching the exhibit of 1,000 photographs depicting encounters between volunteers and Sri Lankans displaced by the Dec. 26, 2004, tsunami, which killed more than 200,000 people.

A school rebuilt by IsraAid opened over the weekend in Sri Lanka.

### 'Chanukah caravans' tour Central Europe

"Chanukah caravans" are traveling around Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, bringing public festive programs to Jewish communities in the three countries.

The caravans, consisting of dance groups, singers and members of Jewish youth groups, are making stops in more than half a dozen cities.

On Sunday, Jews from several cities joined in a program that featured dancing, singing and a theater performance.

Government officials also attended.

### Peruvian Jewish leader has turnaround on candidate

A Jewish leader in Peru joined the political slate of a candidate he denounced as anti-Semitic just three weeks ago.

Isaac Mekler, president of the Peruvian Jewish Association said he joined the Congressional slate of controversial presidential candidate, Ollanta Mekler, after "he convinced me that he was not anti-Semitic."

Humala, a former army officer who with his brother led an indigenous rebellion a few years ago, is currently running second in polls for the presidential election scheduled for April 9.

### British think tank names new leader

A leading British Jewish think tank named a new executive director.

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research appointed Antony Lerman, currently the chief executive of the U.K.-based Rothschild Family Foundation.