

IN THE NEWS
Olmert flies to D.C. for summit with Bush

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert flew to Washington on Sunday for meetings with top-level officials, including President Bush.

During his meetings this week, Olmert is expected to discuss the Iranian nuclear issue and his "convergence plan" to withdraw from parts of the West Bank.

In addition to Bush, Olmert is slated to meet with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and American Jewish leaders.

Israeli airstrike kills four Palestinians

A Palestinian terrorist and three bystanders died in an Israeli airstrike.

Military aircraft fired a missile on Saturday at a car in the Gaza Strip as it carried an Islamic Jihad leader wanted for orchestrating rocket salvos into Israel.

The blast also hit an adjacent vehicle, killing a Palestinian boy along with his mother and grandmother.

Israel apologized for the civilian casualties.

Islamic Jihad vowed to conduct revenge attacks on Israelis.

Peres, Livni meet Abbas

Ehud Olmert's top two deputies met with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni held half an hour of talks Sunday with Abbas on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, the highest-level public talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in months.

While the discussion focused on ideas for alleviating Palestinian humanitarian problems, both sides said it could lead to a first Olmert-Abbas summit.

WORLD REPORT

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Appointment of monitor adds teeth to the fight against anti-Semitism

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The U.S. State Department just added a set of teeth to its fledgling office monitoring anti-Semitism.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on May 17 named Gregg Rickman, a dogged investigator who has tracked the Swiss banks' role in the Holocaust, as the first special envoy for monitoring and combating anti-Semitism around the world.

Jewish leaders unanimously agreed that the appointment would push the office monitoring anti-Semitism, in existence barely 18 months, to the department's front burner.

"It creates a strong point person who will be able to coordinate all the different parts of our government that deal with anti-Semitism," said Mark Levin, executive director of NCSJ, a group that advocates for Jews in the former Soviet Union and that lobbied for the position. "Without continued U.S. leadership, I'm not sure how much attention will be paid by our friends in Europe and elsewhere to anti-Semitism."

Congressional legislation sponsored by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) and Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio) created the office in late 2004 over the objection of State Department mandarins, who said it would create an extra layer of bureaucracy and was unnecessary because the issue already was being addressed in the department's human rights monitoring.

The legislation was created amid the most recent intifada, when anti-Semitism intensified in Europe and the Middle East.

So far the office, under the direction of Edward O'Donnell, special envoy for Holocaust

issues, has produced just one report, in January 2005. Insiders said O'Donnell already was overworked in his capacity encouraging the rightful distribution of Holocaust assets, and the office sorely needed its own "boss."

Rickman's principal qualification for the job is his stint as a director on the Senate Banking Committee in the mid-1990s under the chairmanship of former Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), when it uncovered Swiss banks' role in hiding Nazi loot and keeping Jewish survivors from accessing their pre-Holocaust accounts. Rickman, who is Jewish, wrote an account of the investigation called "Swiss Banks and Jewish Souls."

"Gregg Rickman, working with Sen. D'Amato, is almost single-handedly the one who uncovered the corruption and the immorality of the Swiss banks," said William Daroff, vice president for public policy of the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella body of North American Jewish federations, and director of its Washington office.

Shai Franklin, executive director of the World Jewish Congress' American section, said Rickman understands all sides of the system.

"He's very familiar with how Capitol Hill works and he knows the Jewish community and he knows the Europeans, having opened up a lot of the channels in the Swiss gold issue," he said.

Together with NCSJ, Daroff led the effort for legislation creating the anti-Semitism office when he was congressional liaison for the Republican Jewish Coalition.

Rickman, who also was staff director for former Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (R-Ill.), succeeded

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**FOCUS
ON
ISSUES**

■ The new U.S. envoy on anti-Semitism tracked the Swiss banks' role in the Holocaust

Continued from page 1

Daroff at the RJC in 2004. The group revealed in the appointment of one of its own.

"It is very exciting to have an RJC alum serving in such an important position," said Matt Brooks, the group's executive director.

Rickman, 42, recently returned to the Hill, where he has directed the U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee investigating the "oil for food" scandal implicating U.N. officials and others in receiving kickbacks from Saddam Hussein during the years Iraq was under sanction.

That kind of doggedness will serve him well in his new capacity, according to representatives of groups that liaise between Washington and small, vulnerable Jewish communities overseas.

"Putting someone in there who has the know-how and connections to do the job right at least gives the issue a fair shot," said Rabbi Levi Shemtov, who directs the Chabad-Lubavitch office in Washington.

Some Jewish groups had advocated for a scholar and someone with a less partisan background, but Rickman was the better choice, said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

"You don't need a scholar, you need a pragmatic civil servant who will be there, be articulate and be a liaison," he said.

Rickman's appointment will go a long way toward reassuring Jewish groups who were angered by the Bush administration's initial resistance to the Lantos-Voinovich legislation.

"We're very appreciative of the presi-

dent and Secretary Rice making this appointment," said Nathan Diament, who directs the Orthodox Union's Washington office. "It's consistent with the work they've done to combat anti-Semitism throughout the Bush administration."

Rickman, who will be sworn in Monday, will not simply monitor anti-Semitism; he will inject the issue into every bilateral or multilateral arrangement where it's applicable. Rickman declined to talk to reporters before his position became official.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, cited as an example efforts to get the 55-

member Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to encourage member nations to counter anti-Semitism.

"At a time when we're trying to get some governments to act through the OSCE, it'll be a full-time job," Hoenlein said. "We'll have someone who will privately and publicly express our concerns."

Daroff said Rickman's assignment will be twofold: dealing with official anti-Semitism and encouraging nations to combat anti-Semitism in their societies.

"This post empowers foreign policy and diplomacy," he said. "He can have a tremendous impact on combating anti-Semitism." ■

Jewish group to build ties with Africa

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Fifty years ago, Israel began a program of assistance to Africa that would endure for decades.

The American Jewish Committee continued that tradition earlier this month, inaugurating its Africa Institute, which will promote economic development in the world's poorest continent.

"We need to understand Africa and engage it," said the committee's executive director, David Harris, speaking at the AJCommittee's 100th annual convention in Washington to 500 people, including the ambassadors of a half-dozen African countries.

One of them was George Obiozor, Nigeria's ambassador to the United States. A former envoy to Israel, Obiozor, said Nigeria — Africa's most populous country — has had strong ties with Israel dating back to the days of David Ben-Gurion.

"In Nigeria, there's a deep-rooted admiration for Israel, a little state that turned itself into a veritable breadbasket and an island of prosperity and freedom," he said. "Israel recognized its need for Africa's friendship and kept giving aid until the relationship collapsed in 1973.

"Today, we have a visible presence of Israelis in many areas, particularly construction, tourism and telecommunications. I

would like to invite the Jewish community to come to Nigeria and help us. It's good for Africa, and it's good for Israel."

Stanley Bergman, chairman of the Africa Institute, told JTA the initiative was hatched in 2001, following a meeting between Jewish leaders and South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki.

Last September, Bergman and Eliseo Neuman, the institute's director, traveled to Lagos to meet with Nigerian leaders, including President Olusegun Obasanjo. One result of that meeting was a visit by

Nigerian Cabinet Minister Obiageli Ezekwesili to Israel in March.

Since then, said Bergman, the institute has written to the U.S. Department of Transportation, supporting Virgin Atlantic's bid for direct flights between the United States and Nigeria. It also has initiated a dialogue with Nigerians in the United States, who are said

to number more than 1 million.

"We have a lot to learn from Africa, but there are many stereotypes to be worked through," he said. The AJCommittee "has a history of promoting pluralism, human rights and interreligious dialogue. We believe that what's good for all minorities in any country is good for the Jewish people as well." ■

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George Obiozor
Nigerian ambassador

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THIS WEEK**MONDAY**

■ The Reform movement joins a national coalition of religious leaders in Washington in speaking out against the "Marriage Amendment" to the U.S. Constitution, which would effectively ban gay marriage.

■ A bill sponsored by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) that would ban assistance to the Palestinian Authority and severely restrict humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians is scheduled to come up before the full U.S. House of Representatives.

■ The American Jewish Congress opens its annual two-day meeting in Washington.

TUESDAY

■ Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert meets with President Bush at the White House.

■ A bipartisan slate of senators and U.S. representatives is to present a resolution calling for an "explicit reference to Jewish and other refugees" to appear in any discussion of Middle East refugees.

■ Opponents to any further withdrawals from the West Bank assemble at the Capitol to protest Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visit to Washington.

WEDNESDAY

■ Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert addresses both houses of Congress.

■ An American Enterprise Institute panel considers recent changes to Saudi textbooks.

■ Deborah Dash Moore, the director of the Judaic studies program at the University of Michigan, delivers the annual Weimann lecture at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

THURSDAY

■ The Shalom Center, a dovish Philadelphia-based Jewish grass-roots group, launches a campaign in New York to consider alternative forms of energy.

SATURDAY

■ Britain's largest union for college teachers votes on a proposal to boycott Israeli lecturers and academic institutions that don't publicly declare their opposition to Israeli policy in the West Bank. The National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education will take up the issue at its annual conference, which runs through May 29.

SUNDAY

■ The American Jewish Congress' Commission for Women's Empowerment opens a three-day conference in Tel Aviv.

■ Babaganewz, an American Jewish classroom magazine, and the Israeli postal service, present the four winners of the "Children of America Paint Israel" contest at the convention center in Washington. The winners' works will feature on Israeli stamps.

Gay ceremony in Russia sparks furor

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — Russia's leading Jewish organization has called on the community to boycott Reform Jews after a Reform rabbi officiated at what is believed to be the country's first same-sex commitment ceremony.

"We are calling on Jewish organizations and communities of Russia to relinquish any religious contacts with the people who have committed this sacrilegious and provocative act, as well as with the organizations these people represent," said a statement released May 18 by the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the largest Jewish group in the country.

The federation said it expects Russian Jews to support its stand.

"Silence in this situation will be regarded by the society and posterity as a sign of consent," the group said.

It remains unclear whether the boycott call will have any practical effect in the former Soviet Union, where official contacts between Lubavitch and Reform Jewish activists are almost nonexistent.

But the tiny private ceremony for a Jewish lesbian couple in Moscow could trigger a wider public debate within the Jewish community about gays and lesbians — and homophobia — in Russia.

According to a recent poll, 37 percent of Russians believe gays and lesbians should be criminally prosecuted. Russian Jews are believed to have similar attitudes.

The ceremony took place in Moscow on April 2, but came to light only after it was mentioned May 17 in a Moscow daily newspaper. Rabbi Nelly Shulman, who officiated, said it was not a Jewish wedding but a commitment ceremony.

Shulman insisted that she conducted the ceremony privately and without backing from her group, OROSIR, the umbrella organization of Reform Judaism in Rus-

sia. Alexander Lyskovoï, the group's leading rabbi, confirmed that the group had not endorsed the ceremony.

Hostility and bias toward gays and lesbians remain widespread in the former Soviet Union, where homosexuality was decriminalized only with the fall of communism.

Most recently, there was a heated public debate over a proposed gay pride festival and parade.

Federation leader Rabbi Berel Lazar, one of Russia's two chief rabbis, condemned the proposed festival, telling the Interfax agency in February that the event "would be a blow to morality."

The city government decided May 18 to ban the event.

The lesbian commitment ceremony already has had repercussions for Russia's Reform movement: In late April, Zinovy Kogan resigned as chairman of the

Reform umbrella group to protest the ceremony.

A source familiar with the situation told JTA that though the Reform movement in the United States generally permits same-sex unions, Shulman is the only one of six Reform rabbis working in the former Soviet republics who supports such ceremonies.

The six rabbis likely will take up the issue when they meet in Moscow on May 29. It's possible that the movement will ban such ceremonies in Russian Jewish communities, the source said.

"We are living in a society that has not matured enough for such ceremonies," Shulman acknowledged.

Galina Zelenina, who asked Shulman to conduct the ceremony for her and her partner, told JTA she didn't mean to provoke anyone.

"Judaism allows for a certain interpretation," said Zelenina, 28, a poet who has a degree in Jewish studies from a Moscow university.

"We didn't make it a media event," Zelenina said. "But we didn't want to make it underground either." ■

ACROSS
THE FORMER
SOVIET
UNION

'We are living in a society that has not matured enough for such ceremonies.'
Reform Rabbi Nelly Shulman

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israel releases funds

Israel decided to free some withheld Palestinian taxes in a humanitarian gesture.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Cabinet approved on Sunday the release of \$11 million in tax and customs levies that Israel collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority but has frozen since Hamas won elections in January.

Israel is to use the money to buy medicines and hospital gear, which it will then pass to the Palestinian Authority.

Abbas loyalists confiscate \$800,000

Forces loyal to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas confiscated more than \$800,000 that a Hamas official tried to smuggle into the Gaza Strip. Sami Abu Zuhri was crossing into Gaza from Egypt last Friday after traveling from Qatar.

Qatar has pledged \$50 million to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority. Abbas, a relative moderate who heads the Fatah Party, is in a power struggle with Hamas.

Rocket hits Israeli school

A Palestinian rocket hit an Israeli school but caused no casualties. Pupils at the religious school in Sderot were away at prayers when a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip punched through the ceiling of one of the classrooms.

Two more rockets landed outside the border town. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the salvo.

Defense Minister Amir Peretz, himself a Sderot resident, ordered all schools on Gaza's periphery to be fortified against rocket strikes.

Sweep for illegal Palestinians

Israel conducted a sweep for illegal Palestinian workers.

The border police's weekend dragnet nabbed around 1,000 Palestinians who were in Israel illegally. Twenty-six Israelis suspected of transporting or hiring the undocumented Palestinians were arrested, and 11 stolen cars were seized.

Report: Plot to hit El Al plane in Geneva

French and Swiss intelligence agencies reportedly foiled a plot to down an Israeli airliner.

Three Arabs living in Geneva plotted to shoot down an El Al plane as it landed last December, Yediot Achronot reported last Friday.

Abdullah wants Bush to press Abbas talks

King Abdullah II of Jordan urged President Bush to press Israel to negotiate with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

The May 18 letter added that "any unilateral action will have negative repercussions on the Palestinians," as well as Arab and Muslim countries.

Woman nabbed sneaking Hezbollah info

Israeli security forces arrested a Palestinian woman for smuggling information from Hezbollah into Israel.

The Shin Bet security service arrested the woman two weeks ago, but the news was publicized only last Friday, Ha'aretz reported.

The woman, who is believed to have been taking the information to her son in the West Bank, was nabbed with information on bombings.

Labor Party veteran passes away

Yitzhak Ben Aharon, a stalwart of Israel's Labor Party, died last Friday at age 99. A member of Israel's first Knesset, Ben Aharon is considered an architect of kibbutz movement ideology merging

Socialism and Zionism. Originally from what is now Romania, Ben Aharon died just two months shy of his 100th birthday.

NORTH AMERICA

U.S. opposes unilateral steps

The United States opposes unilateral steps in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The statement summarizing a strategic dialogue May 18 between Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. secretary of state, and Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, said the two "expressed their opposition to any unilateral steps taken by either side in the dispute that may prejudice final status negotiations or undermine progress toward a two-state solution."

Schorsch: Conservative Judaism lacks spirituality

The Conservative movement is being "impoverished" by a dearth of spirituality, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch said.

Conservative Judaism's adherence to halachah, or religious law, lacks a spiritual world view giving halachic observance meaning, the outgoing chancellor of the movement's Jewish Theological Seminary said May 18 in a graduation address in New York City.

'Yellow badge' report withdrawn

A Canadian newspaper withdrew a report that Iran had decided to make its Jews wear a yellow strip of material on their clothing.

The National Post report last Friday raised a storm of protests in the West. But the newspaper backtracked after it emerged that while the Iranian Parliament had recently passed legislation setting a dress code for Muslims, there was no specific law singling out Jews.

U.S.: Saudis not boycotting Israel

The United States sought and received assurances from Saudi Arabia that it's not observing the Arab boycott of Israel.

The United States and Israel agreed to Saudi Arabia's accession to the World Trade Organization last year once the Saudis agreed to WTO rules against boycotting other member nations. Since then, the Saudis reportedly have participated and hosted boycott meetings. Susan Schwab, President Bush's nominee to be U.S. Trade Representative, told the U.S. Senate in confirmation hearings May 16 that the trade office had checked the reports and found them inaccurate.

UNRWA amendment withdrawn

A U.S. congressman withdrew an amendment that would condition U.S. funding of UNRWA on an independent audit. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), a member of the powerful foreign operations subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives, wanted to attach the amendment to the foreign operations bill due for consideration in coming weeks.

He withdrew the amendment last week, instead offering a statement of his concerns last Friday, when the foreign operations subcommittee referred the bill to the full Appropriations Committee.

WORLD

Berlin school gets new Torah

The Lauder Beit Midrash Berlin dedicated its first new Torah this week. Sunday's event launched a new chapter for the growing program.

The event is the last for the Beit Midrash in its current location, said Rabbi Josh Spinner, head of the yeshiva and vice president of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. This summer, the men's program, with 30 students, will move to a new headquarters in Berlin, while the Lauder Midrasha school for women, with 15 students, will move to Berlin from Frankfurt.