

IN THE NEWS

Olmert meets with Mubarak

Israel's Ehud Olmert met with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

The Israeli prime minister's meeting with Mubarak in Egypt on Sunday evening kicked off a month of high-profile talks that is expected to culminate in a summit with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Olmert's aides said in advance that he would try to persuade Mubarak, a key Middle East power broker, to back his plan for partial Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank if there are no peace talks with the Palestinians.

But the "realignment plan" was not mentioned in the news conference given by the two leaders after their dinner meeting.

Instead, Mubarak pushed for Israel to engage the Palestinians. "Peace can change the situation in the Middle East," he said. "It is possible to achieve a peace accord with the Palestinians through negotiations."

Iran considers powers' proposal

Iran is considering a proposal of incentives from the world's major powers to stop its uranium enrichment.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Saturday that Iran would "thoroughly" examine the proposal from the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany.

Javier Solana, the European Union's foreign policy chief, will deliver Ahmadinejad the proposal by Tuesday.

Ahmadinejad has said Iran would always reserve "the right" to enrich uranium.

Israeli troops kill two Egyptians

Israeli troops killed two Egyptian security officers in a shootout. It was not clear why the Egyptians crossed the border last Friday.

WORLD REPORT

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Jews in New Orleans fearful as new hurricane season begins

By LARRY LUXNER

NEW ORLEANS (JTA) — For the last eight months, Joel Colman has lived in a 30-foot trailer parked on the grounds of New Orleans' Temple Sinai.

It's convenient to his job — after all, Colman is the synagogue's cantor — but just a tad claustrophobic living in the trailer provided by the Federal Emergency Management Administration.

"Quite frankly, living here there's not a lot of separation between work and not work," said Colman, whose house was severely damaged by last year's Hurricane Katrina.

"This space gets very small after awhile, and this is a special FEMA handicapped trailer with a three-foot-wide entrance," said the 48-year-old cantor, proudly showing off the mezuzah affixed to the trailer's entrance. "If I need to use the restroom, I can go. But if you've got three or four people living in one of these, it must be crazy."

Colman, whose wife, Jackie, is temporarily living in Detroit with their teenage son while the family home undergoes repairs, knows he's one of the lucky ones. He only had to wait a few months for his \$70,000 trailer, which is parked at Temple Sinai because there's not enough room on his front lawn.

Yet Colman won't be so lucky if even a weak hurricane strikes the Gulf Coast during the 2006 hurricane season, which officially began June 1.

Like everyone else here, the Jews of New Orleans worry that the 2006 hurricane season could bring more unpleasant surprises.

"There's a lot of fear," said Roselle Ungar,

interim director at the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans. "The beginning of every hurricane season is always marked with trepidation. But this year, things are different. People are really talking about where they'll go, how they're going to secure their homes, what to take with them."

Ungar said another evacuation of New Orleans is not a question of if — but when — "and when we have to evacuate this year, the authorities will require people with mobile homes to leave much sooner than the rest of the community."

Especially vulnerable are people like Colman, who are stuck in flimsy FEMA trailers not built to withstand hurricane-force winds.

"The trailers are a huge issue. No one believes they'll stand up to anything, not even in the wake of

a 25-mph wind," says federation spokesman Adam Brownstone. "People aren't meant to live in them for a long time, but obviously people have, in the absence of housing and delays with insurance and getting contractors. All that has inhibited people from moving back to their homes."

In fact, says Brownstone, only 65 percent of New Orleans' 9,500 Jews have returned to the city in the nine months since Katrina's devastation.

While that compares favorably to the 50 percent of residents in general who have moved back to the Big Easy since Katrina, it still represents a loss of nearly a third of the city's Jewish population.

Most of those who have not returned remain in the cities to which they initially evacuated — Houston, Baton Rouge, Mem-

Continued on page 2

ONE
YEAR AFTER
KATRINA

■ *New Orleans Jews worry this hurricane season could bring more unpleasant surprises*

Continued from page 1

phis, Miami and Atlanta.

"The evacuees are spread out far and wide," said Eric Stillman, the former executive director of the New Orleans federation, and now president and CEO of the United Jewish Communities of Broward County, Fla. "They were originally in an area stretching from Texas to Florida, and as time has gone by, they've literally gone further afield into every state."

The dramatic drop in population has affected every Jewish institution in the city.

"We're losing really important members of our Jewish community," said Sandra Levy, executive director of the Jewish Endowment Foundation. "I have a board member whose practice was at Mercy Hospital, which was flooded. He's moving to Waycross, Ga. Another was a professor at Tulane for 30 years. He was let go."

Dina Gerber, director of Jewish Family Services of New Orleans, said that before Katrina, her group had 19 employees. Five left after the storm, and of the 14 that remain, nine are not living in their own homes — either in trailers, renting apartments or living with parents.

"I only have five employees who are in the same houses as they were before Katrina," said Gerber.

"Of the five who have left, I've replaced two people. Before Katrina, we gave out \$24,000 a year in financial assistance. Since Katrina, we have overseen the distribution of more than \$1 million to

individuals in the Jewish community."

Gerber's group also has more than 300 subscribers for its Lifeline program for elderly Jews, but the subscribers she is seeing now are more frail than ever.

"We feel it's a reflection of the shortage of adjunct medical care that's available. Sitters and nurse's aides are very hard to come by," she said, adding that her own 93-year-old mother felt she couldn't return to New Orleans after Katrina.

"One reason is that so few of her friends came back. She's now at an independent living facility in Atlanta," Gerber said.

"More than a year ago, JFS sponsored a mission to Cuba" for humanitarian relief.

"It is striking how in just a few short months, things can be turned upside down," she said.

On the other hand, while a number of area Catholic and Protestant churches have closed for lack of funding, not a single Jewish institution in New Orleans has had to shut its doors — except for Congregation Beth Israel in suburban Lakeview, an Orthodox synagogue that was severely damaged by Katrina's floodwaters.

"Everybody who lives here is passionate about bringing the community back," Levy said. "We're thinking it'll be a five- to 10-year period, but at the rate the federal government is going, it could be 25 years."

Levy, formerly director of the New Orleans Historic Landmark Commission, said the immediate future looks extremely uncertain.

"All this federal money is coming in, but I haven't seen a lot of it," she told JTA. "People are hanging on by threads. Some people took their flood insurance money and left, because they just didn't have the heart to see their houses again."

Levy said some of these houses — particularly those in the devastated Lakeview and Metairie suburbs — were worth between \$500,000 and \$1 million. But even many of those people now face financial ruin.

"Let's say you had the maximum \$250,000 in flood insurance, but a \$500,000

mortgage. You still have to pay your mortgage," Levy explained. "And there's a lack of housing. That's why rents are extraordinarily high. It's very hard for people who are just making a living to be able to afford apartments. They're at least 20 to 30 percent higher than before, and sometimes more than that. We are rapidly becoming an expensive city to live in."

The exodus of Jews from New Orleans has also hurt the budgets of local synagogues and other institutions that depend on annual dues from their members. Fortunately, donations from groups

like the UJC and the Union for Reform Judaism have kept the community afloat for the time being.

"Our salaries are being paid through UJC funds, which in and of itself is important," Brownstone said. "You can't run the community if you can't turn the lights on."

On May 25, local leaders gathered at the Goldring-Woldenberg Jewish

Community Campus to receive \$2.4 million in UJC funds. Federation officials immediately distributed this money to cover shortfalls in operating budgets.

Benefitting from the UJC donation are the federation itself, the Anti-Defamation League and a host of local Jewish social service centers, synagogues and schools.

On June 1, the federation added a new section to its Web site advising local Jews how to get ready for future storms. The site has links to the American Red Cross, FEMA, the City of New Orleans and the Louisiana Department of Emergency Preparedness.

"We're doing a lot of planning now, and we're trying to push people to do a lot of their own planning," Brownstone explained. "So few of us really planned in advance" for Katrina.

"Now, the entire city is gearing up for hurricane preparedness. The newspapers have been full of articles on disaster kits and evacuation routes. We're doing all those things we should have done a long time ago."

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Sandra Levy

Executive director
Jewish Endowment Foundation

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Iran's Jews live dual life

By RACHEL SILVERMAN

NEW YORK (JTA) — Iran wouldn't appear to be a likely candidate to house the largest Jewish community in the Muslim world.

After all, Iran is run by a fundamentalist Islamic regime whose president has threatened to destroy Israel and who regularly denies the Holocaust.

But Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Iran currently is home to an estimated 25,000 Jews.

What is life — and Jewish life — like for these Iranian Jews? How do they reconcile their dual identities? And why do they choose to stay in a land that, at least from an outsiders perspective, appears increasingly inhospitable?

History, in part, holds the answer to these questions.

Iranian Jews have lived in the region for more than 2,700 years. During that time, they've survived waves of forced conversion, anti-Semitic propaganda, derogatory dress codes and economic, legal and social persecution.

But there have also been times when they flourished, like they did under the pro-Western regime of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who ruled until the Islamists took over in the late 1970s.

Indeed, some 100,000 Jews lived in Iran before the 1979 Islamic Revolution prompted an exodus. Through these ebbs and flows, Iranian Jews have learned that oppressors, no matter how tyrannical, are only temporary masters.

For this reason, as George Haroonian, a

community activist in Los Angeles put it, Iranian Jews tend to think of the current anti-Semitic, anti-Israel climate as only "a temporary disruption in the long centuries of the relationship between Jews and Iranians.

"These people know this government will vanish, but Israel will stay and Iran will stay," Haroonian, who runs a magazine for Iranian Jewish emigres, said.

For many Iranian Jews, that means making their peace and carrying on.

"Right now, the situation is like a calm before a storm," said Frank Nikbakht, the former public affairs director of the Council of Iranian American Jewish Organizations.

"The problem is as long as the situation seems to be normal, it's very difficult to ask somebody to pack up and leave a country they've lived in for hundreds of generations."

But there have been occasional anti-Semitic outbursts during the past decade or so.

In 1999, 13 Iranian Jews were accused of spying for Israel, and 10

were imprisoned. Though all were released by 2002, the incident sent shockwaves throughout Iran's Jewish community.

During that period, reports also rose about 11 others who went missing between 1994 and 1997. Haroonian said that Iranian American Jews are "very much still following the issue," since "the Iranian government has not given straight answers of what happened to these people."

In other ways, too, the situation for Iranian Jews is difficult.

Anti-Semitic propaganda is pervasive, say those interviewed for this article, and Jewish citizens have been stripped of many rights, such as their ability to provide testimony in court or hold a position superior to that of a Muslim.

To cope with their lack of freedoms, Jews in Iran have mastered the art of separating their private lives from their public ones.

Outwardly, Iranian Jews do their best to

blend in and stay quiet.

"In order to be as safe as possible, you must hide most of your feelings," Nikbakht explained. "You keep a low profile and agree to the government position, whatever it is."

Haroonian concurred. "Many Jews have sort of accepted, internalized the idea of being inferior to the majority Muslims."

Iranian Jews, at least publicly, often mask their affiliations with both Judaism and Zionism.

In recent years, Jewish practice may have strengthened in Iran.

"Jews in Iran have become more religious since the revolution," confirmed Pooya Dayanim, president of the U.S.-based Iranian Jewish Public Affairs Committee. "As their numbers have dwindled, solidarity and action among them has increased."

He cited 13 active synagogues in the country, as well as a Jewish hospital and slew of Jewish day schools.

Still, practicing Judaism under the current regime has proved difficult. State law forces Jewish schools to remain open on the Sabbath, and specifies that Hebrew lessons are not permitted outside prayer time.

Schools are required to have Muslim principals, since Jews

must occupy subordinate positions at all times, and prayer books are printed in Farsi instead of Hebrew.

The Hebrew Immigration Aid Society holds a contract with the U.S. State Department to operate an immigration center in Vienna, where Iranian Jews are detained until they can enter the U.S. Refugee Program and emigrate. Statistics provided by the organization show that about 200 Iranian Jews were resettled in 2004, and about 300 in 2005.

Haroonian reported that relatives in the United States are "giving messages to their families saying, 'think about your future, the future of your young kids.'"

Some Jews in Iran are too poor, sick or old to leave. Others are dismissive, he said.

"When they hear about assimilation and divorce rates here, and security issues in Israel, so many choose to stay," Haroonian said. "They think it's not very rosy here either." ■

BACKGROUNDER

'In order to be as safe as possible, you must hide most of your feelings.'

Frank Nikbakht

Former public affairs director
Council of Iranian American Jewish Organizations

THIS WEEK

TUESDAY

■ The CIA declassifies 8 million pages related to Nazi and Japanese war crimes records. Members of the interagency group responsible for locating and releasing the papers explain the significance of the declassification at a news conference at the National Archives in Washington.

SUNDAY

■ Aspects of Jewish burial are being discussed at the North American Jewish Cemetery and Chevra Kadisha Conference in Portland, Ore. The three-day event is organized by Kavod v'Nichum, a national non-profit that educates and provides assistance to congregations exploring Jewish funeral issues.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

New militia loyal to Abbas appears

A new militia loyal to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas debuted in the West Bank.

The militia, numbering 2,000 men dressed in black, paraded through the northern West Bank town of Jenin on Saturday.

Abbas, a relative moderate, is determined to face down a challenge to his authority over the security forces from Hamas, the terrorist party that was recently elected to the government.

Syria blames Israel, U.S. for attack

Syria blamed Israel and the United States for a terrorist attack. Ten Islamic militants attacked the Syrian Defense Ministry in Damascus last Friday.

Four were killed, as was one police officer. On Saturday, state-run Syrian media said the attack "is a practical translation of the American-Israeli threats."

PLO lobbies against pullout

PLO officials lobbied in Washington against Israel's conditional plan to unilaterally withdraw from parts of the West Bank.

Four officials from the PLO's negotiations unit met last week with U.S. officials and outlined their objections to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's plan to pull out from parts of the West Bank.

They said the plan would undermine the viability of a Palestinian state because it would cut off Palestinians from one another and from social services.

Olmert won conditional endorsement of the plan from President Bush last month.

Bush first wants Olmert to exhaust all possibilities of getting the Palestinian Authority government, led by the Hamas terrorist group, to recognize Israel and renounce terrorism.

Peres eyes outposts

Illegal West Bank settler outposts will be removed within weeks, Shimon Peres said.

In an interview with Israel Radio on Sunday, the vice premier said he expected an imminent crackdown on the outposts in compliance with the U.S.-led "road map" for peace.

According to Peres, the outposts — which number between 100 and 125 — should be evacuated before Israel implements Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's plan to quit some parts of the West Bank and annex others in the absence of peace talks with the Palestinians.

Israeli adviser quits politics

Dov Weisglass, a veteran adviser to Israel's political leaders, quit to pursue his private business career. Weisglass formally ended his tenure at the Prime Minister's Office on Sunday and took up a senior post at Israel's national telephone firm, Bezek.

He was long considered the eminence grise of Israeli politics, thanks to his close connection with former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Weisglass, a successful corporate lawyer, is credited with helping Sharon mastermind last year's Gaza Strip withdrawal, a move that also won him the respect of President Bush.

But political sources said he was considered less integral to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's administration.

NORTH AMERICA

Bush endorses marriage amendment

U.S. Jewish groups are split on a federal marriage amendment that President Bush endorsed.

"Marriage cannot be cut off from its cultural, religious and natural roots without weakening this good influence on society," Bush said Saturday in his weekly radio address.

"Government, by recognizing and protecting marriage, serves the interests of all."

Major Jewish groups led by the Reform movement oppose the amendment, which would ban same-sex marriage and is due to be considered by the U.S. Senate this week. Orthodox Jewish groups support it.

Bequest to fund birthright, depression center

An \$8 million bequest to UJA-Federation of New York will be used to fund birthright Israel trips and a depression treatment center.

Arthur Zankel's bequest will fund 100 fellowships a year for five years for birthright Israel, the program that sends young Jewish adults to Israel for free.

It will also fund a depression treatment center at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services.

The gifts were part of a total \$120 million gift.

Canadian group loses JPost bid

A New York-based arbitrator ruled against a Canadian media giant's bid to acquire 50 percent ownership in The Jerusalem Post.

The arbitrator ruled last Friday against claims that an Israeli firm, Mirkaei Tikshoret Limited, had failed to follow through on a deal to sell CanWest Global Communications Corp. the 50 percent interest in the paper.

The Post's previous owners, Hollinger Inc., sold the paper in late 2004 after its previous owners ran into both financial and legal troubles.

CanWest is owned by the Aspers, a prominent Canadian Jewish family.

Wiesel, Nobel laureates, back Darfur envoy

Elie Wiesel led 62 Nobel laureates in urging President Bush to name a special envoy to Darfur.

"The appointment of a 'Presidential Envoy for Peace in Sudan' would not only help coordinate U.S. policy, it would be invaluable in encouraging the government of Sudan, Darfur's factions as well as groups in southern Sudan to abide by their commitments," said the letter, which was released on June 1 by Wiesel's Foundation for Humanity.

Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor who won the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end and prevent genocide, has joined a range of Jewish groups in leading the campaign to end the massacres of local people by government-allied militias in the southern Sudan region.

WORLD

French Jews launch fight for tolerance

A plan was launched in France to fight intolerance. French President Jacques Chirac approved the plan initiated by the Jewish group CRIF to launch "Campaign to Live Together" in the French media to fight "for tolerance and against violence and barbarism."

In a related development, CRIF officials met late last week with Chirac.

They discussed the recent anti-Semitic riot by a group of black African extremists known as the Tribu K in Paris' historic Jewish quarter.

After the meeting, Roger Cukierman, president of CRIF, said that Chirac is very concerned that there could be violence between the extremist Tribu K, a small group that has been disavowed by mainstream black community groups, and militant Jewish groups.