

IN THE NEWS
A mega-gift for birthright

Casino mogul Sheldon Adelson and his wife, Miriam, will donate an estimated \$5 million to bankroll 2,000 birthright Israel trips, JTA has learned.

There are 20,000 to 40,000 18-to-26-year-old Jews on the waiting list for the free 10-day trips to Israel; the waiting list has grown because of insufficient funding.

Birthright officials would not comment on the gift because it had not yet been made public.

Jewish groups protest Holocaust conference

As Iran began a conference for Holocaust deniers in Tehran, Jewish groups gathered outside the Iranian mission to the United Nations to protest.

The Monday news conference was convened by the Ad Hoc Leadership Coalition for Justice, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York and chaired by Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents.

Hoenlein told JTA: "We wanted to send a message to the Iranians that this will not pass quietly."

U.N. mission canceled

The United Nations called off an investigative mission into a deadly Israeli shelling in the Gaza Strip.

The U.N. Human Rights Council announced Monday that the mission to Beit Hanoun, which was to have been headed by Nobel laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, had been canceled after Israel withheld authorization.

Nineteen Palestinians died in an Israeli artillery barrage on the northern Gaza town last month, in what Israel called a sighting accident as it responded to Palestinian rocket fire.

WORLD REPORT

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ISG fallout continues with query: Is Israeli-Arab peace the linchpin?

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Officials of the American and Israeli governments agree on two things: Iraq has nothing at all to do with Israeli-Arab issues.

Except when it does.

From President Bush and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on down, the leaderships of the Israeli and American governments are simultaneously embracing and rebuffing last week's conclusions of the congressionally mandated Iraq Study Group, which makes Israeli-Arab peace progress a linchpin of a successful outcome in Iraq.

The crux of their argument is that while it is wrong to blame the Israeli-Arab impasse for any part of the crisis in Iraq, actors in that crisis — chief among them Iran and its allies — are successfully using Israel as a justification for raising the stakes in Iraq.

"We do this not because we are persuaded by some linkage or another, but because it is in the U.S. national interest," David Welch, the top U.S. State Department envoy to the Middle East, said Friday of U.S. involvement in Arab-Israeli peace when he addressed the Saban Forum, an annual colloquy of U.S. and Israeli leaders.

Another Bush administration official put it more bluntly: "'Palestine' is not a relevant issue to Iraq, but it is an issue exploited by Iran and extremists throughout the region," the official told JTA, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Arab-Israeli peace talks would have a "positive, emboldening effect," the official said. "If progress among Israel and the Palestinians is manifested, then moderates throughout the

region win and extremists lose."

Conversely, the official said, "We believe that a success in Iraq, a success for moderates against forces of extremism, whether secular or religious, will have a very significant impact in the region, in Syria, in Lebanon, as well as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The Bush administration has welcomed Olmert's recent overture to the Palestinians in which he promised a release of prisoners and increased mobility should a cease-fire hold and the Palestinians prove themselves able to present a negotiating team that renounces terrorism and recognizes Israel's existence.

Mahmoud Abbas, the relatively moderate Palestinian Authority president, has all but given up on such concessions from the Cabinet, led by the terrorist Hamas group, and has proposed new elections.

Tzipi Livni, Israel's foreign minister, said at the Saban Forum that Israel and the West should encourage alternatives to the Hamas government, although she did not elaborate.

Bush launches a weeklong review of the Iraq Study Group's recommendations on Monday, starting with meetings with top State Department officials. Later in the week he meets with outside experts, top U.S. diplomats in the region and top military brass.

His primary concern about the report is its deadline for a withdrawal of U.S. combat troops by the first quarter of 2008. Bush has steadfastly resisted timetables until now.

But after meeting with Tony Blair, the British prime minister who is about to tour the region, Bush suggested that he

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■ *Israel is being used by some as a justification for raising the stakes in Iraq*

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embraced its Iraq-Israeli-Palestinian linkage, counting it as one of three ways to move the Iraq process forward.

"The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is important to be solved," the president said.

That's music to the ears of Blair and other Europeans, who enthusiastically welcomed the recommendations of the commission, headed by James Baker, secretary of state to Bush's father, and Lee Hamilton, a former Democratic congressman from Indiana.

"The German government shares many of the political observations in the report," a statement from the German Embassy in Washington said last week on the eve of a visit here by the German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. "The entire Middle East region must move into the international community's scope. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is of central importance."

Such views were hardly welcome at the Saban Forum, where the ISG's report lent an anxious irritability to the weekend proceedings at Washington's Ritz Carlton hotel. The Saban Center, a Brookings Institution subsidiary funded by American-Israeli entertainment mogul Haim Saban, attracts top names to its annual colloquies. Last year's was in Jerusalem.

"The Iraqi conflict has very little to do with the Israeli-Palestinian crisis," Yuli Tamir, Israel's education minister, told JTA during a break from the conference's closed sessions. "I don't think it's relevant — it's a good justification but not a reason."

On Sunday, Olmert, who had earlier suggested that he disagrees with the report's conclusions, ordered his Cabinet not to comment on it, saying it was an internal American affair.

Livni did not mention the Baker-Hamilton report by name, but its conclusions were clearly the focus of her keynote address at a gala State Department dinner last Friday night.

"There is a commonly mistaken assumption that I sometimes hear that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the core of the trouble of the

Middle East, that somehow if this conflict could be resolved, so the situation could be different, and we can face a totally different region," she said. "So, this is wrong. This view confuses symptom and cause. The truth is that the conflicts in the Middle East are a consequence, not a cause, of radicalism and terrorism."

That may be the case, but Livni in the same speech was nonetheless preoccupied by how Iran would fare in the Iraq crisis — and what a success by its Shi'ite Muslim proteges in Iraq would bode for Israel and the region.

"The idea of spreading Shi'ism all over the region is a threat not only to Israel but the region itself," she said, citing efforts this week by the Hezbollah terrorist

group to topple Lebanon's Western-leaning government.

Bush expressed wariness about the commission's recommendations to engage Iran and Syria. He was adamant that those countries were out of bounds until they stopped backing terrorists.

If Syria and Iran are "not committed to that concept, then they shouldn't bother to show up" to a regional conference on Iraq, he said after meeting with Blair.

Iran's ambitions dominated much of the Saban Forum. Shimon Peres, the vice prime minister, spoke darkly of the possibil-

ity of war in a Saturday-night panel with former President Clinton.

"Iran's strength derives from the weakness of the international community," he said. "If there was an international coalition, there would be no need to go to war against Iran, and Iran would return to its natural dimensions."

Israel backs U.S. and European efforts to sanction Iran until it gives up enriching uranium, a step toward manufacturing a nuclear weapon.

Peres described a range of options to prevent Iran's nuclearization: monitoring its missiles with nuclear warhead capability; economic sanctions; limiting its oil production; and assisting regime change.

If progress among Israel and the Palestinians is manifested, then moderates throughout the region win and extremists lose.

Bush administration official

McCain: Military may be needed in Iran

NEW YORK (JTA) — A nuclear Iran poses an "unacceptable risk" and may have to be confronted militarily, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) said. In comments Sunday to Yeshiva University's annual Chanukah dinner in Manhattan, McCain urged a robust diplomatic effort — including immediate U.N. Security Council action — to obstruct Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, but warned that the military option cannot be taken off the table.

"It is a simple observation of reality that there is only one thing worse than a military solution, and that, my friends, is a nuclear-armed Iran," McCain said.

The senator, who is said to be considering a run for president in 2008, also called for perseverance in Iraq, the disarmament of Hezbollah in Lebanon and continued U.S. refusal to deal with Hamas.

"We will defeat terrorism against America and we will stand with Israel as she fights the same enemy," McCain said.

McCain was given an honorary doctor of law degree at the event, which also featured an appreciation for philanthropist Ronald Stanton, whose \$100 million gift to Yeshiva University is the largest donation ever to Jewish education in North America.



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Anti-Semitism in Russia: Status quo or rising?

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — Despite numerous reports of anti-Semitic attacks, those who monitor the situation say things haven't worsened for Jews in Russia in 2006. But some leading figures in the Jewish community disagree.

Recent decisions in Russian courts against hate-crime perpetrators have encouraged some Jewish leaders. But does the increased crack-down on hate crimes also indicate an increase in anti-Semitic attacks?

"We cannot speak of a rising tide of anti-Semitic manifestation" in Russia this year, said Alexander Brod, director of the Moscow Bureau on Human Rights, a leading group that monitors anti-Semitism and xenophobia. "The number of incidents remains at the level of the last three to four years, meaning that each month there are three or four cases of anti-Semitism in different parts" of the country.

However, Vyacheslav "Moshe" Kantor, president of the Russian Jewish Congress, said in September that the number of physical attacks on Jews is growing by 10 percent a year. And a spokesman for a leading Jewish religious umbrella organization said the number of anti-Semitic crimes was higher in 2006.

"There is an impression of a growing number of anti-Semitic attacks," said Vladimir Pliss of the Congress of Jewish Religious Organizations and Communities of Russia, or KEROOR.

Russian authorities do not have a separate statistic for crimes motivated by anti-Semitism, which officially fall under the rubric of hate crimes or sometimes into a broader category of extremism-related crimes. That includes manifestations of political radicalism.

Speaking last month in the Russian Parliament, Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika said that since the beginning of the year, there were 232 reported hate crimes in the country. These include racially motivated murders and other grave crimes, he said.

During the same period, the Internal Ministry said, there were 185 cases of extremism-related crimes, a rise of 46 percent from 2005.

One reason the Jewish community remains relatively calm is that it believes Jews no longer are the primary targets of

hate crimes, as they were in earlier periods of Russian history.

Non-Slavic nationals from the former Soviet republics and foreigners from African and Asian countries are believed to be the main magnets of xenophobes.

The Sova think tank in Moscow believes the number of hate crimes, including anti-Semitic attacks, is increasing in Russia by 30 percent a year. But the growth is thought to be connected to more crimes against Muslims, the most frequent targets of hate crimes in recent years, who greatly outnumber Jews in Russia.

According to Sova, 39 people have died in hate crimes this year, 28 of them in Moscow, and more than 300 have been injured. Almost all of the victims were from the Caucasus and Central Asian states and from developing nations.

But the Jewish community has reason to be concerned. Last month, the Federation of Jewish Communities, Russia's largest Jewish group, called on authorities to ensure the safety of Jewish institutions in the provinces after four Jewish centers across Russia were attacked this fall.

No one was injured in the attacks in Astrakhan, Khabarovsk, Surgut and Vladivostok, but the geographical range of the attacks — from the Russian South to Siberia in the Far East — provided some anxiety.

Pliss said anti-Semitic incidents mainly were spontaneous acts caused by economic and social issues, as well as the lack of a unifying idea that has yet to fill an ideological vacuum in post-Soviet Russia.

Some see a positive change in that regard. The Russian Supreme Court last week upheld a 16-year prison term given to a man who stabbed and injured nine people in a Moscow synagogue in January. Also last week, a court in the Russian Far East sentenced two teenagers to 10 and nine and a half years in prison for the racially motivated murder of three men of non-Slavic origin, including one Jew.

The long prison term for the Moscow synagogue attacker — who received an even

stiffer sentence than some Russians found guilty of first-degree murder — may indicate that authorities are overcoming their trend of ignoring hate-based motivation in many crimes against minorities.

Speaking at the state Duma last month, Russian Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev said Parliament must impose tougher punishments on extremists if it wants to crack down on crimes motivated by ethnicity, religion or political affiliation.

But political opposition leaders have accused the government of using high-profile attacks against minorities — from the murder of an Armenian youth on a Moscow subway to the firebombing of a mosque in central Russia — to push for laws that would outlaw not just groups that carry

out hate crimes but legitimate political groups that criticize the Kremlin.

Some argue that the government itself is fanning ethnic and religious hatred in Russian society with a poorly formulated immigration policy.

Last month, the chief of Russia's immigration office said the government should not permit the creation of ethnic enclaves where foreigners outnumber native Russians. Konstantin Romodanovsky's comments came after the announcement of a government policy barring immigrants from trading at street stalls and markets.

His deputy, Vyacheslav Postavnin, said the concentration of foreigners in any district or region should not surpass 20 percent of the native population, particularly if the foreigners have a different national culture and religious faith, in order to avoid possible "discomfort for the indigenous population."

President Vladimir Putin has ordered his Cabinet to take steps to decrease the employment of foreign workers at markets, saying they're crowding out native Russian producers and retailers.

"This rhetoric from above conveys a clear message," said Yevgenia Albats, a leading Russian political journalist and a Jewish activist. "It's only a matter of time before this kind of xenophobia begins to affect Jews directly."

AROUND
THE JEWISH
WORLD

The Jewish community remains relatively calm because it believes Jews are no longer the primary targets of hate crimes.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Gaza gunmen kill Fatah leader's kids

Gaza gunmen killed four Palestinians, including three young sons of a senior intelligence leader.

Monday's shooting in Gaza City targeted Fatah loyalist Baha Balousheh.

The gunmen sprayed his car with dozens of bullets as it passed through a street filled with schoolchildren.

Balousheh was not in the car, but the attack instead killed his sons — aged 9, 6 and 3 — as well as an adult bystander.

The AP said that senior intelligence officials blamed the attack on Hamas, whose officials denied involvement and promised an investigation.

Olmert to Germany, Italy

Ehud Olmert will visit Germany, Italy and the Vatican this week.

The Israeli prime minister set off for Berlin on Monday for his first official German visit. He is to meet Chancellor Angela Merkel on Tuesday and then head to Rome, where he will hold talks with Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi and Pope Benedict XVI. Olmert is expected to press Europe to continue its hard line against the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority and Iran's nuclear program.

Merkel said Sunday she sensed "hopeful signals" about Israeli willingness to seek peace talks with the Palestinian Authority despite the Hamas radicals who run its government.

In an interview with Germany's Der Spiegel magazine published Sunday, Olmert called Merkel "fantastic."

"She appears to me to be one of the most serious and the most responsible leaders that Europe has had in years," he said.

El Al faces religious boycott

A fervently Orthodox group declared a boycott of El Al over recent Shabbat flights. Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, leader of the powerful Lithuanian religious community, issued an edict this week ordering his followers not to use the private Israeli airline. His move could be mirrored by other fervently Orthodox sects, which together make up as much as 30 percent of El Al's clientele.

The controversy was sparked by the carrier's decision, after a public-sector strike disrupted work at Israeli airports late last month, to relieve the backlog by letting some flights operate into Friday evening. Orthodox groups also were upset by reports that passengers who boarded an El Al flight in Russia were served non-kosher sandwiches. Some Orthodox leaders have called for El Al to sign an agreement not to violate religious codes, something the company has resisted.

Israeli media quoted El Al officials as saying the carrier may be forced to respond to the boycott by running on Shabbat full time.

Syria on war footing?

Syria is preparing for war with Israel, Israeli military intelligence's chief analyst said.

Brig. Gen. Yossi Baidaz was quoted as telling Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his Cabinet in a briefing Sunday that Syria has stepped up production of long-range missiles and moved anti-aircraft batteries closer to the border with Israel.

The recent war between Israel and Hezbollah, Syria's proxy in Lebanon, has stirred speculation that Damascus could be involved in the next confrontation. But officials were quick to suggest that Syria's preparations may be defensive.

"Syria is building up its military option, but there is no definite word that it plans to use it," Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh told Army Radio.

NORTH AMERICA

Brooklyn rabbi charged with molestation

A Brooklyn rabbi was charged with molesting his students at an Orthodox boys yeshiva. Rabbi Yehudah Kolko was charged last Friday with four counts of sexual abuse and endangering the welfare of a child. The court released him on \$5,000 bail. Kolko, 60, taught at Yeshiva-Mesivta Torah Temimah for decades and served as the school's assistant principal.

He is accused of molesting a boy who was a first-grade student of his in the 2002-03 school year. A \$20 million civil suit was also brought by two adult former students against Kolko and the yeshiva in May, asserting that the school was aware of the alleged abuse and protected Kolko. Yaakov Applegrad, executive director of the school, said in a radio interview: "If something did indeed happen, we sympathize with the child and are confident that the judicial system will handle it appropriately."

Seattle rabbi regrets Christmas tree removal

A Chabad rabbi in Seattle expressed regret that his complaint to add a menorah to the Seattle-Tacoma Airport's display of Christmas trees resulted in the trees' removal.

"I am devastated, shocked and appalled at the decision that the Port of Seattle came to," Rabbi Elazar Bogomilsky of Chabad-Lubavitch of the Pacific Northwest said in Monday's Seattle Times.

Last week, Bogomilsky's attorney, Harvey Grad, threatened the port with a lawsuit after not receiving a response to a request, first made in October, to install an 8-foot menorah, which Bogomilsky offered to supply. Port Commissioner Pat Davis told the Times that the commission had not heard about the request until Dec. 7, the day before Grad was to head to court.

A spokesperson for SeaTac Airport said the decision to take down the trees was made because the airport did not have the time to accommodate all religions.

WORLD

Germany: Revive 'the Quartet'

Germany, set to assume the rotating presidency of the European Union, will press for the reinvigoration of "the Quartet."

The group, comprising the E.U., the United States, Russia and the United Nations, guides the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and has been less active since Hamas, a terrorist group, assumed governance of the Palestinian Authority in March. "The Middle East Quartet offers an opportunity to bring about progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for the future of a two-state solution," a release from the German Embassy in Washington said Monday.

Scholars call on Vatican to open archives

Thirty-five Jewish and Catholic scholars called on the Vatican to open up its Holocaust archives. The petition, organized by International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission ex-chairman Seymour Reich and the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, was released Monday.

Citing recently uncovered documents about the Vatican's role in protecting Jewish during the Holocaust, the scholars said they "have legitimate disagreements concerning the Vatican's actions regarding European Jewry during the Hitler years."

But, the scholars said, "We all agree that the Vatican should open its archives for the Holocaust period to historians, so that the role of the wartime pope will not be subject to conjecture as to what he knew, what he did, and what he chose to say or not say about the plight of the Jews."