

COSTA RICA & GUATEMALA NEED RABBIS

NEW YORK -- The Jewish communities of Costa Rica and Guatemala are in need of rabbis, and American rabbinical groups should be urged to supply this need, according to a group of American Jewish Committee leaders who have just returned from a two-week visit to five Latin American countries.

Among other recommendations, the group urged the AJC to invite the leaders of the Jewish communities in these countries to participate in the organization's Annual Meeting in New York in May. They also reported that the Jewish community of Venezuela was interested in obtaining for its adult education program copies of the study guides used in the correspondence courses offered by AJC's

Academy for Jewish Studies without walls. The visiting group, consisting of 15 people most of whom are members of the Latin American Committee of AJC's Foreign Affairs Commission, was led by Howard L. Greenberger, Professor and former Associate Dean of the New York University School of Law, who is a member of AJC's Board of Governors and Chairman of the Latin American Committee. It also included Sergio Nudelstejer, Director of AJC's office for Mexico and Central America.

The countries visited, in addition to Costa Rica and Guatemala, were Venezuela, Panama and Santo Domingo. In each country, the AJC mission met with high government officials and with U.S. and

Israeli ambassadors as well as with leaders of the Jewish community.

In a brief summary report on his return to the United States, Mr. Greenberger described some of the group's experiences.

"We had a very enthusiastic meeting with the President of Costa Rica, Dr. Luis Alberto Monge, who reaffirmed his strong commitment to Israel as a democratic society," he said, and added:

"Dr. Monge compared Israel's isolation in the Middle East, surrounded by unfriendly neighbors, to the problems of Costa Rica as one of the few democracies in Central America.

"The Israeli Ambassador in Costa Rica, David Tourge-man, confirmed the fact that relations between Israel and Costa Rica are stronger than ever, with many Costa Rican students going to Israel to study, and Israel providing instructors and technical assistance in return."

Mr. Greenberger also reported that both President Monge and U. S. Ambassador

Francis McNeil had commented on the "enormous strides Costa Rica has made in stabilizing its economy after a period of runaway inflation." He added:

"Costa Rica is receiving increased economic aid from the U.S., and is hoping that the Reagan Administration's Caribbean Basin Plan will be implemented soon in order to eliminate tariffs on their exports to the United States."

In his remarks about the Jewish community in Costa Rica, which numbers approximately 2500 in a population of more than two million, Mr. Greenberger described it as a "close knit group, with an excellent Jewish school, a love of Jewish tradition, and a deep dedication to Israel."

"Its most immediate need is a rabbi," he said.

Turning to the Jews of Panama, Mr. Greenberger characterized them as a "vital community of about 3500 people, dedicated to viable Jewish life."

He said that on Friday evening the members of his AJC mission broke up into three small groups,

each of which attended services in one of Panama's three synagogues -- Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. The community also supports two Jewish day schools, in which 20 per cent of the student body are non-Jews, he said.

"Jews have deep historical roots in Panamanian society," he continued. "Some families can trace themselves back in Panama for more than 200 years, and there is a Jewish cemetery that is at least 200 years old."

Turning his attention to the economic and political situation in Panama, Mr. Greenberger reported that the country was "just beginning to be affected by the worldwide recession" and that "the effects of the recession on Canal tolls are yet to be felt to any great extent."

He described a conversation with the First Secretary of the American Embassy in Panama, who expressed the belief that the government there would "hold elections some time toward the end of this year or the beginning of next year, and that the problems resulting from the evolving relationship between the U.S. and Panama in regard to the Canal were not insurmountable and were working out better than some thought they would five years ago."

Mr. Greenberger issued a warning, however, stating that "the one message we got from a number of

people, including the American Embassy, concerned the amount of educational aid being given by the Soviet Union to Panamanian students in the way of scholarships. A modest program of educational aid from the United States would be terribly helpful and beneficial to American interests."

In Caracas, Venezuela, the most cosmopolitan of the cities visited by the AJC leaders, they found "a very well organized Jewish community of about 25,000 with most institutional bodies under the overall supervision of a central council known as the Confederation of the Jewish Associations of Venezuela."

"They run a whole network of Jewish day schools, have a magnificent athletic facility called the Hebraica, an Askenazi kehila as well as a Sephardic kehila, a B'nai B'rith and a Zionist organization," Mr. Greenberger stated.

"They also share some of the same concerns and problems that are present in American Jewish society -- intermarriage, assimilation when children go away to college, and the general loss of Jewish identity. However, the leadership of the community is broadly based, and they are making sincere efforts to bring in younger professionals and business people to take vital leadership roles."

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