

DCJCC Insider Embassy Night a big success

by Carol Castiel

Special to WJW

The District of Columbia Jewish Community Center's popular Insider Embassy Night program attracted a capacity crowd for its Dec. 18 event at the Embassy of Cape Verde. Ambassador H.E. Corentino Santos expounded on Cape Verde's Jewish roots, its diplomatic ties with Israel and the archipelago's recent attempts to spur economic development through trade, investment and tourism.

Cape Verde, located about 400 miles off the coast of Senegal, West Africa, was a Portuguese colony until it attained independence in 1975. The ambassador explained that since its discovery in

the mid-1400s, the island nation of 400,000 has experienced devastating cycles of drought and famine, but has survived these periods through perseverance and hard work.

Cape Verde is attacking its most stubborn problem, that of a shortage of fresh water, with the help of Israeli state-of-the-art technology and expertise in desalinization and irrigation. The Jewish state is constructing a desalinization plant in the capital city Praia.

The ambassador also spoke of Cape Verde's Jewish heritage which derives from two major waves of immigration. In the late 15th century, Jews and *Marranos* (new Christians) fled to Cape Verde to escape the Portuguese Inquisition. Then, Jews from Morocco arrived

in the late 19th century as reflected by Hebrew and Portuguese etchings on headstones in the several small Jewish cemeteries that dot the islands. The latter group

came in search of economic opportunities and eventually assimilated with the predominantly Catholic population.

Their descendants, though

not practicing Jews, still bear the typically Sephardic surnames such as Cohen, Levy, Benros, Benoliel, Wahnon and Pinto, and speak with pride of their forebears. Through the newly-founded association AMICAEL, The Friends of Cape Verde and Israel, the descendants of these families have formed a committee to restore and preserve the Jewish cemeteries left by their ancestors.

In addition to ancestral ties which bind the Jewish and Cape Verdean people, Amb. Santos underscored two additional shared qualities: Both are a "Diaspora people" (Cape Verdeans, like Jews, have traditionally emigrated to other lands), and both are "survivors" despite the myriad natural and man-made calamities that have befallen them throughout history. ■



ON THE CAPE — DCJCC members were treated to an evening at the Cape Verde Embassy where they learned about the country's ties to Israel.

Photo courtesy of Carol S. Castiel