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U.S. DELAYING INQUIRY INTO ISRAELI TRADE VIOLATIONS

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, Sept. 20 (JTA) -- The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative is delaying hearings into Israel's treatment of Palestinian workers until after Election Day, partly to eliminate potential Jewish backlash to Vice President George Bush's presidential bid, a well-placed trade representative source said Monday.

The decision was made "to ensure an orderly and deliberative process," the source said, but also to prevent it from "becoming an election-year issue."

Stephen Silbiger, Washington representative of the American Jewish Congress, accused the trade office of caving into pressure from the Bush campaign.

Silbiger said that the Bush campaign "did not want this to hit the Jewish community and the Jewish press before the elections."

If the hearings were held before the election, he said, "The Jewish community would realize the seriousness of this issue."

A key Jewish supporter at Bush's campaign headquarters sharply denied any Republican coercion on U.S. Trade Representative Clayton Yeutter to delay the proceedings.

"There was no pressure put on Clayton Yeutter in anyway," said Jacob Stein, former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "This is a normal internal decision by the U.S. trade representative for whatever reasons he thought best."

Another source at the trade representative's office said the delay was needed to give office staffers more preparation time.

Seven countries are being investigated this year under the so-called Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program. The others are Syria, Haiti, Burma, Malaysia, Liberia and the Central African Republic.

Israel is being investigated because the office accepted an Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee petition charging Israel with violating Palestinian rights to organize; to work under basic standards of health and safety; and to receive a minimum wage.

Monday marked the deadline for all parties, including U.S. Jewish groups, to submit testimony summaries to the trade representative.

ISRAELI SATELLITE FUNCTIONING WELL AFTER FIRST DAY OF ORBIT

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Sept. 20 (JTA) -- Ofek One, Israel's first space satellite, has functioned flawlessly during its first 24 hours in orbit, the space agency reported Tuesday.

The 343-pound, octagonal-shaped satellite, manufactured in Israel, is circling the globe every 90 minutes.

Its telemetry, reporting back to a ground station, indicates that the solar energy collector panels and the high-tech instrumentation they power are operating perfectly.

Ofek -- the word means Horizon -- blasted off Monday morning and was hurled into space by an Israeli-made, three-stage Shavit rocket. The launching site was Palmachim beach, just south of Tel Aviv.

According to foreign news reports, the Shavit is based on the Jericho III solid-fuel rocket developed by Rafael, Israel's weapons development authority.

The first stage plunged into the sea. The other two stages will continue in low orbit until they are burned out by atmospheric friction.

Ofek is believed to be the only space satellite travelling from east to west. It was launched in that direction to make sure the first stage fell into the sea and to avoid debris dropping on any neighboring country.

But some have insisted it was because Hebrew is written from right to left, unlike most alphabets.

The successful launch made Israel the eighth country in the world capable of sending an object into orbit. The Soviet Union launched the first satellite, Sputnik, in 1957, followed by the United States a year later.

Other members of the "Space Club," in order of entry, are Japan, France, China, Britain and India. Brazil is expected to become the ninth member, after Israel.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES: NEW CENTRIST RELIGIOUS PARTY MAY PLAY KEY ROLE IN ELECTIONS

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Sept. 20 (JTA) -- With six weeks to go until national elections here, anything is still possible in the battle for political power that will not only produce a new government but may determine the future of the administered territories and the prospects of reaching a peace settlement with Israel's Arab neighbors.

While the opinion polls are far from conclusive, the pundits consistently discern a swing to the right. Most of them are prepared to assert, with a fair degree of certainty, that the center-left Labor Party can hope to govern only if it succeeds in sundering the ties that have bound the religious parties to the right-of-center Likud bloc for more than a decade.

If the religious bloc persists in siding with Premier Yitzhak Shamir's Likud and its rightist allies, say these observers, it is well nigh impossible to see how Labor could stitch together a workable coalition, even if it were to decide to incorporate the farthest-left factions in such a government.

It is against this political-arithmetical backdrop that the newly created centrist religious party, Meimad, has come to the fore in recent weeks as a possibly decisive factor in the coalition-making that will begin as soon as the election results are known on the night of Nov. 1.

The party, led by Rabbi Yehuda Amital, the dean of the Har Etzion Yeshiva in Alon Shvut, is still too new for the polls to be able to give it a meaningful prognosis for Election Day.

But its energetic campaigning, both in the press and through personal contacts, has already made it a talking-point in broad religious circles.

It is, so to speak, "on the map" -- a feat that already distinguishes it from a plethora of

fly-by-night parties that have announced their birth in this anything-goes pre-election period.

Much of the credit for this initial success of this moderate religious list must go to the leader, Amital, himself.

Charismatic Personality

His name and charismatic personality are well known throughout the Orthodox community, from the far right to the Kibbutz Hadati, the left-leaning religious kibbutz movement. The men and women he has gathered around him, moreover, represent a broad swath of rabbinical, academic and lay society.

The rabbi, though a political neophyte, is savvy enough not to plight his troth in advance. He refuses to say categorically that, if elected, he would side only with Labor, never under any circumstances with Likud.

And the Labor Party leader, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, is keeping a deliberate distance, not wishing to smother the fledgling party in an embarrassingly dovish embrace.

But plainly Amital's purpose once in the Knesset would be to challenge the identification between religion and nationalism that has underpinned the Likud's power since Menachem Begin's first coalition in 1977 with the religious parties.

Today, many thoughtful political observers here consider that coalition to have been the former Likud leader's most salient and lasting success on the domestic politic scene.

Over the years, what began as a partnership of expediency has steadily grown into an ideological alliance, with the religious parties -- even the non-Zionist Agudat Yisrael -- moving steadily toward the right of the political spectrum.

For Amital, a Holocaust survivor whose yeshiva was the first hesder institution, where students combine Torah study with army service, the initial stirrings of discomfort occurred during the 1982 Lebanon war.

Long a loyal member of the National Religious Party, he gave voice to his criticism in articles and sermons. But he stopped short of forcing a political schism.

'A Time To Act'

Now, mainly because of the nine-month-old Palestinian uprising, he has reluctantly taken the plunge. "This is a time to act," he wrote to his followers. "The Torah has a relevant message."

Perhaps the growing popularity of the "transfer" concept -- particularly on the religious right -- gave the rabbi's political determination an added urgency.

"The forced expulsion of the Arab population as a means of solving our demographic or political problems is morally repugnant and politically self-destructive," Amital wrote in opposition to the idea.

He insisted above all that "on the question of life and death, religious Zionism must not obstruct the way to peace, even if it entails painful compromises, on condition that genuine security is secured."

To illustrate just how painful the compromises he advocates are likely to be, Amital has said he would give up his own home and his yeshiva in the context of a true peace agreement.

They are built in the Gush Etzion, 10 miles south of Jerusalem. The land was owned and settled by religious Jews before 1948, but was lost to the Jordanians during the War of Independence and became part of the West Bank from 1948 to 1967.

Amital's statement shocked many. But it hammered home his message. The party's platform reads: "Meimad is committed to the principle that the peace, welfare and preservation of the Jewish people and the State of Israel take precedence over the goal of political control of the entirety of the Land of Israel."

Against Imposed Legislation

On religious issues, Meimad takes a line which is anathema to the other religious parties: It strongly opposes religious legislation that is imposed on the Knesset by political horsetrading, and then enforced on a largely hostile public.

That is not the way to win hearts, Amital wrote. It is "a profanation of the sacred name. We will not keep silent . . . Religious Zionists should serve as a bridge between extreme positions."

Meimad has taken an independent stand too on the currently controversial question of women serving on religious councils -- the bodies that run religious services in each city.

This is hotly opposed by all the other religious parties and by the Chief Rabbinate. But Meimad says it "supports the full integration of women in public and political life."

The No. 3 candidate on Meimad's Knesset list (after Amital and educator Haim Rippel of Safed) is a woman, Tova Ilan, a noted kibbutz movement intellectual. The other religious parties field no women at all in realistic slots.

The pundits say Meimad, as a new party, will have done well to win two seats, or even one.

But on Nov. 2, the day after elections, every seat will count. And if Rabbi Amital, whose Orthodoxy and piety are unimpeachable, sides with Labor, that could trigger a domino effect among some of the other religious parties.

ISRAELI HEALTH AUTHORITIES LAUNCH MASS POLIO VACCINATION PROGRAM

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Sept. 20 (JTA) -- The Health Ministry began a mass vaccination program against poliomyelitis (infantile paralysis) Tuesday in the Hadera area.

The ministry has reported seven confirmed cases of the disease and three "suspected" cases in the last few weeks. Most of the victims are residents of Hadera, Or Akiva or other nearby towns.

Tests have indicated the presence of the polio virus in local sewage. Water and sewage samples are being taken all over the country.

Health Minister Shoshana Arbeli-Almoslino ordered the vaccination of all residents up to age 35, including newborn infants. She said 1,000 infants would receive the Salk vaccine Tuesday.

Beginning right after Yom Kippur on Thursday, 50,000 school children will get the Sabin vaccine, followed by 70,000 adults and pre-school children on Sunday.

Israeli health authorities explained that some infants cannot absorb the Sabin vaccine, which passes through their system and winds up in sewage. That may be one cause of the appearance of polio in the Hadera area, they said.

The ministry stressed that there is no polio epidemic in the country. Rather, an unexpectedly high number of cases have been diagnosed and the cause is being investigated.

JEWISH GROUPS PROVIDING RELIEF FOR BANGLADESH AND THE CARIBBEAN

By Andrew Silow Carroll

NEW YORK, Sept. 20 (JTA) -- Jewish relief organizations have stepped in to collect funds for areas devastated by Hurricane Gilbert and for Bangladesh, which has been ravaged by flooding.

But unlike CARE, UNICEF and other major relief organizations, which can mobilize massive and immediate relief efforts, the smaller Jewish organizations take a more deliberate approach in assessing the longer-term needs of countries struck by natural disasters.

The Boston-based American Jewish World Service has raised more than $18,000 on behalf of Bangladesh, where flooding that began late last month killed more than 500 and dislocated hundreds of thousands. At one point, nearly 100 percent of the farmland in some regions lay beneath the waters of the swollen rivers of southern Asia.

AJWS has begun working with non-governmental organizations in the country, including the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee.

Since its founding in 1985, AJWS has set up emergency relief funds for a number of disaster-stricken areas, in addition to its ongoing projects in the Third World.

The organization collected more than $120,000 on behalf of the village of Armero, Colombia, after mud slides killed more than 20,000 there in late 1986.

But rather than join the sometimes chaotic flow of emergency supplies and medicine to those countries, AJWS has chosen to focus on problems that will linger long after the floodwaters recede. They include the destruction of crops, damage to homes and a shortage of drinkable water.

Focus On Jamaica

The AJWS also will focus on reconstruction programs in Jamaica, where Hurricane Gilbert left 500,000 homeless, and in Mexico, where the destruction was even worse.

"We have to be realistic over what can be done in the first few days that is not already being done by the Red Cross, UNICEF and the U.S. Agency for International Development," said Dr. Laurence Simon, AJWS president.

"The real contribution that we can make is to find the middle ground between relief and development. Then we can help people rebuild their villages, rebuild their lives."

Sometimes contributions are not sufficient to fund a separate program, however. In that case, said Aryeh Cooperstock, director of international development at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, organizations may consult with the State Departments's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and locate a likely partner to provide assistance.

With help from private donors, the United Jewish Appeal and federation campaigns around the country, the JDC has funded international relief and recovery efforts on behalf of Jewish and non-Jewish communities for more than 70 years.

When famine again threatened parts of Ethiopia last year, the JDC collected more than $2 million for its own health and agricultural projects there.

Cooperstock said it is too early to tally the monies collected by the JDC on behalf of Bangladesh or the Caribbean. But he said the JDC has been in contact with U.S. officials and the Pan-American Health Organization to monitor those areas' needs.

Cooperstock said the JDC is interested in working with the Jewish community in Jamaica on disaster relief. When an earthquake devastated Mexico City in 1985, the organization worked with Mexican Jews in rebuilding a public junior high school.

Cooperstock spoke with rabbis about including a pitch for the disaster-stricken areas in their High Holiday sermons. But he stressed that a relief organization like his can only deal in cash, and lacks the facility to distribute donations of clothing, food and other goods.

Earmarked contributions to either Bangladesh or the Caribbean can be sent to American Jewish World Service, 729 Boylston Street, Boston, Mass., 02116; or to American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 711 Third Ave., New York, N.Y., 10017.

AGUDAS HARABONIM VOWS TO FIGHT REFORM AND CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

By Andrew Silow Carroll

NEW YORK, Sept. 20 (JTA) -- Leaders of an Orthodox rabbinical group met here Sunday to call for a mass campaign to "alert the public to the dangers of Reform and Conservatism."

Rabbis attending the special meeting of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada drew a direct link between non-Orthodox Jewish denominations and an increasing incidence of marriage between Jews and non-Jews.

They vowed to organize a "united front" to urge all Orthodox organizations to explain to Jews "the importance of staying away from Reform" and Conservative Judaism, according to Hersh Ginsberg, director of the union, which is more commonly known as the Agudas Harabonim.

The meeting was prompted by a request from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, according to Ginsberg.

"The rabbinate feels that Reform and Conservative are pushing themselves strongly into Israel," said Ginsberg.

"They have influence with (Foreign Minister Shimon) Peres, the prime minister (Yitzhak Shamir) and the government, because of the big funds they are able to give. The Chief Rabbinate asked us to put pressure on the (Israeli) government not to allow this."

Sunday's meeting was called in the wake of a number of political and public relations victories for non-Orthodox Jewish movements in Israel.

Both Reform and Conservative Zionist groups boasted unprecedented levels of representation at the most recent Jewish Agency General Assembly.

Earlier this year, Orthodox political parties were again rebuffed in their attempts to pass an amendment to Israel's Law of Return, that would deny extension of automatic citizenship to those converted to Judaism by a non-Orthodox rabbi.

More recently, the Conservative movement ordained its first four Israeli rabbis, and successfully fought the Jerusalem Rabbinate's attempt to withdraw the kosher certification of its Jerusalem youth hostel.

Ginsberg was unequivocal in his opposition to the non-Orthodox movements.

"It leads to mixed marriage," he said of Reform, adding that Conservative Judaism was considered "even more harmful to Orthodoxy" because it acts as a "steppingstone" to Reform.

AGUDATH ISRAEL OPENS D.C. OFFICE TO HELP LOBBY CONGRESS

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, Sept. 20 (JTA) -- When a representative of Agudath Israel of America was on Capitol Hill some time back, several Senate staff members were surprised by his appearance.

While he had on the dark hat and dark suit worn by many Orthodox men, he was fairly young. "We thought all Orthodox Jews were old men with long white beards," the aides said.

That perception is expected to change this month with the opening of a Washington office by Agudath Israel, and with Rabbi Stephen Kasnett, Agudath's representative, expected to become a familiar figure at the Capitol.

Kasnett, a 42-year-old lawyer, has a beard, but it hasn't turned white yet.

He said he plans to change the perception of how the Jewish community is seen on various issues in Congress by advocating the viewpoint of Orthodox Jews.

Agudath Israel will become the 15th Jewish organization with offices here.

Israel, Kasnett said, will not be a major focus of the new office. "Israel is an issue that nobody disagrees with," he said, and it's already "well represented" in Washington.

"What distinguishes us from the other Jewish groups is domestic issues," he explained.

For example, the other Jewish groups oppose federal state aid to non-public schools and are for free choice in abortion, while Orthodox Jews take the opposite point of view.

Kasnett said that when Agudath Israel recently backed legislation to exempt religiously supported institutions from anti-discrimination laws that go against their religious beliefs, reporters were shocked that a Jewish group would take this position.

District Court Ruling

The issue came about over a U.S. District Court ruling that while Georgetown University, a Jesuit school, does not have to officially recognize gay groups on its campus, it must give them financial support as it does other student organizations.

Kasnett said Agudath Israel has also been working with legislators to modify pending legislation that provides federal funds to religious child-care providers.

According to Kasnett, one-third of the day-care centers in the United States are sponsored by either churchesr synagogues.

It is to have input on legislation such as this that Agudath Israel opened is Washington office.

"If we had been on the scene when the (day care) bill started off in the initial stages of legislation, we could have had input in the first draft," Kasnett said.

He said that in speaking to congressional staff, he has already learned in his short time here the importance of "being here at the genesis" of a bill.

The best advice he has received "is to get there early with concrete proposals, concrete langauge."

Kasnett said Congress seeks advice in drafting bills because legislators and their staff do not always know the ramifications of a proposed bill.

"This will be the bread and butter function of the office," Kasnett stressed.

Having a Washington office has been a longtime dream of Rabbi Moshe Sherer, Agudath Israel's president.

Sherer told Kasnett that during World War II, when he and other Agudath Israel leaders went to Washington to plead for European Jews, they frequently had to borrow the train fare.

Up until Sept. 1, David Zweibel, Agudath Israel's general counsel and director of government affairs, had come to Washington twice a month from the organization's national headquarters in New York, to represent the group's interests.

Zweibel will continue to assist the new Washington office, along with Mordechai Avigdor, associate general counsel and executive director of Agudath Israel's commission on legislation and civic action.

Advisory Board

Kasnett, who has established an advisory board of Orthodox lawyers and people in government to assist him, said his job is also to monitor legislation as the "watchdog" of the Orthodox community, and to educate lawmakers on the Orthodox viewpoint.

This means not only ensuring that Orthodox schools get their share of federal funds, but also taking stands on moral issues, such as abortion.

Right now, Kasnett, who was interviewed as he was getting his office into shape, plans to educate himself.

Kasnett, born in Washington, lived here until he went to Dartmouth College at 17. He received a law degree from the Benjamin Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University.

He also was a student at the Yeshiva Beis HaTalmud in Jerusalem, and spent years of advanced Talmudic study at the Kollel of the Mirrer Yeshiva in New York.

He is the author of two recent books on the bible and Jewish philosophy, " A Future and a Hope" and "Ancient Mountains, Timeless Hills."

Kasnett, his wife and their four children are now living in Baltimore, where they moved from the Borough Park section of Brooklyn.

Kasnett is beginning a process of meeting with aides of the members of the House and Senate. He noted that Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.) has been particulary helpful to him.

Meeting Jewish Lawmakers

He has also been meeting with the staffs of other Jewish lawmeakers, but stressed he plans to deal with all members of Congress.

In particular, because of Agudath Israel's major concerns, he will be seeking contacts on the congressional committees dealing with education, social welfare and immigration.

Kasnett also plans to meet with other representatives of Jewish organizations in Washington, as well as with local Jewish groups.

He stressed that Agudath Israel was not in Washington "to undermine" any other Jewish organization, or "to be an adversary," but rather to cooperate with other Jewish organizations whenever possible.

The Agudath Israel office is located at 1730 Rhode Island Ave., N.W., in the heart of downtown.

Kasnett said he hopes to establish a minyan for minchah, or afternoon service, drawing on the many people with offices in the area who have long felt the need for such a service.

He also hopes to start a class in Gemorah.