

VATICAN PRAISED FOR OFFER TO HELP RELOCATE THE CONVENT AT AUSCHWITZ JTA Staff Report

NEW YORK, Sept. 19 (JTA) -- A ray of hope broke through the clouds surrounding Catholic-Jewish relations Tuesday, as Jewish leaders warmly praised the Vatican's public endorsement of the 1987 accord calling for the relocation of the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz.

The were particularly pleased by the Vatican's offer to contribute funds to establish an interfaith center away from the grounds of the former death camp, where the Carmelite nuns are to be relocated.

Those who had urged a freeze in relations with the Vatican until the issue was resolved called Tuesday for a restoration of formal talks with the Catholic Church.

Relations between Jews and the church have deteriorated since Feb. 22, the date by which the convent was to have been moved. The deadline, specified in the 1987 accord, passed with little sign of progress in relocating the convent.

Jewish leaders had repeatedly called for Pope John Paul II to state his support for the 1987 agreement, which was signed in Geneva by nine world Jewish leaders and nine representatives of the Catholic Church, including four European cardinals.

But for more than a year, the Vatican remained silent on the matter, apparently deferring to the Catholic Church in Poland, which the pope formerly headed.

That silence was broken Tuesday, when Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, president of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations With Judaism, issued a statement offering to contribute financially to the construction of the interfaith center.

"The Holy See is convinced that such a center would contribute in a significant manner to the development of good relations between Christians and Jews," the statement read.

"In order to support the realization of this important but costly project, the Holy See is prepared to make its own financial contribution," it said.

End To Freeze On Dialogue Urged

Responding to the statement, World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman recommended "that the freeze be lifted in the formal dialogue with the Vatican that was instituted in February at the time of the failure to carry out the Geneva agreement on removal of the convent at Auschwitz."

He made his recommendation to his group and to IJCIC, the International Jewish Committee for Interfaith Consultations, which was formed 25 years ago to talk with the Vatican.

On Tuesday, Seymour Reich, the newly elected chairman of IJCIC, called the Vatican statement "a heartening development."

Reich, who is president of B'nai B'rith International, said that now "the way will be clear for a resumption of the dialogue that, following the issuance of Nostra Aetate, marked a historic watershed in the 2,000-year relationship between the Catholic and Jewish communities."

Rabbi Jack Bemporad, chairman of the inter-religious committee of the Synagogue Council of America, an IJCIC member group, said, "This means that the two decades of close relations between IJCIC and the Vatican commission can continue."

He said the two sides would discuss such questions as anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, racism and human rights.

Jewish Leader Goes To Vatican

Tensions in the past few months over the convent mounted not only between Catholics and Jews, but within the Jewish community as well. Last week, three American Jewish groups formed an alternative entity, the Jewish Council for International Interreligious Relations, to conduct dialogue with the Vatican.

That group, comprising the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, dispatched its own emissary to the Vatican on Sunday.

The representative, Rabbi A. James Rudin, who is AJCommittee's director of interfaith relations, said in a telephone interview from Rome that he met Tuesday with Willebrands and others at the Vatican.

He was buoyed by his talks and by Tuesday's statement, which he said "puts the Vatican firmly and publicly in favor of building the interreligious center. It is more than rhetoric."

The Vatican move drew praise from several other American Jewish leaders and from officials of B'nai B'rith Canada. It was also received with cautious optimism in Brussels by Markus Pardes, one of the Jewish leaders who signed the Geneva accord.

In Los Angeles, the Simon Wiesenthal Center issued a statement saying that the Vatican declaration "removes a major stumbling block in Catholic-Jewish relations."

But the center's dean, Rabbi Marvin Hier, said there is need for additional discussion with church leaders over "the de-Judaization of the camps and the failure of the Polish Church to comprehend the uniqueness of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust."

(Contributing to this report were JTA staff writers Susan Birnbaum and Allison Kaplan in New York and correspondent Edwin Eytan in Paris.)

NEWS ANALYSIS:

WITH LIKUD-LABOR RELATIONS AT A LOW, PUNDITS TALKING OF NEXT GOVERNMENT

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Sept. 19 (JTA) -- Less than a year after the last Knesset elections, Israelis are focusing on the possibility of new elections very soon, resulting from the expected breakdown of the Likud-Labor unity government.

That expectation, in fact, is so ripe that pundits are already mulling over the possible new political alliances that may emerge.

The political crisis ballooned suddenly when Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Labor's No. 2 man, went to Cairo on Monday without the prior blessing of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, the Likud leader.

Rabin met with President Hosni Mubarak to

discuss Egypt's 10-point paper outlining the terms of proposed Palestinian elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

While Likud and Labor are united on the principle of holding elections, which Israel first suggested last spring, the two parties are divided on the specifics of implementing the elections.

Likud flatly rejected Mubarak's proposals Sunday, only two days after Egypt's ambassador to Israel formally presented them to the government.

Labor is prepared to discuss the Egyptian points, which include allowing East Jerusalem Arabs to participate in the elections, international supervision of the referendum and withdrawal of the Israel Defense Force from the vicinity of polling places.

While Labor is amenable to the "land-for-peace" principle that Egypt insists must be the basis of the whole process, Likud is firmly opposed to relinquishing more territory.

With such glaring differences between the partners, it is difficult for many observers to see how the present coalition can survive.

Shamir Feels Betrayed By Rabin

An examination of the three main players in the unfolding political drama -- Likud, Labor and the ultra-Orthodox bloc, which traditionally holds the balance of power -- may cast light on what is likely to transpire in the next few weeks.

As far as Likud is concerned, Shamir would like the present coalition to survive. But he has stated bluntly that there are "things more valuable than unity."

He feels himself personally betrayed by Rabin, who failed to coordinate his Cairo visit with the prime minister.

The two men met for little over an hour Tuesday to discuss Rabin's talks with Mubarak. Neither they nor their aides had anything to say afterward.

But Shamir told a correspondent for the Canada-based Sun newspaper chain that he might know in a few days whether his differences with Rabin can be resolved.

Rabin was in fact co-author with Shamir of the Israeli peace initiative unveiled on May 14.

It calls for the Palestinians to elect delegates who would negotiate with Israel for interim self-rule in the territories and eventually a permanent settlement.

Observers who thought the latest crisis would have the effect of closing ranks within Likud proved mistaken.

On Tuesday morning, Ariel Sharon, the outspoken minister of industry and trade and aspirant for Shamir's job, delivered a blistering attack on the prime minister. He accused Shamir of leaving most of the Cabinet out of the policy-making process.

Disenchantment With Peres

Sharon railed against the fact that Shamir, together with his close Likud ally, Foreign Minister Moshe Arens, seem to have formed a rump Cabinet with Rabin and Vice Premier Shimon Peres, the Labor Party boss, to deal with Egypt's diplomatic moves.

Sharon complained there has been no reference so far to the Inner Cabinet -- five Likud and five Labor ministers -- which is supposed to be the government's top policy-making forum.

If the differences with Labor cannot be resolved, Shamir is expected to press for early

elections. He seems to believe an election campaign would subdue his own party's internal rivalries and force a divided and unprepared Labor Party into a contest it does not want at this time.

As for Labor, the immediate effect of Rabin's trip to Cairo and the looming political crisis has been to paper over cracks in the party's facade.

In fact, the imminent Histadrut labor federation elections, scheduled for November, have caused warring elements to call a cease-fire. But no one doubts that internal warfare would flare anew if the unity government collapses.

Observers discern basic tactical differences between Peres and his longtime rival Rabin.

If the unity government falls, Peres will try to put together a narrow-based, Labor-led coalition government with the religious parties, observers say. Rabin would instead opt for elections, with himself heading the Labor ticket.

The conventional wisdom in Labor ranks is that Rabin would handily win a leadership contest with Peres at this time. Both men have been prime ministers.

Peres, for all of his cerebral qualities, is seen as a "loser" -- or at least not a winner.

He has led the party through four election campaigns and failed to win any of them decisively, not even in 1984, when Likud was saddled with responsibility for a sour economy and the unpopular Lebanon war.

Orthodox May Now Be Wiser

It is unclear, however, whether Rabin would actually seek to block an attempt by Peres and his supporters to form a narrow government with the Orthodox.

As for the religious parties, it remains to be seen whether the ultra-Orthodox learned from their chastening experience in 1988, when, having overplayed their hand, they were eventually spurned by both major parties.

This time around, they may exhibit greater caution and wisdom.

Statements made last week by Menahem Porush, an Agudat Yisrael Knesset member, and by Interior Minister Arye Deri of Shas have pointed to strong pro-peace forces in both parties, which would put them in the Labor camp.

But both Agudah and Shas have forceful hawkish elements in their ranks, who point to pro-Likud sentiments among their grass-roots supporters.

The upcoming Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur holidays will be a time not only of personal introspection and repentance by Israeli politicians, but one in which they will have to think hard about their personal futures.

CRISIS SPURS STOCK MARKET DIVE **By Hugh Orgel**

TEL AVIV, Set. 19 (JTA) -- Rumors of an impending government crisis sent the Tel Aviv stock market plummeting Monday.

It dropped 10 points after signs emerged that the national unity coalition could break up over new disagreements between Likud and Labor over the peace process.

The market responded to the crisis in heavy trading Tuesday. The volume was 37.2 million shekels (\$19 million), the highest in two years.

Trading in free shares, the market's chief barometer, fell by more than 6 percent.

ARSONISTS TORCH FORESTS NEAR HAIFA, SETTING WORST FIRE IN RECENT YEARS

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Sept. 19 (JTA) -- A dense pall of smoke hung over Mount Carmel and the city of Haifa on Tuesday, as a giant forest fire attributed to Palestinian arsonists raged uncontrolled along the heavily wooded mountain range.

At least nine people were hospitalized for smoke inhalation. None was reported in danger.

Hundreds of firefighters, police, soldiers and civilian volunteers battled the blaze, which was fanned by 50-mile winds. By unhappy coincidence, Israel was struck Tuesday by a Hamsin, the hot desert wind.

Light planes were pressed into service to pour water on the fire from above, while firefighters worked on the ground.

Nevertheless, the popular Nature Preserve at the Carmel summit was destroyed, with its unique collection of flora and fauna. Also burned out was a much frequented tourist area known as "Little Switzerland."

Teams of foresters searched for tourists and vacationers who might have been trapped.

Students and employees of Haifa University were evacuated, as were children from Kibbutz Bet Oren, some miles south, where flames licked at the perimeter buildings.

Residents of the Haifa suburb of Danya also stood ready to evacuate if the fire reached them. Israel Defense Force helicopters hovered over inhabited areas in the path of the blaze.

Police and fire officials said the conflagration was clearly the work of arsonists with "nationalist" motivations. It was started at five or more separate points and swiftly spread to cover hundreds of acres.

Jewish National Fund officials said it was the worst fire in recent years. They predicted it would take years to repair the damage.

Arson linked to the Palestinian uprising has destroyed thousands of acres of forests in Israel over the last two summers.

1975 U.N. VOTE NOT ANTI-ZIONIST, SOVIET OFFICIAL TELLS NCSJ LEADERS

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, Sept. 19 (JTA) -- The senior Soviet official dealing with human rights questions maintained Tuesday that the United Nations General Assembly's 1975 resolution equating Zionism with racism was neither an anti-Zionist nor anti-Semitic act.

"I cannot believe that the majority of states" that voted for the 1975 resolution "condemned Zionism," said Dr. Yuri Reshetov, chief of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Department of Humanitarian and Cultural Relations.

Speaking to the 18th annual leadership assembly of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, Reshetov said that the resolution "was mainly understood" as condemning "the practices of a certain state," a reference to Israel.

Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, told Reshetov that his reply was "very disillusioning and disquieting."

He said "Zionism is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people" and not tied to any government nor to the ideas of socialism or capitalism.

Reshetov, who was in Washington to prepare

for Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's meeting with Secretary of States James Baker in Jackson Hole, Wyo., this week, is the first ranking Soviet official to address an NCSJ convention.

Asked about rising grass-roots anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, Reshetov said that if anyone violates the criminal law, "he should be called to order, he should be punished."

Speaks Of Emigration Reforms

He said that representatives of one group, apparently Pamyat, had been called in and warned about this.

For most of his talk, Reshetov stressed the improvements made in human rights in the Soviet union, including increased emigration. He said Jews are now free to study their cultural heritage, including Hebrew and Yiddish.

Maintaining that the majority of Jews in the Soviet Union want to remain there, Reshetov said that a new law is being introduced guaranteeing "freedom of conscience" for all Soviet citizens.

He said new laws are being introduced to "civilize" the emigration laws. They would deal with the two major reasons for denying exit visas: possession of state secrets and financial obligations to relatives remaining in the Soviet Union -- the "poor relatives" requirement.

Use of the secrecy reason will be limited to five years, instead of indefinitely as is now the case. The "poor relatives" clause will now apply only to alimony obligations, and dispute will be decided by a judge.

FORMER STATE DEPT. OFFICIAL URGES ADMISSION OF STRANDED SOVIET JEWS

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, Sept. 19 (JTA) -- A former senior State Department official who helped press the Soviet Union for increased Jewish emigration said Monday that the United States has the moral responsibility to admit all 17,000 Jews stranded in Vienna and Rome.

"As one of the people who banged on the table, who insisted" to Moscow that Jews be allowed to emigrate, "I would say it is a matter of conscience to take care of them," said Rozanne Ridgway, former assistant secretary of state for European and Canadian affairs.

Ridgway spoke at the 18th annual leadership assembly of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry at which she received NCSJ's Solidarity Award.

Ridgway expressed pleasure at the increased emigration that resulted because of her efforts and that of others in the Reagan administration. But she said the Soviet Union is a "highly dynamic state of instability" and must be watched to see that the improvements are institutionalized in the Soviet constitution and laws.

Ridgway said that she understands the global concerns and other problems that have caused the Bush administration to put a limit on refugees.

"I do hope that some way can be found very quickly, whether it is a special category or special legislation, to bring to the United States those Soviet Jews who went to Vienna and Rome," she said, referring to those still waiting to receive U.S. refugee visas.

She said they left the Soviet Union "under one set of circumstances, one set of promises, one set of expectations in a completely different context and are now caught between the tides of changing times."

AUSTRIA TO REMOVE ENVOY FROM ISRAEL, REDUCING LEVEL OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, Sept. 19 (JTA) -- Israel's relations with Austria reached a new low when Vienna announced Monday it would reduce the level of its diplomatic representation in Israel.

A spokesman for the Austrian Foreign Ministry said the move was in response to Israel's refusal to send a new ambassador to Austria as long as Kurt Waldheim is president.

The announcement came on the same day that Austria's neighbor, Hungary, became the first East bloc nation to restore full diplomatic ties with Israel, broken in 1967.

Israel has already named an ambassador to Budapest, but it has none in Vienna.

Its last envoy, Michael Elitzur, returned home three years ago after the Austrians overwhelmingly elected Waldheim, despite revelations that he had been active in the Nazi Party and had served in a German army unit linked to atrocities against civilians in Greece and Yugoslavia.

Israel has refused to name a successor. Its embassy in Vienna is currently headed by Gideon Yarden, who has the rank of charge d'affaires.

Otto Pleinert, the Austrian ambassador to Israel, is about to be posted to Stockholm. Reports from Vienna this week said he would be replaced by a charge d'affaires.

Pleinert stressed Tuesday that it was important to observe reciprocity. But a final decision about his successor is not expected until next spring.

Waldheim's term expires in 1992. He has not ruled out standing for re-election. But the conservative People's Party, which supported his candidacy in 1986, has hinted it would not do so a second time.

OPENING OF U.N. GENERAL ASSEMBLY GREETED WITH UNCERTAINTY BY ISRAEL

By Allison Kaplan

UNITED NATIONS, Sept. 19 (JTA) -- As the United Nations bustled with activity at the opening of the 44th General Assembly on Tuesday, the Israeli delegation looked forward to the new session with a tinge of uncertainty.

While the Israelis are steeled to counter the expected attacks on their legitimacy from the Arab bloc and their supporters, two key issues are as yet unresolved.

The one of primary concern to Israel is whether or not Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat will be granted a U.S. visa so that he can address the General Assembly.

Clovio Maksud, the Arab League representative here, said Monday that Arafat has not yet decided whether to try to attend the General Assembly session. But he said that if Arafat did come, the logical time for his visit would be in November, when the assembly holds its annual debate on the Palestinian issue.

The other unknown factor for Israel will be the impact of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's address to the General Assembly, which is scheduled for Sept. 29.

It is expected that Mubarak will formalize and detail his offer to host a dialogue between Israeli officials and Palestinian representatives on the implementation of proposed elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

During Mubarak's stay in New York, he will meet with Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens, who will address the General Assembly two days before him, and with Finance Minister Shimon Peres, whose visit is not directly linked to the United Nations.

Credentials Battle Expected

But beyond the unknowns, Israeli officials are prepared to fight the usual attempts to discredit the Jewish state and the expected moves by the PLO to win new victories in its diplomatic war against Israel.

"We are in a situation where the other side is using the U.N. as a propaganda tool," Ephraim Doweck, Israel's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations, said in an interview.

Doweck said that the Israelis view their position at the United Nations as a defensive one, constantly having to fend off attacks and criticism throughout the course of the General Assembly and within various U.N. agencies.

The first move of this General Assembly is expected to come in the form of the traditional attempt to revoke Israel's credentials.

Since 1982, Arab nations have annually tried to oust Israel from the United Nations by proposing an amendment to the report of the Credentials Committee.

In the past, one of the Scandinavian countries has moved for postponement of discussion of the Arab amendment, and that move has been upheld in a vote. That sequence of events is once again expected this year.

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith has sent telegrams to the countries that either voted against the Scandinavian measure or abstained from the vote last year.

The telegram said that refraining from an attack on Israel's U.N. credentials "would send a positive signal to all parties to further the prospects for Arab-Israeli coexistence."

New PLO Moves Expected

Officials at the Israeli mission said they are confident that they have enough votes to survive the credentials battle. They expect approximately the same amount of support Israel received last year, with the possibility of increased support from East bloc countries in the wake of glasnost.

At the same time, the Israelis still do not feel they have a chance of being able to muster enough votes to revoke the 1975 U.N. resolution equating Zionism with racism.

Thomas Pickering, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said in Washington last week that the United States was committed to seeing that resolution repealed.

Pickering said he believed that the United Nations was moving away from constant attacks on both Israel and the United States. He expressed optimism about the prospects for a productive General Assembly.

The Israelis are also wary of the efforts of the Palestine Liberation Organization to be recognized as a state. Currently, its status within the United Nations is as an observer mission called "Palestine."

This year, the PLO may attempt to upgrade its status to that of an observer state, a status held by countries such as Switzerland, or it may even try to be admitted to the international body as a full member.

(JTA correspondent David Friedman in Washington contributed to this report.)