

**ENDING LONG DELAY, U.S. RELEASES
LOAN GUARANTEES FOR \$400 MILLION**

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, Feb. 20 (JTA) -- Ending months of delay and removing a source of increasing friction in U.S.-Israeli relations, the State Department on Wednesday released \$400 million in long-promised loan guarantees to finance the construction in Israel of housing for immigrants from the Soviet Union.

The move was announced in a short statement issued by State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler. It said Secretary of State James Baker had telephoned Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy to inform him of the decision.

Baker told Levy that the guarantees would be released for the entire \$400 million, which will allow Israel to seek the loans from commercial banks at favorable rates.

The announcement came a day after Vice President Dan Quayle told delegates to the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council plenum in Miami that the loans would be released "later on this week."

The Israeli Embassy here had no immediate official comment, but an almost audible sign of relief could be heard. Embassy officials had been bombarded for months with a continuous list of questions from the Bush administration aimed at ensuring that none of the money would be used to house Soviet Jews in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip.

Only last week, Israeli Ambassador Zalman Shoval accused the administration of giving Israel "the runaround" through a series of almost endless technical questions. Shoval later apologized for his remarks, which the White House called "outrageous."

**NJCRC AFFIRMS POLICY
OF NOT DIRECTING OLIM TO TERRITORIES**

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

MIAMI, Feb. 20 (JTA) -- Jewish leaders from communities across the United States narrowly adopted a statement this week that, in effect, urges the Israeli government to abide by its pledge not to direct immigrants to the administered territories.

The stipulation, amended to a statement urging the U.S. government to provide Israel with more financial aid for immigrant absorption, was adopted during a policy debate Monday at the annual plenum of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, which convened here from Sunday to Wednesday.

NJCRC is the policy coordinating body for 13 national Jewish agencies and 117 local Jewish community councils. The annual plenum is the occasion when NJCRC constituent agencies debate and set their community relations priorities for the coming year.

The amended statement on U.S. financial aid for immigrant absorption in Israel was adopted by a vote of 201-176 after 45 minutes of impassioned debate, a vote so close that it had to be taken by ballot rather than the customary show of hands.

The adopted statement "supports an increase in loan guarantees from the United States to

resettle the hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews emigrating to Israel, consistent with the stated Israeli policy not to use such funds in the West Bank or Gaza Strip, and neither to direct nor to provide special incentives to settle Soviet Jews in the West Bank and Gaza."

The stated policy of the Israeli government is not to direct or settle Soviet Jews beyond the areas which were under Israeli control prior to the Six-Day War, as Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy outlined in a written pledge to U.S. Secretary of State James Baker early last October.

A Need To Be Explicit

But the Bush administration has been concerned by recent reports that Israel's Housing Ministry is continuing to channel funds to Jewish settlements in the administered territories. It wants to make sure those funds will not be used to build housing that could later be occupied by Soviet immigrants.

As a result, the administration delayed for months the release of \$400 million in already-promised loan guarantees, pending clarifications from Israel. The guarantees were finally released Wednesday.

Israel was frustrated by the delay, especially because it may eventually ask for some \$10 billion worth of additional loan guarantees, not all from the United States, to help resettle the tens of thousands of immigrants arriving each month from the Soviet Union.

Delegates here wanted to urge the Israeli government to do everything it can to ensure the United States provides the desperately needed funds on an expedited basis.

The original NJCRC proposition brought to the floor simply supported an increase in U.S. loan guarantees to aid the resettlement of Soviet immigrants, "consistent with the understanding between the United States and Israel."

But some NJCRC member agencies, including the American Jewish Congress and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, felt that the "understanding" needed to be explicit. They proposed amending the statement to include reiteration of official Israeli policy about settlement only within Israel's pre-1967 borders.

As a result of the open, heartfelt and sometimes contentious debate that most delegates agree is the heart of NJCRC's strength as an umbrella organization, the original language was modified.

Right To Live Anywhere In Jerusalem

Another focus of debate Monday was a statement urging communication to the administration, Congress and other key players of "the Jewish community's position in support of Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel."

The proposed statement also affirmed "the fundamental right of Jews to live in all parts of the city of Jerusalem," a right that at one point last year appeared to be disputed by the Bush administration.

Many plenum delegates were upset that the proposition failed to address the rights of Jerusalem's non-Jewish residents and implied a double standard for Jews and Palestinians.

Some recalled an incident last spring in

which a group of Orthodox Jews covertly leased a Greek Orthodox Church building in the Christian Quarter of the Old City, with funds from Israel's Housing Ministry, offending the sensibilities of the city's Christian minority.

After debate, the NJCRAC policy statement was amended to affirm "the fundamental right of Israelis to live in all parts of the city of Jerusalem, while being sensitive to the traditional ethnic and religious character of the Old City's neighborhoods."

The final version, adopted by a margin of approximately 3-1, was endorsed by NJCRAC's Israel Task Force and acknowledged, in the analysis of one delegate, that all Israelis have the right to live in all parts of Jerusalem, but the exercise of those rights must be tempered by other considerations.

GROUP PROPOSES EMERGENCY PLAN TO BRING MORE SOVIET JEWS TO U.S.

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, Feb. 20 (JTA) -- Concerned about deteriorating conditions for Jews in the Soviet Union, a national advocacy group is urging that all Soviet Jews who have applied for permission to immigrate to the United States be allowed to do so this year.

The Union of Councils for Soviet Jews is asking the Bush administration, Congress and the American Jewish community to support legislation allowing one-time, emergency admission for current applicants who otherwise would have to wait two to six years to be reunited with their families already in the United States.

The proposal was made by Pamela Cohen, president of the Union of Councils, and Micah Naftalin, its national director, at the organization's semi-annual congressional briefing breakfast here Tuesday.

But the idea elicited a cool reaction from representatives of Jewish agencies that assist the 40,000 Soviet Jews allowed to enter the United States each year as refugees.

The quota for this fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30, has already been filled. But thousands of other Soviet Jews have filed visa applications at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. The applications are then forwarded to a government processing center in Washington.

The Union of Councils estimates the center has already received applications from about 150,000 Soviet families, which could mean upwards of 250,000 individuals. About half of these could be Jews, the group said.

Soviet Jews In 'Imminent Danger'

Naftalin and Cohen warned that because of the increasing "recentralization" of the Soviet government and rising incidents of violence against Jews, there is a need to accelerate all Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union.

"Soviet Jews must be viewed as being in imminent danger, imminent jeopardy," Naftalin said. "The continued high level of emigration must be considered, for planning purposes, equally in jeopardy."

But Karl Zukerman, executive vice president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, said the American Jewish community does not plan to ask for more than the 40,000 allotted refugee slots.

The American Jewish leadership constantly monitors the situation in the Soviet Union and, though concerned about the recent changes, it

does not feel there is an immediate need to increase the numbers, Zukerman said.

He added that with the slowness that OVIR, the Soviet emigration office, has been processing exit visas, there is no certainty that even the 40,000 figure will be reached.

Mark Talisman, director of the Washington office of the Council of Jewish Federations, said there is also the issue of fairness and equity to consider.

He explained that the 40,000 Soviet Jews being admitted are part of a total of 124,500 people allowed to immigrate to the United States as refugees from all over the world. They come out of a pool of some 16 million people, mostly from underdeveloped countries, seeking to enter the United States.

Naftalin said that only those who had already made applications would be covered by the proposed emergency legislation. New applicants would not be included.

The proposal also would not interfere with the large number of Soviet Jews now going to Israel, he stressed.

A Matter Of Cost And Fairness

"To these U.S.-bound Jews, the current annual 40,000 refugee quota presents a clear and dangerous obstacle to rescue and family reunification, dooming them to wait in a hostile and dangerous environment for more than five years," said Cohen.

She said that those hoping to be reunited with families in America "must not be condemned to languish in the USSR, waiting for the Soviet borders to close once again."

A Union of Councils statement on the proposal emphasized that the group was "fully aware" that this emergency "will create financial, political, administrative burdens for the Congress, the administration, the Jewish philanthropic and resettlement agencies, and the local American Jewish communities.

"As difficult as it may be to resettle 40,000 Soviet Jews each year, a five- to six-fold increase will surely prove to be a major hardship, though not nearly as daunting as the challenge Israel has voluntarily and willingly accepted," it said.

But Talisman of CJF pointed out that in addition to paying part of the cost of resettling Soviet Jews who immigrate here, the American Jewish community is raising millions of dollars to help Israel meet the costs of absorbing Soviet Jews who make aliyah.

"Our communities have been bending over backwards to be able to deal with both the overseas and the domestic needs," he said.

While cost is not the only consideration in assessing the Union of Councils proposal, it has to be taken into account, Talisman said.

ISRAELI JETS BOMB BASE IN LEBANON

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Feb. 20 (JTA) -- Israeli air force jets Wednesday night bombed a terrorist stronghold in eastern Lebanon and returned safely to their bases, a military spokesman announced.

He identified the target as a base used by Ahmed Jabril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command for training purposes and to attack Israel. The base was destroyed, the spokesman said.

The air raid was the third by Israel this year on targets in Lebanon.

E.C. RULES OUT ARAFAT CONTACT BECAUSE OF HIS SUPPORT OF IRAQ

By Yossi Lempkovic

BRUSSELS, Feb. 20 (JTA) -- The European Community, about to embark on a new diplomatic initiative in the Middle East, has ruled out official contact with Yasir Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, because of his support of Saddam Hussein.

"In light of the overtly pro-Iraqi statements Arafat made, we decided not to have official contact with Arafat," Jacques Poos, the foreign minister of Luxembourg, told a news conference there Tuesday.

Poos, current chairman of the E.C. Council of Ministers, spoke after the 12 E.C. foreign ministers met in special session in Luxembourg to define an overall postwar Middle East policy.

The E.C. has always insisted that the PLO must participate in the regional peace process. While Poos specifically rejected Arafat, he did not exclude other representatives of the PLO from future discussions.

"It's up to the Palestinian people to designate its own representatives," he added.

British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd said the PLO "has done itself very considerable harm under the present leadership in backing the aggression of Saddam Hussein."

The statement released by the ministers after their meeting made no mention of the PLO. It hinted at flexibility on the issue of an international peace conference, which the E.C. supports but Israel opposes.

"The Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian question are fundamental sources of instability in the region," the statement read, adding that "the international community should make renewed urgent efforts to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting solution."

In that connection, the ministers maintained that "a properly structured international conference at an appropriate time will provide a suitable framework for negotiations."

They stressed that "such a conference will require serious preparation."

Not 'Imposing Solutions'

But a senior official observed that "the spirit with which the 12 member states are tackling the post-crisis situation (in the region) is not one of imposing solutions."

Diplomatic sources said that given Israel's opposition to an international conference, the E.C. ministers might be willing to back the idea of direct Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian talks.

The E.C.'s Middle East initiatives are spearheaded by its so-called troika, consisting of the current chairman of the Council of Ministers and his immediate predecessor and successor.

The troika is scheduled to meet Monday with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy in Luxembourg and later with the foreign ministers of Egypt and Syria.

It will meet subsequently with the ministers of the five North African states -- Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania -- which comprise the Union of Arab Maghreb. The meeting will be held in Libya, which chairs the union.

Also scheduled are talks with the Gulf Cooperation Council, consisting of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, all aligned with the U.S. coalition fighting Iraq.

BRITISH LAWMAKER RECOMMENDS CLOSURE OF PLO'S LONDON OFFICE

By Jenni Frazer

London Jewish Chronicle

LONDON, Feb. 20 (JTA) -- A Conservative member of Parliament said he would continue to urge the closure of the Palestine Liberation Organization's office in London despite a rebuff from Home Secretary Kenneth Baker.

Sir Rhodes Boyson, a former government minister, said he has complained a number of times on behalf of constituents who object to the PLO's presence in Kensington.

Most recently, he wrote Baker about the fears expressed by a woman that the PLO poses an immediate security threat since it has aligned itself with Iraq.

Rhodes told a rally held Sunday at the Finchley Synagogue to show solidarity with Israel that the home secretary said the PLO "enjoys no official status, privilege or immunities, but is free, like any other organization, to set up an office in this country as long as it operates within the law."

However, Rhodes reported, the home secretary made clear that if a member of the PLO staff engaged in criminal activity, he would inform the police and would use his powers under the Immigration Act "if there are good grounds for believing that individuals working at the PLO office may constitute a threat to national security."

LEADER OF GREEN PARTY SAYS ISRAEL DESERVES SCUD HITS

By David Kantor

BONN, Feb. 20 (JTA) -- The leader of Germany's Green Party has equated Israel's administration of Arab-populated territories with Iraq's occupation of Kuwait and said Israeli policy is therefore to blame for the Iraqi missile attacks on Israel.

Hans-Christian Strobele, in a newspaper interview published Wednesday, said Israel's administration of the West Bank and Gaza Strip is "in principle the same unlawful act as the occupation of Kuwait" by Iraq, and thus Scud missile attacks on the Jewish state are "the logical, nearly unavoidable consequences of Israel's policies."

Strobele, who was involved in an assault on Jewish community headquarters in West Berlin nearly 20 years ago, is presently the Greens' chief policy-maker and spokesman. He opposed Germany's shipment of Patriot anti-missile batteries to Israel, claiming Israel would one day use the defensive system for offensive purposes.

The Greens, a coalition of environmentalists and pacifists, has often been accused of anti-Israel bias. Its small pro-Israel faction is weak.

But the party no longer has much influence on German policies. It lost its Bundestag representation in the December 1990 elections, the first held in the newly united Germany.

German military assistance to Israel has run into more formidable resistance from the opposition Social Democratic Party, or SPD.

Oskar LaFontaine, its leader, reiterated Wednesday that the SPD opposes the government's plans to finance the construction of two submarines for Israel's navy. Help in financing the submarines is part of a \$670,000 aid package recently promised Israel by the German government.

JEWISH GROUPS ELEVATE CAMPAIGN TO HELP 4,000 JEWS STILL IN SYRIA

By Aliza Marcus

NEW YORK, Feb. 20 (JTA) -- Sixteen years ago this month, four young Jewish women from Syria attempted to flee their country illegally.

But the smugglers they hired to help guide them through the perilous journey turned out to be more dangerous than the journey itself, and the young women were later found murdered.

For years, their death was a symbol of the desperation Syrian Jews felt in a country in which blanket repression was the norm, and which for Jews was even worse.

As the anniversary of this tragic event approaches, American Jewish groups are promoting anew their old campaign to pressure the Syrian government into easing restrictions against Jews, with the focus on allowing free emigration.

The groups also want to see six Jewish men now believed held in Syrian jails released and allowed to emigrate. The six reportedly were arrested for trying to escape from Syria.

The unofficial kickoff for the campaign will take place this weekend on Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath preceding Purim, when Jews traditionally recall historical threats to their existence.

Synagogue congregations are being called on to recite special prayers for Syrian Jews and to send letters of concern to Syrian President Hafez Assad, President Bush and other Syrian, U.S. and U.N. officials.

Campaign organizers, including the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council and the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews, say they want to capitalize on the new alliance between Syria and the United States to try to persuade a loosening of restrictions.

"We have to capitalize on that and use whatever leverage the United States has in conveying a message to Syria in a direct yet non-hostile manner," said Abraham Bayer, director for international concerns at NJCRAC, the umbrella group for Jewish community relations.

The campaign also is calling on Syrian officials to allow the reunification of divided families and specifically the emigration of young Jewish women who are unable to find Jewish husbands.

Syria May Now Be Open To Change

According to international human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Helsinki Watch, Syria is a longtime serious human rights violator, with torture of prisoners common and freedom of speech and press severely constrained.

"Thousands of political prisoners, including hundreds of prisoners of conscience, continued to be detained under state of emergency legislation in force since 1963," Amnesty International wrote in its 1990 annual report.

Nevertheless, Jewish leaders believe Syria may now be open to changing its policies concerning Jews, citing the recent U.S. State Department human rights report which indicated that "Syria did continue to respond positively to specific requests from the United States about the status of Syrian Jews."

Campaign officials said they were pleased with the level of U.S. government involvement in passing messages along to Syrian officials. They are also heartened that Syrian officials have responded to inquiries, even if the responses have not yet led to public action.

About 4,000 Jews live in Syria, more than

half of whom are in Damascus, with smaller communities of less than 1,000 each based in Aleppo and Al Qamishli.

On the surface, Jewish life is maintained, with working synagogues and two Jewish elementary schools, according to the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews, founded in 1989 by members of New York's Syrian Jewish community.

But the Jewish community in Syria is reported to be under constant surveillance by members of the Syrian secret police, known as mukhabarat, and a file is kept on every member of the community, according to the council.

Jews are generally denied all but the lowest level government jobs, while Jewish schools are run by Moslem directors and Hebrew instruction is prohibited, council officials say. Those requesting permission to travel abroad must leave behind family members and a large sum of money.

Those involved in the campaign said the process of freeing Syrian Jews would be a long one, but added they were confident that the new relationship between Syria and the United States would aid immeasurably in their struggle.

The lack of positive, public steps has at least been somewhat offset by Syrian acknowledgment of certain issues, such as family reunification, raised by those concerned about the plight of Syrian Jews.

"Our emphasis is on human rights, we feel this is a human rights issue and the Jews should be able to leave the country and return freely," said Alice Harary, vice president of the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jewry.

OVER HALF OF ITALIAN PRIESTS FAVOR VATICAN TIES WITH ISRAEL

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, Feb. 20 (JTA) -- A shade over half of the 302 priests polled in Italy, seat of the Roman Catholic Church, believe the Vatican should extend diplomatic recognition to Israel.

But 67 percent of them would link recognition to a solution of the Palestinian problem, according to the survey conducted by the SWG agency of Trieste, published in the weekly Panorama.

While over 84 percent of the priests denied that anti-Semitism exists in their parishes, more than half said it exists in varying degrees in Italy as a whole.

Many of the priests and parishioners quoted by Panorama expressed sympathy for Israel. But remarks of others were tinged with anti-Israel or anti-Semitic bias.

"When Israel is mixed up in things, there's always trouble," said Luisa Cravino, an elderly woman in Turin.

Carla Ghisio thought Saddam Hussein had a right to launch Scud missiles at Israel. "How else could he defend himself? Israel scares me because it is armed like America, a lot more than Iraq," she said.

The Rev. Francesco Patti in Milan said anti-Semitism is non-existent in that northern Italian metropolis. "If I really must speak the truth, there is, rather, an opportunistic pro-Semitism, because the Jews count, they have in their hands the levers of finance," the cleric said.

Although nearly 50 percent of those polled think Israel's treatment of the Palestinians is the most likely cause of anti-Semitism, 19.2 percent cited the Jews' "wealth and power." Only 1.3 percent said "the killing of Christ."