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SOVIETS REPORTEDLY SETTING UP PANEL TO RESOLVE LONG-TERM REFUSENIK CASES

MOSCOW, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- The plight of long-term Jewish refuseniks may be resolved soon, according to reports emanating from an international human rights conference here.

According to official sources at the conference, which is being held under the auspices of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Soviets have agreed to set up a five-member commission of experts to review the cases of Jews who have been refused permission to emigrate for more than five years.

Soviet Jewish activist Roman Gefter reportedly has been asked to serve on the commission.

News of the Soviet decision was reported by Shoshana Cardin, chairman of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry and a public member of the U.S. delegation to the CSCE meeting. She said she had learned of the development from sources in the various delegations to the conference.

If the reports are correct, they would be an indication that the Soviet government now wants to resolve the issue of Jewish emigration once and for all.

The Soviet legislature passed an emigration reform law in May. But Soviet Jewish advocacy groups in the West expressed concern that the bill contained a number of loopholes that would allow Soviet authorities to continue denying emigration visas to Jews for such arbitrary reasons as access to state secrets or financial responsibility to "poor relatives."

More than 200 Soviet Jewish families have been denied permission to emigrate, according to recent estimates. But the number of long-term cases is considerably smaller.

Cardin 'Gratified' By Report

Cardin said that while Western delegates to the CSCE meeting have been pressing the Soviet government to resolve the long-term cases prior to the conference's end on Oct. 4, Soviet officials say it is unlikely that case reviews can be completed by that date.

She also expressed concern about reports that the Soviet government claims that there are only 10 unresolved long-term cases. Soviet Jewry activists say the number of remaining long-term cases is higher.

"We will ask the Soviet authorities to check very carefully whether the roster of long-term refuseniks is complete," Cardin said.

But she stressed that the National Conference is "gratified at this indication of the potential resolution of these cases, a step which likely has been made possible by the failure of the August coup attempt" in Moscow.

Meanwhile, Soviet citizens got a rare opportunity to sample chazzanut, or Jewish cantorial singing, during a 40th day commemoration ceremony Sunday for the three young Russians killed fighting off Soviet tanks during the failed coup of Aug. 19 to 21.

Members of the JDC-Moscow Synagogue Choir, founded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, wore kipot as they sang a prayer from the Yom Kippur service for the martyrs, one of whom, Ilya Krichevsky, was Jewish.

SOVIET OFFICIAL SAYS USSR TO RESTORE TIES WITH ISRAEL BY PEACE CONFERENCE

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- Soviet Foreign Minister Boris Pankin's assertion here Friday that his country will restore full diplomatic relations with Israel before next month's planned Middle East peace conference appears to remove one of the key issues obstructing the proposed peace talks, observers say.

Pankin's confirmation of Soviet intentions, which was welcomed by Israel's supporters, came after a meeting here with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy. The two foreign ministers were in New York for the beginning weeks of the new U.N. General Assembly session.

The Soviet foreign minister confirmed that "there will be re-establishment of diplomatic ties in the very near future," and said that it will occur "surely before the peace conference."

The two foreign ministers emerged from their half-hour meeting pleased with the exchange.

"We had a productive and fruitful discussion," Pankin said. "There are no obstacles to re-establishing relations, and no matters that remain outstanding."

"We had a very good and friendly conversation," Levy agreed. "The minister has been invited and promised to visit Israel," he said.

Pankin also met Sunday afternoon with a delegation of World Jewish Congress officials, led by Edgar Bronfman, its president. They asked the Soviet foreign minister to press Syria to allow thousands of Jews living there to emigrate.

Pankin said he was unfamiliar with the plight of Syrian Jews but promised to look into it, said Elan Steinberg, WJC executive director.

'Most Definitive' Statement Yet

The Soviet Union has indicated for some time that it plans to normalize relations with Israel in the near future. But Pankin's announcement Friday is significant in that it is the first time a specific time frame has been set, said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive director of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "This is the most definitive statement" so far from the Soviets, he said.

And like Pankin's call at the United Nations early last week to repeal the 1975 General Assembly resolution branding Zionism as a form of racism, "it represents a change in Soviet policy," Hoenlein said.

"There are many areas of potential cooperation" between the two nations, he said. "It's the kind of enlightened policy we had hoped for, for a long time."

The unambiguous reaffirmation of Soviet intentions to restore full diplomatic relations with Israel is one of "the most important remaining matters for resolution" before convening the Middle East peace conference, said Marvin Feuerwerker, a senior strategic fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a pro-Israel think-tank.

It "is very helpful in assuring us that we will be able to get the other issues resolved," Feuerwerker said.

NEWS ANALYSIS:**AS PNC AUTHORIZES PEACE TALKS, ISRAEL NEARS A MOMENT OF TRUTH**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- Israel is nearing its moment of truth as prospects improve for the Middle East peace conference the United States wants to convene by the end of October.

The most significant in the latest series of rapidly converging events was the Palestine National Council's vote in Algiers on Friday authorizing Palestinian participation in the conference.

It was a triumph for Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat against radicals urging armed struggle instead of diplomacy.

Bush administration officials in Washington said they were extremely pleased by the PLO's apparent endorsement of the peace conference. They admitted that the most difficult task lies ahead: reconciling the PLO's desire to get increasingly involved in the conference with Israel's absolute rejection of any PLO role in the process.

The PNC is an adjunct of the PLO and its actions therefore are routinely dismissed by Israel as "irrelevant." But Israeli officials admitted privately over the weekend that Arafat's success removed the last hurdle in the way of the conference on the Arab side.

The PNC further pleased the Americans by dropping from its top policy-making panel Mohammed (Abul) Abbas, head of the Baghdad-based Palestine Liberation Front, whom Washington accuses of being a terrorist leader.

Abbas was behind a failed commando raid on Israeli beaches in May 1990. Because the PLO refused to repudiate the raid or dismiss Abbas, Washington broke off its dialogue with the PLO which, to date, has not been resumed.

No-Confidence Vote Set Oct. 7

Israel's conditional commitment to participate in the proposed peace conference is still stronger than the ambiguous Palestinian position. But Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir is under increasing pressure from the right wing of his governing coalition to withdraw it.

His government faces a no-confidence vote when the Knesset opens its winter session Oct. 7. If the three far-right factions cast their combined seven votes with the opposition bloc, Shamir will have lost his parliamentary majority and the government will almost certainly resign.

In all likelihood, that would mean dissolution of the 12th Knesset over a year before its statutory term expires and new elections in about four or five months.

Shamir presumably would head the caretaker government in the interim. In theory, he could send Israel to the peace table.

In practice, though, he cannot do so without a fresh mandate from the electorate. As Israel struggled through a grueling election campaign, the entire peace process would languish.

That scenario loomed as U.S. Secretary of State James Baker was expected back in the region shortly for what would be his eighth visit to the Middle East since the Persian Gulf War ended in March.

The purpose of his trip this time would be to deliver invitations to the conference to each of the participating parties.

The imminence of that development injected sudden drama into Israel's domestic political

arena. Shamir met Sunday with the leaders of Tehiya and Moledet, the two far-right coalition partners that have threatened to revolt in next Monday's Knesset showdown.

Shamir apparently did not succeed in mollifying them. Goula Cohen of Tehiya accused him of "running into a disastrous conference, instead of running for election."

Tsomet Now Against Peace Conference

Shamir took another blow from the right when Agriculture Minister Rafael Eitan, leader of the Tsomet faction, announced over the weekend that he was reversing his previous support of the peace conference, because the United States is "not acting like an honest broker" but siding with the Arabs.

He did not say how he would vote Oct. 7.

Cohen accused Shamir of trying to "frighten" his rightist allies by suggesting that if they defected, the four Orthodox parties would also leave the coalition to form a new government with the Labor bloc. The religious parties denied they were considering any such option.

While the Labor Party and its allies plan to introduce no-confidence motions, opinion is divided over the prospects of early elections. Some Laborites demand that the party back Shamir against his hard-line partners, while legislation reforming the electoral system makes its slow way through the Knesset.

Elsewhere on the diplomatic front, Washington indicated it was determined not to let a dispute with Israel over the roles of Palestinian activists Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi impede progress toward the peace conference.

The United States reportedly sent a discreet warning to Jerusalem not to take vigorous legal action against the two, who allegedly flew from London last week to the PNC meeting in Algiers, in defiance of Israeli law.

Israel forbids Palestinians as well as its own citizens from any contact with the PLO. The right has demanded the arrest of the two Palestinian leaders as soon as they return to Israel.

But opposition politicians and even some Likud figures are urging the government not to initiate criminal proceedings against them, especially since their intervention in Algiers was widely reported to have tilted the balance in favor of peace talks.

No Role For Husseini Or Ashrawi

One prominent Likud member who took that view is Shlomo Lahat, the popular mayor of Tel Aviv. But he is often dismissed by his party as a maverick for his support of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, which is seen as a heresy against the Likud party line.

Husseini and Ashrawi deny having gone to Algiers. But it is a feeble denial inasmuch as the news media placed them at the PNC session and even credited them with swaying the delegates in favor of the moderates in Arafat's camp who support a peace conference.

Israel, for its part, is understood to have warned the United States that if Baker meets with the pair in Washington at this time, it would be regarded in Jerusalem as an intolerable affront that could "gravely damage" the conference prospects.

Shamir on Friday ruled out any role for Husseini or Ashrawi at the peace conference -- Husseini because he lives in East Jerusalem and Ashrawi because she identifies with the PLO.

BUSH CRITICIZED FOR RESTORING MILLIONS IN MILITARY AID TO JORDAN

WASHINGTON, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- The Jewish War Veterans of the United States has sharply criticized President Bush for releasing nearly \$21 million in U.S. military aid to Jordan.

The aid was frozen by Congress in April because of Jordan's support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Bush informed Congress on Friday that the funds were being unfrozen in response to Jordan's help in the Middle East peace process.

Albert Cohen, the JWV's recently elected national commander, called Bush's action "manipulative and without merit."

Jordan will be eligible for \$20 million in financing for arms purchases and up to \$783,000 for military training.

"How can President Bush justify opening U.S. coffers to Jordan for military purposes when that country stood on the side of Saddam Hussein during the Gulf war?" the head of the 100,000-member veterans service organization asked.

"Clearly, the president is attempting to manipulate the players of a future Mideast peace conference with this move," Cohen said. "Apparently, our enemies deserve greater consideration than given to our real friends."

BILL WOULD BAR PENTAGON CONTRACTS TO FOREIGN FIRMS SUPPORTING BOYCOTT

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- The American Jewish Congress is urging a Senate-House conference committee to adopt an amendment to the defense appropriations bill denying military contracts to foreign companies that adhere to the Arab League boycott against Israel.

The amendment, introduced by Sen. Timothy Wirth (D-Colo.), was adopted Sept. 26 by the Senate, which voted 99-0. The House bill approving Defense Department appropriations for 1992 did not contain the provision. The conference committee must now resolve the differences.

In a letter to the members of the committee, AJCongress points out that the provision would "eliminate or reduce the advantage foreign firms now enjoy over their American competitors subject to the U.S. boycott laws and would weaken the impact of the odious boycott law."

The letter was signed by Will Maslow, AJCongress general counsel and editor of its monthly newsletter "Boycott Report," and Mark Pelavin, the organization's Washington representative.

Wirth said that while the Arab primary and secondary boycotts "have been a shackle on the Israeli economy," the secondary boycott also has meant economic losses for American firms that trade with Israel.

"The very government that enforces anti-boycott legislation for its own American companies should not be in the business of rewarding foreign companies that comply with the boycott by allowing them to receive government contracts," the senator said.

The Wirth amendment would deny Pentagon contracts over \$25,000 to foreign firms complying with the secondary boycott of Israel. The firms would have to certify that they are not complying with the boycott when bidding for contracts.

The amendment was co-sponsored by Sens. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), Harris Wofford (D-Pa.), Paul Simon (D-Ill.), Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Connie Mack (R-Fla.).

FLURRY OF REPORTS ON ISRAELI MIAs CALLED PART OF DISINFORMATION DRIVE

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- Israeli officials say they have no information concerning a report in a Swiss Jewish weekly that the Shi'ite fundamentalist group Hezbollah has turned over the bodies of two missing Israeli soldiers to a forensic laboratory in Vienna.

On Friday, Judische Rundschau reported that Hezbollah had transferred the remains of Rachamim Alsheikh and Yosef Fink to the University of Vienna, on condition they not be handed over to Israel until a number of Palestinian terrorists are freed.

Their reported demands included the release of Shi'ite cleric Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid.

But Hezbollah has since denied the report, and Austrian government officials said they had no information about such a transfer.

Israel has accepted a report that Alsheikh is dead but said that reports concerning Fink are inconclusive and await further credible evidence.

In Jerusalem, Yossi Olmert, head of the Government Press Office, said there had been no change in recent days with regard to Israeli soldiers listed as missing in action.

"Israel has received no new information on the MIAs, including Yossi Fink and navigator Ron Arad."

Arad, an air force navigator shot down over Lebanon in 1986, has been variously reported to be in Iranian hands or a captive of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Uri Lubrani, Israel's chief prisoner-exchange negotiator, dismissed the recent rash of "disclosures" as a "wave of unfounded speculation."

Lubrani said U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar is continuing his efforts. "In the meantime, we need patience and strong nerves."

ISRAEL WOULD RETALIATE AGAINST IRAQ IF ATTACKED AGAIN, IDF GENERAL SAYS

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- If Iraq launched another missile attack on Israel, there is no question that Israel would retaliate, Lt. Gen. Ehud Barak, the Israel Defense Force chief of staff, indicated in interviews published Sunday.

Israel would not be bound by the restraints it voluntarily assumed during the Persian Gulf War to help the United States hold together a coalition that included several Arab states, Barak made clear in interviews with Ma'ariv and Yediot Achronot.

He estimated that Iraq still has hundreds of surface-to-surface missiles. But Israel has the capability to operate against them at their source, he said.

"I hope Saddam Hussein fully understands the difference between the current situation and that of the time of the Gulf war," the chief of staff said.

The question arose in connection with the possibility that Iraq might strike Israel again if the United States were to use military means to force Baghdad to dismantle its nuclear weapons program.

Barak said the U.N. inspectors' exposure of Iraq's advances only confirms that Iraq must be stripped of every capability for making nuclear weapons and prevented from renewing its efforts in the foreseeable future.

ISRAELIS EVACUATED FROM ZAIRE, AT GREAT RISK, ARRIVE HOME SAFELY

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- About 130 Israelis and other Jewish evacuees from Zaire arrived here by air Friday, leaving a skeleton staff at the Israeli Embassy in riot-torn Kinshasa.

A mutiny by unpaid troops touched off rioting and looting in the Zaire capital, which escalated last week into a full-fledged revolt against the 26-year rule of President Mobutu Sese Seko.

The Israeli ambassador, Shlomo Avital, who stayed at his post, sent word of the bravery of two members of his staff, who helped the Israeli community leave when it became clear the Central African nation was degenerating into chaos.

The exodus of Israelis followed that by Belgian, French and Portuguese nationals.

At great risk, the Israeli envoys visited homes and helped Israeli families move to assembly points on the banks of the Congo River, secured by French and Belgian troops who had been rushed to Zaire to protect foreigners.

The Israelis, under some danger of gunfire from rioting soldiers, crossed the river to Brazzaville, in neighboring Congo, in a boat owned by a member of the local Jewish community.

The group that arrived here Friday, by plane via Johannesburg, included 100 embassy staffers, military and economic attaches and their families.

Israel has maintained a relatively large establishment in Zaire because of the agricultural and public health projects and military training it undertook at Mobutu's invitation.

The evacuees also included Israeli businessmen and 30 members of Zaire's permanent Jewish community, which numbers under 200. Jews lived in Kinshasa when it was still Leopoldville, capital of the former Belgian Congo, which won independence in 1960.

Many of the evacuees said they would return to Zaire when the situation normalized.

ENCOURAGED BY PANEL'S VOTE, GROUPS URGING SENATE NOT TO CONFIRM JUDGE

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- Organizations opposed to the appointment of Judge Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court, including Jewish groups, will be pressing hard this week to convince the full Senate to reject his nomination.

The groups are calling it a victory that the Senate Judiciary Committee deadlocked 7-7 Friday on the confirmation of the 43-year-old black conservative U.S. Court of Appeals judge.

Opponents of Thomas predict a close battle, noting that Thomas was expected to be approved by the Judiciary Committee until last Thursday, when Sen. Howell Heflin (D-Ala.), who was supposed to be a swing vote, announced he could not support the judge.

The vote was on straight party lines, with the exception of Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D-Ariz.), who voted with the six Republicans on the panel to confirm Thomas.

Six Jewish groups are on record as opposed to Thomas: the American Jewish Congress, Jewish Labor Committee, National Council of Jewish Women, New Jewish Agenda, Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Workmen's Circle.

Two Jewish groups, both Orthodox, are supporting Thomas: Agudath Israel of America and the National Council of Young Israel.

ISRAEL CALLS FOR CONFERENCE TO RESOLVE SCROLLS DISPUTE

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Sept. 29 (JTA) -- Backing down from a legal threat, the Antiquities Authority has called for an international conference of scholars in Jerusalem to resolve a dispute over access to more than 3,000 photographs of fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The authority's director, Amir Drori, said a compromise formula would be sought to protect the rights of those scholars who have long worked on the scrolls and others who until now were unable to gain access to them for research.

He proposed that the conference be held in December and attended by representatives of the four institutions that hold negatives of the photographs and the international team already involved in the research.

The Huntington Library in San Marino, Calif., touched off the controversy early last week, when it opened its photographic collection to all qualified scholars, despite strong objections from Jerusalem.

Israel maintains that Huntington, one of the world's foremost private research libraries, was contractually obliged to serve only as a repository of photocopies made as a precaution against the originals in Jerusalem being lost or destroyed.

The Antiquities Authority, the Israeli government's official custodian of archaeological finds, threatened legal action over what it claimed to be a breach of contract.

The Jerusalem Post quoted a senior archaeologist Friday as saying, "The authority is quitting the fray because it would have been too expensive to fight it in the courts."

The authority heatedly denied that in a statement over the weekend. But it said it is interested in resolving the dispute through a conference rather than a head-on confrontation.

Errors In Reproduction Possible

The scrolls, widely considered the most important archaeological discovery of the century, were found in caves near the Dead Sea over 40 years ago.

According to Drori, 80 percent have been published to date. The remainder is being worked on and should be ready for publication in six to seven years.

A pirate publication of the scrolls was just produced by two Bible scholars, using computers to reconstruct probable passages from a secret concordance of the text.

Its publisher, Herschel Shanks, editor of Biblical Archeology Review, conceded there could be at least 20 percent error in the reconstruction. But he said it had been necessary to break the lock by a small group of scholars on the scrolls.

Critics have long charged that research has been restricted to a privileged few scholars who have been slow and secretive about their work, impeding research.

Drori acknowledges that there have been delays in publishing the ancient documents. He insists the Antiquities Authority opposes their unauthorized publication only to protect the work and reputations of the 40-odd scholars who have labored over them.

REMINDER: The Daily News Bulletin will not be published Tuesday or Wednesday, Oct. 1 or 2.