JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN

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WIFE OF MISSING ISRAELI AIRMAN MEETS U.N. CHIEF, VISITS IRANIANS

By Larry Yudelson

UNITED NATIONS, Dec. 19 (JTA) -- The wife of missing Israeli airman Ron Arad emerged from a meeting here Thursday with the outgoing U.N. secretary-general saying she is confident he is doing all he can to bring home her husband.

Tami Arad said the U.N. chief, Javier Perez de Cuellar, told her he "believes my husband is alive and that he will make a very large effort for his release."

Earlier in the week, Arad had criticized the United Nations for not doing enough to win the release of her husband, who was captured in October 1986 after his aircraft exploded over Lebanon. He is now held by pro-Iranian forces.

Joining Arad at the meeting Thursday were families of other Israeli soldiers missing in Lebanon. The meeting represented a heightening of the public campaign for the MIA's release now that the last U.S. hostages in Lebanon are free.

Another step in that campaign was a demonstration held Thursday across from the United Nations and a march to the Iranian Mission, where Arad succeeded in presenting a letter asking for her husband's freedom.

Arad said Perez de Cuellar, whose term ends Dec. 31, promised that he would continue his efforts, and those of special envoy Giandomenico Picco, past the new year if necessary. Picco is now in the Middle East for discussions with Iran.

Iranian Official Startled

Also meeting with the secretary-general were members of the Israel's U.N. Mission, including Ambassador Yoram Aridor, and the parents of missing Israeli soldiers Zvi Feldman and Yehuda Katz. Katz and Feldman, along with Zachary Baumel, are believed to have been captured by the Syrians following a tank battle in June 1982.

Syria has consistently denied knowledge of their whereabouts, and Israeli hostage negotiators are not optimistic that they remain alive.

Nevertheless, Joseph Katz said he remained confident his son was alive. "The secretary-general said we should not believe all kinds of bad evidence," he said.

At the U.N. rally, sponsored by the New York Jewish Community Relations Council, Sen. Alfonse D'amato (R-N.Y.) criticized the Bush administration's rapprochement with Syria "so long as Syria holds Israeli soldiers captive."

Following the rally, Arad, the other MIA families and JCRC leaders marched to the Iranian Mission to present the ambassador with the letter calling for her husband's release.

They originally were told they could not proceed up to the mission offices, but after insisting they had an urgent message to deliver, they procured two passes enabling Arad and a photographer to ascend.

"You're holding my husband hostage," Arad told a surprised Iranian receptionist, giving her the envelope containing the letter and photographs of her husband, before being returned downstairs by security personnel.

At the Syrian Mission, Arad left a similar package at the front desk.

BUSH FRUSTRATED BY LACK OF PROGRESS ACHIEVED AT PEACE TALKS IN WASHINGTON

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, Dec. 19 (JTA) -- President Bush said Thursday that he is frustrated with the lack of progress achieved by Israeli and Arab negotiators during two weeks of peace talks here, which recessed Wednesday.

They spent much of the time talking "about where the next meeting is going to be," Bush complained to a group of mainly foreign journalists in the Old Executive Office Building. "I was disappointed," he said.

But even as he spoke, the Israeli delegation arrived back in Jerusalem with a relatively upbeat message.

"The talks did not fail," said Benjamin Netanyahu, who served as spokesman for the Israeli negotiating teams in Washington.

And Yossi Ben-Aharon, who headed the delegation that spent more than 16 hours with the hard-nosed Syrians, seemed to consider it an accomplishment that the talks were held at all.

"We are speaking together, that much I can say," he told reporters in Israel.

Yossi Hadass, co-chairman of the delegation negotiating with Lebanon, gave the most optimistic appraisal of the talks to date.

He said the atmosphere of the meetings with the Lebanese was positively friendly and hinted they might get into substantive matters when their talks resume. He said that would be in the second week of January.

Warning Against Violence

But Bush, whose administration spent months engineering the peace talks, was skeptical of the results to date.

"I'm told some progress was made. Don't quiz me on that," he told reporters.

"I felt that a lot of time was spent talking about modalities and locations, and obviously we would have liked to see more progress, and we shared those observations with the various participants," he said.

Bush did not differentiate between Israel's talks with Syrian and Lebanese negotiators, which delved into substantive issues, and the more procedural talks with Palestinians and Jordanians.

In those, the heads of the Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian delegations sat on a couch in a State Department corridor for six days trying to resolve a dispute over whether the Arab delegations would meet as one or separately with Israel.

"That's one of the reasons I express frustration about talks that talk only about where the next meeting is going to be," Bush said.

But he noted that the parties are trying to resolve their disputes in a "peaceful manner," saying "thank God" such talks have begun.

The president warned the parties they will not be able to reach peace "by acts of violence on one side or another."

Israel, the Palestinians and Jordan have agreed to resume talks Jan. 7 at a place to be decided later. Syria and Lebanon have agreed to meet the Israelis after the new year, but neither the date nor place has been named.

Israel has urged a Middle East venue from the outset. The Arabs, wary of giving Israel any sense of recognition, want the talks to stay in Washington or anywhere but the Middle East.

In Jerusalem, Israeli officials would not confirm reports that when the talks resume, the venue will be Washington again.

Netanyahu stressed that Israel wants to be closer to home because of the physical and logistical burdens of long-distance commuting.

Moscow Talks Still On

In Brussels, meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker affirmed Thursday that multilateral talks on Middle East regional issues will take place in Moscow next month as planned.

The talks, slated for Jan. 28-29, will focus on solving such regional problems as faltering economies, acute water shortages and weapons proliferation.

Baker dismissed speculation that because of the political turmoil in the Soviet Union, the venue might be shifted to the Portuguese capital of Lisbon or some other site.

"It is my view that the parties involved all want to see that happen in Moscow, and we are not about to pull back an agreement that we made with respect to the venue," he said.

In Washington, Bush said that Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who met with Baker this week in Moscow, reiterated that "they wanted" to host those talks.

It was not clear who the president meant by "they," but the Russian republic moved this week to assume the Soviet Union's foreign policy commitments.

In trying to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, Bush restated the U.S. desire to serve as an "honest broker" and a "catalyst" for peace, and "not attempt to dictate solutions."

"I think the parties see us in that role," the president said.

Asked repeatedly about his view of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Bush reiterated his administration's position that they are an "obstacle to peace."

He added that "some in Israel happen to agree with us on this, as a matter of fact," apparently referring to recent polls in Israel.

But the solution to the settlements problem will have to be resolved by the parties, the president said.

'No Decision' On Loan Guarantees

Bush also said he has "problems with some of the Arab positions," specifically the participation of Arab countries in the economic boycott against Israel.

Asked if he was linking a cessation of Israeli settlement-building to the granting of U.S. loan guarantees to Israel, Bush replied that "no decision has been taken -- no final decision at all," he stressed.

In Amman, meanwhile, Jordan's King Hussein accused Israeli hard-liners Thursday of trying to sabotage the peace talks.

He told the graduating class of an officers training school that the "the hurdles placed by some Israeli hard-liners on the path of peace" exposed their rejection of "all principles of international legitimacy."

The Jordanian and Syrian press criticized the United States for passively standing by while the talks reached a dead end.

(JTA correspondent David Landau in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

SHARON MAKES BID FOR PREMIERSHIP DAYS BEFORE ELECTORAL REFORM VOTE

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Dec. 19 (JTA) -- Just days before a crucial vote on electoral reform, Ariel Sharon announced Wednesday that he would challenge Yitzhak Shamir for the leadership of Likud and the office of prime minister.

Likud's huge Central Committee is scheduled to vote by secret ballot Sunday whether to support legislation for the direct election of the prime minister, now before the Knesset.

Shamir opposes the reform. Sharon, who is housing minister and chairman of the Central Committee, is a strong supporter of the bill.

Political observers agree that if the reform measure succeeds, Sharon's prospects of unseating Shamir would improve. Under the present system, they are close to nil, the observers say.

But Sharon a Likud hawk opposed to the current peace process, savaged Shamir's policies in a speech Wednesday to about 1,000 sympathizers in Tel Aviv.

He blasted the peace talks in Washington, which recessed this week, the government's handling of the economy and its immigrant absorption process.

Sharon described the government's diplomacy as "schlemiel-like." He called the talks with Palestinians in the State Department corridors "a national disgrace."

The Prime Minister's Office responded with the bland statement that Sharon's criticisms were "neither justified nor proper."

Although Sharon, as chairman of the Central Committee, will be in charge of the voting Sunday, political commentators predicted the ballot would go heavily against reform.

That is because Shamir, who initially supported the measure, turned against it and exerted his considerable influence in Likud.

But Sharon is not the only prominent Likud member to support reform. His views on that subject are shared by Benjamin Netanyahu, a deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Office, and David Magen, the economic planning minister.

They have said publicly they would break party discipline to vote for the bill in the Knesset. The opposition Labor Party also backs reform.

But commentators believe that if Shamir can marshall most of Likud, he could defeat the bill with the support of some of the small parties, which stand to lose much of their leverage if the reform is adopted.

The measure would elect the prime minister by a direct ballot separate from the vote for party lists. It is intended to free the chosen leader of government from the demands of small, special-interest parties, whose support is essential under the present system.

BOAR TRIPS ISRAELI HIT ON LEBANON

TEL AVIV, Dec. 19 (JTA) -- A false alarm triggered the heavy shelling of two Shi'ite villages in the southern Lebanon security zone Wednesday night.

The Israel Defense Force and its allied South Lebanon Army let loose an artillery barrage against Kabrikha and Majdal Slim villages on the northern edge of the zone, after the explosion of what they thought was a Katyusha rocket.

Actually, the blast was a land mine detonated by a wild boar, U.N. sources reported.

COURT BARS U.S. FROM DEPORTING OHIO MAN WHO SERVED AS NAZI GUARD

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, Dec. 19 (JTA) -- A federal appeals court this week affirmed an earlier ruling blocking the U.S. government from deporting a Cincinnati man who admitted serving as a guard at a Nazi labor camp in western Germany.

The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati on Tuesday rejected the government's appeal of a ruling by a three-judge panel of the court in September.

The panel had barred the deportation of Leonid Petkiewytsch, 68, who admitted having served at the Kiel-Hassee labor camp when he applied for U.S. citizenship. He had been living in America on an immigrant visa since 1955.

The panel said the government had failed to prove that Petkiewytsch had abused prisoners.

Few Jews were at the Kiel-Hassee camp because inmates there were serving sentences for Nazi crimes other than being Jewish, a Justice Department official explained. The case marks the first time the U.S. government has tried to deport a guard at such a labor camp, the official said.

The U.S. government has yet to decide whether to appeal this week's ruling to the Supreme Court, the official said.

If it does appeal, it will argue that the appeals court erred in interpreting the so-called 1978 Holtzman Amendment, which allows the government to deport former alleged Nazis.

The court decided that Petkiewytsch was not a "full-fledged Nazi," the official said. But the congressional statute only requires alleged former Nazis to have "ordered, incited or otherwise participated" in persecution, the official said.

FOLLOWING THREE ACQUITTALS, NEO-NAZI CONVICTED IN AUSTRIA

By Marta Halpert

VIENNA, Dec. 16 (JTA) -- An Austrian provincial court on Monday sentenced Walter Ochensberger to three years' imprisonment for neo-Nazi activities, provoking an outburst from the startled defendant, who had been acquitted of the same charges at three previous trials.

Ochensberger publishes a newsletter called Sieg (Victory), which he distributes mainly outside of schools. It alleges that the Holocaust never occurred, that gas chambers never existed and that all of the "horrors the Allies showed were fabricated after the war."

Nevertheless, it took nearly nine hours of deliberations before a jury in Feldkirch, a town near the Swiss border, convicted the neo-Nazi.

The problem in this and the earlier trials was the jury's reluctance to impose the mandatory five-year prison sentence. Ochensberger's conviction was obtained only because the prosecutor agreed to a sentence below the judicial minimum.

Nevertheless, Ochensberger, who apparently had expected another acquittal, protested loudly. "I will not accept this sentence," he shouted as he was being removed from the courtroom.

The trial has renewed the political debate here over existing laws.

The Christian Conservative Party would like to see the minimum sentence for neo-Nazi offenses lowered so it could be applied more often.

The Social Democrats fear that would convey a message that such crimes are regarded in Austria as little more than misdemeanors.

HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATIONS GET UNWELCOME RECEPTION IN ROMANIA

By Odette Caufman-Blumenfeld

IASI, Romania (JTA) -- Romanian Jews are beginning to feel their non-Jewish countrymen would like them to end public commemorations of Holocaust-related events.

Two such occasions this year received sparse media coverage and, where notice was taken, the reaction was ambiguous if not outright cynical.

In July, the Federation of Romanian Jewish Communities, marking the 50th anniversary of the Iasi pogrom, held a memorial for the 400,000 Romanian Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

Immediately afterward, nationalistic journalists took issue with Chief Rabbi Moses Rosen for not making clear enough that one-third of the Jews, those in northern Transylvania, were the victims of Hungarian fascists.

Those protests were accompanied by quibbling over just how many did die, which trivialized the enormity of the crime and diminished the guilt of the perpetrators.

To Jews here, that represented a last desperate effort by a relatively few people who refuse to acknowledge that there was a Holocaust in Romania, that Romanian fascists as well as German Nazis were responsible for it and that the younger generation of Romanians should be told what happened.

On Nov. 25, in Cluj -- a city recalled by Jews as Klausenberg -- six representatives of the Hungarian minority bloc in Romania's Parliament begged forgiveness for the crimes committed against Jews in Transylvania in the spring of 1944, when the province was ruled by Hungary.

At that time, 166,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz, of whom 130,000 perished.

Cynical Media Coverage

The appeal for forgiveness to Rabbi Rosen was made by Domokos Gheza, president of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania, the Hungarian faction in Parliament.

In a poignant scene, six of the members of Parliament knelt on the street in front of the Memorial Temple for the Deported, as the synagogue in Cluj is called.

Among those present was Laszlo Tokes, the Hungarian Reformed Church bishop who played a leading role in the 1989 revolution.

Rosen recalled that on May 18, 1944, when the deportations of tens of thousands of Jews began and Cluj was occupied by the Gestapo and the army of Hungary's fascist dictator, Admiral Horthy, the Roman Catholic bishop, Marton Aaron, spoke out fearlessly in defense of the Jews.

President Ion Iliescu of Romania sent greetings to the participants in the memorial. The Jewish Federation and the Hungarian Democratic Unions sent written statements on the event to ROM, the Romanian news agency.

But few newspapers published or commented on them. An independent newspaper, The Truth, dismissed the memorial ceremony as sheer propaganda for the coming elections.

The newspaper of the National Salvation Front, Romania's governing party, published a picture of the six parliamentarians on their knees over the caption, "They Should Only Calm Down."

Television coverage was better. The event was reported on the main evening newscast and an extensive report was given in the weekly Hungarian-language broadcast.

SOVIET JEWS LEAVING ISRAEL, BUT HOW MANY IS IN DISPUTE

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Dec. 19 (JTA) -- Israel's two top-ranking immigration officials differ sharply over how many Soviet newcomers have left the country, although both base their estimates on the same set of data provided by the Interior Ministry.

According to Uri Gordon, head of the Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency for Israel, 7,000 Soviet olim left Israel in 1991 alone.

But Absorption Minister Yitzhak Peretz disagrees. He said Wednesday that no more than 500 Soviet immigrant families have departed during the past two years, which is "far from an emigration phenomenon."

A spokeswoman from the Interior Ministry, Tova Elinson, reported Wednesday that 4,125 Soviet immigrants have been issued laissez-passer travel documents in the last 13 months, and a much smaller number were issued passports.

Immigrants are not eligible for Israeli passports during their first year in the country but are entitled to a laissez-passer papers to go abroad.

All but 1,500 of the immigrants who left with the documents have returned, Elinson said. She said that over 190,000 Soviet immigrants had arrived in the last 13 months.

Meanwhile, the press attache at the South African Embassy here confirmed that about 3,000 immigrants have sought information from the embassy this year about immigrating to South Africa, Ha'aretz reported Thursday.

COMPETING CONGRESSIONAL BILLS WOULD REINFORCE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

By Howard Rosenberg

WASHINGTON, Dec. 19 (JTA) -- Two proposed bills in the U.S. Congress would make it tougher for states to enact laws impinging on religious liberties.

The bills, introduced in November by Rep. Christopher Smith (R-N.J.) and in July by Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.), are designed to circumvent a 1990 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that states no longer have to demonstrate a "compelling state interest" before barring certain religious practices.

In April 1990, the high court voted 6-3 to uphold an Oregon anti-drug abuse law against claims that it effectively barred American Indians from using peyote in their religious rituals.

Jewish groups fear the ruling could signal a new, deferential treatment by the high court toward state laws that incidentally impinge on religious liberties. If so, the court could conceivably permit states to outlaw yarmulkes in public schools or ban the drinking of sacramental wine by minors.

Both of the proposed bills seek to restore the compelling state interest test. But Smith, who is pro-life, does not want that higher standard applied to cases challenging laws that restrict abortion, because he fears that women challenging such laws may do so on religious freedom grounds.

Smith argues that Solarz's bill, which does not carve out an exception for cases involving abortion, would make it easer for such challenges to succeed by compelling courts to apply the tougher standard in reviewing anti-abortion laws.

But Jewish groups opposed to Smith's modified version of the Solarz bill characterize it as an arbitrary division of religious liberty guarantees along abortion and non-abortion lines. They prefer Solarz's approach, under which all religious liberty cases undergo the same legal test.

Marc Stern, legal director of the American Jewish Congress, who helped draft the Solarz bill, said Smith's decision to introduce his own bill "makes the issue neat and clean."

"Now we have to fight out the abortion issue," he said.

Solarz's version of the bill has 124 cosponsors, while Smith's had 19 as of the close of the first session of the 102nd Congress.

After the second session convenes in January, Sens. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) and Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) will introduce a Senate version of the Solarz bill, a Hatch staffer said Tuesday.

There has yet to emerge any Senate sponsor for the Smith version.

HASIDIC MEMBER OF KNESSET SAYS WOMEN BELONG AT HOME

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Dec. 19 (JTA) -- A Hasidic member of Knesset unleashed a furious reaction when he told a television talk-show host that he would prefer women would not be elected to public office because their place was in the home. In fact, he would also deny women the right to vote.

Rabbi Moshe Ze'ev Feldman, a yeshiva dean and Gerer Hasid, represents the Agudat Yisrael party, one of the three Haredi, or ultra-Orthodox, parties in Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's coalition.

But the outrage of the eight women members of parliament, shared by many of their male colleagues, crossed party lines.

Sara Doron, chairwoman of the Likud Knesset faction, took the rostrum to remind Feldman that it was largely through her efforts that he was awarded the important post of chairman of the Knesset Finance Committee.

"His grandmother, who taught him that two and two make four, obviously didn't teach him much more than that," Doron snapped.

Edna Solodar of the Labor Party asked rhetorically, "What is someone doing here who lives in the Middle Ages?"

Geula Cohen of Tehiya suggested that "a man who is obviously cut off from both Heaven and Earth ought to be cut off, too, from the infusion of 'special funding.' "

That was a reference to the controversial government subsidies given the Haredi parties for their religious schools.

Dozens of women picketed Feldman's home in the religious township of Bnei Brak, northeast of Tel Aviv, on Wednesday. The demonstrators urged local women to join them, but they had little if any success.

Most of them had no idea what the furor was about, as the Haredim do not have television sets at home.

In any event, residents of Bnei Brak, women as well as men, seemed to be of the same mindset as Feldman.

The JTA Daily News Bulletin will not be published Wednesday, Dec. 25.