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TSOMET PULLS OUT OF GOVERNMENT OVER LIKUD STAND AGAINST REFORM

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Dec. 24 (JTA) -- The Israeli government received an unexpected jolt Tuesday, when the Tsomet party quit the Likud-led coalition and its leader, Agriculture Minister Rafael Eitan, submitted his resignation to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir.

The departure of the far-right faction, which holds two Knesset seats, leaves the governing coalition with a still comfortable 64-vote margin in the 120-member parliament.

But the fear in Likud circles is that Tsomet's action may trigger defections by the right-wing Tehiya and Moledet parties, which would deprive the government of five more Knesset mandates and possibly force it to resign.

All three rightist parties, uneasy over peace talks with the Arabs, have vowed to leave the government if and when substantive negotiations begin on Palestinian autonomy.

But Tsomet's move was unrelated to the peace talks, which are scheduled to resume in Washington next month.

Eitan quit because Likud's Central Committee voted overwhelmingly late Sunday to reject an electoral reform bill pending in the Knesset that would provide for the direct election of the prime minister.

He and Tsomet Knesset member Yoash Zidon had a brief but reportedly tense meeting with Shamir on Tuesday.

A Week To Change His Mind

Eitan told reporters afterward that he asked Shamir if the Central Committee's action was binding on all Likud Knesset members. If so, he said it would violate the coalition agreement Tsomet signed with Likud last year, in which Likud promised to allow its members a free vote on the issue.

According to Eitan, Shamir said the Central Committee's vote was not formally binding on Likud's Knesset faction. But he declined to put that in writing, whereupon Eitan resigned.

Within hours, aides were clearing out his desk, and Eitan informed the Knesset secretariat that he would not appear in the chamber for a question-and-answer session later Tuesday.

Under Israeli law, a minister's resignation takes effect 48 hours after it is submitted to the full Cabinet. The Cabinet meets next on Sunday, which gives Eitan a week to change his mind.

But the former Israel Defense Force chief of staff said he would not revoke his resignation unless Shamir states publicly that Likud Knesset members are not bound by the Central Committee's decision against electoral reform.

That decision, urged by Shamir, sealed the doom of the reform measure, which is due for its second reading in the Knesset next week.

Many Likud leaders, including Shamir, originally supported reforms that would end the unseemly coalition bargaining process and reduce the disproportionate political influence of small single-issue parties.

But Shamir and 80 percent of the 3,400-member Central Committee opposed it Sunday.

FAILURE TO SOLVE PRISONER ISSUE STRAINING ISRAELI TIES WITH U.N.

By Larry Yudelson

UNITED NATIONS, Dec. 24 (JTA) -- Signs of strain have emerged between Israel and the United Nations over the failure of U.N. negotiators so far to secure the freedom or at least determine the fate of four Israeli soldiers missing in Lebanon, one of whom is believed to be alive.

At the same time, the Bush administration has reassured the American Jewish community that it is committed to obtaining the Israelis' release.

The Israelis feel frustrated that outgoing U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar was not able to secure the release of missing Israeli airman Ron Arad as part of the overall prisoner exchange that led to the freeing of the last U.S. and British hostages held by Shi'ite groups in Lebanon.

The United Nations, for its part, has accused Israel of complicating the negotiations by staging a commando raid in southern Lebanon last Friday, in which three civilians were apprehended, taken to Israel for questioning and later released.

Perez de Cuellar issued a statement Monday regretting the Israeli raid, saying it "already has had a negative effect" on his efforts on behalf of the Israeli MIAs.

The statement did not elaborate. But the secretary-general's special envoy, Giandomenico Picco, was reportedly in Lebanon at the time, seeking the release of the Israeli MIAs, as well as two abducted Germans. Also on his itinerary were meetings in Teheran and Damascus, before departing for New York on Tuesday.

'Just An Excuse'

Israel's chief negotiator on the MIAs, Uri Lubrani, denied that the Lebanon operation affected the negotiations. "I don't think there is any connection," he told army radio in Israel. "I think it is just an excuse to show why it is so hard."

In what appears to have been a deliberate snub, Lubrani specifically excluded Perez de Cuellar from his praise for ongoing U.N. efforts.

"I have no doubt that the people that were occupied with this for the United Nations made an effort -- I'm not talking at the moment about the secretary-general, I'm talking about the people who were occupied with it -- made a real effort," Lubrani said.

This contrasted with the satisfaction expressed by families of the MIAs after they met here last week with the secretary-general.

Most notably pleased was Arad's wife, Tami, who had earlier criticized the United Nations for not pushing hard enough for his release.

Ron Arad, an Israeli air force navigator captured in Lebanon in 1986, is the only Israeli MIA believed alive. Three other soldiers, captured by the Syrians in 1982, are believed dead, but there has been no firm word on their fate.

In New York, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations has stepped up its public push for the MIAs. The focus of its efforts is the Bush administration, which came under criticism for failing to mention the Israeli soldiers at a White House reception

honoring the secretary-general after the last American hostage was freed.

Late last week, however, the White House called the Conference of Presidents to say that President Bush did raise the issue of the Israeli MIAs in his private discussions with Perez de Cuellar and Picco during the reception.

"The president is continuing to give this priority attention," Malcolm Hoenlein, executive director of the Conference of Presidents, said after speaking with an assistant to the president.

As part of the increased profile being given to the issue, Shoshana Cardin has written a personal letter to first lady Barbara Bush, describing the anguish felt by the families of the Israeli MIAs.

REPORTS POINT TO PALESTINIAN GROUPS IN BUDAPEST ATTACK ON SOVIET OLIM

By Agnes Bohm

BUDAPEST, Dec. 24 (JTA) -- One of two Palestinian terrorist groups is believed responsible for Monday's attack on a busload of Soviet emigres here.

Reports here point to either the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a dissident constituent of the Palestine Liberation Organization led by George Habash, or a splinter of the Popular Front headed by Salim Abu-Salam.

Both have long records of attacking Israeli and Jewish targets abroad.

The remote-control car bomb explosion, which severely damaged the Ikarus bus shuttling the emigres from the Budapest railroad station to a Jewish Agency hostel at the airport, was described by the Budapest police chief as a "highly professional job."

Hungarian police have been unable to confirm earlier allegations that the car in which the bomb was placed was a Lancia. It was completely destroyed in the explosion.

The police published an Identikit rendering of two men "of Arab appearance" who are being sought in connection with the booby-trapped car. But there have been no arrests so far and no group has claimed credit for the bombing.

The Hungarian interior minister and the chief of police have offered a reward of about $6,000 in finding the perpetrators.

Israeli Ambassador David Kraus paid a hospital visit to the two Hungarian policemen who were injured in the attack. One suffered serious burns when his Lada automobile, which was escorting the olim, blew up.

Security Services Cooperate

Meanwhile, the 28 Soviet olim who escaped unscathed from the attack arrived at Ben-Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv on Tuesday evening, a day later than expected but in good spirits.

In Budapest, George Suha, spokesman for the chief commissioner of the Hungarian police, denied claims made Monday by Uri Gordon, head of the Jewish Agency's Immigration Department, that Hungarian police had known two days earlier that an attack had been planned.

Suha called the claim "complete nonsense," in a telephone interview.

Suha categorically denied the allegations, adding that had it been so, the Hungarians would have informed the Israelis. He said there are good relations between the security services of the two countries.

Asked to comment on reports that Israeli intelligence forces had come to Budapest from Warsaw to investigate the attack, Suha only cited the good cooperation between the countries' security.

Of the suspect parties, Abu-Salam's group, though small and unsophisticated, has participated in attacks abroad in cooperation with the Habash group and Shi'ite organizations. It specializes in planting time-bomb devices in public places.

If this group is indeed responsible for the attack, it would mark a deviation from the PLO's policy since 1974, when, at the 12th Palestine National Council session, it renounced terrorist activities abroad.

A break with policy by the Habash group could signify despair over the current Arab-Israeli peace process, to which Habash is bitterly opposed. The PFLP has intensified its activities in the Israeli-administered territories and may now be going after immigrant targets overseas.

Arab countries and terrorist organizations have been urging measures to sabotage Soviet immigration. The radical Islamic Jihad and the fundamentalist Hezbollah in southern Lebanon have dedicated themselves to that end since large-scale aliyah began in 1989.

The dissolution of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe has made their task more difficult. Nevertheless, the Budapest attack showed that immigrant transit facilities and airports are still prime targets.

(JTA correspondent Hugh Orgel in Tel Aviv contributed to this report.)

CHINESE OFFICIAL'S VISIT TO ISRAEL MAY MEAN FULL DIPLOMATIC TIES SOON

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, Dec. 24 (JTA) -- A high-ranking Chinese government official came here this week on what was to be a secret mission to Israel that could be the precursor to normal diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Deputy Foreign Minister Yung Fu Cheng arrived here Monday from Beijing. His unannounced visit was soon leaked to the news media, as was the fact that he met Tuesday with Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Foreign Minister David Levy.

Yung reportedly raised the issues of bilateral relations and the Middle East peace process, which are apparently linked.

A multilateral peace conference on Middle East regional issues is scheduled to open in Moscow on Jan. 28, to which Israel, the Arab states and the major powers of Europe have been invited, along with the United States, Canada and Japan.

China is aware Israel will not agree to its participation without full diplomatic relations. That led to speculation here that the establishment of such relations may be imminent.

Israel and China presently maintain diplomatic contact through a Chinese tourist office in Israel and an Israeli scientific mission in Beijing.

Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens apparently made a secret visit to China last month, escorted by the heads of Israel's military and aviation industries. The secret was not long preserved, captured in photograph.

Yung's trip here was in lieu of a visit to China by Yosef Hadas, director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. Hadas had to cancel because of his involvement in the Israeli-Arab bilateral peace talks in Washington.

LATVIAN PRO-NAZI GIVES UP CITIZENSHIP IN EXCHANGE FOR DEPORTATION REPRIEVE
By Susan Birnbaum

NEW YORK, Dec. 24 (JTA) -- A wartime member of a pro-Nazi killing squad in Latvia who had been slated for denaturalization proceedings has agreed to give up his U.S. citizenship.

In exchange, the U.S. government has agreed not to pursue deportation efforts against Mikelis Kirsteins, 74, of Utica, N.Y., who has admitted to serving during World War II as a member of the elite Arajs Kommando, the Latvian Security Auxiliary Police.

The agreement, which was signed in the federal district court in Binghamton, was reported by Shelly Shapiro, director of Holocaust Survivors and Friends in Albany, a group that has closely followed the case.

The Justice Department later confirmed the report.

The agreement was apparently sought because of the declining health of Kirsteins, who suffered a stroke in July, shortly before long-delayed denaturalization proceedings against him were to have begun.

Kirsteins had been slated to appear at a denaturalization hearing Aug. 1. After he was hospitalized, the hearing was postponed until January.

The nine-page consent agreement was signed Monday evening and filed Tuesday morning. In it, the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations agreed not to bring deportation proceedings or expel Kirsteins "unless there is substantial improvement in his medical condition," OSI said in a statement.

"OSI is entitled to appoint a physician to re-evaluate defendant's condition at periodic intervals up to twice yearly," the statement said.

OSI initiated denaturalization proceedings against Kirsteins in July 1987, based on his having lied about his wartime past when he entered the country in 1956 and became a U.S. citizen in 1965.

Shot Children 'In Cold Blood'

OSI attorneys say that in a 1987 interview, Kirsteins voluntarily admitted he had been a member of the Arajs Kommando, which operated under the German Security Police and SD, the SS Security Service. The group traveled through Latvia, carrying out mass executions of Jews and others.

Kirsteins participated in an "aktion" in the Birkinicki Forest in Riga, in which Jewish men, women and children were lined up in front of a mass grave and shot to death.

The group's commander, Viktors Arajs, was convicted by a West German court in 1979 for the murder of at least 13,000 people during the Nazi occupation of Latvia. He served a life term in a West German prison, where he died in 1988.

In September 1989, U.S. District Judge Thomas McAvoy suppressed Kirsteins' admissions, since he was not accompanied by an attorney at the interview.

Justice Department officials contended that Kirsteins had done so by his own choice, despite OSI's advice in writing. Moreover, they said that a civil case did not warrant telling him he could bring counsel.

Reacting Tuesday to news of the consent agreement, Elliot Welles, director of the Anti-Defamation League's Nazi Task Force, said, "I still feel he should be deported to Latvia and face trial by a Latvian court.

"The Arajs Kommando had no pity on women and children. They shot them in cold blood," said Welles, whose own mother was killed by the Arajs Kommando.

The group "enjoyed killing Jews even more than the Germans," said Welles, who survived the Riga Ghetto, where the Arajs Kommando operated. "We look forward to the Latvian court putting him on trial, regardless of his reasons of health. I do not think there should be any pity."

OSI Director Neal Sher said in a statement, "There is nothing in the consent judgment that would prevent a foreign government having criminal jurisdiction from seeking Kirsteins' extradition to stand trial abroad."

ARREST OF KKK MEMBERS IN MANITOBA SEEN AS BLOW TO HATE-GROUP ACTIVITY
By Gary Pogrow

VANCOUVER, British Columbia, Dec. 24 (JTA) -- Police in Winnipeg, Manitoba, say they have broken the back of a growing Ku Klux Klan chapter in the Canadian province after arresting two of its leaders.

The two men -- William James Harcus, 21, and Theron Maurice Skryba, 25 -- were charged under Section 318 of the Canadian Criminal Code with advocating and promoting genocide, between August and December of this year.

The arrests were the result of a yearlong investigation that had as many as 20 undercover detectives infiltrate three Klan cells.

"The KKK is insidious. Its presence must be eradicated," said Joseph Wilder, chairman of the Community Relations Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

Praising the work of the police and the Manitoba attorney general, Wilder added, "The dogged determination of the Winnipeg police in investigating the KKK's activities should serve as an example for other law-enforcement agencies in Canada."

This is the first time that Section 318 has been used under Canadian law. It reads, in part: "Everyone who advocates or promotes genocide is guilty of an indictable offense."

"Genocide is defined as an attempt to destroy an identifiable group," Wilder explained. "They have to advocate killing members of a group or deliberately inflicting on them conditions of life apt to bring about its destruction."

He said the maximum term of imprisonment after conviction is five years.

Wilder believes that it is very important for Jews and other minorities to see that the actions of hatemongers are taken seriously in Canada.

"We consider Section 318 important and serious, particularly in light of the Nazi Holocaust," he said. "All minority groups must be protected from vilification, especially from those who advocate their destruction."

The CJC in Winnipeg knew for some time about this KKK cell, its activities and one of the men arrested. Two months ago, the CJC met with the authorities regarding this particular KKK group.

The Winnipeg police said that statements by Klan members were aimed at Jews, blacks, Indians, Eskimos and gays. The Manitoba government has shut down a Klan hotline located in Winnipeg that played a variety of messages attacking members of these groups.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES:
NEW IJCIC CHAIRMAN FOCUSING ON RELATIONS BEYOND VATICAN
By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, Dec. 24 (JTA) -- The new chairman of the umbrella group representing world Jewry in interfaith dialogue thinks it is time for the Jewish community to focus on building ties with religions beyond the Roman Catholics.

The International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, or IJCIC, has represented world Jewry in interfaith dialogue since 1979. But for the last several years, it has focused primarily on crisis management of relations with the Vatican.

But Edgar Bronfman, IJCIC's new chairman, believes it is now time to strengthen lines of communication with the Eastern Orthodox, Protestants and Moslems.

Bronfman is president of the World Jewish Congress, an IJCIC member agency. He succeeds Seymour Reich of B'nai B'rith International as IJCIC's chairman.

One of Bronfman's first initiatives was to reinstate the relationship with Protestants, which had lain fallow so long that it had ceased to exist, for all practical purposes.

Bronfman sent Israel Singer, WJC secretary-general, to represent him at a meeting in Geneva with Dr. Emilio Castro, secretary-general of the World Council of Churches.

The Dec. 18 meeting was the first that leaders of the two groups had held in six or eight years, Singer said.

At the meeting, Castro invited IJCIC's leadership to meet again with leaders of the World Council, which represents more than 300 Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox denominations in 100 countries.

'Dialogue Is Back On Track'

"We've reopened the dialogue. This is a major breakthrough," Singer said. "Dialogue is back on track without conditions, without terms. And we have not changed our positions for the sake of relations."

IJCIC has accepted the invitation "in principle," said Singer, and representatives hope to meet with World Council leaders in the spring.

One factor that has contributed to the decline in relations between the two groups has been "the very anti-Israel stance that the World Council has taken on many occasions," according to Elan Steinberg, executive director of the WJC and a spokesperson for Bronfman.

During the Persian Gulf War, for instance, when the World Council met in Canberra, Australia, it made no statement about the Iraqi missile attacks on Israel.

"Not one moral voice spoke out at the conference," Singer recalled.

But when the WJC official raised the issue in Geneva, there was a noticeable change in tone.

He quoted Castro, the group's secretary-general, as saying, "We did not feel your pain there, and we feel it today. Especially with respect to gas, we understand why Jews felt so terrible. We should have responded, and we're doing it right now."

Another of Bronfman's initiatives is a meeting between IJCIC representatives and officials of the more than dozen Eastern Orthodox churches, scheduled to be held in Athens in May.

The Athens meeting will be "the first-ever consultation with the Orthodox Church as a whole," Steinberg said.

The various Eastern Orthodox churches are self-governing but share consensus on matters of faith, despite diverse ethnicities, histories, cultures and languages.

First Meeting In Five Years

It will be IJCIC's first meeting with the Eastern Orthodox in five years, according to Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, a former IJCIC chairman and current member of the Synagogue Council of America's interreligious affairs committee.

The Synagogue Council is one of IJCIC's constituent agencies and serves as its American secretariat.

"We're going to have to go slowly and really do our homework on both sides, so we don't merely repeat banalities to each other" at the Athens meeting, he said.

While in Geneva last week, Singer and a six-member IJCIC delegation met with senior Vatican officials to plan a meeting with leaders of the Vatican Commission on Religious Relations With the Jews.

This year it will be held May 4-7 in Baltimore, at a still-undetermined location.

The last high-level meeting between IJCIC and the commission was held in September 1990, in Prague, and resulted in the unprecedented church definition of anti-Semitism as a sin against God and humanity.

The relationship with the Vatican could easily have fallen into a rut because of the interreligious debacle this year over Polish Cardinal Jozef Glemp's visit to the United States, Singer said.

But instead, Vatican officials made a point last week of welcoming the U.N. General Assembly's vote to rescind its 1975 resolution branding Zionism as racism.

"It was really remarkable. We opened (the meeting) with this positive spirit," said Singer.

Perhaps the most important item on the agenda in Baltimore will be the worldwide implementation of the Prague declaration.

Members of the Vatican's Commission on Education and its Commission on Peace and Justice, which will disseminate and implement the Prague proclamation, will be at the Baltimore meeting, Singer said.

'There Is A New Spirit'

There remains a great deal of work for them to do, he said. Even in this country, "in some Catholic schools, textbooks say that Zionism is racism. This will all have to be routed out," Singer said.

Members of the Vatican Commission on Relations With the Jews "want the information to trickle down to every parish," he said.

"As one of the people who have been tough in the past, I can tell you there is a new spirit, the spirit of Prague," he said.

IJCIC and Vatican representatives are also discussing joint action on human rights issues, said Singer, on problems such as extreme nationalism, world poverty, the homeless, nuclear proliferation and the plight of political refugees.

"This is the first time that substantive questions of interest to both sides like this are being discussed at international forums," he said.

REMINDER: The JTA Daily News Bulletin will not be published on Thursday, Dec. 26.