

**73 SENATORS SIGN A LETTER TO CLINTON
URGING PRESSURE ON SYRIA TO FREE JEWS**
By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, May 23 (JTA) -- A letter from 73 senators to President Clinton voicing concern over Syria's withholding of travel visas from its Jews has returned the issue of Syrian Jewry to the public arena.

The May 20 letter, spearheaded by Sens. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), urged Clinton "to press Syria to honor its commitment to allow Jews the right to travel freely."

Syrian President Hafez Assad made that commitment more than a year ago, after years in which the 3,500 Jews of Syria were severely restricted or barred from overseas travel and emigration.

But between last October and January 1993, not a single one of the 1,400 Jews remaining in Syria were granted travel visas. In recent months, only a handful of Jews have been given exit papers each week.

"Syria's failure to abide by its promised change in visa policy for its Jewish community, continued support for terrorist groups, as well as its failure to abide by the Taif agreement by withdrawing from Lebanon last September -- present clear obstacles to closer relations, including removal from the terrorism list," the senatorial letter said.

The letter follows months of quiet diplomacy by U.S. officials and other interlocutors, among them the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

Syria Denies Change In Policy

Syrian officials had denied that there had been any change in their policy, insisting that only bureaucratic delays were involved.

Jewish groups did not credit this explanation.

More recently, in possible tandem with the shift to allowing limited travel visas, Syrian officials have offered a different explanation.

The Canadian ambassador to Syria, Martin Collacutt, met recently with Syrian officials to discuss the issue, as has his American counterpart.

Collacutt reported being told that the reason for the delay is that those Jews who left in 1992 did so without settling their debts, according to Judy Feld Carr, chairman of the Canadian Jewish Congress' Task Force on Syrian Jewry.

The bureaucratic process now in place was "to ensure that this does not recur," Carr said in reporting what Collacutt told her.

She said the ambassador told the Syrians that Canadian policy continues to demand accelerated exit permits.

Since the end of the free-travel policy, Jewish groups have been reluctant to criticize Syria too loudly, fearing that an outcry might harden Assad's position and lead him to formalize the travel ban and slowdown.

And, while they deny any specific linkage between travel -- a human rights issue, and the Syrian-Israeli peace talks -- a political issue, Jewish groups hesitated to raise the issue too publicly until the completion of the ninth round

of talks this month. This round was the first since Clinton's inauguration.

The senatorial letter comes as Jewish groups have decided to go public once again with the issue.

"Perhaps this letter by a distinguished bipartisan group of United States senators will convince Mr. Assad that he can no longer defy our country with impunity," said Seymour Reich, who heads a task force on Syrian Jewry convened by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

"President Clinton will now be able to make it abundantly clear that he speaks not only for his administration but for the United States Senate as well, when he presses the Syrian government," said Alice Sardell Harary, president of the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews.

The council was formed by members of the Syrian Jewish community in the New York area.

**ISRAEL TO INVEST SOME \$11 MILLION
TO CREATE JOBS IN THE TERRITORIES**
By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, May 23 (JTA) -- The government will invest roughly \$11 million to create 20,000 jobs in the administered territories in an effort to curb massive unemployment there.

The decision, taken at the weekly Cabinet meeting Sunday, followed hours of debate over what to do in response to reports that the economic situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has continued to worsen since the closure of the territories two months ago.

Security experts have also warned that the economic situation will inevitably lead to further frustration among Palestinians and, in the end, increased attacks against soldiers and Jewish settlers.

The Cabinet rejected a more ambitious \$37 million job-creation program proposed by ministers of the left-wing Meretz bloc, who fear the closure jeopardizes the peace process.

Also rejected were Meretz proposals to pay unemployment benefits to Palestinians shut out from their jobs in Israel and to allow Palestinians from the territories to sell produce in Israel.

The government did, however, move to make it easier for Palestinians to enter Israel for purposes of medical treatment, business, education and access to places of worship.

Meretz ministers had been expected to condition their cooperation in settling the current coalition crisis on the Cabinet's accepting a series of demands to improve conditions in the territories.

The two junior partners in the coalition, Meretz and the fervently Orthodox Shas party, have been feuding over the status of Meretz leader Shulamit Aloni, who until two weeks ago was education minister.

But the measures taken appear to have mollified the Meretz bloc for the time being.

"Our requests were accepted only partially by the prime minister," said Yair Tsaban, minister of immigration and absorption and a Meretz member.

But he said he believed the government

would eventually approve the party's other proposals.

Labor and Welfare Minister Ora Namir, from the Labor Party, said, "I'm very glad that we decided on providing immediate jobs for 20,000 Palestinians. We are obliged to take care of them as long as we are responsible for the territories.

"But I do hope the governmental coalition crisis will be finished immediately because the peace process might be very damaged because of this crisis," Namir added.

"If there will be no immediate peace process there will be a very serious problem with the Palestinians, with the Israelis and with the security of the State of Israel," she said.

Also circulated at the Cabinet meeting was a document issued by the finance minister warning that inflation will rise and the gross domestic product will fall if the closure in the territories continues.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin seemed determined to have the government take the initiative on even a modest job-creation program rather than be pressured to institute similar measures by the high-level U.S. State Department delegation reportedly planning a visit here soon.

According to Israeli press reports, State Department officials Dan Kurtzer and Aaron Miller are expected to visit here and try to bridge the gaps between Israel and the Palestinians. They will reportedly seek to reach an agreement on a joint declaration of principles for the peace negotiations.

Commenting on the peace talks, Rabin said at the Cabinet meeting that if an agreement in principle is reached on an interim settlement through the negotiations in Washington, he saw no reason why it could not be applied first in the Gaza Strip. He did not elaborate.

RABIN SECURES ANOTHER WEEK TO RESOLVE COALITION CRISIS

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, May 23 (JTA) -- Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin has won another week's grace to resolve the ongoing political crisis caused by feuding between his two junior coalition partners.

The Labor Party's two allies in the ruling coalition, the secularist Meretz bloc and the fervently Orthodox Shas party, agreed Sunday to put off again a deadline for settling the crisis by one week -- the second such postponement secured by Rabin.

Meretz said it would give Rabin the extra week to try to come up with more compromise solutions. But if he failed, the left-wing bloc would insist that the prime minister honor an earlier pledge to appoint Meretz leader Shulamit Aloni as Minister of Communications and Culture.

The crisis began when Shas, offended by statements made by Aloni that it perceived as anti-religious, demanded that she be removed from her previous post as minister of education. She also was in charge of the culture portfolio.

But Shas now says it also objects to Aloni's retaining control over the culture department, especially if that means that she will control all or most of the government-owned electronic media.

Rabin met alone with Aloni before Sunday's weekly Cabinet meeting and won her agreement to the additional one-week reprieve. The two agreed to meet again later in the week.

In the meantime, both Aloni and Shas leader

Aryeh Deri -- minister of the interior until the crisis broke out -- remain ministers without portfolio, since they formally deposited their portfolios in the hands of the prime minister.

This move was agreed upon as an interim measure designed to give Rabin more time to solve the crisis.

Shas has apparently said it would accept a resolution in which the education and culture portfolios are held by Meretz's Amnon Rubinstein, considered by Shas to be less stridently anti-religious than Aloni.

Aloni, though, would have to be given another senior post. Shas would have no problem with Aloni as foreign minister or in another senior position that would be non-controversial.

Rabin, however, is loath to give Aloni foreign affairs since this would mean moving the current foreign minister, Shimon Peres, to defense -- which Rabin wishes to keep holding himself.

Shas, which had been threatening to quit to coalition, says the need to solve the crisis is no longer urgent from its point of view, since Aloni is out of the education ministry.

Now that Rabin has won a reprieve from Meretz too, political observers feel that the two junior partners' evident desire to maintain the present coalition lineup will eventually enable Rabin to find a way out of the crisis.

SHOHAT REITERATES GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR STATE OF ISRAEL BONDS ORGANIZATION

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, May 23 (JTA) -- Finance Minister Avraham Shohat has reiterated that Israel has no plans to dissolve the State of Israel Bonds Organization, contrary to reports that appeared in the press earlier this year.

Shohat did say, however, that the interest rates on the bonds were too high several months ago and that the rate has since been adjusted downward.

Speaking to Jewish journalists here Tuesday, Shohat sought to clarify controversial remarks attributed to him a few months ago. The minister said he never suggested the bonds were not useful or appreciated by Israel, as was reported.

"I look at the bonds organization as a very important organization," he said.

Other Israeli officials, though, have questioned the government's bond program -- with its associated fund-raising expenses and the bond's interest rates -- at a time when the United States has approved billions of dollars in loan guarantees.

Likud Knesset Member Meir Shetreet has proposed to the Knesset's Finance Committee that the bonds organization be dissolved.

Speaking on other matters, Shohat said the Labor-led government's economic policy has already succeeded in boosting the rate of growth and exports and in spurring privatization.

A successful peace process would be a further boon for the economy, he said.

In explaining the strong performance of the economy, Shohat pointed to the shift in budget priorities made by the Labor government elected last June away from housing to infrastructure and education.

He also defended his decision not to create "an artificial" jobs program to help absorb new immigrants and bring down the unemployment rate, saying he had preferred to see the rate drop as a result of overall economic growth.

SLOVAK LEADER DISAVOWS ANY TIES TO NAZI STATE

By Deborah Kalb
States News Service

WASHINGTON, May 23 (JTA) -- The prime minister of the Slovak Republic, in a meeting here this week with American Jewish leaders, vowed that his new country would have "nothing in common" with the World War II-era Slovakian state, which was a Nazi ally.

Vladimir Meciar, whose country split from the Czech Republic on Jan. 1, said Friday through an interpreter that his government is "doing all we can" to create "a rebirth of the Jewish religion, and freedom to those who practice it."

The meeting, organized by the American Jewish Committee, came just weeks after an emotional meeting between the Slovak president, Michal Kovac, and a number of the same Jewish leaders.

In the April meeting, Kovac, who had been in town for the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, broke down in tears when recalling the fate of Jews in his village during the Nazi Holocaust.

He pledged to ensure that young Slovaks learned about the tragic events of the World War II era.

While less emotional, Meciar also pledged to institute educational programs to combat anti-Semitism in his country.

He said his country would respect minority rights.

"Legal guarantees for freedom and democracy," he said, "should be put in place no later than one year's time."

Negative Attitudes Toward Jews Predominate

An AJCommittee survey released in the Slovak capital of Bratislava last month showed negative attitudes toward Jews predominating in the economically troubled country.

Over a quarter of respondents said that "many important events take place as a result of the worldwide Jewish conspiracy."

Sixty-three percent believed that "Jews are mainly concerned about themselves -- their money and their profit."

But 83 percent believed that "Jews are no better and no worse than other people."

Rabbi Andrew Baker, director of European affairs for the AJCommittee, said after the meeting Friday that he thought certain minority rights would be quickly put into place in the Slovak Republic.

In order to become a member of the Council of Europe -- a largely Western European group -- a country has to meet certain minimal standards.

But Baker said that some of the other issues Meciar discussed in the meeting, such as property restitution to Jews and educational programs, would probably take longer to implement.

"It will require prodding," Baker said of the educational programs.

He noted that with all the economic problems now facing Slovakia, such programs would not be "first on the agenda" for the Slovak leadership.

The Jewish community in Slovakia, numbering 135,000 before World War II, now consists of only 3,000 to 4,000.

During the Holocaust, 60,000 to 70,000 Slovak Jews perished, Baker said.

CANADIAN AUTHORITIES CHARGE 2 SOLDIERS AS PART OF EFFORT TO WEED OUT RACISM

By Bram D. Eisenthal

MONTREAL, May 23 (JTA) -- In an apparent response to concern about racism and neo-Nazism in the Canadian military, the army charged two soldiers with the murder and torture of a Somali civilian committed with racist motives.

Two Canadian soldiers with the U.N. peacekeeping force in Somalia -- Master Cpl. Clayton Matchee, 27, of Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, and Pvt. Elvin Brown, 24, of Edmonton, Alberta -- were charged with second-degree murder and torture of the Somali man.

Two other soldiers were charged with torture and negligent performance of duties, and an investigation is under way to determine if a third soldier had any involvement in the March 16 incident.

The Somali civilian, Shidane Abukar Arone, was killed after he attempted to enter the Canadian base at Belet Huen, 186 miles north of Mogadishu.

The charges follow reports in the media that neo-Nazis have infiltrated the Canadian army.

One member of the Canadian peacekeeping force in Somalia, Cpl. Matt McKay, had posed for a photograph standing under a swastika wearing an Adolf Hitler T-shirt and giving the Nazi salute.

The photo was published last year in a Winnipeg, Manitoba, newspaper.

Other allegations of neo-Nazi involvement in the army were made recently on a Canadian Broadcasting Corp. television news program.

The charges announced against the soldiers are the first charges of torture and murder leveled against members of Canada's peacekeeping force in its 46-year history.

"These are the most serious charges ever laid in Canadian military operations with the U.N.," said the judge advocate-general for the Canadian armed forces, Brig. Gen. Pierre Boutet.

Following his arrest on suspicion of murder, Matchee was found hanging in an apparent suicide attempt, but was rescued.

He is hospitalized in serious condition.

U.N. HELPS JDC WITH AID TO SARAJEVO

NEW YORK, May 23 (JTA) -- United Nations officials have said they will cooperate with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and fly at no cost a shipment of JDC medical supplies from Split, Croatia, to the Jewish community in besieged Sarajevo, inside Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The supplies will be flown by the local branch of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in the Adriatic city of Split, JDC officials in New York said.

The medications, stored by the JDC in Split, are part of a continuous supply being sent to Sarajevo and distributed to the entire population.

"We currently operate three pharmacies that serve more than 15,000 patients a month -- Jews, Moslems, Christians -- who have no other source of help," said Ambassador Milton Wolf, JDC president.

"We also sent medicines to the Sarajevo Hospital, where the inventory is rapidly being depleted as a result of the renewed violence," Wolf said.

Increased fighting recently between Croatian and largely Moslem forces in Bosnia has blocked the land routes to Sarajevo.

THE DIASPORA LAG**ONCE ISRAEL'S STAUNCHEST BACKERS,
LIKUDNIKS IN U.S. FREELY CRITICIZE**

By Larry Yudelson

NEW YORK, May 23 (JTA) -- Since at least the days of President Jimmy Carter, readers of The New York Times could count on columnist William Safire for a strong and eloquent defense of Israel.

So imagine their surprise when, last November, no less prominent an Israeli than U.N. Ambassador Gad Yaacobi wrote a letter to the editor, gently but firmly taking issue with Safire.

While Safire had written that "this is the moment to discover whether direct negotiation between Arabs and Jews has a future," Yaacobi cautioned that "if direct negotiations do not succeed, the stakes are too high to allow the process to fail."

In short, while Safire was repeating the case made by the previous Israeli government of Yitzhak Shamir, the representative of this Israeli government was saying thanks, but no thanks.

The willingness of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to reverse long-standing Israeli policy and consider dramatic concessions at the negotiating table has opened a rift between his government and those American Jews who had considered themselves among Israel's firmest supporters.

It is a rift increasingly evident in debate within the Jewish community and on the editorial pages of publications widely read by Jews, including The Times.

Some observers see Safire's position as epitomizing the failure of some American Jews to get with Rabin's new program -- a problem they dub the "Diaspora lag."

But in the months since November, it has become clear that Safire, as well as fellow Times columnist A.M. Rosenthal and other neoconservatives who manned the pro-Israel lines during the 1980s, have no intention of joining up with the Labor Party just to show their support for Israel.

Betting On Netanyahu

Much as liberal columnist Anthony Lewis rooted for Shimon Peres when he headed the then-opposition Labor Party, Safire and Rosenthal seem to be placing their bets on Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu.

At the next election, Safire enthusiastically predicted last month, Rabin "is likely to be ousted" by Netanyahu.

All this raises a question, which as phrased by Safire himself in a column last month, goes like this: "Should longtime hard-liners, who used to assail any criticism of Israeli policies by U.S. doves as divisive, now abandon that principle and denounce the Labor Government's willingness to welcome a P.L.O.-ish state?"

The answer, clearly, is yes.

The only question is, how to justify the apparent about-face.

Safire went on to answer that support of Israel "should be thoughtful, not knee-jerk; no democracy needs right-or-wrong loyalists," and says he had never accepted the argument that criticism is itself harmful.

A lengthier answer was given by Norman Podhoretz. The editor of Commentary, a neoconservative publication, has over the years maintained that "American Jews had no moral right to criticize Israel's security policies."

Now, writing in a recent Commentary editor-

ial, Podhoretz said he feels compelled to speak out against the peace process and the new policies of the Rabin government because "if those policies are meeting with so much approval in certain quarters, it must mean that they are not good for Israel."

There is, he wrote, "not only a political but also a moral distinction" between "criticizing Israel when it is under attack by everyone -- and criticizing Israel when its policies are meeting with general approval."

There is a further distinction, Podhoretz continued, "between accusing Israel of all sorts of heinous crimes, as many of its critics on the Left did in the past, and questioning the prudential wisdom of its policies."

Not surprisingly, some Labor Party officials find these distinctions less than compelling.

Turning Old Argument On Its Head

Again on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times, Labor Knesset Member Ephraim Sneh turned on its head the old argument against American Jews criticizing Israel.

During the Likud era, American Jews were told they were in no position to criticize the hard-line tactics of a nation besieged by enemies. Now, Sneh argued, American Jews, watching from their distant perch should not judge a battle-weary nation seeking peace.

Americans who disapprove of the peace process "may not have experienced the horrors of war and the tough conditions of daily life in Israel," Sneh wrote.

"Hard-line criticism from a safe distance of 6,000 miles will not change the situation," he continued.

What hard-line criticism from American Jews can do, fear some Israeli officials, is succeed in stalling the fragile peace process.

The Times' Rosenthal, one target of this Labor broadside, took a dim view of the critique against speaking out.

"If Labor takes the position that people have no right to comment on the most important thing (affecting Israel), and that if they do they're anti-Israel, then they're making one hell of a mistake," Rosenthal told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

"During the Likud regime, not only was there criticism, but people like Peres and Abba Eban came to the United States openly trying to influence the U.S. government to be harder toward Israel in its policies," he continued. "Nobody said they were anti-Israel for doing so."

American Jews who criticized Likud policies in the past say they remember a harsh reception to their critique.

But while not buying the efforts of Podhoretz to distinguish between criticism from the left and from the right, they admit that the turnabout is fair play.

They have long maintained that there is a role for American Jews to play in Israeli politics.

They just wish that Podhoretz and others would be more honest about it.

"I think American Jews need to get rid of this idea that Israeli politics are off-limits or treif," said Jonathan Jacoby, who is forming a new American Jewish organization to support the Labor Party.

"If you ignore politics, and party politics as well, you exclude yourself from having an impact on what happens in Israel, and from helping Israel in a significant way," he said.