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**PEACE TALKS TO RESUME NEXT WEEK,
AND ALL SIDES ARE VOICING OPTIMISM**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, June 7 (JTA) -- The various parties to the Middle East peace process all sounded notes of distinct optimism this week as they prepared to return to Washington for the 10th round of bilateral negotiations.

Arab foreign ministers, meeting over the weekend in Amman, Jordan, even skipped the usual song and dance over whether or not they should attend the talks -- a scene witnessed before nearly every previous round.

The ministers and the Palestinians made it clear to journalists that all the Arab parties would be present in the U.S. capital on schedule June 15, with the Palestinians arriving earlier for preliminary talks with American officials.

Indeed, the Jordanian host of the Arab gathering, Prime Minister Abdul Salam al-Majali, formerly the country's chief peace negotiator, asserted pointedly and repeatedly that Jordan and Israel are on the brink of signing an initial agreement setting forth the agenda of issues between them. Only technicalities remain, he said.

Across the river in Israel, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres went even further. In upbeat remarks, Peres said Sunday, and repeated Monday, that Israel and Jordan had in effect reached agreement on a peace treaty.

What was lacking, said Peres, was "not the agreement -- but the pen." He added, more soberly, that it would be difficult for Jordan to be the first of the Arab parties to sign with Israel.

Peres' purpose, like that of the Arab leaders in Amman, was apparently intended to create a favorable atmosphere, conducive to progress, for the coming round of negotiations.

Perhaps more importantly, Israeli diplomatic sources said they had a clear signal from Washington that the United States would be playing an active role in the upcoming round of talks.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher, in a recent not-for-attribution briefing later relayed to the Israelis, spoke of the need for such American involvement, particularly in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

Potential For Real Progress

Here, Christopher reportedly said, he sensed the potential for significant progress at this time and the opportunity for the United States to serve as spur for achieving that goal.

The secretary and his senior aides feel that U.S. efforts at the end of the last round brought Israelis and Palestinians close to agreeing upon a joint statement of principles.

There was disappointment when this was not eventually achieved. But the Americans were encouraged by the general impact of their efforts on both sides.

American officials still hope to get the sides to adopt the statement, hence their invitation to the Israelis and Palestinians to hold preliminary talks in Washington before the full round opens.

U.S. officials also hope that with the injection of active American input, the Israeli-Syrian talks can be given a substantial push.

The hopeful mood has affected even those perennial skeptics, the Palestinians.

Yasir Abed Rabbo, a key aide to Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat, this week swept aside any thought of the Palestinians delaying their arrival in Washington or conditioning their participation in the talks on human rights improvements in the territories.

The PLO clearly is instructing the Palestinian negotiating team to deal with the nuts and bolts of the Israeli autonomy proposals, while canvassing for human rights concessions in a parallel but not necessarily linked effort.

Abdel-Shafi Not Calling The Shots

One of the working groups set up during the last round is concerned with human rights in the territories. This panel will press on with its work, but without being linked to the autonomy talks.

In this vein, too, the Palestinian negotiators and their Tunis-based PLO political masters gave short shrift this week to the by-now customary negativism voiced by Dr. Haidar Abdel-Shafi, the Palestinians' chief negotiator.

Both Faisal Hussein of Jerusalem, who is the overall head of the Palestinian delegation, and the PLO leadership in Tunis made it clear that Abdel-Shafi does not call the shots when it comes to deciding whether or under what conditions the Palestinians will participate in the peace talks.

Abdel-Shafi is disturbed by the deteriorating economic and social situation inside the territories, now in the third month of being closed off from Israel proper.

Israel's highly publicized arrest of more than 120 Moslem fundamentalist militants will doubtless add both to resentment in the territories and to strains between the pro-PLO, pro-peace camp and the fundamentalist hard-liners.

Abdel-Shafi, a physician from the Gaza Strip, where the fundamentalists draw their strongest support, finds himself squarely in the middle of these conflicting pressures.

**PEACE TALKS ARE 'FRONT AND CENTER'
ON THE U.S. AGENDA, CHRISTOPHER SAYS**
By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, June 7 (JTA) -- The Middle East peace talks, now set to resume next week, are "front and center" on the U.S. agenda, Secretary of State Warren Christopher assured top Jewish organizational leaders here this week.

The Jewish leaders, Lester Pollack and Malcolm Hoenlein, chairman and executive vice chairman, respectively, of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said they left the meeting "reassured on virtually all the issues that we raised."

In the 45-minute meeting Monday at the State Department, Christopher said he was optimistic that progress was possible in this next round of talks, Hoenlein reported afterward. He quoted the secretary as saying that the American commitment to the process would be evident from the administration's actions.

Administration officials indicated that all tracks of the peace process would be given equal priority.

Israel is negotiating with Syria, Lebanon,

Jordan and the Palestinians on four separate tracks. At various points, there has been talk here of making one or another of the tracks a higher priority, in order to achieve progress on a track that seems promising at the time.

On another topic of concern to the Jewish community, Christopher said that the United States will take a clear stand on stepping up action against the Arab boycott of Israel during the meeting in Tokyo next month of the Group of Seven major industrialized nations.

Jewish groups are seeking a strong statement from the G-7 leaders against the secondary boycott of companies doing business with Israel.

They received support this week from 94 members of Congress, who signed a letter to President Clinton, initiated by Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), calling on the United States to press the G-7 nations to fight the boycott.

Schumer, who chairs the Congressional Task Force to End the Arab Boycott, said: "A formal statement by the G-7 would send an important international message that the Arab boycott is not tolerated by the major trading nations."

Another upcoming international gathering, a special U.N. conference on human rights opening in Vienna next week, was among the items discussed Monday at the Jewish leaders' meeting with Christopher.

Pollack and Hoenlein expressed concern that the meeting would turn into an Israel-bashing forum, and they conveyed the Jewish community's desire that anti-Semitism be included among the human rights concerns discussed.

The two leaders said Christopher was "very responsive" on these points.

Other issues discussed at the State Department meeting included U.S. foreign aid, the fate of Israeli soldiers missing in action in Lebanon, the problems facing Syrian Jews and the effort to isolate Iran.

Summing up the session, Pollack said, "It was a very valuable exchange."

ISRAELI GOVERNMENT TAKES ISSUE WITH REMARK BY AN AIPAC VISITOR

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, June 7 (JTA) -- The American Israel Public Affairs Committee has once again found itself in the uncomfortable position of being scolded by the Israeli government.

The latest embarrassment came Sunday, when an AIPAC member accompanying an AIPAC-sponsored congressional delegation from Florida criticized Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's peace policies at a meeting here.

The Foreign Ministry promptly lodged a protest with AIPAC over what it saw as an attack on the Rabin government.

Tom Dine, AIPAC's executive director, apologized, explaining that the man who made the comments, Harvey Friedman, was not speaking for the influential pro-Israel lobby.

The incident occurred during the delegation's meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin. According to an informed source, Friedman spoke out against any potential territorial concessions planned by Rabin in the course of the peace talks.

"Where does Rabin get the chutzpah to give up territory?" Friedman was quoted by the source as saying.

He said Beilin was "shocked by the statement" and passed a complaint on to Israel's

ambassador to Washington, Itamar Rabinovich, who in turn passed it on to Dine.

"It was an unfortunate incident portrayed by the press as an AIPAC statement, but it was not," said Leonard Davis, director of AIPAC's Jerusalem office.

"It was clear from the individuals and officials involved that they understood it to be an individual statement" not reflecting the lobby's position, said Davis.

The Foreign Ministry said it has accepted AIPAC's explanation. A spokesman said the episode should not be blown out of proportion.

With Dine's "clarification of the Friedman criticism of Rabin, we see the end" of the episode, the Foreign Ministry spokesman said. "We shouldn't enlarge it; it's over."

The relationship between AIPAC and the Rabin government began on shaky ground when, shortly after he was elected last June, Rabin singled out AIPAC for criticism, charging it had overstepped its role in U.S.-Israeli relations.

The Prime Minister's Office later issued a statement expressing appreciation for AIPAC's work in Washington on behalf of Israel.

BLACK CAUCUS MEMBERS VISIT ISRAEL, LEAVE BETTER-EQUIPPED TO ADVOCATE

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, June 7 (JTA) -- A delegation of Congressional Black Caucus members ended an intensive five-day visit here saying they felt better-equipped to defend U.S. aid to Israel.

Seven members of the caucus joined the trip, which it co-sponsored with the American Israel Educational Foundation, which is affiliated with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

"It was a very important trip because, while we knew a great deal about Israel, we had the opportunity to fill the gaps and will communicate (what we learned) to our constituents," said U.S. Rep. Major Owens (D-N.Y.).

"This is a difficult year for the budget, and there will be a lot of controversy," he said, "and we'll be in the middle of it."

Owens made the comments as the group left the Prime Minister's Office prior to its departure from Israel on Monday night.

He said Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had conveyed his strong commitment to the peace process and the fact that it is moving forward at a rapid rate.

Owens said that during the trip, which was filled with briefings and site visits, the group was given "every reason" on a "firsthand basis" for the United States to "continue support for Israel, uninterrupted."

Among those accompanying the caucus delegation was Bernice Manocherian, a national vice president of AIPAC from New York, who initiated the trip because she believed it was "extremely important."

"There is a great deal of polarization between Jews and blacks in the United States, and we felt it was an opportunity" to build bridges, she said.

Manocherian said she believed that was accomplished, in part because of the exposure the visitors got to the myriad programs to help absorb Ethiopian immigrants.

Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.), said he will take back with him a much clearer sense of where the peace talks are headed, as well as of the "points of contention in the region."

HIGH COURT ISSUES 2 RULINGS OF RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, June 7 (JTA) -- In rulings that partially split the organized Jewish community, the Supreme Court this week decided two church-state cases that could have a major impact on religious activities in the public schools.

In one case, the court, without comment, let stand a lower court ruling allowing students to lead prayers at public school graduation ceremonies under certain circumstances.

That decision Monday, in *Jones vs. Clear Creek Independent School District*, chipped away at a ruling last year, welcomed by much of the Jewish community, that barred the recitation during public school graduation ceremonies of prayers containing either God's name or biblical passages.

Since the high court did not hear the *Jones* case and merely let the lower court ruling stand, its decision sets no precedent and is only applicable in parts of the country bound by the lower court's rulings.

But many Jewish groups expressed disappointment with the court's decision not to take the case.

In a second case, *Lamb's Chapel vs. Center Moriches Union Free School District*, the court decided unanimously Monday that an evangelical church group on New York's Long Island could use public school facilities to show a movie with a Christian theme, as long as it was done after school hours.

That ruling came as a disappointment to the leading Jewish defense agencies, but was welcomed by Orthodox and Reform groups.

But the *Jones* ruling proved disappointing to most in the Jewish community, who had supported the court's ruling the year before in *Lee vs. Weisman*. In that case, the court barred a rabbi from reciting a religious invocation during commencement exercises at a Rhode Island public high school.

In the *Jones* case, however, the court let stand a multi-part test allowed by the lower court. Under this test, prayers could be said at graduation ceremonies if a majority of students approved, if they were offered by a student, if they were non-sectarian and if they did not try to convert other people.

'A Troubling Trend'

"It's disappointing," Samuel Rabinove, legal director of the American Jewish Committee, said of the *Jones* ruling. "It opens the door to something the majority closed the door to in *Lee vs. Weisman*."

The decision "is going to cause trouble for Jewish communities across the country," said Marc Stern, co-director of legal affairs for the American Jewish Congress.

Steven Freeman, director of legal affairs for the Anti-Defamation League, said that in combination, Monday's rulings in *Jones* and *Lamb's Chapel* are "reflective of a troubling trend."

The ADL had supported the losing side in the *Lamb's Chapel* case, but Freeman said that the court's ruling in that case was "not particularly objectionable."

"What is objectionable," he said, is that the line is becoming blurred in cases involving religious activity in schools.

Freeman, and others in the Jewish com-

munity, said it is reassuring that in its *Lamb's Chapel* decision, the court referred to the so-called *Lemon* test, named after the 1971 case *Lemon vs. Kurtzman*.

The *Lemon* test, supported by many Jewish groups, requires all government activity to meet three criteria: Its principle purpose must be secular, its effect must neither enhance nor inhibit religion, and it cannot involve excessive government entanglement with religion.

Some of the court's more conservative members have expressed unhappiness with the doctrine, but in Monday's decision, the majority joined an opinion referring to *Lemon*.

The Jewish community had not been unified in its view of the *Lamb's Chapel* case. Supporting the evangelical group were some Orthodox Jewish groups and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform movement's congregational arm. The ADL had taken the opposing side.

David Zwiebel, director of governmental affairs for Agudath Israel of America, said his fervently Orthodox group was pleased with the court's decision in *Lamb's Chapel*, because it "could have a very important impact on Jewish institutions, just as it did on the particular church in this case."

Zwiebel pointed out that religious groups in some communities need to use public school facilities after hours because there are no other facilities large enough to hold some rallies or ceremonies.

'One Victory, One Setback'

"We feel gratified," said Betty Ehrenberg of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America.

The decision "undermines any attempt at viewpoint discrimination, which is not acceptable under the First Amendment," said Ehrenberg, who is executive director of the Orthodox Union's Institute of Public Affairs.

Nathan Lewin, a Washington attorney who serves as vice president of COLPA, the National Jewish Commission on Law and Public Affairs, which represents the interests of observant Jews in courts and legislatures, said his group is pleased at the outcome of the *Lamb's Chapel* case, in which it had filed a brief.

Lewin said COLPA is gratified not only that the court "reaffirmed that you can't discriminate against religious speech," but also that Justice Antonin Scalia, in his concurring opinion, had spoken out against the *Lemon* test, which COLPA opposes as too restrictive.

Stern of AJCongress observed that in its ruling, the court carefully pointed out that the activity in question -- the showing of a religious film on child reading -- took place after school hours, was not directed at students and was not sponsored by the school.

Stern, whose group had not taken sides in *Lamb's Chapel*, called that "very good news."

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said in a statement that the court's actions Monday represent "one victory, one setback" for church-state separation.

His group had supported the religious group in the *Lamb's Chapel* case. Saperstein said the court's decision shows that "religion will be accorded equal protection under the First Amendment to all other forms of expression."

But Saperstein called the *Jones* decision "a major disappointment."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES:

FALASH MORA LEARN ABOUT JUDAISM AS THEY AWAIT PASSAGE TO ISRAEL

By Michele Chabin

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia, June 7 (JTA) -- Finding this city's lone synagogue is a hit-or-miss affair, with few street signs to point the way.

Set back off a mud-lined street, through a dusty courtyard and up a steep flight of stairs, the Sukkat Rachamim synagogue is the last remnant of a dwindling Jewish community on the verge of extinction.

Built more than 60 years ago, the shul has long been the center of Jewish life for the Adenites, a tiny community of Caucasian Jews who immigrated to Ethiopia from Aden, the one-time capital of the former South Yemen, several decades ago.

At its height in the 1950s, the community numbered about 200; today, there are less than a dozen permanent residents, plus a handful of Israeli diplomats and Jewish relief workers.

It came as a surprise, then, to find the synagogue filled to overflowing with worshippers on a recent Shabbat morning. It was an even bigger surprise to learn that, despite the presence of hundreds of men and women at Shabbat services every week, it is difficult to muster a minyan.

The problem: the vast majority of the worshippers are Falash Mora -- Jews whose ancestors converted to Christianity in the recent or distant past -- and thus are not considered Jewish according to Jewish law.

In late 1990, the Israeli government, with the help of various Jewish organizations and bodies, encouraged Jews living in all parts of Ethiopia to move to Addis Ababa in preparation for the Operation Solomon airlift of May 1991.

After checking the religious background of the 16,500 people awaiting evacuation, Israeli officials informed 2,800 of them that they were not eligible to immigrate to Israel on the grounds that they or their ancestors had converted to Christianity.

Ranks Of Falash Mora in Addis Swelling

Today, these 2,800 Falash Mora continue to live in Addis Ababa and another 1,200 have swelled their ranks. At the request of the Israeli government at the time of the 1991 airlift, the American Joint Distribution Committee has continuously provided the 2,800 left behind with food, medical care and monthly stipends.

The remainder, who moved to the capital after the airlift against the express wishes of the Israeli government, receive emergency medical care and vaccinations but no food or stipends.

An Israeli government committee, headed by Absorption Minister Yair Tsaban, last month established guidelines for admitting some of the Falash Mora to Israel.

According to the guidelines, the 4,000 Falash Mora now in Addis Ababa, as well as an estimated 30,000 living in the countryside, are eligible to immigrate to Israel only through family reunification, the Law of Return or a "return" to Judaism.

The Falash Mora at the synagogue on Shabbat morning "are finding their way back to Jewish life," said Rabbi Menahem Waldman, an expert on Ethiopian Jewry and the Falash Mora.

Waldman, who heads the Israeli Chief Rabbinate's Commission on Falash Mora, was here last week to perform a wedding in the Adenite community.

Over the past two years he has spent several weeks with the Falash Mora in Addis Ababa in an attempt to determine whether their return to Jewish ritual is motivated by a sincere desire to be Jewish, or -- as some critics claim -- an attempt to escape from the poverty of Ethiopia by feigning a love of Zion.

"If you ask me whether the Falash Mora of Addis can count in a minyan, I have to say no," said Waldman during an hour-long walk to the synagogue on Shabbat morning.

"Nor do I consider them fully Christian. They are in the process of returning to their Jewish roots, and are therefore not considered converts.

"I have lived with them, prayed with them, and have seen their community change its behavior from Christian to Jewish. These people pray every day, they do not work on Shabbat and they do not eat non-kosher meat," he said.

The rabbi makes a distinction between those 2,800 who have been in the capital under the auspices of Jewish organizations for the past three years, and those who have arrived more recently.

"I cannot vouch for people who I do not know firsthand," said Waldman.

Despite a decision two years ago by the Chief Rabbinate to set up a program of Jewish study for the Falash Mora, it has not yet been instituted.

In the meantime, said Waldman, "The community does what it can to learn about Judaism."

"They receive three hours of religious instruction a day, funded by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry. It's not enough, but it's a start," he said.

According to halachah, said Waldman, "those who can prove that their mother and grandmother were Jewish and who seriously, honestly want to be Jews -- who leave behind Christian practices and embrace Jewish faith, prayer and learning -- can return to Judaism with the approval of three recognized religious leaders."

Waldman acknowledged that "there have been many mistakes in the past."

"We must now be very careful to verify that all who claim a desire to return to Judaism are telling the truth," he said.

IMMIGRANTS STAGE VIOLENT PROTEST

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, June 7 (JTA) -- A peaceful demonstration by new immigrants living in trailer homes at an absorption center near Acre turned violent when some of the demonstrators threw stones at police, injuring three of them.

Immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union were protesting Sunday what they claimed were unacceptable conditions at the site, which houses more than 4,000 people.

The immigrants have complained repeatedly about the trailer camp's state of disrepair. They say it is unfair for them to pay for repairs that should be made by the owners, the state-run Amidar housing company.

Sunday's demonstration turned violent when protesters refused police requests to disperse, leading to scuffles and stone-throwing.

The Construction and Housing Ministry has decided to gradually phase out the trailer home centers scattered around the country, which were established to help house the massive wave of new immigrants.