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**CLINTON-ASSAD MEETING DRAWS
CAUTIOUS HOPES, CONSTERNATION**
By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, Dec. 9 (JTA) -- News that President Clinton will meet next month with Syrian leader Hafez Assad has caused concern among some in the Jewish community here.

But others are taking a position similar to that of the Clinton administration, which views a meeting with Assad as furthering a comprehensive peace settlement in the region.

The Jewish leaders voicing doubts say that, to earn a meeting with Clinton, Assad must live up to his promises to allow free travel for Syrian Jews and to allow a congressional delegation to investigate the case of missing Israeli soldiers.

In addition, there is concern that it would be inappropriate for a presidential meeting with a leader whose country remains on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism.

"I feel confident that President Clinton won't proceed with the meeting until all the Jews have their exit permits," Alice Harary, president of the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews, said Thursday.

Syria's 1,350-person Jewish community has been awaiting permits to leave the country since last year, when the Syrian government first announced that the community would be able to travel freely.

But in recent months, only a trickle of Jews has been able to leave, prompting the Clinton administration and members of Congress to urge Assad to let the Syrian Jews go.

Assad said earlier this month that he would grant exit permits to Jews by month's end, leaving Jews here pleased but skeptical.

Harary said she was "hopeful they'll all be out by the end of the month." But she said that, as of Thursday, nothing had happened in Syria in the wake of Assad's announcement.

'A Vital Cornerstone In Our Efforts'

About 400 of the 1,350 Jews in Syria have U.S. visas, leaving about 950 in need of exit permits, Harary said.

In Syria, where he was meeting with Assad as part of a swing through the region, Secretary of State Warren Christopher said the Clinton-Assad meeting would "help to put in place a vital cornerstone in our efforts to build a comprehensive, just and lasting peace."

One of the goals of his trip was to re-engage Syria in the peace process, and Christopher said at a news conference in Damascus on Thursday that the Syrians would be returning to the Washington-based talks, from which they pulled out in September.

Syria and Israel are locked in a disagreement over definitions of a future peace between the two countries and an Israeli withdrawal from at least part of the Golan Heights.

Reports had been circulating here recently that the United States would offer Syria a meeting between Clinton and Assad.

The United States could be playing a more active role in the Israeli-Syrian talks than it did in the talks between Israel and the Palestinians,

said Warren Eisenberg, director of B'nai B'rith's International Council.

"Syria represents a different case," Eisenberg said, with "wider stakes."

The Clinton-Assad meeting, which would take place in Geneva, would be the first encounter between the two.

Christopher would not say whether Syria had made any pledges in return for his meeting with Clinton, nor whether the United States had made any promises to Assad.

Some Jewish officials asked to react to the news said a Clinton-Assad meeting could result in progress on the Israeli-Syrian negotiating track and thus benefit the overall peace process.

"This is a first step that probably needs to be taken at this stage," said Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), who spearheaded a recent letter from 57 colleagues to Christopher urging the secretary to press the Syrians on behalf of the Syrian Jews.

Gary Rubin, executive director of the dovish group Americans for Peace Now, said his organization was "very pleased with the announcement, because any lasting peace in the area has to be a comprehensive peace," including Syria.

'Question Is Whether He Deserves The Reward'

But other Jewish officials expressed some wariness about a meeting.

Rep. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) wrote to Clinton on Thursday urging the president not to make a final decision about the meeting until Assad allows the Syrian Jews to leave.

"I am worried that meeting with President Assad while he continues to hold 1,350 Syrian Jews hostage in his country would send the message that the welfare of this beleaguered community is not a priority for the United States government," Schumer wrote.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said he had "real reservations" about the meeting.

"The question is whether he deserves the reward," Hoenlein said, noting that the meeting would give Assad what he wants, "respectability."

And Herbert Zweibon, chairman of the group Americans for a Safe Israel, which stands on the right of the American Jewish political spectrum, released a statement calling the meeting a "moral outrage."

Still other Jewish leaders said Syria must have given the United States certain assurances before Clinton approved the meeting.

"We find it unimaginable that President Clinton would have agreed" to a meeting with Assad "without a clear understanding that such a meeting would signal a change in Syria's sponsorship of terrorism and in its reluctance to spell out the terms of its peace with Israel," American Jewish Congress President Robert Lifton and Executive Director Henry Siegman said in a statement.

Another gesture the United States made this week was allowing Kuwait to transfer three old U.S.-made 727 planes to Syria.

But representatives of the American Jewish community received assurances from the administration that the gesture was a limited one.

RABIN, ARAFAT SLATED TO MEET IN CAIRO DAY BEFORE TROOP WITHDRAWAL DEADLINE By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Dec. 9 (JTA) -- One day before Israeli troops are scheduled to begin to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat were slated to meet in Cairo.

Nabil Sha'ath, chief Palestinian negotiator at the Cairo talks between Israel and the PLO, announced Thursday in the Egyptian capital that a Rabin-Arafat meeting would take place Sunday.

But sources on both sides admitted the withdrawal deadline was growing increasingly unlikely, as the talks being held in the Egyptian capital were at an impasse on several issues.

Negotiators ended their ninth round of talks Thursday with no conclusive progress made.

The sticking points are the size of the Jericho area that will fall under Palestinian authority, who will control the border crossings between Gaza and Egypt and between Jericho and Jordan, and the size of the Israeli forces that will be left in the regions to protect Israeli settlers.

Even if a withdrawal of Israeli troops does not begin as scheduled, it is likely that Israel will make some symbolic gesture to demonstrate its commitment to the accord.

But feelings of optimism were dampened as violent incidents occurred again Thursday, the day marking the sixth anniversary of the beginning of the Palestinian uprising.

As a general strike was carried out to mark the anniversary, violent attacks in the West Bank and Gaza went on in a manner reminiscent of the years of upheaval of the intifada.

Arafat And Peres Discuss Borders

A 51-year-old Palestinian farmer was shot dead in his field near the West Bank town of Ramallah, and Palestinians said he had been attacked by Jewish settlers.

In Gaza, two Arabs stabbed an Israeli woman while she was working in a greenhouse.

Rabin has been maintaining that a delay in implementing the accord is less significant than reaching a complete understanding of its terms.

The accord provided for an Israeli troop withdrawal to begin Dec. 13 and end by April 13.

Meanwhile, Arafat met Thursday with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in Granada, Spain, where both were attending a U.N. symposium on building Middle East peace.

During their hourlong meeting, they reportedly discussed the issue of border crossings.

Peres has previously said that Israel refuses to compromise on this point, which he calls a top security priority.

Meanwhile, the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas movement, which claims responsibility for the deaths of 11 Israelis since the agreement was signed in Washington three months ago, has pledged to continue its campaign of violence against Israeli soldiers and settlers.

Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin this week decried the protests against the Israel-PLO accord being made by both Israeli settlers and Palestinians. He called it imperative that progress be made in the Cairo negotiations.

Beilin said the government would not bend to those opposing the accord, but would try to "intensify the talks and implement them as soon as possible."

AS GREECE PREPARES TO HEAD E.C., ATHENS VOWS SUPPORT FOR PEACE By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK, Dec. 9 (JTA) -- Greece will throw its full support behind the Middle East peace process when it assumes the presidency of the European Community next month, Deputy Foreign Minister George Papandreou said at a meeting here this week with the American Jewish Committee.

Papandreou told a small gathering of AJCommittee leaders that the peace process will be high on Greece's list of priorities and the Athens government will soon be in a position to influence the E.C. agenda on Middle East issues.

"Ten days ago, Israeli Foreign Minister (Shimon) Peres and Chairman (Yasser) Arafat visited Greece," said Papandreou. "When Greece becomes the president of the European Community, we will be able to set the tone and agenda of the work of the E.C."

"One of our priority issues will certainly be the peace process in the Middle East. We want to help in any way we can," he said.

Papandreou also told the small gathering that he strongly opposes the inclusion of religious affiliation on Greek national identity cards, a troubling issue for the Greek Jewish community.

"I believe it is an outrage and I think our government will change this," he said.

Papandreou was visiting the United States to pave the way for a visit early next year by his father, Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou, who was returned to power in elections this year.

During his previous tenure as prime minister, he supported the Palestine Liberation Organization and was highly critical of Israel.

AJCommittee Executive Director David Harris welcomed the deputy foreign minister's comments.

"It is now clear that this new government is prepared to change its attitude, both with Israel and with world Jewry," Harris said.

GAZA MAN ASKED TO FORM CITY COUNCIL

JERUSALEM, Dec. 9 (JTA) -- A Gaza businessman chosen by Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat to form a Gaza City Council said he would head the panel only if it includes all Palestinian factions, including the fundamentalist Hamas.

The council would be the first such entity in a decade.

Gaza City has been administered by the Israelis since they deposed Mayor Rashad al-Shawaa, Mansour al-Shawaa's late father, some 10 years ago.

PLO, UNESCO SIGN COOPERATION DEAL

UNITED NATIONS, Dec. 9 (JTA) -- The Palestine Liberation Organization and UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, have signed an agreement calling for the U.N. agency to help foster development in the areas slated for Palestinian autonomy.

The agreement was signed in Granada, Spain, by PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Federico Mayor Zaragoza, head of UNESCO, at a symposium focusing on ways to build peace in the Middle East.

The venue was also a meeting place for Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

CONTROVERSIAL NEO-NAZI FILM PULLED IN FACE OF CONTROVERSY

BERLIN, Dec. 9 (JTA) -- A neo-Nazi film, supported with subsidies from several German state governments, has been withdrawn from distribution under pressure from its sponsors after it provoked a swarm of controversy here.

The film, "Profession: Neo-Nazi," was playing in two theaters but was blasted by critics who said it violated German law prohibiting anti-Jewish statements without response.

Those who have seen the film said its director, Winfried Bonengel, allows neo-Nazi Bela Althans to rave on about Auschwitz lies without any opposition.

A German newspaper reported Monday that Ignatz Bubis, head of the German Jewish community, was going to ask that criminal charges be brought against Althans and others over at least 10 passages in the film that he said violate German law.

Bonengel defended the film as a portrayal of neo-Nazis as they really are.

The film has provoked and worried the Jewish community for weeks and was prevented from opening by opponents in at least one city, Hamburg.

The German state governments that helped finance the film -- Hesse, Hamburg, Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Pomerania -- themselves asked that the film's distribution be stopped.

E.C. DELAYING NEGOTIATIONS ON ISRAEL'S STATUS WITH GROUP By Joseph Kopel

BRUSSELS, Dec. 9 (JTA) -- The European Community's foreign ministers are ready to negotiate a new agreement that would upgrade Israel's ties to the 12-nation body, diplomatic sources said in Brussels.

But, contrary to initial Israeli expectations, the formal mandate for such negotiations will be determined only later this month.

During a meeting Tuesday, the E.C. ministers agreed in principle to such an agreement. The formal mandate to upgrade Israel's status with the E.C. will be given to the European Executive Commission at the foreign ministers' meeting in two weeks.

Israel has had a trade agreement with the community since 1975.

In the last years, it has tried to elevate its status to gain better access to the European market, which is Israel's main trade partner.

The E.C. has seemed more inclined toward Israel since the Sept. 13 signing of the Israel-Palestine Liberation Organization agreement.

During his first official visit to Brussels, earlier this month, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin pleaded for a change in Israel's status, to the kind enjoyed by members nations of the European Free Trade Association.

"What we want is to raise our agricultural quotas," Rabin said. "It's not financial aid that we are demanding from Europe."

The new accord would extend the free-trade area to include services and would associate Israel in certain scientific research and development programs.

According to diplomatic sources, some E.C. members have been reluctant to give greater access to Israel's farm products, and their reluctance has delayed any change in Israel's status.

STRIKE ALL BUT CRIPPLES ISRAEL, BUT EL AL, POST OFFICE OPERATE By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Dec. 9 (JTA) -- The 24-hour general strike announced by the Histadrut trade union federation went on Thursday as planned, all but crippling the country.

Nearly 100,000 workers were affected.

Nevertheless, operations continued almost normally at Ben-Gurion Airport and at El Al services, and postal workers did not walk out after they were issued strike restraining orders by the courts.

El Al, anticipating problems, had advanced departure times of 11 flights scheduled to take off after 7 a.m., the time the work stoppage was called for. Thereafter, a more or less normal schedule was adhered to by El Al Airline workers.

Meanwhile, the airline's planned inaugural flight to Bombay and Bangkok, due to take off just before midnight, was being prepared for takeoff as planned. In fact, in view of an overwhelming demand for the flight, the Israeli airline added two aircraft to the route.

But the strike took its predictable toll at 30 of 32 large government-owned manufacturing and service enterprises.

The usual broadcast blackouts also went ahead as preplanned.

Israel Radio began its usual morning service at 7 a.m. but went silent an hour later in the middle of a sentence.

From then on, the only broadcasts heard were brief news summaries aired hourly by Israel Radio's main channel. All other channels remained silent throughout the day.

The army radio station was not affected by the work stoppage.

But its program was entirely devoted to a 30-hour fund raiser for soldiers welfare.

Business and services idled by the strike included the ports and domestic airports, railroads, Bezek telephone services, Israel Aircraft Industries and Israel Military Industries.

Also on strike were the employees of the Rafael Weapons Development Authority, the Electric Corp., the Mekorot Water Co., Israel Chemicals, the Haifa Oil Refineries, Dead Sea Works, Israel Shipyards and the nuclear plants at Dimona and Nahal Sorek.

The striking employees what they deem a lack of safeguards for their futures under privatization plans announced by the government.

SOUTH AFRICAN JEWS SUPPORT ELECTIONS By Suzanne Belling

JOHANNESBURG, Dec. 9 (JTA) -- The leadership of the South African Jewish community has pledged support for the country's first non-racial elections, which will take place next April.

Mervyn Smith, the national chairman of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, said at a recent national executive meeting here, "The board is optimistic about a future democratic South Africa."

"Our board recognizes the challenges and difficulties surrounding the issues, such as the economy, education and violence."

"The board is nonetheless hopeful that these issues will be dealt with successfully."

Smith promised that "the board will encourage our community to vote for parties expressing true democratic values."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES:

**ISRAEL RECONSIDERS SCHOOLING SYSTEM
USED TO EDUCATE ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANTS**

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM (JTA) -- Questions are being raised about the way Israel educates children who have immigrated here from Ethiopia, with some suggesting that the segregation of these immigrants is putting them at a permanent economic disadvantage.

Among the most vocal critics of the educational system into which Ethiopian immigrant children have been absorbed is Micha Odenheimer, Israel director of the American Association of Ethiopian Jews, soon to be renamed the Israel Association of Ethiopian Jews.

Odenheimer believes Israel risks creating a permanent underclass of Ethiopian immigrants if its schooling system is not changed soon.

Virtually all of the children who arrived here during either the 1991 Operation Solomon airlift or the Operation Moses immigration wave of 1984-85 -- some 21,000 students -- are in the government's religious school system, whose administration is entirely separate from the administration of the state's secular schools.

Some maintain that this segregation, which is based on the fact that the Ethiopian immigrants tend to come from religiously traditional backgrounds, cuts them off from certain academic opportunities enjoyed by other immigrants.

Odenheimer voices especially sharp fears about the boarding schools in which more than 90 percent of Ethiopian teen-agers are educated. They are run by the Youth Aliyah Department of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Youth Aliyah's academic curricula are controlled by the Education Ministry, and in the case of the Ethiopians, by its religious education division.

Odenheimer questions whether the Ethiopians are being given a chance to reach their full potential because most have been tracked into vocational training.

He is not alone. Education Ministry statistics from 1992 show a significant gap between the academic achievement of the Ethiopian students and other Jewish Israelis.

Virtually Segregated Villages

Some, such as Yehiel Leket, head of the Jewish Agency's Youth Aliyah Department, deny the validity of such comparisons. But he and other officials with responsibility for the welfare of these youth concede there are problems.

The education authorities all insist they are in the process of making the necessary changes.

Since 1983, roughly 9,000 Ethiopians between the ages of 12 and 18 have been or are being educated, in 52 different Youth Aliyah villages and dormitories.

Youth Aliyah's mandate, officials say, has always been to give the students a stable environment that helps them to realize their potential and to mainstream them into Israeli society.

But Odenheimer says Youth Aliyah cannot fulfill its mainstreaming mandate if many live in essentially segregated villages, with more than 70 and 80 percent Ethiopians.

And he believes that not enough students have been offered the opportunity to take the bagrut, the academic matriculation exam, which he calls the "dividing line" or "watershed" for Israelis.

The exams are "strict requirements for continuing in any higher education framework," he said, and usually a prerequisite for a good job. Without them, the youth will be relegated to work "as a fry cook at Burger Ranch," he said, referring to a fast-food restaurant chain.

Only 30 percent of Ethiopian students took the exam in 1992, compared to 76 percent of Jewish Israelis, according to Education Ministry statistics. And only 10 percent of the Ethiopians who took the exam received a certificate of matriculation, compared to 60 percent of the overall population.

The head of the Education Ministry's religious education division, Matityahu Dagan, conceded it was "a mistake of our system" to over-emphasize vocational training for the Ethiopians.

"They are naturally intelligent and very keen to study," he said, while high school vocational training across the board operates with "very, very low standards."

Last year, he said, his ministry decided that all Ethiopians at Youth Aliyah schools should be exposed to academic instead of vocational training, at the end of which they can opt for a vocational course. But implementing this will take time and be difficult, he said.

A Strong Motivation To Study

Leket, who has been head of Youth Aliyah for about a year, defends his program but also admits there are problems with the way Ethiopian youth are being educated.

He admits there is a problem of Ethiopian overconcentration in certain youth villages by virtue of mathematics.

Since nearly all of the Ethiopians are in the religious programs, and only 50 percent of Youth Aliyah villages are religious, the result is "like an Ethiopian ghetto," in which 70 to 80 percent of the students are Ethiopian.

"We should find a way to change it," Leket said. "The aim should be no youth villages with more than 50 percent" Ethiopians.

Leket is also willing to consider whether the Youth Aliyah program enables the Ethiopian immigrants to realize their full academic potential.

He concedes that the Ethiopian students "can do better. They have a strong, unique motivation and are ready to study, study, study."

He said the new academic programs that his department has introduced this year will help "give an opportunity to most of the children to take the bagrut."

Odenheimer of the Ethiopian Jewry association believes the Ethiopians are a "very unique" but vulnerable population, who came here in large measure "with very little preparation for Western society."

He believes that unless a strong and consistent push is exerted to enable them to break the barriers, there will be a natural downward slide that will not be easily reversed.

"If the special needs of this group, who have arrived in Israel from a vastly different culture, are not addressed," Odenheimer wrote recently in a letter to Immigrant Absorption Minister Yair Tsaban, "the inevitable result will be the creation of a subclass with all the added problems that racial distinctions bring to economically deprived groups."

"The time to act is now," he warned Tsaban, "before the place of the Ethiopians within Israeli society has been fixed, both for others and within the Ethiopian's own self-image."