

**ISRAELI, VATICAN OFFICIALS APPROVE
ACCORD ESTABLISHING DIPLOMATIC TIES**
By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, Dec. 29 (JTA) -- In a move toward ending nearly two millennia of strained relations between Jews and Catholics, a bilateral commission on Israeli-Vatican relations has formally ratified an agreement under which the Holy See and Israel will establish full diplomatic relations.

Following the ratification, which took place Wednesday at the Vatican, all that remained was a final signing ceremony the following day in Jerusalem.

The establishment of relations is the most important part of the wide-ranging agreement, said Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro Valls.

But he said the fact that the agreement covers other areas, including anti-Semitism and human rights, makes it all the more important.

"It is very rich," he said. "It underlines the personality, and particularly the moral personality, of the Holy See."

The agreement, which is the product of more than a year of negotiations by the bilateral commission, represents the culmination of steadily warming relations between the Vatican and Israel over the past three decades.

A major turning point in their relations came in 1965, when the Second Vatican Council promulgated the document "Nostra Aetate" (In Our Time), which repudiated the notion of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus.

But Catholic-Jewish relations have also had their sour points at various points over the years.

In May 1948, the Vatican reacted coolly to the establishment of the Jewish state. The Vatican newspaper wrote at the time, "Zionism is not the embodiment of Israel as it is described in the Bible."

In June 1987, Pope John Paul II angered world Jewry when he granted a private audience to Austrian President Kurt Waldheim, who had served in a German army unit linked to Nazi war crimes.

Relations between the Vatican and Israel hit another low point over the presence of a Carmelite convent that had been erected on the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

'Climate Of Sincere Cooperation'

Under this week's agreement, Israel and the Vatican will exchange "special representatives" immediately and ambassadors within four months.

The Roman Catholic Church has promised to oppose anti-Semitism throughout the world and to support the current Middle East peace process.

Israel, in turn, has agreed to respect the religious rights of all Catholics and to allow the church to operate schools, run charities and own property in Israel.

Israel has also agreed to continue to guarantee freedom of Catholic worship and to protect Catholic holy places within Israel.

Both parties have agreed to promote Christian pilgrimages to Israel in the hope that they will foster improved interreligious understanding.

A joint statement released following the commission's meeting Wednesday expressed "appreciation both for the climate of sincere coop-

eration and mutual trust that characterized and facilitated the talks, and for the notable results."

It said the bilateral commission "is looking forward to the continuation of its work following the signature of the Fundamental Agreement with a view to its implementation."

In a related development, Pope John Paul II held a private audience Wednesday with Rabbi Henry Sobel of Sao Paulo, Brazil, who is director of the interreligious relations department of the Latin American Jewish Congress and religious leader of the largest Jewish congregation in Latin America.

He is also Jewish coordinator for the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops' Commission for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue. It was in this last capacity that he handed the pope a personal letter from Cardinal Evaristo Arns, archbishop of Sao Paulo.

Sobel said Arns' letter congratulated the pope on the agreement with Israel and defined the normalization of relations with Israel as "the crowning achievement" of John Paul's papacy.

**SYRIA ONCE AGAIN ISSUING VISAS
ALLOWING JEWS TO LEAVE COUNTRY**
By Steven Weiss

WASHINGTON, Dec. 29 (JTA) -- Reports that Syria is once again granting travel visas to the country's Jews have the American Jewish community optimistic but cautious.

A State Department official confirmed Wednesday that the Syrian government recently resumed issuing travel visas to Syrian Jews, who, except for a brief lull in 1992, were long barred from leaving the country.

"We've seen progress in the issuance of travel visas in the past few weeks," the official said, refusing to comment on the number of visas issued so far.

A source on Capitol Hill confirmed that between 100 and 200 visas had been issued last week. The source could not confirm whether more visas were granted this week.

The turnabout is seen as an attempt to make good on a promise that Syrian President Hafez Assad made to U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher during a meeting in Damascus in early December. The Syrian leader pledged he would give exit visas to all remaining Jews by the end of 1993.

While up to 1,000 Syrian Jews apparently still have not been given travel visas, Jewish advocacy groups are nevertheless encouraged.

"We're pleased that there's movement" in the right direction, said Alice Harary, president of the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews.

"It's certainly about time that the Jews in Syria should have the basic human right of travel," Harary said.

Jewish leaders were carefully measuring their excitement, however, citing previous but unfulfilled promises that the Syrian Jews were free to leave.

"This is a sensitive issue brought up at a sensitive time," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Hoenlein and others stressed that speculation

could only stir false optimism and potentially threaten the visa-issuing process.

Syria announced a free-travel policy for its Jewish community in April 1992. But since October 1992, few travel visas have been issued.

Christopher's meeting with Assad followed an intense lobbying effort by Jewish organizations urging the Clinton administration to press Syria to free the country's Jews.

Observers interpret Assad's recent promise to give visas to all Syrian Jews as a goodwill gesture offered in part in exchange for a meeting with Clinton. The president is scheduled to meet with Assad in Geneva in January.

ISRAEL AND PLO CREATE DRAFT AGREEMENT ON SECURITY ISSUES OF SELF-RULE ACCORD

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Dec. 29 (JTA) -- Israeli and Palestine Liberation Organization negotiators have hammered out a draft agreement on security issues for implementation of the self-rule accord, but it remains unclear whether the draft will meet with the approval of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Wednesday night he expected that an agreement between Israel and the PLO would be finalized within "two or three weeks."

Peres headed the Israeli negotiating team that has been negotiating with the PLO in Cairo for much of the past week.

As Peres flew back to Israel, Arafat was closeted with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the Egyptian capital for what observers believed was a tough bout of Egyptian pressure.

The PLO chief flew into Cairo on Wednesday evening -- his third visit there this week -- as his aides signaled he was still unhappy with compromise proposals evolving in the negotiations.

Arafat arrived in Cairo from Tunis, where the PLO's Executive Committee had rejected the Israeli proposals for breaking the deadlock that has so far held up implementation of the self-rule accord.

Israeli news media, while admitting they were still largely in the dark over details, reported from Cairo that the draft agreement now on the table broadens the area that will fall under Palestinian authority in the West Bank town of Jericho to some 24 square miles.

The agreement also reportedly provides four separate but linked Israeli and Palestinian control facilities at the border crossing points between Jericho and Jordan and between the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

Egypt Pressuring Arafat

But the draft maintains effective Israeli military control over the borders themselves, with the Palestinians reportedly permitted to mount their own border patrols some distance inland.

The draft also deals with security arrangements for Israeli settlers living in the stretch of settlements in the south of Gaza.

The draft agreement was worked out late into Tuesday night with the personal and intensive participation of Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa, who spent six hours with the delegations in Cairo's Gezira Sheraton Hotel.

The Egyptians, who are hosting the talks, are playing an increasingly active role as mediators in the negotiations.

Israeli officials maintain that Mubarak and

his top aides accept Jerusalem's positions on matters of security, and are bringing strong pressure on Arafat to accept them.

Peres, in his brief remarks Wednesday night, said it was now up to "the PLO leaders" to adopt the "joint declaration," as he called it, that had been hammered out in Cairo.

He noted that the two sides had instructed their subgroups negotiating on security issues, which meet at the Sinai border town of Tabá, to reconvene immediately "in order not to waste any time."

It was not clear whether the joint liaison committee, which is headed by Peres and by the PLO's Mahmoud Abbas, will need to meet again before the accord can be signed.

The liaison committee, which met this week in Cairo, has overall responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the self-rule accord. The subgroups were empowered to hammer out the operational details of any agreements reached by the liaison committee.

NEARLY HALF A MILLION FROM EX-USSR HAVE IMMIGRATED TO ISRAEL SINCE '89

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Dec. 29 (JTA) -- The year's end marks the arrival of 475,000 immigrants to Israel from the republics of the former Soviet Union since the start of the immigration wave in 1989, Jewish Agency Chairman Simcha Diniz announced this week in a review of the agency's activities for the year.

If present political and economic trends in the newly independent states continue, Diniz said, 100,000 to 120,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union are expected to emigrate annually for each of the next five years. Of these, 70,000 to 80,000 are expected to come to Israel annually.

About 77,000 immigrants arrived from various countries this year, 65,000 of whom came from the ex-Soviet republics and 8,000 from Western countries.

Diniz said that by the year 2000, the Jewish population of the former Soviet republics, now estimated at 1.4 million, is expected to decrease by 50 percent.

He said the combined efforts of the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government would fulfill the Zionist dream of bringing 1 million Jews to Israel by the year 2000, making Israel's Jewish population the largest in the world with 6 million. The 500,000th immigrant is expected to arrive within the next few months, he said.

Meanwhile, Diniz said the Jewish Agency had doubled its activities this year in the newly independent states, where 20,000 Jews studied Hebrew and 20,000 youth participated in Zionist activities. A total of 10,000 youths attended 40 Jewish summer camps in Russia and the neighboring republics.

The Jewish Agency also trained 500 local youth leaders as well as 800 Hebrew and Jewish studies teachers.

A program it initiated this year to encourage aliyah sent 40 teams to 150 cities to promote employment projects, programs for youth and programs to familiarize prospective immigrants with the absorption process in Israel.

Also this year, 1,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 18 from the newly independent states came to Israel on Youth Aliyah programs, and the Jewish Agency plans to increase the number in 1994.

NOMINATION OF STATE DEPT. DEPUTY GETS LUKEWARM RESPONSE FROM JEWS

By Steven Weiss

WASHINGTON, Dec. 29 (JTA) -- The nomination of Strobe Talbott as deputy secretary of state is being met with equanimity in the Jewish community, with one Jewish official calling the choice "neither a positive nor negative development."

Some are praising Talbott's expertise on the republics of the former Soviet Union as a boon for those concerned with the fate of Jews living there. Others have expressed reservations about Talbott's limited diplomatic experience and lack of a record with respect to Israel.

But few expect his appointment to alter the Clinton administration's Middle East policy, which is generally seen as highly supportive of Israel.

They note that the State Department's No. 2 official is rarely involved directly in policy on areas as high-profile as the Middle East -- a role Secretary of State Warren Christopher is likely to retain for himself.

"We don't expect any change in policy by Clinton as a result of this appointment," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

"To the extent that Clinton's policy remains the same, this is a good" nomination, he said.

But some expressed concern that as the Clinton administration reshapes its foreign policy team, it is bringing in people who have little background on Israel and other Jewish concerns.

Both Talbott and Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, who was nominated in mid-December as defense secretary to replace the pro-Israel Les Aspin, are seen as "outsiders" who may not understand the Jewish community's sensitivities.

Publicly, though, Jewish groups have praised Talbott, a longtime journalist at Time magazine who presently serves as ambassador at large to the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union.

"We had a very positive relationship with him," said Mark Levin, executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

'The Best Person For The Job'

"He is accessible and knowledgeable," Levin said. "We look forward to dealing with him in his new position."

Martin Wenick, executive vice president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, called Talbott "exceedingly competent" with an "in-depth knowledge of foreign policy."

But Wenick, himself a former State Department expert on Russia, agreed that Talbott's appointment is likely to have no significant impact on Israel.

Talbott's nomination follows a tough year for the Clinton administration's foreign policy team, which endured harsh criticism for its actions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Haiti and Somalia despite its relative success in the Middle East.

At the announcement of Talbott's nomination Tuesday in Los Angeles, Christopher called the former ambassador "the best person for the job."

"I recommend him to the president because I have got great confidence in his ability, his knowledge of foreign affairs, his integrity and his character," the secretary said.

Talbott is expected to rely heavily on his knowledge of the former Soviet Union, although

his new position is certain to involve him in a broader range of issues.

According to Richard Haass, senior associate for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Talbott is well-positioned to deal with the question of Jewish emigration from the newly independent states if the situation there worsens.

He also could raise the profile of the human rights concerns of Jews and other minorities in the former Soviet republics, he said.

"Talbott is concerned about seeing strides made in all areas of Soviet Jewry," said Levin of the National Conference, "including protection of the rights of Jewish citizens from new laws" being considered there.

But Haass, who was the senior Middle East expert on the Bush administration's National Security Council, does not expect Talbott to become heavily involved in the Middle East peace process because Christopher has devoted himself to that issue.

The selection of Talbott comes amid other staffing changes at the State Department.

Edward Djerejian, the new ambassador to Israel, is due to arrive there in mid-January, according to a State Department source.

His departure leaves vacant the position of assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs. There is no timetable for the position to be filled, according to a State Department source.

Also leaving is Samuel Lewis, director of the policy planning staff, who is retiring as of Jan. 22, in a move that reportedly is the result of a "mutual agreement." Lewis, a former ambassador to Israel, was seen as a staunch friend of the Jewish state but was believed to be "out of the loop" when it comes to Middle East policy.

Dennis Ross, the State Department's special Middle East coordinator, will remain for now. A holdover from the Bush administration, Ross was originally to have concluded his assignment by the close of 1993.

The State Department on Wednesday had no information on how long Ross would stay, or whether he will keep his position throughout Clinton's term.

ERROR MAY BE TO BLAME FOR FIGHTING IN SOUTHERN LEBANON SECURITY ZONE

TEL AVIV, Dec. 29 (JTA) -- An incident that set off intensive fighting this week in southern Lebanon's security zone may have been caused by an Israeli patrol unit commander's error.

During routine patrol Tuesday in the buffer zone, Israeli soldiers set off two land mines.

One soldier was originally said to have suffered slight injuries to his leg. But after he was admitted to Nahariya Hospital, surgeons had to amputate his foot.

A preliminary Israel Defense Force investigation into the incident indicates the cause was not hostile activity but an error by the patrol commander, who led the squad into an area filled with mines set by the Israelis themselves.

Throughout Tuesday there were a series of mortar and artillery exchanges between forces of the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement and the IDF. The exchanges culminated in three air strikes by the Israeli air force, which carried out the third sortie on Hezbollah targets north of the security zone shortly before midnight.

The IDF Northern Command suspended the squad commander whose error led his patrol into the minefield, pending a complete military review.

REBBE'S HEALTH IS DETERIORATING AMID DOUBTS ABOUT HIS TREATMENT

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, Dec. 29 (JTA) -- The Lubavitcher rebbe's health has deteriorated to the point where he is almost completely blinded by cataracts, has lost physical mobility and is a virtual prisoner in his own room, say medical experts involved in his care as consultants.

The worsening health of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson is of deep concern not only to the thousands of his followers in the Lubavitch Chasidic movement, many of whom regard him as a potential Messiah, but also to Jews all over the world who consider the rebbe a Jewish spiritual leader unparalleled in this generation.

The doctors directly involved in the rebbe's care say that the main impediment to his recovery from the massive stroke he suffered 22 months ago is the rebbe himself, who has refused to participate in physical therapy.

But none of them, they admit, wants to force the rebbe to do anything he does not want to do, though stroke patients of lesser stature are regularly told by their doctors what they must do to recover.

This deference to the rebbe's wishes has prompted some of the medical consultants to charge that the rebbe is not receiving the kind of care necessary for his recovery. They note that none of the doctors directly involved in his care is an expert in geriatrics or stroke rehabilitation.

"The longer you wait (to start therapy), the more likely it is that he will die, and you'll never see the rebbe again," said Dr. Jonathan Lief, chief of geriatric medical psychiatry at Hahnemann Hospital in Boston and a supervising consultant to 200 nursing homes.

"You can't just let it go on and on like this," he said.

In a Dec. 4 conference call with Lubavitch shlichim, or emissaries, Lief said he had visited and examined the rebbe several times but had been prohibited from doing so for four months. However, he is in touch with the doctors who care for the rebbe.

A recording of that conference call has been circulated in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, where the rebbe and his Lubavitch movement are based, and was obtained by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

Approach Is To 'Hide The Rebbe'

The problem, say Lief and others, is that Rabbi Leib Groner, one of the rebbe's top aides, is in sole control of access to the rebbe and that no one who disagrees with his philosophy is permitted access to the Lubavitch leader.

"Rabbi Groner told me directly he believes the rebbe should not be allowed in public because he would be an embarrassment to the Chasidim, and he is trying to shelter the rebbe," said Lief.

"In the vacuum of leadership, Rabbi Groner is in essence functioning as the rebbe, making all decisions and not allowing the rebbe any freedom of any kind that I can see. His approach is to hide the rebbe from the world and cover this whole thing up," Lief said during the call.

Repeated attempts to reach Groner for comment were unsuccessful.

In response to the charges made on that tape, one of the doctors who was criticized and is centrally involved in the rebbe's care, Dr. Eli Rosen, a Crown Heights general practitioner, made

his own tape on Dec. 18 and has had it distributed throughout the Brooklyn neighborhood.

Rosen and the other doctors on the team treating the rebbe said that they have done everything medically and therapeutically possible, and that the rebbe's deterioration is due to no one but the rebbe himself.

As far back as two months after his March 3, 1992 stroke, the rebbe began refusing efforts by physical therapists to treat him, they said in the taped conversation.

"The rebbe was in charge. The rebbe worked with who the rebbe wanted to work with," said Rosen. "The limiting factor throughout was the rebbe himself."

When the rebbe indicated that he did not want to continue a therapy session, "none of his Chasidim would ever contradict his opinion, though it may have been necessary," said Dr. Yosef Minkowitz, a Toronto cardiologist who was brought in to work as the coordinator of the rebbe's medical team in early October.

"None of us have the guts," he said during the Dec. 18 taped conversation.

"We dictate to patients in any hospital what needs to be done, but no one here dictates to the rebbe," he said. "No one has the right to dictate to him what needs to be done."

Treatment Based On 'Nods Of His Head'

Rosen defended the way the rebbe was allowed to decline his physical therapy, comparing the protective efforts of the rebbe's secretaries to a child protecting his parent.

"It seems reasonable to me that any child of any parent should be able to protect the parent from a therapist who seemed insensitive to the needs of the parent," he said.

Several others took issue with that approach.

One resident of Crown Heights, said, "The rebbe can't speak, can hardly hear, so how do you know what he's saying? A stroke patient is helpless, so we cannot justify what we are doing to the rebbe medically based on nods of his head," she said.

A big part of the problem is that the Lubavitch community wants to believe that the rebbe is still capable of making his own decisions.

"People in Crown Heights feel basically helpless. People would really rather believe the rebbe is in control through Leibel Groner, and they say if you question what we're saying you're saying that the rebbe is not the rebbe," said the Crown Heights resident.

According to Yaakov Spritzer, a businessman in Crown Heights and a prominent community member, the rebbe knows exactly what's going on.

"Today I would never allow a member of my family to have surgery without his consent, and I consult with him on all major business dealings," said Spritzer.

"Anyone who says differently is basically denying belief in the power of the one we believe to be the Moses of our generation," he said in an interview in his dining room, with a life-size oil portrait of the rebbe looking down over the table.

Said the woman from Crown Heights, "I don't know what will happen. It can't get worse. It's like the rebbe is like a living dead man already. I hope Moshiah comes."