

**U.S. HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT HOPEFUL
ABOUT TALKS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND PLO**

By Deborah Kalb

WASHINGTON, Feb. 1 (JTA) -- In the wake of their historic agreement, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization came in for some unusual praise in the State Department's annual human rights report released this week.

The report, released Tuesday and covering the year 1993, noted that the Israeli-Palestinian agreement, "when implemented, should fundamentally transform the basic relationship between Palestinians and Israelis."

Tim Wirth, the State Department counselor, told reporters Tuesday that he saw "progress" on worldwide human rights issues backed by the United States.

"Efforts by Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk, by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, by the people of Cambodia and the former Soviet Union, confirm the purpose of our commitment," Wirth said.

The human rights report is viewed as a barometer of U.S. attitudes toward human rights practices in countries around the world. This year, 193 countries were covered in the report.

As in previous years, the report was critical of some Israeli human rights practices directed against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

It cited "credible reports" that in 1993, among other things, Israel mistreated and sometimes tortured Palestinian prisoners, ordered administrative detention, and used questionable undercover units "implicated in possible extrajudicial killings."

'Positive Developments'

But this year, with Israelis and Palestinians negotiating the implementation of their agreement, the report had some hopeful words about the future.

It noted other "positive human rights developments" in Israel and the territories in addition to the ramifications of the peace accord.

These developments included the Knesset's decision to eliminate restrictions on PLO membership and Israeli court decisions limiting house demolition orders.

The report also noted that "in 1993 the government began seriously to address imbalances in resource allocations to the Arab sector, especially in education and infrastructure development."

However, the report included some sobering facts on the continuing violence in Israel and the territories since the Israeli-Palestinian agreement was signed.

From October through mid-December, six settlers were killed by Palestinians and eight Palestinians were killed by settlers, the report said.

On another controversial issue, the report noted that Israel's decision last March to close off the West Bank and Gaza from Israel "resulted in restrictions on the numbers of Palestinians able to work in Israel and travel to Jerusalem."

The closure decision was partially eased later in 1993, the report said.

The report cited "credible sources" who reported that in 1993, Israeli undercover units disguised as Palestinians killed 27 Palestinians as of late November, a "significant decrease" from the 1992 figure of 45 such deaths.

On the other hand, the report said that a total of 184 Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces in 1993, up from 158 in 1992.

In response to a question on Palestinian prisoners, Wirth said Tuesday that the report showed "the beginning of a trend toward the release of political prisoners" in the territories.

He added, however, that "there are many more such prisoners to be released."

In Syria, a country closely watched by the American Jewish community, the report said that "there was no basic change in the human rights situation in 1993."

The report said that various Syrian government security services are "responsible for severe human rights violations."

It noted, however, that Syria had made some gestures including easing the system whereby Syrian Jews seek permits to leave the country.

And it said that beginning in mid-December, the Syrian government had accelerated the rate of issuance of permits to Syrian Jews.

John Shattuck, assistant secretary of state for human rights, called this development "quite positive."

"We are monitoring the situation very closely to ensure that all Jews who wish to leave Syria are permitted to do so," Shattuck told reporters Tuesday.

Russia Also Scrutinized

Syria's small Jewish population and other religious minorities are "largely free to practice their religions," the report said.

But it also said that Jews "are under more thorough surveillance by the intelligence services than is the general population," and that Jews were restricted from certain jobs.

The situation facing Jews in turbulent Russia also came in for scrutiny in the report.

The report noted that although "anti-Semitism is no longer condoned by the government," it continues to exist.

"The authorities at times have been unwilling to take action when anti-Semitic acts are committed," the report said.

Overall, the report said that Russia had made "significant progress in recent years," but still had an "uneven" human rights record.

Meanwhile, the report was critical of all sides in the continuing fighting in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but it reserved much of the blame for the Bosnian Serbs.

"In 1993, as in 1992, all national groups were victimized by the conflict, and all sides violated the Geneva conventions," the report said.

"But the BSA (Bosnian Serb armed militia), with Belgrade's complicity, launched the Bosnian conflict through its aggressive ethnic cleansing campaign," the report said.

Many American Jewish groups have been active in the effort to encourage the U.S. government to take stronger actions in Bosnia, because they see parallels between the Serbs' "ethnic cleansing" campaign and the Nazi Holocaust.

ANALYSIS:
FEAR OF 'GAZA-JERICHO ONLY' UNDERLIES SLOW PACE OF ISRAELI-PLO NEGOTIATIONS

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Feb. 1 (JTA) -- The eight-hour meeting between Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres late Saturday night at the Swiss resort of Davos brought glowing reports of progress in the talks between the two sides.

But the continuing routine of setbacks, progress and then again more setbacks in hammering out the details of the Israeli-PLO accord has obscured a broader question:

Why are both sides, but particularly the Palestinians, allowing the original target date of Dec. 13 for Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip to slip further and further into the past?

And why has so much of the debate revolved around questions that are largely symbolic, like the exact size of the area around Jericho from which Israeli troops will withdraw?

After all, Israel is scheduled to begin withdrawing its troops from much of the remainder of the West Bank in July, only three months after any initial changes are supposed to take place in and around Jericho.

The fixation on the current round of negotiations seems to reinforce the thinking current in political circles here that the Gaza-Jericho agreement, originally intended as merely the first stage of the interim autonomy plan, may prove to be the only stage.

This would explain the doggedness with which both Israelis and Palestinians have been negotiating.

And it would explain why the PLO is so determined to obtain as large an area as possible for its Jericho enclave, despite the promise in the Israeli-PLO Declaration of Principles that the status of Jericho would be no different from that of Hebron and Nablus in only a matter of months.

Indeed, among the items apparently agreed to in Davos were an undertaking for joint Israeli-Palestinian tourism projects at the Dead Sea, south of Jericho, and Palestinian access to holy sites beyond the Jericho enclave.

Reports reaching Jerusalem from Cairo this week further corroborated the assessment that full autonomy has dropped off the diplomatic agenda.

According to top Egyptian sources, Arafat is less than committed to hold territories-wide elections for an autonomous governing council, as provided for in the Declaration of Principles.

In conversations with Egyptians, he reportedly replied vaguely when questioned on this point. Asked, for instance, who might run against him in such elections, he pointed, apparently in jest, to his longtime colleague Yasser Abed Rabbo.

In direct contacts with the Israelis, the idea has recently resurfaced of holding, at least as a first step, local or municipal elections rather than the national campaign envisaged in the Declaration of Principles.

At any rate, with all attention focussed on the last, nerve-racking stages of the Gaza-Jericho accord, the prospects for an overall autonomy agreement seem a good deal less promising than they did when the Declaration of Principles itself was signed last September.

Just how close Israel and the PLO are to a signed Gaza-Jericho accord remains an open

question, with diplomatic optimism ranging on a not unfamiliar sliding scale from Arafat to Rabin.

The PLO chairman radiated confidence following his weekend meetings with Peres, telling the world that he expected the agreement to be signed within two weeks.

Peres was slightly more cautious.

Other Israeli officials stressed that while understandings had been reached between Peres and Arafat on major security issues which had been holding up progress, much detailed negotiating still remained on other aspects of the Gaza-Jericho accord.

Rabin himself, after studying the documents emerging from the Davos round, confirmed that progress had certainly been made there. But there was still a long way to go, he stressed, intimating pointedly that the Peres-inspired upbeat reports from Davos had been exaggerated.

Unnamed "defense circles" in Tel Aviv went further, telling reporters that Israeli concessions at Davos, especially in connection with the crossing-points between Jericho and Jordan and between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, could endanger important security interests.

These warnings were quickly denied by Rabin's office. But they, too, added to the confused and fragmented picture.

They added, moreover, to the rumors that Rabin and Peres were at odds over the negotiations. Peres himself told reporters this week that he wanted to consult with Rabin face-to-face before meeting with Arafat again, possibly in Cairo on Sunday.

PERES BRIEFS SECRETARY OF STATE ON HIS RECENT MEETING WITH ARAFAT

By Steven Weiss

WASHINGTON, Feb. 1 (JTA) -- Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres briefed Secretary of State Warren Christopher this week on his talks last weekend with Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat.

In a one-hour session Tuesday afternoon, the two leaders discussed Peres's meeting with Arafat in the Swiss ski resort of Davos, as well as the Middle East peace talks taking place here.

Before his meeting with Christopher, Peres told reporters about the negotiations with Arafat last weekend, saying that the two sides "overcame many of the problems" they have encountered in recent weeks.

Israelis and Palestinians have met with delays in working out the specifics for implementation of last September's self-rule accord, but Christopher sounded upbeat Tuesday about the prospect for eventual success.

For his part, Peres said he looked forward to his upcoming meeting with Arafat next week in Cairo. He would not, however, make any predictions as to when the two would sign an agreement.

"Our meeting today is part of an ongoing coordination in deep friendship between our countries to bring peace to the Middle East," the foreign minister said.

Peres also offered positive words on the recent meeting between President Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad.

"I think the meeting between President Clinton and President Assad gave new life to the momentum of peace between Syria and ourselves," he said. "We would like to have a healthy, fully peaceful Middle East."

GORE SPEAKS OUT AGAINST ANTI-SEMITISM IN ADDRESS TO AMERICAN JEWISH LEADERS

By Mark Joffe

NEW YORK, Feb. 1 (JTA) -- Vice President Al Gore spoke out passionately against anti-Semitism this week, taking issue strongly with a recent speech by an aide to Louis Farrakhan.

"Anti-Semitism has stained our history," Gore said at a tribute dinner here Monday night sponsored by the UJA-Federation of New York. "How can we relax when Louis Farrakhan's lieutenants blame Jews for the Holocaust?"

The vice president was referring to a speech given at Kean College in New Jersey last November by Khalid Abdul Mohammad, a senior official of Farrakhan's Nation of Islam.

In the speech, Muhammad called Jews "the bloodsuckers of the black nation," said they controlled the White House, the media and the Federal Reserve, and said they brought the Holocaust upon themselves.

Gore pointed out that several mainstream black leaders had denounced the speech, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, Rep. Kweisi Mfume (D-Md.). And the vice president called on Farrakhan to do the same.

"America is a tolerant country, but we should not tolerate hatred and racism," he said.

"Jesse Jackson rejects it, The Black Caucus rejects it. Louis Farrakhan should do the same."

But Farrakhan has so far refused to do so. And in a speech of his own last week, the Black Muslim leader appeared to have made matters worse by calling Jews "the most organized, rich and powerful people, not only in America, but the world."

Says Peace Is 'Within Grasp'

"They're plotting against us even as we speak," he was quoted as saying during a New York rally that drew a crowd of 10,000 people.

Gore made his remarks during a tribute dinner for Laurence Tisch, chairman of the board of CBS Inc., and his wife, Wilma "Billie" Tisch, a former president of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York.

Gore also spoke about the Middle East peace process, saying that this is a time when "the peace longed for by generations is within grasp."

Gore said he had found "no moment in my political experience more stirring" than the historic handshake between Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on the White House lawn last September.

The handshake, he said, was a "stunning demarcation line between war and peace, between despair and hope."

Gore defended President Clinton's recent meeting with Syrian President Hafez Assad. He said the Syrian leader had told Clinton that his country had made "a strategic choice for peace with Israel."

"Those words were important," Gore said, adding: "But words alone will not suffice."

The vice president called for an end to the Arab economic boycott of Israel, saying, "We have to demonstrate that when Israel takes risks for peace, the Arab world responds."

He also called on U.S. Jews to support the steps toward peace taken by Israel's government. "The United States and American Jews must stand by Israel in this time of transition," he said.

ITALY'S NEO-FASCISTS TRY TO SOFTEN RIGHTIST POSITIONS TO GAIN SUPPORT

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME, Feb. 1 (JTA) -- Italy's neo-fascists have formally voted to soften some of their traditional far-right positions in an attempt to ditch their jackboot image and win support in crucial general elections two months from now.

Delegates to a national convention this past weekend of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, known by the initials MSI, backed party leader Gianfranco Fini's call to merge with other conservative-right groups into a bloc called the National Alliance Movement.

"Fascist-anti-fascist polemics have disappeared," Fini told the delegates.

"There is no longer ideological anathema. Let's consign fascism to the judgment of history, as should also happen to anti-fascism. The new Italy needs neither penitents nor deniers, but rather a new synthesis which agrees on common values."

These values, he said, should be "freedom, democracy, solidarity, refusal of any dictatorship or totalitarianism, and refusal of any form of racism or discrimination."

The National Alliance already has the support of some marginal conservative groups such as shopkeepers and monarchists, but it is seeking to ally itself with other rightists before the country's general elections, scheduled for March 27-28.

Plans To Form National Alliance

The elections will be the first national poll held under a new, simple-majority electoral system, which effectively forces Italy's numerous small parties to form coalitions.

In the upcoming elections, voters are expected to replace the scandal-tainted Parliament and throw out discredited politicians and parties that have led the country for the past 45 years.

The MSI, founded by followers of the slain fascist dictator Benito Mussolini after World War II, was regarded as an extremist fringe party until it made surprisingly strong gains in local elections held under the new majority system in December.

Jewish leaders here had regarded the MSI threat -- particularly in the Rome and Naples mayoral races -- so dangerous that they had for the first time openly asked voters not to vote for a certain party.

Buoyed by those election results, Fini said he wanted to formally shed MSI's extremist image and form the National Alliance, a move some observers here have compared to the transformation of the former Communists into more mainstream left-wing forces after the collapse of communism.

A reformed MSI would be a key element in any right-wing alliance, although some other rightist leaders refuse to believe that the party has actually changed.

"The fascists remain fascists: they should disappear," Umberto Bossi, leader of the Northern League party, told the daily newspaper L'Indipendente.

The Northern League is a party that advocates some sort of sovereignty for northern Italy for financial reasons, because the industrialized North is far wealthier than southern Italy.

"It's not enough for a party leader to say one fine day 'Now I'm changing everything' for it to really happen," he said.

"Fini is the heir to Mussolini," he said.

**BEHIND THE HEADLINES:
ISRAEL WORKING HARD TO HELP
ALIENATED TEEN-AGE IMMIGRANTS**

By Cynthia Mann

JERUSALEM, Feb. 1 (JTA) -- Increasing numbers of teen-age immigrants are "dropping out" of Israeli society, and the authorities are determined to do something about it.

An estimated 5,000 to 7,000 of the teenagers who have immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union since 1989 are not in school or in any other social framework, and thousands more are at risk of joining them, experts say.

The problem of alienated young immigrants has recently gripped the attention of the Israeli authorities.

The Education Ministry, which has established a division for alienated youth, last year set aside a special budget for what they described as "youth at risk."

Meanwhile, the Immigration and Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency for Israel decided a few weeks ago to make the absorption of these alienated young immigrants one of its highest priorities.

Both the Education Ministry and the Jewish Agency are involved in programs that try to bring the youths back into the system through alternative education, vocational training, preparation for military service and social and cultural activities.

"There is a tremendous potential in this wave of aliyah, especially among the young," said Daniel Pins, director of the Jerusalem region of the Jewish Agency's Immigration and Absorption Department.

"If we can intervene and help prevent them from dropping out of the system, they (will) make a tremendous contribution."

He observed that overcoming "culture shock and prejudice on both sides" is one of the biggest tasks facing everyone involved.

This year, said Pins, the Jewish Agency's absorption coordinators working throughout the country decided to give high priority to the most vulnerable immigrant groups, which include teenagers.

'Always People On The Periphery'

Chaim Lahav is director of the youth advancement department of the Education Ministry, which runs programs for alienated immigrant teens. He fought for more than a year to get a special budget for the vulnerable immigrant teens, arguing that their problems are unique.

Lahav was careful to note that Israel has expended a great deal of effort on the more than 500,000 olim, or immigrants, who have arrived from the former Soviet Union since 1989, including the 85,000 teen-agers among them.

But, he added, "there are always people on the periphery for whom the (general) answers don't apply."

Many youths who do not find themselves in school or within other existing frameworks end up on the streets or in gangs, which function for them as alternative "societies."

Lahav said the Education Ministry has built a new model for working with alienated immigrants that corrects mistakes made during past immigration waves.

In the old model, Lahav said, "no matter where you came from, the past was not important" and "you had to assimilate, to fit in and be Israeli."

It took decades to recognize the mistakes, he said. "You can't throw away (the immigrants') background. We're now asking the Moroccans to sing their songs, which we didn't want to hear" when they came in the 1950s.

"In the new model," said Lahav, there is room for "pluralism. There is a legitimation of different cultures."

There are many reasons some teen-age olim do not fit in at Israeli schools, said Lahav. Many come from families that were already transient before they emigrated, and whose education was therefore disrupted before they arrived in Israel.

Others come from subcultures in which education is not as important as family obligations, and as a result students miss school for long stretches of time.

Falling behind because of the language gap is another big problem, said Lahav.

But the biggest problem, he said, is "the combination of the trauma of immigration and adolescence."

At a time when "they need to know where they are and where they're going," he said, immigrant teens have "lost their environment, their culture, their language, their friends."

Parents Have Their Own Traumas

And, to make matters worse, he said, "their parents cannot be their anchors" because they are going through their own trauma.

The Jewish Agency has 90 absorption coordinators working throughout Israel. Many of them dispense services from within the municipal government structure.

The Jewish Agency also provides seed money to special municipal youth projects funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Zionist Forum and other immigrant societies.

Hana Ofek is an absorption coordinator in Netanya. Last summer she helped launch a program for 373 teen-age dropouts in Netanya who had been identified by the Education Ministry.

Most could not compete in school, had problems integrating with Israelis, were from families with special difficulties and had "no one to take care of them," she said. "They were wandering the streets, working in the shouk (or market), or on the beach."

The goal was to determine the youths' needs and try to put them in a framework that would aid their integration in Israeli society, she said.

That can mean psychological evaluation, individual tutoring that enables them to return to school, vocational training and social clubs, where they have a chance to engage in sports and interact with other Israeli youths.

There are also programs to prepare the teens to serve in the army, which will not accept anyone who does not have basic educational certification, Ofek said.

"In Israel, serving in the army is very important," she said. "If you're not accepted, regardless of the reasons, you'll have problems all your life."

"The fundamental question is, do we want aliyah?" asked Ofek. "It's not enough to think it's important for the Jewish nation. If we want them (the immigrants), we must do something to accept them."

"If we try to force our views on someone without listening, nothing will happen except confrontation," she said. "The newcomers have brought so much with them and they need a chance to give."