



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ With the House of Representatives scheduled to begin full-scale debate on welfare reform, Jewish activists are feverishly lobbying to protect immigrants from losing all access to welfare. Many Jewish groups fear that local Jewish communities will be forced to step in to fill the void if the tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants who collect welfare are thrown off the rolls. [Page 1]

■ U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher reportedly secured more than \$100 million in previously pledged assistance for the Palestinians from the leaders of the Persian Gulf states. Christopher met with Gulf leaders in Saudi Arabia in advance of his visit to Damascus. Syria accused the United States of being biased toward Israel and said there was little hope of a breakthrough in the long-stalled Israeli-Syrian talks. [Page 4]

■ Israel lifted its monthlong blockade of Lebanese ports, apparently as a peace gesture to U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher. The Israeli government had imposed the blockade in retaliation for what it called the Lebanese government's harassment of residents living in the southern security zone who supported Israeli efforts to drive the Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement from the area.

■ A Jewish Agency emissary in Ukraine was allegedly killed after he squabbled with a neighbor over the playing of loud music and was apparently knocked down a flight of stairs. [Page 3]

■ Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Jordan's Crown Prince Hassan held talks in Amman about financing dams to be built on the Yarmouk and Jordan rivers. The discussions focused on coordinating Jordanian and Israeli positions in anticipation of a request to the European Union to finance the projects.

■ British Prime Minister John Major arrived in Israel on the first leg of a four-day regional visit that will include talks in Jordan and Gaza. Major was accompanied by business leaders — a reflection, he said, of his country's interest in improving bilateral business relations with Israel.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jewish groups fight uphill battle to retain welfare for immigrants

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, March 12 (JTA) — Hundreds of thousands of Jews who came to America from the former Soviet Union, and thousands more seeking to immigrate, will lose their financial safety net if Congress continues its assault on the nation's newcomers, Jewish activists say.

With Congress' budget ax set to slash welfare for legal immigrants, many Jewish activists are fighting what they know is an uphill battle to retain the programs that allow many Jewish families to bring their relatives to live in the United States.

In addition to cutting the safety net that assures future security, the legislation weaving its way through Capitol Hill signals a more immediate threat for the tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants who now collect welfare benefits.

Despite intensive lobbying over the past few months, Jewish activists have already lost round one. Last week, three House committees, including the House Ways and Means Committee, approved separate versions of the Personal Responsibility Act, the most sweeping welfare reform proposal to be seriously debated in decades.

The House leadership is working to combine the three versions into one bill, which the House is then scheduled to begin debating March 20.

Reforming welfare is one of the central tenets of the Republicans' Contract With America. The entire House plans to vote on the measure before April 14, the 100th day of the new Congress.

For many Jewish activists, the welfare debate reaches beyond the immediate concerns over the impact such proposals would have on Jewish immigrants and the Jewish poor. It also reaches to the core of traditional Jewish views of society.

These battles are decidedly Jewish issues, said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism.

"Jewish tradition cares about protecting God's children," Saperstein said in recent testimony to a House Ways and Means subcommittee. "The reforms would be devastating to Americans and to so many Jews."

'An affirmative obligation to help the poor'

In a 24-page pamphlet on welfare reform, leaders of the American Jewish Congress agreed.

"Judaism includes a strong commitment to the attainment of economic justice and insists that every person, as an individual and as a member of society, has an affirmative obligation to both prevent poverty and to help the poor," wrote Flora Perskie and Martin Hochbaum, co-chairs of the AJCongress Commission on National Affairs.

Amid the overall concern for the poor, however, Jewish activists have been mostly focused on the legislation's impact on immigrants. Many in the Jewish organizational world are concerned that local communities will be forced to fill the void when Jewish immigrants who now receive welfare are forced off the rolls.

"The implications are mind-boggling," said Joel Carp, senior vice president of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. "In no possible way can any federation in any city replace the long-term public assistance programs."

Jewish communities across the country would face an unparalleled crisis, activists say, if states kick unemployed, elderly and disabled refugees off the welfare rolls if they do not become citizens within five years.

The overwhelming majority of Jews who come to the United States each year from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe enter the country as refugees. Thousands more come from Iran. An estimated 30,000 Jews are expected to come to the United States from the former Soviet Union this year alone.

Although refugees are considered immigrants under American law, they are afforded special benefits because they are presumed to be fleeing a "well-founded fear of persecution."

The House of Representative's bill would limit refugees to five years

of benefits and immediately slash all other immigrants from the welfare rolls. Only refugees older than 75 and those who become citizens would remain eligible to collect welfare.

"Punishing those who followed the rules and came here legally is not the answer to problems we face in our communities and in our country," Diana Aviv, director of the Washington office of the Council of Jewish Federations, recently told a House Ways and Means subcommittee.

Aviv has been leading the organized Jewish community's coordinated opposition to the reform proposal.

But some Republican Jewish activists support the initiative.

"My grandparents came to this country with pennies in their pockets, not speaking the language and never turned to the government for help," said Matthew Brooks, executive director of the National Jewish Coalition, a Republican group.

Carp of Chicago vehemently disagreed.

"That experience was so wonderful," he said sardonically, referring to the early immigrants to this country, "that Congress created this program" to provide special assistance for refugees.

While honest debate continues over the merits of extending benefits to legal immigrants, activists say there is little question that ending the aid would devastate immigrants and refugees alike who have become accustomed to the federal cash-assistance programs.

Activists estimate that tens of thousands of Jewish refugees now collect welfare benefits. No state or Jewish organization tracks the number of refugees who collect welfare after their first year in the country.

Some 1.4 million immigrants collect welfare

According to the General Accounting Office, the congressional watchdog agency, 1.4 million legal immigrants, including refugees, were collecting welfare assistance either through Supplemental Security Income or Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1993.

The study also shows that immigrants are nearly twice as likely to collect welfare than citizens. The GAO found that 6 percent of legal immigrants in the United States receive cash welfare, compared with 3.4 percent of citizens. Nonetheless, the total number of immigrants on welfare remains significantly lower than the number of citizens.

Jewish activists say privately that the study has hurt their quest to preserve benefits for immigrants. They add that the study is misleading because refugees are counted as legal immigrants. Government policy, they explain, assumes that refugees will receive special assistance, which, according to the study, is classified as welfare when they first arrive in the country.

Reform proponents argue that five years is sufficient for refugees to become citizens, at which point they would then have equal access to welfare, in whatever form it may exist.

"Five years is a long time to be able to integrate into society," said Brooks, the Republican Jewish activist. "It's a luxury that our ancestors didn't have."

Activists counter that five years is not enough time to become a citizen.

Immigration and Naturalization Service offices across the country have monthlong backlogs for citizenship applications.

Over the last several months, since the welfare reform debate began, Jewish refugees have been seeking to speed up the process of becoming U.S. citizens, according to Jewish communal officials.

The refugees have been flooding local INS offices as well as citizenship assistance programs provided by local Jewish communities.

Activists point out that older and disabled refugees have more difficulty meeting the eligibility requirements because of language barriers and immobility.

Despite the rush to cut money from the welfare program, special benefits given to refugees when they arrive in America remain unscathed so far in Congress.

For the first eight months, a combination of federal and Jewish communal assistance programs provide refugees with housing, food, clothing and basic furniture.

For the employable refugees, additional assistance is provided for English-language and job-training classes. These refugees, though eligible for food stamps and health care, cannot qualify for welfare during this period.

In contrast to the employable refugees, the disabled and elderly generally go directly onto welfare, where they can receive supplemental security income checks, which provide a maximum monthly cash benefit of \$458.

Although refugees older than 75 would not be affected by the proposed legislation, those older or disabled refugees younger than 75 could be most adversely affected by the plan because of the physical limitations on their ability to become citizens.

With debate on Capitol Hill slated to continue through the end of March, some activists have thrown in the towel on the House and have begun to focus their energies on the Senate. □

Party officials agree to readmit Ramon and followers to Labor fold

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, March 12 (JTA) — Israel's Labor Party agreed last week to readmit to its ranks Haim Ramon and his supporters, who seceded from Labor last year.

The decision was approved by a large majority at a session of Labor's executive in Tel Aviv on March 9.

The decision was considered particularly significant because it comes amid a new flurry of rumors that Ramon may challenge Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin for the party leadership and prime ministerial candidacy in next year's general elections. Ramon, the leader of the Histadrut labor federation and a Knesset member, last week flatly and repeatedly denied the rumors.

After the Labor executive's decision, Ramon said formal negotiations would now begin between his group and Labor. A final reconciliation is not expected until the fall.

Ramon, a former minister of health in the Rabin government, quit the Labor Party last year after the government refused to back his program of health reform measures.

Ramon and his supporters, along with members of the left-wing Meretz bloc, had formed a new list, "Ram," to run in last year's elections for the Histadrut leadership.

Overturning decades of Labor's leadership of Histadrut, Ramon won the elections for the top spot in the labor federation. A central plank of Ram's platform was the need to root out entrenched corruption in the union movement, particularly the alleged widespread use of Histadrut funds for non-union purposes.

This week, during a blaze of media publicity, the police disclosed ongoing sweeping investigations into these allegations, which reportedly involved some of the top figures of the previous, Labor-led administration of the Histadrut.

Political observers believe that the scandal, which is expected to drag on for many months, could weaken or even cripple the Labor Party. □

Latest ruling on Kiryas Joel divides Satmar, other groups

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, March 12 (JTA) — Mainstream Jewish groups are once again pitted against Satmar Chasidim, this time over a New York State Supreme Court ruling that the Kiryas Joel public school district is constitutional.

Satmar leaders of the Orange County, N.Y., village celebrated the court's March 8 decision, which allows for publicly funded education for 260 disabled children in a school district that is within the village and attended only by Satmar children.

But legal experts at major Jewish organizations expressed disappointment.

The decision by the state's high court is "terribly misguided," said Samuel Rabinove, legal director at the American Jewish Committee.

The "sole purpose" of the Satmar school district "is to perpetuate the fusion of governmental and religious authority," he said. "And that is plainly unconstitutional. We hope this decision will be reversed."

The court's decision "encourages subterfuge," said Marc Stern, co-director of the American Jewish Congress' legal department, "because it allows lawmakers to pretend that they are designing a statute that is ostensibly religiously neutral but in reality is designed to aid only a particular faith."

The Kiryas Joel Village School District was created by the New York state Legislature in 1989 to allow Satmar children to remain in the village while continuing to get a publicly financed education. Satmar parents had argued that sending their children for special education at public schools outside their insular community subjected their children to ridicule because they speak and dress differently.

Louis Grumet, the executive director of the New York State School Boards Association, challenged the constitutionality of the school district in the courts.

The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in his favor in June 1994. The law carving out the school district, the court said, was unconstitutional because it violated the separation of church and state.

In response to the Supreme Court's decision, then-Gov. Mario Cuomo and the New York state Legislature quickly passed a new statute that allowed for the Satmar school district. In order to comply with the Supreme Court's concerns that the previous law had favored the Jewish district, the new law was carefully worded to allow any group to secede and form a new public school district if it met certain criteria.

Grumet again brought suit, losing the first round last week in the New York high court, which is the state's lowest full-jurisdiction court.

The American Jewish Congress was the only Jewish group to sign onto the case, with a friend-of-the-court brief backing Grumet's position.

It is not yet clear whether Grumet will appeal. □

Jewish Agency emissary killed in Ukraine during altercation

By Uriel Masad

TEL AVIV, March 12 (JTA) — A Jewish Agency emissary in Ukraine was killed over the weekend after he allegedly squabbled with a neighbor about the playing of loud music.

Shimon Feingold, a 49-year-old married father of two, died in Kiev on Saturday.

His death did not occur as a result of anti-Semitic motives, said Yoseph Tropiansky, head of Jewish Agency operations in Ukraine.

According to agency reports, Feingold was in his fifth-floor apartment Saturday afternoon, when he heard loud music and noise from an upstairs floor.

Shortly after he went upstairs to ask the neighbors to turn down the music, Feingold's wife, Chava, heard yells followed by a loud bang.

She rushed out to find her husband lying on the steps with a serious bleeding injury to the head.

Attempts to revive Feingold failed, and he died soon after.

A fight had apparently broken out between Feingold and his neighbors, during which Feingold was allegedly pushed down the stairs to his death.

After the incident, the neighbors fled the apartment, but Kiev police tracked them down and were questioning them.

Feingold's autopsy showed that he had received a powerful blow to the jaw prior to his fall.

In Jerusalem, Avraham Burg, acting chairman of the Jewish Agency, expressed shock and deep sorrow over the tragic death and contacted the family to convey his condolences.

He called a special meeting of Jewish Agency officials Sunday to discuss the incident and its ramifications.

Feingold had arrived in Kiev last year for a two-year stint representing the Youth Department of the agency.

He was working with pupils, organizing summer camps and youth clubs.

Feingold's body was scheduled to be flown to Israel on Monday, and the funeral was to take place later in the day at Kibbutz Hazerim, near Beersheba, where the family had lived. □

Spy petitions Israeli court, says illness justifies freedom

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, March 12 (JTA) — An Israeli scientist convicted of spying for the former Soviet Union has once again asked to be set free because of his poor health.

Marcus Klingberg, 77, recently filed a petition in the Beersheba District Court in which he asked the court to recommend to Police Minister Moshe Shahal that he be released after serving 12 years of his 20-year sentence.

After a five-hour hearing, the court decided to render its finding at a later time.

Klingberg, who had been deputy head of the Biological Institute in Ness Ziona, disappeared in the early 1980s. Two years ago, media organizations reported the reason for his disappearance, saying he had been convicted of spying for the former Soviet Union.

The news reports said the Russian-born epidemics expert had been charged with passing on information about germ warfare to the Russians.

Last summer, Klingberg, who is being held in the Ashkelon prison, appealed his sentence.

Klingberg had suffered a stroke, and said a release was warranted because of his deteriorating state of health and because he had already served two-thirds of his sentence.

"I am very weak," he had written, "and am asking that you let me spend what's left of my life with my family."

The parole board rejected that appeal, saying Klingberg still represents a threat to state security. □

Christopher secures aid to PLO as part of Mideast peace mission

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, March 12 (JTA) — Continuing his efforts to advance the Middle East peace process, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher has secured long-promised financial help for the Palestinian Authority from the Persian Gulf states.

Christopher's visit to Saudi Arabia on Sunday followed a series of meetings last week with Israeli and Palestinian leaders aimed at advancing their long-stalled negotiations. The Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, had pledged more than \$100 million in financial assistance for the Palestinians last year.

But they reportedly had not officially turned over the money until Christopher's visit during the weekend with leaders of six Gulf states.

At his meeting in the Saudi Red Sea port of Jeddah, Christopher also reportedly pressed the Gulf nations to end the Arab boycott of Israel. At a news conference after the meeting, Bahrain's foreign minister, Mohammed al-Khalifa, said all the Gulf states had implemented legislation to terminate sanctions against countries trading with Israel.

Christopher told the news conference that he thought that the entire Arab League would lift the boycott against Israel itself "someday."

His wording was less optimistic than last November, when he predicted the move would take place soon.

Christopher's visit to the Middle East — his first effort at shuttle diplomacy in the region this year — began with a visit to Egypt on March 7.

He arrived in Israel two days later to the news that Israel and the Palestinians had earlier in the day agreed to set a new target date of July 1 for completing talks on an Israeli redeployment in the West Bank.

Agreement described as a breakthrough

The agreement, which came at a meeting between Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Palestine Liberation Organization, was described by Peres as a breakthrough.

Peres told Israel Television last Friday that secret talks with the Palestinians had broken the deadlock in their negotiations. Both sides had agreed to a gradual withdrawal of Israeli troops in the West Bank and a transfer of responsibilities to the Palestinians, Peres said.

But Saturday, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and other Palestinian leaders denied that there had been any breakthrough with Israel, saying that fundamental differences remained.

Arafat met with Christopher last Friday to discuss the ongoing negotiations with Israel, which have been stalled in the wake of repeated terror attacks against Israelis by Islamic fundamentalist groups opposed to the peace process.

After his talks with Arafat, Christopher said he had received assurances that the Palestinian Authority would take new measures to "pre-empt terror."

"Gaza cannot be a safe haven" for terrorists, Christopher said. "There are important steps that can be taken."

Arafat maintained that his forces had prevented 10 terrorist attacks and that the suspects are in jail. The PLO leader pledged cooperation in the battle against terror, but cautioned that he had no "magic stick" to prevent further attacks.

During their meeting, Christopher outlined new American aid for the Palestinian Authority. He said the aid would include 200 surplus trucks and the dispatch of teams

from the Defense and Agriculture departments for advice on medical, humanitarian and agricultural needs.

In addition to his meetings last week with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Peres, Christopher met with President Ezer Weizman and Likud opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu.

Meanwhile, hours before the Christopher-Arafat meeting last Friday, Israel lifted its monthlong blockade of Lebanese ports.

The blockade had been imposed since Feb. 8. Israel had said the blockade was in retaliation for the Lebanese government's harassment of residents living in the southern security zone who supported Israeli efforts to drive the Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement from the area.

According to Army Radio, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin lifted the blockade as a gesture to Christopher's ongoing peace efforts.

Christopher left Saudi Arabia on Sunday to fly to Damascus, where he was scheduled to meet with Syrian President Hafez Assad about the long-stalled negotiations with Israel. He was expected to return to Israel on Monday to brief Israeli officials on his talks with the Syrian leader.

According to local news reports, Israeli officials expected that Syria would agree to resume the ambassadorial and high-level military talks in Washington that were suspended by Assad in December.

But the Syrian media indicated that Christopher should not expect Assad to make any concessions to Israel.

The Syrian daily A-Thawra condemned what it called the United States' "absolute support of Israel" and said the Americans had yet to prove that they are fair and impartial mediators.

Rabin said after his meeting last week with Christopher that Israel is committed to and capable of peace with Damascus.

At the same time, a political source quoted by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz said Rabin does not feel a "sense of urgency" about negotiations with Damascus.

However, Peres called for an intensive effort to reach a political solution with Syria before the 1996 elections.

In a television interview, Peres said, "We have 20 months until the elections. The feeling that time is running out, and that perhaps there is a risk of losing peace, obligates us to concentrate our efforts to advance the peace."

Peres said Israel had analyzed the Syrian position and had concluded that "alongside the Syrian stubbornness, there is an inclination to make progress." □

Minister, mayor reveal plans for Jerusalem 3000 celebration

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM, March 12 (JTA) — Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert and Tourism Minister Uzi Baram unveiled plans last week for Jerusalem 3000, a gala of events commemorating the third millennium since the city was declared the capital of Israel by King David.

The 15-month program of international cultural events, exhibitions and fairs is set to begin in September 1995.

Events will include theater productions, a gospel music celebration and performances by leading orchestras, including the Berlin State Opera and the Pittsburgh Symphony.

Olmert said those planning the celebrations would try to appeal to Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. He noted that even though the future status of Jerusalem is a matter of debate, its past is not. "The celebrations are not going to be a political event," the mayor said. □