

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher elicited an agreement from Israeli and Syrian leaders to resume their peace negotiations in Washington.** Christopher said the talks, which had been suspended by Syrian President Hafez Assad in December, would resume within the next several days. The development came as Christopher wrapped up a week of shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East.

■ **Conoco, the major American oil company, canceled its \$1 billion energy deal with Iran.** The move, which came as President Clinton was set to issue an executive order halting the deal, drew praise from Jewish groups and averted an anticipated showdown between Edgar Bronfman and the board of directors of Du Pont, Conoco's parent company. [Page 1]

■ **Cardinal William Keeler met with Jewish groups in the wake of a controversial statement, in which church leaders called on President Clinton to pressure Israel to limit its presence in Jerusalem.** Jewish leaders left the meeting not satisfied that Christian groups were sensitive to Jewish concerns on Jerusalem. [Page 2]

■ **A Texas judge declared the Religious Freedom Restoration Act unconstitutional.** A Jewish legal scholar said the decision was "scary" for the future of the legislation, but it was too early to "sound the alarm bells." [Page 3]

■ **A general strike was observed throughout Lebanon to protest 17 years of Israeli presence in the country.** Israeli planes flying over Lebanon drew fire from Lebanese and Hezbollah forces. [Page 4]

■ **British Prime Minister John Major pledged \$11 million to help Palestinian self-rule.** The pledge came as Major wrapped up his first visit to the Jewish state. [Page 4]

■ **Israeli and Palestinian officials reconvened in Cairo for negotiations on Palestinian elections in the territories.** Chief Israeli negotiator Yoel Singer said he expected talks to enter high gear, but Palestinian Saeb Erekat, expressed disappointment with the pace of the negotiations.

Conoco decision draws praise, averts showdown with Bronfman

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, March 14 (JTA) — Under the threat of a presidential order and dissent within its own parent company, Conoco, the major American oil company, has canceled a \$1 billion deal with Iran.

The move drew praise from Jewish groups and averted an anticipated showdown between Edgar Bronfman and the board of directors of Du Pont, Conoco's parent company.

Bronfman, along with his brother Charles and son Edgar, holds a controlling interest in the Seagram's company, which owns 24.3 percent of Du Pont, which in turn owns Conoco Inc., the Houston-based oil company.

Bronfman, a leading Jewish philanthropist and president of the World Jewish Congress, stood to gain hundreds of millions of dollars from the deal.

Instead, he led the charge to scuttle the agreement on Capitol Hill and within the administration.

In visits to Capitol Hill last week, Bronfman had signaled he would "do everything he can" to block the deal when it came before the Du Pont board, according to legislative aides who attended the meetings.

Sources close to Bronfman said if "push came to shove, he had the support" to kill the deal.

As Clinton was poised to sign an executive order banning U.S. companies from entering into contracts for the financing, supervision or management of oil development projects in Iran, Conoco announced it would abandon its deal signed March 6.

Under the agreement, Conoco was to have built two off-shore rigs and natural gas lines for Iran.

A face-saving way out of the agreement

The president's executive order, according to the Capitol Hill staffers, essentially gave Conoco a face-saving way to bow out of the agreement with the National Iranian Oil Company.

Conoco called off the deal in a terse, three-paragraph statement released Tuesday by Constantine Nicandros, vice chairman of Du Pont and president and CEO of Conoco.

"Du Pont and Conoco pride themselves on being good corporate citizens in the United States as well as around the world. As a result, Conoco will not proceed with the agreement," the statement said.

The Du Pont board would not have approved the deal if the U.S. government opposed the agreement, Nicandros said.

"If I were a professor of ethics at the Harvard Business School, I would use this as a case study of how a chairman of a company should behave," Israel Singer, secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress, said, referring to Bronfman's actions.

Although Clinton's move will ban development in Iran, U.S. companies can continue to export oil from the Persian Gulf state to Europe and Asia. American companies exported more than \$3.5 billion worth of oil from Iran last year. In addition, U.S. companies exported over \$210 million worth of goods to Iran last year.

Meanwhile, Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) is forging ahead with his proposed legislation that would tighten the loophole that allowed Conoco to sign the deal with Iran in the first place.

The legislation would ban all trade between Iran and U.S. companies as well as their overseas affiliates.

"Right now the embargo is a myth. We should be ashamed of ourselves for helping Iran secure \$3.5 billion in hard currency," D'Amato said at a news conference.

D'Amato, who has scheduled hearings on the measure for Thursday, praised the president's decision.

"The president's executive order was the right thing and I am pleased to see that Conoco made the decision themselves," he said.

Many Jewish organizations, which had been quick to condemn the Conoco deal, offered praise Tuesday for Clinton's order and Conoco's decision.

"This sends an important message and we welcome Conoco's

decision," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

"We hope that European countries will see that the U.S. is acting on principles and strategic interests and that they ought to do the same," said Hoenlein on Tuesday during a visit to Washington.

He said he and other Conference of Presidents members "heard a very clear message of universal opposition from congressional leaders and senior administration officials" during their lobbying day.

Calling the president's order an "important tool," the Anti-Defamation League said in a statement, "This action enhances U.S. credibility in urging other nations to deny Iran financial assistance or other support for its aggressive and incendiary foreign policy."

Several Jewish groups are supporting D'Amato's bill. Without such measures, "the United States helps support state-sanctioned terrorism which targets the U.S. and its closest allies, including Israel and Egypt," said Phil Baum, executive director of the American Jewish Congress.

Passing this legislation would "demonstrate to the world that stopping terrorism is more important for the United States than making profitable oil deals," Baum said. □

Jews leave meeting with Catholics unhappy with stance on Jerusalem

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, March 14 (JTA) — Jewish interfaith leaders felt apprehensive this week after leaving a meeting with Cardinal William Keeler, the ranking Catholic official in the United States.

The meeting was hastily arranged after Keeler and other Christian leaders released a statement last week calling on the Clinton administration to press Israel to limit its presence in Jerusalem.

The statement set off a storm of protest from Jewish groups and Israeli leaders.

Although Jewish participants described the meeting as constructive, they did not feel satisfied that the cardinal and other Christian leaders understood the sensitivity of the issue in the Jewish community.

The statement signed by Keeler and other church leaders caused "potential damage" to the relationship between Catholics and Jews, said Michael Kotzin, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Chicago.

From the top levels of the hierarchy to the grass roots, the Catholic-Jewish relationship is described by Jews as being the best interreligious or interethnic relationship in the country.

The problems with Keeler have to do with both his "method and the substance" of the statement, said Kotzin, who participated in the March 13 meeting at the cardinal's residence in Baltimore.

His statement "set up a sense that the Catholic community has become a kind of counterpart advocacy group for the Palestinian position," Kotzin said.

"Given the relationship we've had with them on this, it implied a troubling switch. And given the openness of exchange we have, it seemed violated by this method. [The statement] put at risk the confidence of our maintaining dialogue as we've had it," said Kotzin.

Keeler, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, has long had a close relationship with representatives of several Jewish groups.

Several of the Jewish participants said the meeting would serve to strengthen the dialogue and consultation process that has taken place between the American Catholic and Jewish communities for several years. □

"It was a constructive meeting," said Rabbi Leon Klenicki, director of interfaith affairs for the Anti-Defamation League. "It was beneficial for Cardinal Keeler to realize how important Jerusalem is for us."

According to Jerome Chanes, co-director for domestic concerns at the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, "The substance [of the disagreement with Keeler], although serious, is probably less important than the process" of working through the disagreement.

"The whole premise of Catholic-Jewish relations in recent years has been the consultative process that has been taken seriously by both sides," Chanes said.

"The surprise here was that on a statement which is clearly on some of the most sensitive issues and has the potential to damage the peace process, there was no prior consultation," he said. "We feel that at this meeting we were able to work through that prospectively, with an eye to the future."

NJCRAC, an umbrella group representing national Jewish organizations and local community relations councils, initiated the meeting with Keeler after reading the statement he signed last week.

The eight Christian leaders who signed the statement criticized Israel's assertion that Jerusalem will remain the "eternal and undivided capital of Israel." They further accused Israel of violating international law by expanding Jewish settlements in Jerusalem.

Jewish leaders received no warning

Asserting that the "future of Jerusalem is open to peaceful negotiations," the church leaders called on Clinton to use his influence "to prevent this issue from being settled by force of events or the creation of facts on the ground."

Its signatories, who also included Edmond Browning, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, and Bishop Herbert Chilstrom of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, asked to meet with President Clinton about the issue.

There is a tacit agreement between Catholics and Jews engaged in dialogue. Before either group issues a position on an issue considered sensitive by the other, that group will consult, or at least warn, its dialogue partner about the impending announcement.

This time, Jews who have had warm relations with Keeler for decades did not even get a warning about the statement he was planning to issue about Jerusalem, an issue at the heart of Jewish concerns and passions.

"It's a fundamental issue of importance to the Jewish people," said Rabbi A. James Rudin, director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, and a participant in the meeting with Keeler.

"There was bewilderment and surprise and sadness" on the part of Jews that the cardinal took the position he did, Rudin said. "We're looking forward to clarifications from the cardinal," he added.

Other Jewish participants in the meeting said the lack of communication about the statement beforehand "reinforces a sense of skepticism about the dialogue that people in our community have," Kotzin said.

Kotzin, who represents a community with several ongoing Catholic-Jewish dialogues, will shortly leave for a trip to Israel, to accompany Chicago's archbishop, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, on the cardinal's first visit to the Holy Land.

Eugene Fisher, associate director of the bishops conference's Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, said Keeler's support of the statement about Jerusalem was a reflection of "increasingly urgent concerns in the Christian community which need to be put in the public forum in this country." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES (Part 2 of 2)

Jews not adversely affected by affirmative action policy

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK, March 14 (JTA) — In light of the renewed debate over affirmative action, Jewish activists have asked the question: Have Jews been directly affected by race-conscious hiring and admissions policies?

The answer is yes — but whether the impact has been positive or negative depends on whom you ask.

In the early 1970s, Jewish social scientist Seymour Martin Lipset predicted that Jewish women would be among affirmative action's chief beneficiaries.

He seems to have been right.

Though not quantified through any scientific study, it has become almost axiomatic that affirmative action has been good for women. In fact, Jewish women may have benefited more than other women because the average Jewish woman has attained a higher educational level than the average white woman, which has positioned Jewish women well for competitive positions.

"Women's understanding is that it helps us as women," said writer and political activist Letty Cottin Pogrebin. "We don't think in terms of quotas, but in terms of goals."

According to Norman Podhoretz, editor-in-chief of Commentary and an outspoken opponent of affirmative action, the fact that "Jewish women have benefited from affirmative action has made up for whatever losses were suffered by Jewish men."

"But that's not a positive outcome," Podhoretz said. "It's a lie to say that it's been a boon to Jewish women. I don't think affirmative action has had any positive effects. It's poisoned relations between the races and between the sexes."

The first legal challenges to affirmative action that galvanized the Jewish community, in the DeFunis and Bakke cases of the mid-1970s, related to admission to graduate schools.

Although Jewish opposition was most widespread in those cases, observers say that Jews have not suffered as a group from affirmative action policies being applied in schools.

"Undoubtedly, Jews haven't made it to Harvard or Yale or Columbia law and medical schools because some seats are reserved for blacks, though the schools would deny it," said Marc Stern, co-director of the American Jewish Congress' Commission on Law and Social Action.

Appalachian males may have complaint

"God knows that there are enough Jewish doctors and lawyers around that it looks foolish to complain about it.

"On scholarships there are dollars that don't go to Jews but among whites, Appalachian males probably have a bigger complaint about that," said Stern.

The only area in which Jews may have lost out as a result of affirmative action is in civil service.

"Jews almost constituted a bit of an establishment years ago in public school systems and welfare departments," said Murray Friedman, author of the recently published book, "What Went Wrong? The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance."

"Jews dominated the government social welfare field and were replaced, not with ease. It's been harsh at times," he said.

Public "schools have become black, so the concept of having black principals in big cities where Jews had constituted a kind of establishment" has become accepted, said Friedman.

"Set-asides have become routine and accepted as part of a civil rights strategy.

"It's become accepted without much challenge anymore," he said.

According to Stern, "Jews in the lower ranks of civil service have paid a real price for affirmative action. Elsewhere there are no fields [that] Jews have been knocked out of." □

Religious Freedom Act ruled unconstitutional by Texas court

By Jennifer Batog

WASHINGTON, March 14 (JTA) — In a decision that could threaten the future of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a Texas judge has declared the legislation unconstitutional.

Arguing that Congress did not have the authority to enact the legislation known as RFRA, U.S. District Court Judge Lucius Bunton has taken the first step in a case involving a church in San Antonio.

Last week's ruling is the first to label the act unconstitutional.

Enacted by Congress in 1993, RFRA requires local, state and federal governments to show a compelling interest before interfering with the practice of religion, whether inadvertently or intentionally.

Supported by a wide coalition of religious organizations, including Jewish groups, the legislation was passed to counter a 1990 Supreme Court decision that said as long as government action did not target religion specifically, it did not have to show a compelling interest before intervening in religious matters.

Bunton argued that the law violates the role of Congress and the courts as defined by the Constitution.

The court is "convinced of Congress' violation of the doctrine of Separation of Powers by intruding on the power and duty of the judiciary" through RFRA, Bunton said in his six-page decision issued Monday.

In the Texas case, Flores vs. City of Boerne, San Antonio's Archbishop P.F. Flores wanted to expand a church in Boerne's historic district. A landmark preservation ordinance, which required city approval for changes in that area, blocked the effort.

The archbishop challenged the law based on RFRA. The city responded by challenging the act's constitutionality.

Although the U.S. District Court of the Western District of Texas ruled on one aspect of the case, other issues are still pending before it will be closed, said Marc Stern, co-director of the legal department of the American Jewish Congress.

The plaintiff has appealed the judge's decision, and RFRA proponents hope it will be overturned in federal appeals court.

President Clinton, who supports RFRA, announced that the administration will join in the appeal in the Texas case, Michael McCurry, White House spokesman, said Wednesday.

The case bears watching because it could lead to the eradication of RFRA, Stern said. "There won't be a RFRA if this case is upheld," he said. "It might well be the case that determines RFRA's constitutionality."

Stern called Bunton's decision "scary," but cautioned that it was too early to "sound the alarm bells" because about 11 other RFRA cases are pending throughout the country.

Only one other decision has been handed down so far and that one ruled in favor of RFRA, he said. In that case, the U.S. District Court for the District of Hawaii said that Congress does have the power to enact RFRA. □

British prime minister vows additional aid for Palestinians*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM, March 14 (JTA) — British Prime Minister John Major has vowed to increase business ties with Israel and to pump additional aid into the cash-strapped Palestinian Authority.

Major pledged support for the peace partners during a visit to the region this week.

During a visit to Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat's headquarters in Gaza City on Tuesday, Major pledged \$11 million to the Palestinians.

Of the total aid pledged, \$3 million would be designated for U.N. relief efforts in the self-rule areas and \$8 million for Palestinian infrastructure and training projects, he said.

Major was the second head of state to visit Gaza since Palestinian self-rule was launched last May. Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller visited in November.

His visit to Israel marked only the second by a British head of state. Margaret Thatcher toured the country in 1986.

Major's pledge brought total British aid to the Palestinians to \$130 million for 1994 to 1997. In addition, Major said Britain would give 50 jeeps and minibuses to the Palestinian police.

Major changed his planned tour of Gaza after a Palestinian security guard accidentally shot and killed a 10-year-old boy in the Shati refugee camp. According to witnesses, the accident occurred when the guard, a member of Arafat's personal security unit, was trying to move a group of children away from his jeep.

He was scheduled to visit Jordan on Tuesday.

While visiting Israel earlier in the week, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres had urged Major to provide financial support to the Palestinians.

"We did not ask for any financial support for Israel. We asked for financial support for the peace process," Peres told reporters after a half-hour meeting with Major.

Major addresses security concerns

The British prime minister later said he would consider Israel's request to help fund a group of industrial parks planned as an Israeli-Palestinian joint venture in Gaza and the West Bank.

During his stay, Major also addressed Israeli security concerns, which have been heightened in the wake of a series of terror attacks launched by Islamic fundamentalist groups opposed to the peace process.

"There is one thing that remains key for Israel, and understandably so: the question of security," he said at a news conference in Jerusalem. "I think no one will protest the importance of that."

On Monday, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin took Major on a helicopter tour of the Golan Heights and the Israeli-Lebanese border.

Major told the reporters during the tour that "it is clear" that the Golan will be handed back to Syria "providing there is an agreement that satisfies Israel's security."

Major's visit coincided with the latest visit to the region by U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who was attempting to restart the long-stalled Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations.

While in Jerusalem, Major also visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial.

Although Major devoted much of his time to the peace process during his visit, business concerns were also on his agenda.

Underscoring his desire to improve the Israeli-British business relationship, Major's entourage included 29 business leaders who met with 50 Israeli counterparts.

"We are keen to invest in Israel, and we are happy to accept Israeli investment in the United Kingdom," Major said on Monday.

Israel's total annual exports to Britain stand at about \$500 million, compared with total imports of about \$1.2 billion. □

Israeli planes draw fire as Lebanon protests zone*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM, March 14 (JTA) — Israeli fighter planes flew low over southern Lebanon this week as a general strike was observed throughout Lebanon to protest the Israeli presence in the country.

The planes drew anti-aircraft fire from Lebanese government troops and members of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Islamic fundamentalist movement. No hits were reported.

Tuesday's general strike was called by the Lebanese government to mark the 17th anniversary of Israel's first incursion into Lebanon.

The event was not marked in recent years, but the Lebanese government apparently wanted to underscore the continued Israeli presence in southern Lebanon while U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher was visiting the region.

Lebanon's prime minister, Rafik al-Hariri, convened a special meeting of his Cabinet to underline Lebanon's demand for an Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Both the country's Christian and Muslim populations, who were divided during Lebanon's 15-year bloody civil war that ended in 1990, joined in the general strike.

Schools, banks, government offices and stores were shut across Lebanon. Beirut's airport and seaport remained closed for two hours.

Hezbollah officials dismissed the strike as ineffectual, instead calling for armed resistance to the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon.

On March 14, 1978, Israeli troops went into southern Lebanon to drive out Palestinian guerrillas led by Yasser Arafat.

The U.N. Security Council ordered Israel to withdraw. A U.N. peacekeeping force was authorized to oversee the pullback, which occurred after three months.

Israeli troops returned to Lebanon in 1982 and eventually drove Arafat and his followers out of the country.

Most of the Israeli forces withdrew in 1985, but Israel established a 9-mile-wide buffer strip, known as the security zone, to protect northern Israel from repeated terrorist raids launched from Lebanon.

In Washington, Lebanon's ambassador to the United States, Riad Tababarrah, told reporters that his country would only resume negotiations with Israel "if Israel declares its intention to withdraw" from the zone.

The Arab American Institute released a statement from five members of Congress, expressing support for Lebanon and saying they are looking forward to the time "when Lebanon regains full sovereignty over all of its land."

The statement was signed by Sen. Spencer Abraham (R-Mich.) and Reps. John Baldacci (D-Maine), Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.), Ray LaHood (R-Ill.) and Pat Danner (D-Mo.). □

(JTA correspondent Matthew Dorf in Washington contributed to this report.)