

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **President Clinton announced that goods imported from the Palestinian autonomous zones will no longer be subject to American tariffs.** The announcement was timed to coincide with Vice President Al Gore's meeting with Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat in the West Bank Jericho enclave. Gore told Arafat the move was "unusual" and "of great economic value."

■ **Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin accused the Likud opposition of "making common cause with Hamas."** The accusation promptly triggered countercharges from Likud that Rabin had "lost his marbles." Political pundits saw the exchange as an early harbinger of the 1996 election campaign. [Page 1]

■ **Veteran Jewish philanthropist Max Fisher signed on as the honorary national finance chairman for Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.).** The move comes as Republican presidential hopefuls have begun to line up Jewish political heavyweights to support their campaigns. Insiders called Fisher's endorsement a coup because of his potential fund-raising power and his recognition as a major Jewish political player. [Page 2]

■ **German authorities will charge some 25 people with Nazi war crimes, according to the World Jewish Congress.** The charges will be initiated as the result of research into millions of documents on Nazi war criminals that had been held in the archives of the Stasi, the secret police of the former East Germany. [Page 2]

■ **Leaders of British Jewry launched a campaign to toughen European laws against discrimination.** The leaders, who met with officials of the European Union, want to ensure that specific mention of anti-Semitism is included in anti-racist statements issued by E.U. leaders. [Page 3]

■ **A resident of New Jersey filed suit against Egypt to recover 300 Torahs and other Egyptian Jewish artifacts,** which he claims belong to the Egyptian Jewish community. Both Egyptian officials and an Israeli working in Cairo reject claims that a valuable ancient Hebrew manuscript collection has disappeared from a Cairo synagogue. [Page 4]

NEWS ANALYSIS**Are Rabin's harsh words harbinger of 1996 elections?**

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, March 26 (JTA) — Perhaps taking a cue from American politics, the Israeli election season has for all intents and purposes begun.

In what political pundits viewed as an early harbinger of what the 1996 Israeli election campaign will be like, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin baldly accused the Likud opposition on Israel Television last Friday of "making common cause with Hamas."

That accusation promptly triggered countercharges from a Likud official that Rabin had "lost his marbles."

There can be little surer indication that the campaign has begun than this exchange, which, like much political rhetoric, generated more heat than light.

If anyone had any doubts about the matter, Rabin dropped a broad hint last week that he intends to lead his Labor Party into the country's national elections.

"I am conducting a policy," he told reporters, "and I intend to lead that policy for as long as I can."

"Does that mean you intend running in the election?" a reporter asked.

"You seem an intelligent young woman," Rabin replied. "You can understand what I said."

The next day, while speaking on Israel Television, Rabin launched the unprecedented sharp attack on the Likud and on its leader, Benjamin Netanyahu.

A pre-planned assault

Rabin said Hamas and Islamic Jihad, militant fundamentalist organizations that have claimed responsibility for a series of recent terror attacks against Israelis, were attempting to erode Israeli support for the ongoing peace process.

Rabin then added that "the terror groups succeed because the Likud has become the collaborator of Islamic Jihad and of Hamas."

"Every terror attack triggers a counterassault by the Likud" against the Rabin government, he said.

Rabin then added that "this situation will only perpetuate and escalate the terrorism."

In reaction, Netanyahu said the prime minister was "apparently losing his head."

"Instead of adopting a tough policy against the terrorists, he follows a policy of weakness and capitulation towards them, and blames the opposition for his government's failures," Netanyahu said.

Likud Knesset member Limor Livnat warned that Rabin's language could "lead to civil war."

Another Likud parliamentarian, Tzachi Hanegbi, called on the prime minister to waive his parliamentary immunity so that he could be prosecuted for incitement.

"Never in the history of Israel has such a low and inciteful statement been uttered," Hanegbi said. "It reflects Rabin's state of mind."

Also questioning Rabin's mental capacities was Netanyahu spokesman Shai Bazak, who accused Rabin of "apparently losing his marbles."

"Instead of displaying an aggressive policy against terrorism, he is conducting a policy of hesitancy, concessions and gestures toward the terrorist organizations," Bazak said.

Rabin's attack on Likud came against the backdrop of waning support in opinion polls for Labor and for its peace policies.

A new study released Sunday by the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University showed Labor behind Likud, Rabin behind Netanyahu, a general mood of worry over matters of personal security and skepticism over the peace process.

Political sources said Rabin's attack on Likud reflected a deliberate decision by Labor's top leadership to step up the party's rhetoric against the

right — and especially Likud. These sources said Rabin's statements last Friday were no slip of the tongue, but a pre-planned assault.

They said the Labor Party's campaign strategy would be to demonstrate that the Likud, for all its railings against the government, can produce no viable and credible alternative policy of its own on the peace front, or on the domestic front.

In an effort to gird itself for the upcoming elections, the Labor Party has not only come out swinging against Likud, it has also taken steps to shore up disputes within its own membership.

In this regard, Labor's Central Committee, the party's top policy-making forum, on March 23 endorsed the party leadership's recent decision to welcome Histadrut Chairman Haim Ramon and his supporters back into the party fold.

Ramon, formerly minister of health, seceded from Labor last year in a dispute over health reform. He then ran successfully against Labor for the leadership of the Histadrut labor federation.

In recent weeks, police inquiries have been launched into alleged misuse of Histadrut funds for Labor Party purposes by the defeated former leadership of the union movement.

Attempts to recapture public support

This development, though obviously damaging Labor's standing in the short term, is seen by many in the party as a long-overdue cleaning of the stables, which, with the popular Ramon's return to the fold, can help Labor recapture public support.

Similarly, Ramon and Finance Minister Avraham Shohat announced over the weekend an agreement regarding the future of the Histadrut-run pension funds, where Ramon had discovered looming financial disaster after episodes of mismanagement over the years.

In an attempt to prevent such a disaster, Shohat undertook to guarantee the accumulated rights of current pensioners and longtime members of the funds, who number in the many hundreds of thousands, while slightly reducing the pension conditions of the pension funds' younger members.

This action, too, was seen as a much-needed reform.

Although the situation implicitly reflected earlier Labor Party-related mismanagement of the pension funds, Shohat's step may signal a new resolve to ensure greater transparency and accountability in the handling of domestic affairs.

Some Labor Party hopefuls believe, therefore, that despite the party's low standing in the polls, Ramon's return to the party fold and Rabin's get-tough rhetoric can reverse the party's sagging fortunes.

Others are less prepared, at this point, to tie their future to the sagging Rabin.

Labor Knesset member Avraham Burg, the new chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, remarked pointedly over the weekend that for him what will matter in selecting the party's leader will be solely the prospect of advancing the peace process to its successful conclusion.

The new leader "can be 70 or he can be 45," Burg said, "so long as he brings peace."

Burg's reference to "70" was plainly an allusion to Rabin, who is 73, and/or to his longtime rival, Shimon Peres, 72.

His mention of "45," on the other hand, was a clear reference to Ramon, who, flanked by younger-generation figures such as Yossi Beilin and Ehud Barak, could present to Labor stalwarts and to the general public an alternative leadership team. □

GOP presidential hopefuls line up Jewish supporters

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON, March 26 (JTA) — Republican presidential hopefuls have begun to line up Jewish political heavyweights to support their campaigns.

Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.) announced last week that Max Fisher will serve as his honorary national finance chairman. Republican insiders called Fisher's endorsement a major coup because of his potential fund-raising power and recognition as a major Jewish political player.

Dole called Fisher the "undisputed dean and elder statesman of the American Jewish community."

The former national president of the United Jewish Appeal, Fisher also served as the founding chairman of the reconstituted Jewish Agency for Israel. Fisher was one of the founders of the National Jewish Coalition, a Republican Jewish organization. He has advised the last four Republican presidents.

"I'm hoping to become the fifth," Dole said in a statement announcing the appointment.

Dole has also gained the backing of George Klein and Sam Fox. Klein is active with Agudath Israel and with the Holocaust memorial museum in New York. Fox has raised significant funds for the Republican National Committee and is active in Jewish affairs in St. Louis. Both serve as senior officers on the National Jewish Coalition's board.

Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Texas) has secured the support of Mayer "Bubba" Mitchell, a former president of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Melvin Sembler, a former ambassador to Australia and an active supporter of Jewish Federations in Florida, has endorsed Lamar Alexander, former secretary of education.

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), the first Jew to make a major run for president in decades, also has lined up Jewish support. His backers include Herb Linsenberg of Philadelphia, treasurer of NJC.

Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) has the backing of Robert Mazer, a former AIPAC officer and Jewish activist in Chicago. □

About 25 to face war crimes after research into Stasi files

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK, March 26 (JTA) — Acting on information gleaned from the files of the former East German secret police, German authorities will charge some 25 people with Nazi war crimes, according to the World Jewish Congress.

The charges will be initiated by the state prosecutor's office in the central German city of Ludwigsburg as the result of research into millions of documents on Nazi war criminals that had been held in the archives of the Stasi, the secret police of the former East Germany.

But because of the age and physical condition of the 25 people set to be charged, it is unlikely that all will be brought before a German court, said WJC Executive Director Elan Steinberg. "We're not likely to see many charges brought before the courts soon," Steinberg said.

In the past, German officials have delayed the prosecutions of suspected Nazi war criminals because of the failing health of those charged.

The office handling such prosecutions is understaffed and underfinanced by the German government, Steinberg said. He noted that only one person has been assigned the task of combing through the millions of documents comprising the Stasi archives. □

Yeltsin cracks down on fascism amid plans for 50th ceremonies*By Lisa Glazer*

MOSCOW, March 26 (JTA) — After weeks of anticipation, Russian President Boris Yeltsin has signed into law a decree on fascism that urges legal and security bureaucracies to do a better job to enforce existing laws against political extremism.

"Fanning the flames of social, racial, national and religious antagonism has become increasingly common in the Russian Federation," the text states. "Anti-constitutional activity by extremist groups has reached major proportions, and has become ever more blatant."

The decree, signed last week, exhorts the public prosecutor's office, the Interior Ministry and the Federal Counterintelligence Service to increase their actions against hard-line groups, which include stopping organizations that finance or distribute hate publications.

Yeltsin's willingness to speak out publicly and sign a decree that appears to apply to neo-nationalist, anti-Semitic groups is a switch from his usual reticence on the topic.

Yet these groups, known in Russia as fascist organizations, have become a more mainstream concern as Russia approaches the 50th anniversary of the Allied victory against Nazi Germany, to be commemorated on May 9.

Yeltsin's decree was directly linked to the upcoming anniversary. Nazis in Russia usually are known as fascists.

Some have said Russia's image would be tarnished if neo-fascists were in operation while the country celebrates its defeat of fascism in World War II.

Questions remain, however, about the effectiveness of Yeltsin's new decree.

Alexander Lieberman, director of the Moscow office of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, said the decree fails to offer concrete measures to clamp down on extremist groups, especially neo-nationalists.

Others, such as Yevgeny Proshechkin of the Moscow Anti-Fascist Center, said the decree at least puts the spotlight on hate groups and may finally spur the government authorities to use current laws to stop the publication and sale of books such as Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf."

According to the Anti-Fascist Center, about 100 hate groups exist in Russia with a membership of about 5,000.

Comparisons to the Weimar Republic

Despite their small numbers, Proshechkin said, they play a dangerous role. They accelerate the spread of extreme nationalism and intolerance among a population that is nostalgic for the glory of the Soviet Union and the stability that accompanied totalitarianism under leaders such as Stalin.

In an article last month in the newspaper *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Sergei Gryzunov, chairman of the State Press Committee, wrote:

"If anyone thinks that there are no grounds for fascists or Nazis coming to power, let him compare the Weimar Republic and our own: the collapse of a great empire; the fall in production, inflation, growing unemployment; rightist propaganda in military and law enforcement structure; insecurity about the future; a weak government; the formation of rightist militarized organizations and the flow of people to them from the army and the police; the unimpeded publication of the fascist and Nazi press."

"There are grounds for alarm, serious ones," Gryzunov also said.

Shortly after Gryzunov's article was published, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin announced that he would be removed from his post.

Gryzunov responded that the decision was connected to his anti-fascist sentiments and that he managed to hold on to his job only after fierce public lobbying from media leaders and the Russian intelligentsia.

In addition to Chernomyrdin's threat against Gryzunov, there are other indications that the government is less than entirely committed to its fight against modern-day fascism.

The same day that Yeltsin signed his decree, hard-liner Alexei Vedenkin was released from prison on the condition that he would not leave Moscow.

Vedenkin, a member of the extreme nationalist Russian National Unity Party, had been jailed after he threatened to shoot two leading opponents of the war in Chechnya and spoke in favor of mass purges.

He has been accused of threatening murder. Another charge of inciting ethnic hatred was dropped. □

British Jewish heads urge E.U. to stiffen anti-discrimination laws*By Bernard Josephs**London Jewish Chronicle*

LONDON, March 26 (JTA) — The Board of Deputies of British Jews has launched a campaign to toughen European laws against discrimination and to ensure that specific mention of anti-Semitism is included in anti-racist statements issued by leaders of the European Union.

Board members recently held talks with leading E.U. politicians and officials at the union's headquarters in the eastern French city of Strasbourg. There, board members pressed for a continentwide strategy to fight far-right and neo-Nazi groups.

The aim, said Board of Deputies President Eldred Tabachnik, is to encourage an E.U. directive on race relations that would cover discrimination, racial violence, anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.

"A Europewide law against racism is vital," Tabachnik said. "This is especially so with open borders. Some countries in the [European] community have strong laws against racism and others have weak laws.

"Racists will be able to go from country to country to carry out their activities. We need to be very vigilant about this."

Among those meeting with the board were European Parliament President Klaus Hensch and Pauline Green, a British member of the European Parliament who heads the majority Socialist bloc.

The European Parliament is the legislative branch of the European Union.

The board leaders said they were determined to achieve a specific mention of anti-Semitism in a forthcoming report to be issued by the E.U. racism commission.

This was particularly important, they said, because the report was likely to be adopted at the next European Summit meeting, which was scheduled to take place in the summer.

"We do not want anti-Semitism dealt with under the general heading of racism because it is also religious hatred. We want it specifically mentioned alongside Holocaust denial," Tabachnik said.

He urged members of local Jewish communities to write to their representatives in the European Parliament and tell them to support a strong, Europewide law against racism.

"This will be an ongoing campaign," Tabachnik said. "Our policy is to establish ties with the E.U." □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Egypt served with summons in case of Jewish artifacts

*Abigail Klein Leichman
The Jewish Standard*

TENAFLY, N.J., (JTA) — International intrigue or international miscommunication?

It depends on who's talking.

Marc Lewitinn, a resident of Tenafly, N.J., says his pending lawsuit against the Republic of Egypt is having major repercussions.

But sources in the Middle East insist it's a non-issue.

Lewitinn claims that his class-action suit, which he filed in September, to recover 300 Torahs and other Egyptian Jewish artifacts, has prompted the Egyptian government to hire armed guards at the synagogues housing the items.

In a recent news release, he also said the Ben-Asher Codex, an invaluable ancient Hebrew manuscript collection, has vanished from its storage place in a Cairo synagogue.

However, Emanuel Marx, director of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo, said that Codex is right where it always was, in the Karaite synagogue in Cairo.

In a telephone interview from Cairo, Marx said, "I am not aware of any lawsuit, nor is anyone else here."

Home to about 60 elderly Jews

Lewitinn said copies of the complaint were received by the tiny Jewish communities in Cairo and Alexandria. Cairo is home to about 60 elderly Jews.

The items named in the complaint "are the property of the Egyptian Jewish community," said Marx, who is responsible for the preservation and cataloging of the items at libraries in Cairo synagogues. He also arranges research between Israeli and Egyptian universities.

"All the synagogues are guarded by police to prevent vandalism," said Marx. He said one synagogue is used sporadically by the Jews of Cairo, two are used primarily by tourists and the Karaite synagogue is frequented by members of the Karaite community, an ancient Jewish sect.

Marx also characterized the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's Antiquities Authority, under whose supervision he works, as "very cooperative."

But Lewitinn doesn't see it that way.

His family was one of many who were forced to leave behind Jewish artifacts when virtually all Jews were driven from Egypt in the 1950s, in the wake of the creation of the State of Israel.

For years, he has been trying to retrieve the property on behalf of "the Egyptian Jewish community," he said. The community to which he refers is not the 60 Jews of Cairo, but the large numbers who now live primarily in the eastern United States, Israel and France.

As an alternative to returning the artifacts, Egypt is being asked to award this community \$300 million in compensatory damages.

Lewitinn has repeatedly blamed the Israeli government for failing to pursue the issue more diligently, particularly during the 1979 peace talks with Egypt.

This is not a topic on the government's agenda, however. Gideon Mark, consul for community and public affairs at the Israeli Consulate in New York, said, "Ancient Torah books in Egypt are also considered a part of the Egyptian cultural heritage."

The consul's position was echoed by Ahmed Maher El Sayed of the Egyptian Embassy in Washington, who wrote in a statement last month that "Egypt considers all

national antiquities, whether Pharaonic, Islamic, Coptic or Jewish, as an integral part of the Egyptian national heritage and patrimony of which we are extremely proud and which we are determined to respect and safeguard."

El Sayed's letter said recent restoration projects of the Antiquities Authority have included the Ben Zara Synagogue in Cairo and "all antiquities including Torah scrolls."

He wrote that the agency has "supervised the establishment of Jewish libraries attached to Jewish synagogues in cooperation with the Jewish community in Egypt and with a view to ensuring that the old scripts are well-kept and preserved."

Lewitinn, on the other hand, argued that Torahs are not antiquities, but rather religious objects intended for constant use. Because of the virtually non-existent state of Egyptian Jewry, most of the Torahs sit unused.

Lewitinn's lawsuit states that he had personally observed unprotected Torah scrolls falling into disrepair, rendering them potentially useless.

He said he is afraid that the current political and religious upheaval in Egypt, with increasing violence by Islamic fundamentalists, will soon result in an Islamic republic.

If that happens, he said, "Will Professor Marx still have access to those items? They have to be recovered now, before we lose access completely."

Lewitinn said that in November, heavily armed guards had been stationed in the synagogues to assure the safety of the artifacts. The guards remain, according to Lewitinn's acquaintances, who travel periodically from Israel to Egypt to check on the items.

But he said his sources think that the Codex and several of the more valuable Torahs, 700 to 800 years old, have been removed to an unknown location for safekeeping. Lewitinn was also told that as of Feb. 13, no one has been allowed to enter any of the synagogues without a special permit.

Marx denied both these charges in a communique Feb. 22. "The Ben-Asher Codex has not vanished, and is still in Cairo," he wrote, "and Jewish visitors enter [the synagogues] freely."

'The courts will not resolve issue'

Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department has served a summons to the Republic of Egypt in response to Lewitinn's complaint. The Egyptians must now respond by filing appropriate documents. No date has been set for a court appearance.

"The courts are not going to resolve this issue," Lewitinn said. "The diplomatic attention generated by the case will." He said he has received assurances that members of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Appropriations are looking into the matter.

But his attempts to involve Israeli Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron were rebuffed with a cordial but terse note from the rabbi's personal secretary. Lewitinn said the note wished him luck, but said the chief rabbi's office has no way to intervene in Egypt.

Lewitinn, who is a member of the Sephardi minyan that meets at Congregation Ahavath Torah in Englewood, N.J., said he believes that the recent "calamities befalling Egypt" could possibly be seen as Egypt's "illegal possession" of what he considers private property.

"Each and every one [of the Torahs] had a curse inscribed on its cover for anyone who mishandles them," Lewitinn said.

"I know it sounds weird to talk about curses in our culture," he said. "But it's not weird to Muslims. It's because of these curses that the Torahs weren't touched for so many years." □