



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher told a House of Representatives subcommittee that he asked the Justice Department to look into extraditing Achille Lauro mastermind Abul Abbas. Christopher's testimony contradicted a White House spokesman who had said an extradition was not possible.

■ The Russian Foreign Ministry publicly explained for the first time that it had canceled the Jewish Agency for Israel's accreditation because the agency had "breached" Russian law. Jewish Agency Chairman Avraham Burg said the organization had applied for a new license to operate. [Page 4]

■ Israel's political leaders called on their supporters to avoid violence after the shooting of a Russian immigrant who was hanging Labor Party posters. Artur Yarusky was shot twice in the leg by a gunman who police said drove a car rented by the Likud election campaign center. [Page 2]

■ American Jewish groups are sending an open letter to Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu urging them not to make concessions to Israel's Orthodox political parties that would "further erode the protection of civil rights and religious freedom." [Page 3]

■ Former House historian Christina Jeffrey said she is suing House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), alleging breach of contract, defamation and infliction of emotional distress. [Page 2]

■ The American Jewish Committee publicly severed a 17-year relationship with the Chicago-based Polish American Congress. The AJCommittee cut its ties to the group after the publication of a letter from the Polish group's head to the president of Poland that expressed concern "regarding the submissiveness of the Polish authorities with respect to demands raised by Jews."

■ An Israel Defense Force soldier was wounded in an attack by Hezbollah in the southern Lebanon security zone in the fourth straight day of hostilities there.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Republican Jews enter fray over platform plank on abortion

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — "We believe the unborn child has a fundamental right to life that cannot be infringed," begins the Republican Party's platform plank on abortion.

"We believe this language has no place in the party's resume of ideas," counters Susan Cullman in her argument to drop the language from the platform altogether.

The head of the Republican Coalition for Choice and a board member of the National Jewish Coalition, Cullman is one of many Republican Jews engaged in a self-described battle for the future of the Republican Party.

In less than three months, Republican activists will gather in San Diego for their nominating convention.

But before Bob Dole is crowned as the party's choice to face off against President Clinton, delegates will write the party's platform.

The quadrennial ritual, though largely symbolic, has inflamed passions on both sides of the abortion debate.

For everyone arguing that Dole cannot win in November if the GOP retains its call for a constitutional amendment banning abortion, there are other activists arguing that he cannot win without it.

The fight over abortion rights serves as one of the galvanizing issues for the Republicans. Although it is arguably the most divisive social issue in America today, the pro-life/pro-choice battle is emblematic of a host of social issues dividing the Republican Party — and the country.

Skirmishes over abortion give rise to schisms over other issues, such as homosexual rights, school prayer and the future of welfare.

Many Jewish Republicans, who for the most part tend toward liberal positions on social issues, were among those moderates in the party who were turned off by the strong influence of Pat Buchanan and other right-wing conservatives during the 1992 convention.

"You can't underestimate the significance of the debate," said one high-level Jewish official in the Republican Party.

"People walked away from the 1992 convention believing the party was intolerant and had been taken over by the right wing," the official said. "We're petrified of leaving the same impression in 1996."

"The intolerance of the 1992 convention hurt us," said Alan Steinberg, deputy commissioner of the N.J. Department of Commerce and N.J. Gov. Christine Todd Whitman's de facto liaison with the Jewish community. "We have to show that there is room in the party that supports all points of view."

Very public acrimonious debate

The issue of abortion will continue to dominate center stage, activists say, until the platform is settled by the party faithful.

Proponents and opponents of the party's position have begun a very public and acrimonious debate that in the end will determine whether the party remains rigidly pro-life or shifts its position to welcome the growing number of pro-choice members among its rank-and-file.

The platform plank on abortion calls for "a human life amendment to the Constitution" and endorses "legislation to make it clear that the 14th Amendment's protections apply to unborn children."

Emotions are already running high as the jockeying over abortion has moved from back-door negotiating sessions to the public eye.

Whitman and like-minded pro-choice governors of Massachusetts, New York and California recently banded together to call on the GOP to drop its pro-life stance.

The call prompted pro-life forces to threaten a loud walkout from the convention if the language is changed.

Pro-choice forces countered with a threatened walkout of their own. With this in mind, party insiders have begun the potentially elusive quest to find an acceptable compromise that would include all views on choice.

Republicans on both sides of the issue hope to work out their differences before the convention and avoid a "bloodbath on the floor in San

Diego," said a Republican Party official who asked not to be identified. "The last thing we need is grandstanding at the convention. This will be worked out behind closed doors."

Jewish Republicans plan to throw their political weight behind the moderate forces in the party. While the overwhelming majority of Jews traditionally vote along Democratic lines, Republican activists are working hard to attract more Jewish voters.

"Our sense is that the question of choice is a personal decision," said Matthew Brooks, executive director of the NJC. "What is important to convey is that people can disagree on this and still be good Republicans."

Although Republican Jews — like the rest of the Jewish community — are not monolithic on the issue of abortion rights, those organizing for the convention favor a change in the platform's language.

The NJC has not embraced any specific language for the platform but supports language that recognizes the differences in the party over the abortion question, Brooks said. "We need to demonstrate that the Republican Party is an inclusive party," he said.

Dole has stayed on the sidelines since the recent flap that started when Ralph Reed, executive director of the conservative Christian Coalition, recently offered to revisit the platform language.

Reed's public flirtation with flexibility was immediately rejected by others associated with the party's right wing.

Buchanan argues that the party must adhere to the firm rejection of abortion.

Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) entered the fray, declaring that "it would be unrealistic to try to dramatically change" the platform's abortion language. "The reality is, we're a pro-life party," he said.

The party, in fact, named a staunch opponent of choice, Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), to head the platform committee.

While much attention is focused on the platform debate, one Dole campaign official tried to put the flap into perspective. "When was the last time you saw anyone pull a copy of the platform out of his pocket to refer to?" he said.

"This election will be fought on the issue of whether Bill Clinton can govern, not on who wins the abortion battle in San Diego."

But opponents of the party's current language on abortion take the debate very seriously and are "openly worried about the outcome in November" if the plank is changed. □

Former House historian files lawsuit against Gingrich

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Former House historian Christina Jeffrey is suing House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), alleging breach of contract, defamation and infliction of emotional distress.

Gingrich handpicked Jeffrey to serve as House historian in January 1995, then fired her a week later after learning that, as a consultant for the Education Department in 1986, she had criticized a junior high school Holocaust course for not presenting "the Nazi point of view."

Disclosure of the review caused an immediate uproar with the media, some members of Congress and Jewish groups portraying Jeffrey as a racist and Nazi sympathizer.

Jeffrey apologized for her comments and said she had been misunderstood.

"I am suing for defamation and contract violations

because my small case is symptomatic of the megalomania and shameless mendacity" that characterizes the political scene in the nation's capital, Jeffrey said at a Washington news conference Wednesday.

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, is claiming nearly \$17 million in damages. Four others were also named in the suit: Reps. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) and Gingrich's press secretary, Tony Blankley.

She alleges that all of them defamed her character and "clamored for my discharge."

Jeffrey, an associate professor at Kennesaw State College in Marietta, Ga., said she had spent at least 30 hours a week for the past 16 months trying to clear her name.

"For more than a year, I have skirmished without result with Mr. Gingrich to both vindicate my good name and the official records of the House of Representatives, and to be made financially whole," Jeffrey said, adding, "I have been treated more as a pest than as a constituent."

A spokesman for Gingrich was not immediately available for comment. □

Political leaders appeal for calm after shooting of Labor activist

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel's political leaders called on their supporters to avoid violence after this week's shooting of a Russian immigrant who was hanging Labor Party posters for the May 29 election.

Artur Yarusky was shot twice in the leg by a gunman who police said drove a car rented by the Likud election campaign center.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres deplored the incident, as did Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu, Peres' rival in the race for prime minister.

"I call on everyone to do the utmost to ensure that incidents like this one are not repeated," Peres said during a campaign stop.

Likud officials said the man arrested by police as the suspected gunman was not a party activist, adding that he had merely been hired to put up posters.

The shooting was not an organized attempt "to intimidate Labor activists," said Likud spokesman Michael Stoltz.

Netanyahu called on all political parties to eject violent elements from their ranks.

Previous election campaigns in 1981 and 1984 were marred by clashes, including fistfights, between Likud and Labor supporters. Wednesday's incident was believed to be the first shooting linked to a political campaign.

Coming little more than six months after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the incident sounded alarm bells throughout Israel. Knesset members agreed to put a discussion of the incident on the agenda for next week's scheduled special Knesset session.

The shooting occurred about 5 a.m. in Herzliya, north of Tel Aviv.

Speaking to reporters from his hospital bed, Yarusky said he had been hanging up posters when a car drove up. Four people got out and ordered him to stop, he said. When he refused, one of them fired a gun three times, hitting him twice before the group drove away.

Herzliya police questioned two suspects Wednesday afternoon. They were looking for two other known suspects.

The lawyers of the detainees said their clients had no connection to the incident and were hanging campaign posters elsewhere when the shooting occurred. □

Israeli political leaders urged not to 'concede' religious pluralism

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — A broad coalition of liberal Jewish organizations is appealing to both Labor Party leader Shimon Peres and Likud chief Benjamin Netanyahu not to make any concessions to the Orthodox political parties that could damage the cause of religious pluralism in the Jewish state.

The groups say they are concerned that religious pluralism will be sacrificed as political leaders work to forge coalitions with Orthodox political parties and muster a Knesset majority in the aftermath of the May 29 elections. The groups, coming together under the newly formed North American Coalition to Advance Religious Pluralism in Israel, are sending the candidates for prime minister an open letter urging them not to "further erode the protection of civil rights and religious freedom" in Israel.

Members of the coalition include the American Jewish Congress, the New Israel Fund, the World Union of Progressive Judaism as well as all the central organizations representing Reform and Conservative Jews and the Federation of Reconstructionist Synagogues and Havurot.

The urging comes in the wake of a series of recent Israeli Supreme Court decisions that have begun to erode the Orthodox monopoly on issues of religious status in the Jewish state. Those decisions have led the liberal religious movements to feel hopeful that they might attain official recognition in Israel.

At the same time, most of the court decisions have not been implemented and could be nullified by political deals made with the Orthodox.

National security a top concern

Liberal groups' fears were exacerbated when even sympathetic Labor Party officials recently made it clear that issues of religious pluralism are secondary to concerns about national security.

Orthodox leaders are determined to maintain the status quo that has existed since the founding of the state and gives the Orthodox rabbinate control over government-sanctioned marriages and divorces, and over supervision of religious institutions. It is that status quo, Orthodox leaders say, which has prevented Diaspora ills such as intermarriage from gaining a foothold in Israel.

In a draft of the letter, the coalition warns: "To agree to further concessions would cast a longer shadow over Israel's democratic character, create a crisis with world Jewry at precisely the moment when both of you have made Israel-Diaspora relations a priority, and weaken opportunities for Israelis to deepen their Jewish identities."

"We cannot emphasize enough the damage we fear may result from making political concessions in coalition negotiations which would perpetuate and even exacerbate these denials of religious rights and opportunities for our people in Israel," reads the letter. The closing line of the draft reads, "We cannot keep silent."

The coalition is "trying to make as firm a statement as one can and to mitigate any damage that will be done" by the political wrangling, said Phil Baum, executive director of the AJCongress.

When asked whether the language of the letter was drafted to intimate that if the cause of religious pluralism is discarded in the course of the political negotiations, it would cause a breach in the relationship between Israel and liberal Diaspora Jewry, Baum said no.

"We will not break off with the people of Israel on this issue," Baum said. "We don't believe it will be a rupture of our relationship, but we think it's important that our views on this issue be heard and understood."

Recent Israeli Supreme Court decisions include one early last autumn mandating inclusion of non-Orthodox representatives on the religious councils of each city, which control everything from kashrut certification to mikvahs.

Several of the country's religious councils, including Jerusalem's, have refused to reconvene rather than permit non-Orthodox representatives to participate. As a result, no religious councils now include Reform or Conservative representatives.

The court also issued a decision last November that leaned toward recognizing Reform conversions but ordered the Knesset to decide the matter definitively through legislation. The Knesset, in recess prior to the national election, has not taken up the issue. And last autumn, for the first time, the Ministry of Education began distributing funds to develop curricula in the public schools to teach about non-Orthodox views of Judaism. □

B'nai B'rith slashes budget but denies bankruptcy reports

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — B'nai B'rith International plans to slash \$2 million from next year's annual budget, with a hefty portion of that cut expected to hit two programs targeted at youth: Hillel and the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization.

Nevertheless, the impact on Hillel, the college campus program, is not likely to be dramatic because B'nai B'rith provides less than 10 percent of Hillel's \$22.5 million annual income.

This week, B'nai B'rith officials were reeling from an article in U.S. News & World Report that the organization would be "forced shortly to declare bankruptcy."

Its president, Tommy Baer, categorically denied the claim and threatened legal action.

At the same time, he conceded that a \$2 million budget shortfall would prompt a reallocation of resources as the agency carries out a long-term restructuring process to "make it more receptive to members' needs."

But "to equate major restructuring with financial collapse" is "irresponsible," he said in a statement. "We are shocked at this gross misstatement of facts and are consulting legal counsel to restore our reputation," he said.

The group's financial difficulties stem in part from B'nai B'rith's \$2 million loss in annual income from a change two years ago in the members' insurance program, Baer said. To compensate for the loss and "provide a cushion against future losses," the budget committee last week cut \$2 million from the 1997 budget, which now totals \$12 million. The 1996 budget was \$15.2 million.

Sidney Clearfield, the group's executive vice president, said the exact target of the cuts had yet to be determined, but that "a substantial amount of money" would be taken out of Hillel and BBYO. When pressed, he said only that the cuts would be much closer to \$500,000 than \$10,000.

Richard Joel, Hillel's international director, was in transit and unavailable for comment on the potential impact of the cuts.

Nurite Notarius-Rosin, a Hillel spokeswoman, said it was "very premature to speculate" about the cuts. Budget information she provided, however, indicated that the impact would not necessarily be dramatic.

Of the more than \$22 million in Hillel's income for 1994-1995, only \$1.9 million came from B'nai B'rith.

Hillel was once a division of B'nai B'rith. Now, the Jewish federations are its single largest source of income, providing \$9.7 million in 1994-1995. □

(JTA Washington bureau chief Matthew Dorf contributed to this report.)

Jewish Agency Russian imbroglio escalates with official's remarks*By Michele Chabin*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Russian authorities have disclosed publicly for the first time that they canceled the license of the Jewish Agency for Israel because, they charged, its practices were violating Russian law.

In a briefing in Moscow, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Grigory Karasin did not specify what the practices or laws in question were.

"I regret to say that the representative office of this agency violated Russian legislation," he said.

At the same time, he said, the cancellation was reversible. "If the Jewish Agency displays readiness to strictly observe the relevant Russian laws and regulations, the existing problem can be resolved."

Agency officials reacted with concern to this latest development in a monthlong imbroglio over their status in Russia. But they suggested that the problem could be solved by meeting the Russians' request to update their registration documents.

Jewish Agency Chairman Avraham Burg said Wednesday at a news conference called to respond to the charges, "The agency has always complied with all local and national legislation and regulations in every country in which JAFI operates. This is how JAFI has operated in Russia, and will continue to do so in the future."

When the Russian canceled the agency's license last month, Russian and Israeli officials downplayed the move as a bureaucratic, regulatory matter.

The same notification went out to several other foreign non-governmental organizations.

But Russian authorities subsequently began to restrict some agency activities, shutting down some local offices and canceling an immigration seminar.

While Jewish emigration has not been affected, should the agency lose its mandate to operate in Russia — something officials assert is highly unlikely — emigration could be at risk.

The agency has helped hundreds of thousands of Jews emigrate from the former Soviet Union to Israel since the gates reopened in 1989.

An estimated 2 million Jews still reside in the former Soviet Union.

The Jewish Agency is the primary recipient in Israel of funds raised by the United Jewish Appeal in concert with North American local federations.

Remarks trigger alarm

Karasin's public statements Tuesday clearly shocked agency officials, who had planned to apply for reaccreditation the very next day.

But one highly placed Israeli official who requested anonymity cautioned that the timing probably was only coincidental. He said Karasin likely was responding to letters from overseas, primarily the United States, pressing the government to explain last month's action.

Still, the remarks triggered alarm in Israel.

Burg told reporters that he had spent Tuesday night in emergency consultations with Prime Minister Shimon Peres and representatives of the Foreign Ministry, and had spoken on the phone with several Diaspora Jewish leaders.

Evidently reluctant to escalate the tensions, Burg insisted that "this is not an issue between the states of Israel and Russia, but between Russia and a non-governmental organization." At the same time, he said, "we are ready for every contingency," but refused to say what steps might be taken, should the Russian government turn down the agency's reaccreditation request. Without actually blaming Russian officials, Burg implied

that they had stalled the reaccreditation process by refusing to accept the agency's completed application forms.

The news conference was cut short when Alla Levy, director general of the agency's unit in the former Soviet Union, called from Moscow to say she had successfully delivered the forms to the Russian Justice Ministry.

The ministry now has 30 days to accept or deny the agency's application.

But the highly placed Israeli source said developments could rest on more than whether the agency has submitted the proper papers. He said the latest public comments by the Russian official has elevated the story's profile in Russia and could set off an unpredictable chain of events just as the country is preparing to vote in presidential elections next month. "The Russian politicians read the newspapers and they will have to respond," he said, adding that they could be angered by the publicity.

Mark Levin, executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, said, "The substance of the situation really hasn't changed," only "the type of attention" it has gotten. "We'll have to wait and see" what the impact of this latest publicity will be on the agency's operations, he added. So far, "nothing has changed on the ground in terms of the movement of people." □

(JTA staff writer Cynthia Mann in New York contributed to this report.)

Leader of Australian state apologizes for Nazi remarks*By Jeremy Jones*

SYDNEY, Australia (JTA) — The premier of the Australian state of Victoria has bowed to a wave of public criticism and apologized for comments he made linking a federal senator to the wartime Nazi Party.

Premier Jeff Kennett, whose position is equivalent to that of a governor in the United States, touched off a controversy when he said a senator in the national Parliament representing the small Australian Democrats Party was a member of the Hitler Youth.

"I don't say it lightly: He was," said Kennett, adding that Sen. Sid Spindler "finishes his public career in exactly the same way as he started." Kennett made the comments about Spindler after the Australian Democrats and the opposition Australian Labor Party had called for an inquiry into what may have been questionable dealings between the Victorian state government and a casino.

Spindler responded by saying what he has made public for many years: that as a German boy living in Poland during the occupation he had been "automatically enrolled" in the Hitler Youth.

He added, "My experience during those years has made me a lifelong peace activist, an anti-racist and a strong opponent of totalitarian regimes."

Spindler said unless Kennett withdrew the comments, he would file a defamation suit.

Geoffrey Green, president of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria, the roof body for the state's approximately 45,000 Jews, attacked Kennett for "totally inappropriate hyperbole" and "irresponsible language."

Green said such comments serve "only to distress many in our community who still carry the deep scars of the Holocaust" and "demeans the memory of the millions who died" because they failed "the abhorrent Nazi test of Aryan purity."

Other Jewish leaders from across Australia said Spindler had an excellent record in opposing racism.

Kennett initially refused to retract his comments about Spindler. But after public criticism, he apologized, saying publicly that his comments were accurate, "but unnecessary." □