

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat voiced optimism about continuing the peace process. Their meeting was the first high-level exchange between the Israelis and Palestinians since Benjamin Netanyahu was elected prime minister. [Page 3]

■ Jewish groups launched a new effort to combat Republican plans to bring a religious equality constitutional amendment up for a vote by September. The measure would allow prayer in public schools.

■ Strong support was expressed at the Council of Jewish Federations executive committee meeting in Chicago for a new proposed "partnership" between CJF and United Jewish Appeal. The recently unveiled proposal follows a now-defunct plan for a more comprehensive merger.

■ A federal appeals court ruled that Beverly Hills violated the Constitution by allowing Chabad to erect a menorah in a public park while prohibiting other groups from displaying religious symbols. The local Chabad representative called the decision "a technicality." [Page 2]

■ The House of Representatives approved a measure that would impose sanctions on overseas businesses that contract with Libya's and Iran's lucrative energy industries or assist the outcast states in building up their chemical or nuclear weapons programs. The Senate unanimously passed the same bill last week.

■ The outgoing head of the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic intelligence agency, admitted to killing two Palestinian terrorists after their capture in 1984. [Page 4]

■ The Buenos Aires City Council approved a location for a monument for the victims of the July 18, 1994, bombing of the Jewish community center. The monument will sit in a plaza across the street from the Argentine Supreme Court, a location some council members had initially said was "a provocation."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Welfare reform's restrictions will cost Jewish communities**

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish activists are looking to President Clinton as a last line of defense against welfare reform legislation that would bar thousands of refugees and other legal immigrants from receiving government benefits.

Jewish communal organizations, already financially strapped, are especially concerned about how they would be able to step in to provide health care, nutritional assistance and other necessary services now provided to Jewish refugees by the government.

The House last week approved a welfare bill that would, among other things, require welfare recipients in general to work after two years, while limiting their government benefits to a maximum of five years.

The House voted 256-170, largely along party lines.

The Senate passed a similar measure Tuesday in a vote of 74-24, more than the two-thirds majority needed to override a presidential veto.

The House-Senate conference committee, which must reconcile the differences in the two bills, is expected to meet next week in order to get the measure to the White House by early August.

Clinton has sent mixed messages on the legislation, which would end the long-standing federal guarantee of assistance to the poor, and it remains unclear whether he would sign it.

Both bills would reduce federal welfare expenditures during the next six years by \$59 billion.

About half the spending reductions would be achieved by limiting benefits to refugees after their first five years in the United States. The reductions would also come from the termination of benefits for legal immigrants other than refugees, no matter how long they have lived here, if they have not become U.S. citizens.

Jewish activists are chiefly concerned about the impact such legislation would have on the tens of thousands of Jewish refugees who have come to America from the former Soviet Union, as well as the thousands more seeking to emigrate.

In 1995, nearly 22,000 Jewish refugees arrived from the former Soviet Union, while others came from Iran and Eastern Europe.

More than 30,000 Jewish refugees are expected to arrive in 1996.

Refugees are considered immigrants under current American law, but they are afforded special status because they are presumed to be fleeing a "well-founded fear of persecution." Because of that status, refugees are entitled to certain benefits — such as cash assistance for resettling in the United States — not available to other immigrants. Such refugee-specific benefits would not be affected by welfare reform.

But refugees, as well as other legal immigrants in need, have long been entitled to benefits available to U.S. citizens, including Medicaid, Aid to Families With Dependent Children, Supplemental Security Income and food stamps.

The welfare reform bills would bar refugees from receiving those four key benefits after five years.

Refugees could be cut off

While many refugees would again be entitled to government benefits once they become citizens, they could be cut off while waiting for their citizenship applications to be processed.

The situation poses a serious problem, activists say, because refugees must wait five years before they are eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship, and the citizenship process frequently takes six months or longer.

Aware of this fact, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society has undertaken a major effort in the past year to encourage as many refugees as possible to become citizens.

HIAS has assisted the Immigration and Naturalization Service in processing applications and in swearing-in ceremonies.

The welfare reform provisions pertaining to legal immigrants would be even more restrictive. Jews who came more than 10 years ago from the

former Soviet Union arrived as legal immigrants, not as refugees.

Those immigrants still receiving government benefits would lose access to Medicaid, SSI and food stamps unless they can demonstrate that they or their spouses had worked and paid federal income taxes for 10 years or more.

That provision would exclude many elderly Jewish immigrants who have not become citizens and who have depended on government assistance of one form or another.

If the House bill becomes law, nearly 1 million legal immigrants awaiting citizenship would lose their Medicaid, about 1 million would lose food stamps and a half million would lose their SSI, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

"This legislation is certainly not what our religious charities and synagogues and churches — with decades of experience doing extraordinary work assisting the poor — consider welfare reform," said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

"These institutions will be crippled by such far-reaching cuts," he added. "Already overloaded and underfunded, they cannot be expected to fill the vacuum created by these massive cutbacks in government services."

Alan Isbitz, director of administration for Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly in Brighton, Mass., said the Jewish refugees who make up about 25 percent of his clientele would be severely affected if they lose access to government benefits after five years.

In a worst-case scenario, where Jewish communal organizations are unable to provide funding to fill the void created by the government, Isbitz said, "we may have to choose between paying our mortgage and evicting our tenants."

"I would hate to face that situation," he added. "We could conceivably default on our mortgage to try to help this group from being evicted from our housing."

The current effort to overhaul welfare marks the third time this Congress has taken action on such legislation.

'Move people from welfare to work'

Clinton has already vetoed two different welfare reform bills, one in December and one in January.

Under pressure to sign reform legislation after running for office in 1992 promising to "end welfare as we know it," Clinton reiterated his desire this week to "sign legislation that does move people from welfare to work."

But he has voiced several objections to the current reform legislation, one of which is that the bills go too far in denying most federal benefits to legal immigrants.

Trying to make the bill more acceptable to Clinton, the Senate on Tuesday eliminated a provision that would have given states control of the food stamps program. The Senate also voted to continue current Medicaid health benefits for poor women and children.

But lawmakers rejected an effort led by California's Democrats, Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, to roll back a portion of the bill denying benefits to legal immigrants now in the United States.

The White House said it was pleased with the Senate's accommodations on food stamps and Medicaid.

Jewish activists, meanwhile, see the new bills as more stringent than those already vetoed by the president. They are calling on Clinton to kill welfare reform outright. Short of that, they are urging him to stand firm in his objections to the legal immigrant and food stamp provisions — with hopes of securing, in the words of one, a "less Draconian" bill.

"We are looking to the president to make some very clear and unequivocal statement that he will sign a bill only if certain provisions are improved," said Diana Aviv, director of the Council of Jewish Federation's Washington Action Office. □

Court rules against menorah displayed in Beverly Hills park

By Tom Tugend

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — A federal appeals court has ruled that the city of Beverly Hills violated the Constitution by allowing Chabad to erect a menorah in a public park, while prohibiting other groups from displaying their own symbols in the same park.

The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, sitting in San Francisco, found that Beverly Hills clearly showed favoritism toward Chabad of California.

Such favoritism, the court said in a unanimous decision, constituted an establishment of religion forbidden by the First Amendment.

Chabad obtained permission in 1986 to erect a 27-foot-high menorah in the city park and "light" its electric candles at Chanukah. The event is accompanied by songs and prayers.

Many members of the Beverly Hills City Council are Jewish and some have participated in the menorah-lighting ceremonies.

The court noted that Beverly Hills has a general policy of not permitting residents to display large unattended objects on public property, but made an exception for Chabad.

In 1989, the court said, Beverly Hills had denied one group the right to erect a cross in a park, and prevented another from mounting a winter solstice display.

The court ruled that Beverly Hills must develop a standardized permit system if it wishes to allow Chabad or any other group to erect such displays on public property.

Rabbi Boruch Shlomo Cunin, West Coast director of Chabad-Lubavitch, called the decision "a technicality."

"I'm confident that it will be settled by the city of Beverly Hills," he said.

Cunin expressed confidence that "the menorah will be there again as other menorahs are standing across this great country of ours from sea to shining sea."

The suit challenging the city's action in permitting the menorah display was filed by the local chapter of the American Jewish Congress and four Jewish residents of Beverly Hills, with the Anti-Defamation League filing a friend-of-the-court brief.

The two Jewish organizations are opposed to religious displays on public property and have previously tangled with Chabad on the issue.

"Few principles of church-state law are as well-settled as that requiring government to scrupulously avoid any favoritism between one group's religious speech and another's," Douglas Mirell, former president of AJCongress' Southern Pacific Region, said after the decision.

"The city of Beverly Hills ignored that bedrock principle when it granted only a Jewish group the right to place its religious symbol in a public park."

In recent years, the U.S. Supreme Court has moved toward allowing the display of religious symbols in public places, provided that equal access is granted to all applicants.

Last year, the Supreme Court ruled that the Ku Klux Klan had a right to erect a cross in a civic square in Columbus, Ohio, after Chabad had been allowed to display a menorah in the same square. □

(JTA intern Heather Camlot in New York contributed to this report.)

NEWS ANALYSIS**Israeli leaders' talks with Arabs
revive optimism about peace***By Mitchell Danow*

NEW YORK (JTA) — In the always unpredictable Middle East, the opening round of discussions between the new government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israel's Arab neighbors has created a fresh series of surprises.

Days after Netanyahu won Israel's May 29 general elections, a veritable cry went out in the Arab world, replete with warnings to the new prime minister of the dire consequences of failing to follow the peace process pursued by the previous, Labor-led government.

Palestinian voices warned of a new intifada, more violent than the 1987-1993 uprising in the territories.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak assembled 21 of the 22 Arab League members — their first such summit in six years — to present a united front against what they perceived would be the hard-line intransigence of the Netanyahu government, which had been installed only days before the June 22-23 Cairo gathering.

Even Jordan, Israel's closest regional friend, seemed embarrassed by the peace moves it had made with the Jewish state. And through it all, Syrian President Hafez Assad could be heard uttering a hearty, self-satisfied "I told you so" to the Arab world.

But that specter of doom changed this past week, after meetings between Netanyahu and Mubarak, Netanyahu and Jordanian Prime Minister Abdul Karim al-Kabariti, and Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Tuesday's 90-minute session between Levy and Arafat was the most significant, because regional Arab leaders have pegged any continued warming of relations with the Jewish state to the Netanyahu government's approach to the Palestinians.

But those who were expecting a flaring of tempers at the Levy-Arafat meeting were sorely disappointed.

The two emerged from their session at the Erez Crossing separating Israel from Gaza with a dramatic pronouncement: They had found enough common ground between them to continue peace negotiations.

'Work side by side'

"I have no doubt that what we achieved today will give a push to the process that is meant to bring peace to Israel and the Palestinians," Levy told a news conference.

He made no direct reference to contentious issues, including the Israeli redeployment in Hebron and the five-month closure of the territories imposed by Israel after the first of four Hamas suicide bombings in late February and early March.

But he said the sides had agreed to hold an "open dialogue on some of the delicate problems."

Arafat stressed that "we shall work side by side in order to support this relationship for the benefit of Israel and the Palestinian people." Asked when he expected the remaining elements of the Interim Agreement to be implemented, Arafat said, "very soon."

Gone were the warnings, the recriminations, the dire predictions that Palestinian officials had voiced in the days after Netanyahu's electoral victory.

Instead, there was "an immediate chemistry between Levy and Arafat," as one unnamed Palestinian official reportedly described the Erez encounter.

Levy later said that Arafat had pledged to act on matters that the Netanyahu government perceived as violations of previously signed accords.

Arafat, he said, vowed to cease Palestinian activi-

ties in Jerusalem and to provide Israel a document clarifying the meaning of the April vote by the Palestine National Council to revoke those portions of the Palestinian charter calling for Israel's destruction.

Levy said Arafat also vowed to step up the fight against terror and to seek information about Ilan Sa'adon, an Israeli soldier kidnapped and killed by Hamas several years ago whose burial site is unknown. Levy said Hebron was also discussed, but would not elaborate.

But Arafat has demands, too. Chief among them is the Israeli redeployment from most of Hebron, originally slated to be accomplished by late March.

Netanyahu said Tuesday that he expected to conclude consultations with government and security officials about Hebron and to issue a decision soon balancing Israel's security needs with the previous government's commitment to the redeployment.

Meanwhile, optimism about the peace process prevailed at Erez, as it did at Netanyahu's meetings with Arab leaders. The July 17 meeting in Tel Aviv between Netanyahu and Kabariti, the Israeli premier's first meeting with an Arab leader since taking office, was marked by upbeat statements from both leaders.

It also was a rehearsal for Netanyahu's more dramatic meeting with Mubarak the next day in Cairo.

Indeed, according to political observers, Mubarak had been worried by Netanyahu's warm reception earlier this month in Washington, and wanted to know in advance whether the premier would repeat to him the same hard-line stances that he articulated during his U.S. visit.

The surprise meeting between Netanyahu and Kabariti, observers said, had been arranged by Mubarak in order to sound out Netanyahu before they met in Cairo.

'I am very relaxed'

Netanyahu was sending a conciliatory message to Mubarak when he said at a joint news conference with Kabariti, "We both recognize the central importance of Egypt as the cornerstone for the Arab-Israeli peace."

And after Netanyahu and Mubarak met on July 18 — exactly one month after Netanyahu presented his new government to the Knesset — they proclaimed a message of optimism.

"I can tell you now that I am very relaxed," said Mubarak — the same Mubarak who had assembled the Arab League a month earlier to warn Netanyahu of the dangers of intransigence. "I understand his conceptions and I have great hopes that the peace process will continue." And from Netanyahu came a statement worthy of his predecessor, Shimon Peres: "We want to expand the circle of peace."

True, Netanyahu spoke of the need for Israel's peace partners to commit themselves to "fulfilling existing commitments," a thinly veiled warning to Arafat that the peace process would not continue in the face of continued violations of the Israeli-Palestinian accords.

And it was also true that Mubarak told reporters that "whatever agreements are reached must be in accordance with U.N. resolutions [for the Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab territories]" as the basis for a lasting regional peace.

But more important was the climate of optimism the two leaders projected that negotiations, however arduous, could lead to peace. Certainly, it is too soon to tell whether the upbeat pronouncements from the Erez, Cairo and Tel Aviv meetings will translate into substantive advances in the peace process. But they gave more ground for hope than the dire warnings that emanated from last month's Arab summit. □

(JTA correspondent Naomi Segal in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

House hearings probe abuses of Palestinian human rights*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — International human rights activists who have made a career of harshly criticizing Israel for alleged human rights violations turned their attention this week to the Palestinian Authority's treatment of its own citizens.

But plans to focus exclusively on the government of Yasser Arafat's human rights violations partially backfired when witnesses used the stage at a House International Relations subcommittee hearing to rail against Israel's closure of the West Bank and Gaza.

"Just as we have protested Israeli violations of human rights during the years of military occupation, so we will remain vigilant and protest against continuing violations by the Israeli government in this period of transition away from military occupation and towards Palestinian self-rule," said Neil Hicks, coordinator of the Middle East and North Africa program at the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights.

Four of the five witnesses at the hearing explicitly called on Israel to work toward lifting the closure of the West Bank and Gaza. A closure has been in effect since the first in a series of suicide bomb attacks in Israel earlier this year.

While criticism of Israel peppered the testimony of representatives of the Robert Kennedy Center for Human Rights, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the harshest statements were reserved for the Palestinian Authority's security courts and security forces. "At least half of those arrested" by the Palestinian Authority "are subjected to torture," said Maryam Elahi, Amnesty International's program officer for the Middle East.

Joe Stork, advocacy director of Human Rights Watch, added that areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority have "one of the highest ratios of police to citizens in the world."

Trumped-up charges

The hearings by the International Relations Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights were called in response to the recent arrest of Eyad al-Sarraj, director of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights, on what are widely believed to be trumped-up drug possession charges. Sarraj was eventually released from a Gaza jail after an international uproar.

Human rights activists have continually called for reform of the Palestinian Authority's judicial system. State security courts frequently meet in closed sessions where defendants are denied an attorney, the activists said.

They asserted that Israeli and American pressure to round up suspected terrorists has led to an atmosphere where Palestinians disregard human rights.

The loudest criticism of the Palestinian judicial system came from Irwin Cotler, a professor of law at McGill University in Montreal. Cotler cited a recent 80-page report of the Israeli-based Peace Watch to lambaste what he termed the Palestinian Authority's "dismal" human rights record.

Although human rights abuses are a direct violation of the accords the Palestinians signed with Israel, the witnesses were united in opposing cutting off U.S. financial aid to the Palestinian Authority. The United States provides about \$75 million in cash assistance annually to the Palestinians. Under U.S. law, the Palestinian Authority must be in compliance with its accords to receive the aid.

Critics of the aid charge that the State Department has repeatedly overlooked human rights violations by the Palestinians. □

Shin Bet official confesses to killing captured terrorists*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A top Israeli security official, in a newspaper interview given on the eve of his retirement, admitted to killing two Palestinian terrorists after their capture in 1984.

The senior official in the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security service, also said he had no regrets.

Ehud Yatom told the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot the details of the incident, which had prompted a public debate on the Shin Bet's powers.

In April 1984, four Palestinian terrorists hijacked an Egged bus, threatening to kill the passengers. During a rescue raid, two of the terrorists were killed, along with one passenger. Two other hijackers survived.

Yatom said the two were taken from the bus and beaten. "Everyone who was there — the army, civilians, the [Shin Bet] — beat them," he said. "It was a spontaneous act following a long night of uncertainty about what was happening on the bus."

Yatom added: "We put them in the van and drove off. On the way we received instructions from [Shin Bet Chief] Avraham Shalom to kill them, so we killed them."

Shin Bet officials said at the time of the attack that those two hijackers were killed as the bus was stormed.

But newspapers had published photos of the hijackers being taken away, unhurt.

Yatom said he was sorry that the real story had gotten out. "We made a mistake when we killed them because the operation was being covered by the media," he said.

A government inquiry into the affair later found Yitzhak Mordechai, who was then the head of the paratroop unit that stormed the bus and who now serves as defense minister, responsible for causing grievous bodily harm to the hijackers. A military court later acquitted Mordechai, saying that he was framed by Shin Bet agents.

Shalom eventually resigned because of the incident. He later was pardoned.

Yatom retires this week after 24 years in the service. "I am the only one who came out of this whole episode emotionally healthy," he said. □

Conspiracy trial wraps up; student denies being 'plant'*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Arguments in the conspiracy trial of Yigal Amir, his brother Hagai Amir and friend Dror Adani wrapped up this week.

A ruling is expected sometime in September.

One of the defense witnesses who testified on the last day was Avishai Raviv, the Bar-Ilan University student who had earlier denied reports that he was an operative for the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security service.

The Amir brothers and Adani are accused of plotting to kill Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Yigal Amir is now serving a life sentence for killing Rabin on Nov. 4.

In the initial days after Rabin's assassination, it was reported that Raviv was a Shin Bet plant in right-wing extremist groups and that he knew Amir, but had failed to inform the security service of Yigal Amir's plan to kill the prime minister.

In court this week, Raviv again denied that he worked for the Shin Bet.

But he acknowledged that he knew Yigal Amir from their studies at Bar-Ilan and that they were active in political demonstrations against terrorist attacks and to show support for Jewish settlements. □