

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Jewish leaders scrapped plans to call for an international boycott of Swiss banks. The announcement came after the three largest Swiss banks created a Holocaust memorial fund. Meanwhile, pressure mounted on the Swiss government to contribute to the fund.

■ President Clinton urged members of Congress and their guests at the annual National Prayer Breakfast to "remember the heartbreaking loss that our friends in Israel" sustained when two military helicopters collided. Meanwhile, as the Israeli nation continued to mourn, investigators were leaning toward human error as the possible cause of the air disaster. [Page 2]

■ The United States is concerned that terrorists from Libya, Iran and Syria will eventually use chemical and biological weapons currently under development in those countries, CIA Acting Director George Tenet told a U.S. Senate panel. He also said he believed that Iran would develop in less than 10 years a nuclear weapon capable of reaching Israel.

■ President Clinton asked Congress to extend refugees' access to welfare benefits from five to seven years. Clinton also asked Congress to restore \$21 billion in savings from last year's welfare reform bill and apply most of the funds to reinstate access for legal immigrants to federal benefits.

■ Alabama Gov. Fob James promised to defy any attempt by the American Civil Liberties Union to remove prayer and the Ten Commandments from a state courtroom. James told a Baptist gathering that he would use state troopers and the National Guard to stop anyone trying to block prayer and remove a religious display.

■ A jury deciding the fate of two black men charged in the slaying of a Jewish scholar in the 1991 Crown Heights riots had qualms about selecting a Jewish or a black person as its foreperson. The jurors selected a Jewish woman, but some panelists had voiced concern about the choice because of the sensitivity in the community.

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Critics skeptical of new agenda advanced by Christian Coalition**

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Christian Coalition has unveiled a legislative plan for the 105th Congress that attempts to put forth a kinder, gentler face.

Promoting racial tolerance, rebuilding inner cities and combating drugs and poverty are central elements of "The Samaritan Project" — a set of priorities designed to expand the group's appeal to racial minorities.

But ideological opponents of the conservative Christian lobby, including most of the organized Jewish community, are skeptical of the group's new tack.

They see it as creative repackaging of a familiar agenda that continues to threaten the constitutional separation of church and state. While welcoming the Christian Coalition's concern for the poor, critics dismissed it as a transparent ploy to channel government funds to religious institutions.

The new focus comes in the wake of an election that produced mixed results for the Christian Coalition. The group and its agenda fared well in evangelical strongholds, but failed to make gains in mainstream America.

The push to reach out to minorities, moreover, coincides with a similar effort announced last month by GOP leaders.

"For too long, our movement has been a predominantly — frankly, almost exclusively — white, evangelical, Republican movement whose political center of gravity has centered in the safety of the suburbs," Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, said at a news conference here last week. The group is calling on Congress to provide tuition vouchers for poor children to attend private or parochial schools. It also wants government to allow drug rehabilitation programs run by churches to receive taxpayer money.

Phil Baum, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, called the approach a "cosmetic rearrangement" of the Christian Coalition's traditional agenda "under the guise of a new preoccupation with the plight of the disadvantaged and minorities."

David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, agreed. "Their real priorities remain changing the Constitution to tear down the wall separating church and state, securing government funding for their overtly sectarian religious operations and enacting their social legislation on abortion and gay rights," he said.

But not everyone in the Jewish community shares that view.

'Stuck in a fossilized interpretation'

Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christian and Jews, sees the Christian Coalition's new focus on racial outreach and helping the urban poor as a "sincere attempt" to bring disparate groups together to address social ills.

"To me it's sound and it's right and it's good for our country and it's good for Jews," Eckstein said.

He said Jewish groups that do not recognize areas where government and religious institutions can form partnerships "are missing the boat."

"They are stuck in a fossilized, absolutist interpretation of the First Amendment," he said.

Standing with black ministers and Hispanic community activists last week, Reed unveiled what he called a "bold plan that shatters the color line and bridges that gap that has separated us from our African American and Latino brothers and sisters."

In addition to tuition vouchers and church-run drug-rehabilitation programs, the agenda calls on government to:

- Give \$500 tax credits to those who give both money and at least 10 hours of their time to local charities.

- Discourage divorce and out-of-wedlock births.

Critics see the proposals as a "watering down" of the "Contract With the American Family," the Christian Coalition's agenda for the last Congress. That plan, defeated on most fronts, featured calls for constitutional amendments banning abortion and allowing for prayer in public schools.

Variations on those themes are contained in the new agenda, but Reed downplayed them in favor of the coalition's focus on the plight of the disadvantaged.

He said, however, that the group's new focus would "augment the issues we're working on, not replace them."

Opponents of such issues are convinced that some of the group's more radical proposals on issues such as school prayer and abortion still form the basis of the group's core agenda.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, believes that the Christian Coalition's goal "remains a country where government doles out aid to churches and religious schools, tries to impose religious beliefs on all citizens and advances an agenda to restrict personal decision-making on matters of morals and family values."

Some of the coalition's key legislative items, meanwhile, have already garnered support on Capitol Hill. The Republican leadership has incorporated into its agenda proposals for vouchers, banning partial-birth abortions and allowing certain church-run programs to receive government funding.

It remains to be seen how the new agenda will be received by the Christian Coalition's membership — 1.7 million strong by its own count. □

Human error possible cause of Israel's worst air disaster

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Investigators are leaning toward human error as the possible cause of this week's air disaster in northern Israel.

As Israel continued to bury the 73 soldiers and crew killed in the mid-air collision of two military helicopters, members of the investigating commission, led by David Ivry, former Defense Ministry director general, visited Moshav Sha'ar Yishuv, the site of Tuesday night's crash.

An air force official said the two helicopters were hovering over the moshav while awaiting clearance to cross the Lebanese border to take the soldiers to the security zone in southern Lebanon.

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, speaking at a briefing this week, said weather and technical difficulty had been ruled out as possible causes of the worst air crash in Israel's history.

Funerals for 35 servicemen were held Thursday in cemeteries across the country. Twenty-five were buried the previous day. Nine of the crash victims will be buried Friday. Funerals have not yet been scheduled for four soldiers, whose remains have not yet been positively identified, but who were on the list of those who boarded the helicopters.

A national day of mourning was observed Thursday.

Schools across the country held special assemblies to help students deal with their grief.

In Jerusalem, thousands responded to a call from Israel's chief rabbis, and filled the Western Wall plaza to recite Psalms and pray for the lost lives.

Knesset members and other government officials attended funerals across the country.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took part in the funeral of Staff Sgt. Yonatan Amedi at the Mount Herzl military cemetery in Jerusalem.

Amedi, 20, who lived in Ma'ale Adumim, outside the capital, was named after Netanyahu's older brother, Yonatan, who was killed in the 1976 Entebbe rescue raid in Uganda.

The premier said both his brother and Amedi gave their lives for their country. He pledged to do his utmost to bring about peace, and ensure the future of the country.

President Ezer Weizman visited the bereaved families. Earlier this week, the president urged Israelis to be patient in waiting for the conclusions of the team investigating the crash. □

Israel, Syria had set target to conclude treaty last year

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel and Syria were shooting for October 1996 as a target date to sign a peace treaty under the previous Israeli government, former Prime Minister Shimon Peres has confirmed.

But Peres, who now serves as opposition leader, denied claims in a report by the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot that Israeli and Syrian negotiators had reached security and diplomatic agreements predicated on an Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights.

The report came as government leaders expressed optimism about a renewal of the talks with Syria, which were suspended last March.

"It's true that the Syrians proposed concluding the talks in 1996, and it's true that I agreed to it," Peres said in an Israel Radio interview from Davos, Switzerland, where he attended this week's annual meeting of the World Economic Forum.

But because the main problems were not resolved, including security arrangements and water, he told the Syrians that "we must raise the negotiations and decision-making to the level of president and prime minister."

Peres said Syrian President Hafez Assad had agreed to meet with him, but could not give a date.

"I said that if there is no date, then there is no purpose to all this talk," Peres added.

The Labor Party leader denied that Israel had committed to a withdrawal on the Golan.

"We never hid anything," he said, noting that both he and his predecessor, Yitzhak Rabin, had made clear that "the depth of the withdrawal would be linked to the depth of peace."

"But we never gave the Syrians any geographic parameters," he added.

With the talks with Syria on hold for nearly a year, efforts are now under way to renew the negotiations.

Foreign Minister David Levy was briefed Tuesday by the European Union envoy to the Middle East, Miguel Angel Moratinos, who was in Damascus over the weekend.

Moratinos said Assad had expressed an interest in concluding negotiations with Israel in the coming months.

Levy said he believed that a formula to allow negotiations to resume could be reached.

Syria has demanded that Israel agree to withdraw from the Golan as part of a peace treaty. Israel refuses to commit to any territorial concession as a precondition to talks.

Syrian officials have said that when the talks do resume, they must pick up from the point they left off when the previous Labor government was in power.

Damascus has long maintained that it received assurances that Israel would withdraw on the Golan.

Israel this week called on Syria to quash Hezbollah attacks on Israeli troops operating in the southern Lebanon security zone. Syria, which has some 40,000 troops stationed in Lebanon, is considered a main power broker in Beirut.

This week, an American official confirmed reports that Hezbollah had been receiving arms from Iran with the knowledge of Syria. □

NEWS ANALYSIS**Netanyahu's success abroad is soured by scandal at home***By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The fruits of the Hebron agreement have quickly ripened for Benjamin Netanyahu.

But a political scandal at home surrounding the appointment of a new attorney general has soured the Israeli prime minister's enjoyment of his peace policy success.

Increasingly, Israeli observers find themselves making comparisons to the early history of Watergate as they grapple with the deepening dissonance between Netanyahu's rising star abroad and his messy problems on the domestic front.

At the annual World Economic Forum over the weekend in Davos, Switzerland, Netanyahu was one of the most popular among the global political and business leaders in attendance.

Netanyahu, long the target of international criticism as a hard-liner whose peace policies were leading to deadlock — and possibly disaster — was now widely feted as a pragmatist who had moved decisively to break the diplomatic logjam.

Fellow heads of government sought private meetings with him, and the international media pursued him for interviews.

A sign of Netanyahu's enhanced international standing was his meeting in Davos with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who had been Netanyahu's most vociferous critic during the long months of the Hebron negotiations.

The two men were all smiles now, with Mubarak inviting Netanyahu to Cairo and the premier's wife, Sara Netanyahu, praising the Egyptian president's son, a businessman representing a major British firm.

With Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat, too, Netanyahu had a friendly meeting. They scheduled a meeting for this week on the Israel-Gaza border to continue their discussions about further steps in the peace process.

Israeli economists accompanying the prime minister voiced hope that the Hebron accord would quickly undo the damage to Israel's standing as an investment address and a trading partner that the previous months of diplomatic regression had caused.

Scant time to enjoy success

There is optimism in Israel's tourism industry that last year's severe drop in travel will soon give way to a new boom, celebrating the resumed peace process and building up toward the millennium.

Continuing his foreign travel after Davos, Netanyahu was cordially welcomed Monday at the Vatican and assured of a papal visit to Israel before the year 2000. Pope John Paul II pointedly praised the recent gains in the peace process, while voicing deep interest in further progress.

Yet, while Netanyahu is feted around the world, at home he has been given scant time to enjoy his Hebron success.

Within days of last month's signing of the Hebron accord, Israel Television's Channel One unleashed a political bombshell, accusing the prime minister's aides of trying to barter the attorney generalship.

According to the report, Jerusalem attorney and Likud activist Roni Bar-On was appointed attorney general last month because he undertook to engineer a plea bargain for Shas leader Aryeh Deri.

The leader of the fervently Orthodox Sephardi party is on trial for charges of taking bribes and fraud and

may face additional charges of misappropriation of public funds for party purposes.

Deri threatened, according to the report, to withhold Shas' crucial votes in the Cabinet for the Hebron accord if Bar-On were not appointed.

In the end, Bar-On's appointment lasted only three days. Under a hail of public protest — led by members of the legal profession who believed that he did not have the proper stature for the position — Bar-On announced his resignation before he was even sworn into office.

But the Channel One story refuses to die.

For more than two weeks, the "Hebron-Bar-On affair," as it has become known, has dominated the interest of the Israeli media and public.

Netanyahu's new popularity in foreign capitals deeply contrasts his perceived situation at home — a beleaguered political leader fighting to stave off criminal taint in the highest echelons of his administration.

For instance, while Israeli media covered the premier's meetings in Europe this week, Israel's second major station, Channel Two, opened its prime-time news program Monday night with the disclosure that just hours earlier, police had questioned Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert in connection with the Bar-On investigation.

The central item on that newscast was a rare interview with Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, spiritual leader of Shas, in which he brushed off the accusation that his party, which holds 10 Knesset seats, had threatened to oppose the Hebron accord if Bar-On were not appointed.

Veteran observers here recall that in the early stages of Watergate, President Nixon found his towering international successes — in China and elsewhere — soured repeatedly by nagging media inquiries about the seemingly picayune incident that a single U.S. news organization, The Washington Post, was determinedly reporting, day after day. The wider world looked on with bemused disbelief and incomprehension. The president's foreign policy agenda seemed much more momentous than the bizarre break-in at the Democratic Party headquarters.

Headed to the Oval Office

Regardless of the eventual outcome of the current Israeli police inquiry — an investigation that Netanyahu himself welcomed when it was announced — there are other parallels with Watergate. As with Nixon, senior aides to Netanyahu, rather than the head of government himself, are on the firing line at this early stage.

In a television interview last week that has added to the tension surrounding the Bar-On affair, Netanyahu's top aide, Avigdor Lieberman, accused the Israeli police of launching inquiries out of political motivation. Lieberman, a Russian immigrant who is director general of the Prime Minister's Office and formerly was director general of the Likud Party, spoke bitterly of "racist discrimination" against Russian newcomers such as himself.

According to Channel One, Lieberman was a key figure in the Bar-On affair. Indeed, the director general's remarks in his interview appeared to dovetail with Netanyahu's own often-stated resolve to batter down long-entrenched establishments dominating Israeli society.

At the top of his list — shades of Nixon again — is the media, which Netanyahu accuses of persistent political bias against him.

But the academic community and the legal profession are also seen in Netanyahu's close circle as inherently hostile to the premier personally and to his ideas of how Israel should be governed. With Israel's media and police in hot pursuit of the "Hebron-Bar-On affair," the prime minister no doubt is relishing his return next week to the world stage. This time, he is headed to the Oval Office, where he is certain to be welcomed with open arms. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD
JDC program helps Bosnians
develop business, build trust*By Michele Chabin*

SARAJEVO, Bosnia (JTA) — An accountant for two decades, 40-year-old Sarajevo native Bosiljka Markovic would like to start her own accounting firm.

While many might consider this a pipe dream, given the sorry state of Sarajevo's war-ravaged economy, Markovic says she knows what she is getting into, thanks to a small-business program recently initiated by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Modeled in large part on a group of small-business centers it launched in 1990 to assist new immigrants to Israel, the JDC has tailored the Sarajevo program to the challenges facing postwar Bosnia.

Funded by several humanitarian organizations — the funds are channeled by La Benevolencija, the Sarajevo Jewish community's aid organization — the program is made up of a business development school and center, a mentoring program and a loan fund.

According to Amir Ribic, administrative manager of the small business center, the Sarajevo economy "is in a state of transition."

"First, we are recovering from the war, which devastated the infrastructure," he says. "Second, we were moving from a socialist to a capitalist way of thinking even before the war, and this trend is continuing."

Having spent three years just trying to survive the siege that destroyed large sections of their city, Sarajevo's 500,000 residents are finding it difficult to pick up the pieces, he says.

"During the war, almost half the population was involved in defense, and directly after the cease-fire [brokered in late 1995], 90 percent of the people were jobless," Ribic says.

Although reconstruction has begun, "at least 60 percent of able-bodied men are functionally unemployed."

'Prepared to help themselves'

"Some of them work a few hours a week, but it's not enough to feed their families," he adds.

Ribic estimates that 80 percent to 90 percent of Sarajevo's industrial base was destroyed in the war.

"At this point, about 20 percent of the [industrial sector] is functioning, but virtually all the industries are old-fashioned, based on old-fashioned technology."

Noting that the recovery has been painfully slow, with even the water supply still severely rationed, he adds, "At the moment, there aren't enough assets to build big factories. Small businesses have a much better chance."

Shauli Dritter, the JDC's small-business project director, agrees that large-scale ventures have no place in today's Sarajevo.

"Just look around you," he says, pointing to street after street of destroyed buildings. "Recovery will take a long time, and people can't wait for businesses to rebuild in two or three years. These people need help now, and they're prepared to help themselves."

The desire of Sarajevans to work hard and rebuild their lives is evident in the classroom.

At the business center, which provides three-week courses to would-be entrepreneurs and to those who lost a business or are struggling to maintain one, the students — who are 18 to 60 years old and from every ethnic group — hang onto to every word uttered by their instructors.

Judging from the tough, hands-on questions they ask their teachers, one quarter of whom are Israeli, the participants appear to have few illusions about the problems facing Sarajevo's business sector.

During a class on Bosnia's chaotic tax system, one student who is a distributor of housing materials complains, "When I asked how much tax I'll have to pay in the coming year, I received three different answers. It's impossible to work like this."

A middle-age man with a construction company adds, "The taxes are so ridiculous, it's impossible to pay them. The government can't tax those who are unemployed, so they are killing the rest of us."

Despite their personal and economic difficulties, the participants maintain a dark sense of humor.

When one of the visiting professors details how to conduct a marketing survey, one of the students quips, "That's one less thing to worry about. There's no market to survey."

While many of the course participants will not launch a small business, "that's part of the learning process," says Dritter.

"Our courses aim to give information and insight. Learning that you're not cut out to be a businessman is also a valuable lesson."

In addition to their course work, and the mentoring that follows, the students are learning another lesson: how to rebuild trust.

Stressing that the business program is non-sectarian, and that Muslims, Serbs, Croats and Jews learn side-by-side, Ribic says, "During the war, you had many enemies.

Sometimes, you barely trusted your own parents. Now we must learn to trust each other."

At the business center, "religion and ethnic origin are things we leave at home," Ribic says, adding, "Here, at least, we are all Bosnians." □

Chinese plant may aid memory

NEW YORK (JTA) — A chemical in hyssop plants grown in China might serve as the basis for the newest medication to treat Alzheimer's disease, Israeli researchers have found.

Alzheimer's is a neurological disease that causes the destruction of brain cells and a loss of memory.

Scientists at the Weizmann Institute of Science at Rehovot discovered that the chemical in the plant can strengthen memory. □

Tel Aviv profs: Up, up and away

NEW YORK (JTA) — American and Israeli firms have shown interest in a technological advance in cellular phone communications developed at Tel Aviv University, Israeli media reported.

Professors at the school said a pilotless plane or balloon that would operate a cellular phone exchange through sophisticated antennas would be better than Earth stations. The new system would also save radio frequencies and maintenance of ground stations, they said. □

Israelis produce new skin medicine

NEW YORK (JTA) — Israeli researchers have produced a new medication to treat psoriasis, Israeli media reported.

The medication contains some synthetic materials that have been effective against psoriasis cells as well as some cancer cells.

The compound, developed by Hebrew University and Hadassah Medical Center scientists, has been submitted to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration before being tested on humans.

The medication does not yet have a patent. □