



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Clinton discussed ways to reopen Israeli-Syrian peace talks and to counter continuing terrorism. Netanyahu also held a separate meeting with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. [Page 1]**

■ **Israel, Jordan and the United States are working on a deal to send jailed Hamas leader Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzook from the United States to Jordan instead of extraditing him to Israel, according to sources. Some concern exists about whether an Israeli trial for Marzook would lead to additional Hamas terror attacks. [Page 1]**

■ **Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) likened the work of a coalition of groups opposed to a balanced-budget constitutional amendment to Mordechai, the hero of the Book of Esther, and called supporters of the measure Haman. Jewish groups in the coalition welcomed news that Republicans appeared short of the necessary two-thirds House and Senate majority to pass such a measure.**

■ **The Workplace Religious Freedom Act got a major boost when Sen. Daniel Coats (R-Ind.) agreed to sign on to the measure. Coats became the first Republican to endorse the measure, which would prevent religious discrimination in the workplace by forcing employers to accommodate their employees' religious needs.**

■ **The Israel Export Institute said it would participate in three trade exhibitions in Oman after receiving an official invitation.**

■ **Two Israeli Orthodox rabbis were detained after being accused of taking bribes to perform quick conversions. The matter was exposed in a television documentary in which a reporter and kibbutz volunteer posing as a couple paid thousands of dollars in cash to obtain a conversion for the woman.**

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, Feb. 17.

Netanyahu, Clinton pledge cooperation, moves on peace

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched a monthlong parade of Middle East leaders to the White House with a promise to forge ahead with the peace process.

Hoping to solidify gains and maintain momentum from the recent Hebron agreement, Netanyahu's visit brought the Middle East back to the White House stage.

During a news conference after their meeting, President Clinton said the January signing of the Hebron agreement had created a momentum that "must not be wasted."

The Hebron achievement is a "call to action — and it must be heeded," he added.

During three hours of meetings Thursday, Netanyahu presented Clinton with Israel's plan for renewing talks with Syria.

But neither leader would comment on any specific proposals that had been made to restart the Israeli-Syrian talks, which were suspended last March.

Clinton told reporters that they had nothing to say publicly because it "will only undermine the chances for peace."

According to an Israeli official, Netanyahu had expressed his willingness to accept U.N. Security Council land-for-peace resolutions as a basis for restarting the talks with Syria.

Israel would also "recognize" the discussions held between the previous Labor government and Syria, the official added. But it remained unclear how far this recognition would extend.

There had been reports that Netanyahu and Clinton were going to discuss a possible deal to send jailed Hamas leader Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzook from the United States to Jordan instead of extraditing him to the Jewish state.

The potential deal comes amid concerns that an Israeli trial for Marzook would lead to additional Hamas terror attacks.

But Clinton told reporters that the two leaders did not discuss the Marzook case because it was a matter for the courts. But according to officials close to the meeting, representatives from the two countries had discussed Marzook. Meanwhile, the Jordanians have sent signals that they are amenable to the extradition of Marzook to their country, sources said.

A senior official from the Israeli Justice Ministry was at the Justice Department recently, apparently to discuss Marzook, the sources added.

In an effort to close the circle of peace, Clinton has scheduled meetings with Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat, Jordan's King Hussein and Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak.

Administration officials also plan to meet in the coming weeks with high-level delegations from Saudi Arabia and Oman.

Missing from the list, of course, is Syrian President Hafez Assad, whom Clinton and Netanyahu hope to bring into the peace talks.

Concerns about sale of jets to Syria

Netanyahu's visit, the fourth to Washington since his election as prime minister in May, marked his first trip here during a period of calm in U.S.-Israel relations. The session, however, was not without yet another looming deadline: Israeli forces are to withdraw from additional West Bank territories by March 7, according to the recently signed Hebron agreement.

Netanyahu presented U.S. officials with preliminary maps detailing Israel's withdrawal plans, according to officials. During the meetings, Netanyahu also expressed Israel's concern over a potential sale of 100 American-made F-16 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia, officials said.

During his flight to Washington, Netanyahu was quoted as telling reporters aboard his plane that he would view the sale "with severity."

Clinton told the news conference that the United States had not been asked by the Saudi government for the F-16s. He also said it was an American priority to "do nothing that will undermine the qualitative edge of Israeli forces in the Middle East."

While the meetings focused on substantive issues, Clinton and

Netanyahu also sought to build better working relations. Those relations had been frayed by Clinton's all-but-explicit endorsement of Shimon Peres in last year's Israeli elections and by Netanyahu's decision in September to open a new entrance to an archaeological tunnel in Jerusalem. That move was followed by three days of Palestinian rioting.

Both leaders went out of their way to heap praise on each other. "I want once again to congratulate him for the agreement that was made with Chairman Arafat over Hebron. It was a brave and wise thing to do," Clinton told Netanyahu at the beginning of their Oval Office meeting.

Netanyahu, who was not scheduled to address the media prior to the meeting, jumped in to thank Clinton.

"We have seen him personally and his staff make a tremendous contribution for peace. I think their contribution for the Hebron agreement was decisive," Netanyahu said. "And it reflects and reaffirms the leadership for peace that President Clinton has shown throughout his term of office."

True to his promise to raise the issue of Palestinian compliance and to call on the Palestinians to fulfill their signed accords with Israel, Netanyahu added, "I think we've taken bold steps for peace. It's time that we see such steps from our partners, as well."

In addition to meeting with Clinton, Netanyahu had his first face-to-face meeting with Secretary of Defense William Cohen and also saw Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin. Netanyahu also met with Madeleine Albright for the first time since she assumed the duties of secretary of state.

Albright told the Israeli premier that she would devote special attention to promote Middle East peace.

Netanyahu also raised the issue of Palestinian compliance with her, calling on Arafat to combat terrorism and to close Palestinian Authority offices operating in eastern Jerusalem, according to a spokesman at the Israeli Embassy.

The meeting came on the heels of revelations that Israel knew of Albright's Jewish roots two years ago but did not tell her.

Former Israeli leaders Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres were told of Albright's Jewish background in 1994 by Israel's then-ambassador to the United Nations, Gad Ya'acobi.

Ya'acobi said in an interview this week that he learned of Albright's Jewish roots from a British friend who had known her father in London during the war years.

Albright reiterated Thursday that the recent revelations about her Jewish heritage would not change her outlook or actions as secretary of state.

"There is absolutely nothing that has been revealed that has changed any of my values or any sense that I would have done anything differently" had she known earlier about her past, she said in a brief interview after the three-hour meeting between Netanyahu and Clinton. □

Surge in Swiss anti-Semitism linked to compensation effort

By Fredy Rom

ZURICH (JTA) — Swiss Jews are confronting a mounting wave of anti-Semitism in the wake of international pressure on Switzerland to compensate Holocaust victims and their heirs for funds deposited in Swiss banks during the World War II era.

At the same time, however, Swiss Jews have found support from a largely sympathetic press and from Christian groups.

The surge in anti-Semitism was prompted by remarks made by Jean-Pascal Delamuraz on Dec. 31, the eve of his departure from the rotating Swiss presidency.

In an interview with the daily Tribune de Geneve, Delamuraz said the Auschwitz death camp "was not in Switzerland," adding that the growing demands of international Jewish groups to compensate Holocaust survivors and their heirs was nothing less than "blackmail."

Jewish organizations led by the New York-based World Jewish Congress have claimed that Swiss banks hold up to \$7 billion in unclaimed accounts belonging to Holocaust victims, but the banks say initial searches of their archives turned up only \$32 million in unclaimed accounts.

The Jewish claims came amid a series of revelations, based on material contained in recently declassified wartime documents, that Switzerland hoarded the wealth of Holocaust victims while helping to finance the Nazi war effort.

While Delamuraz apologized after an international outcry, his New Year's Eve interview already had become something of a mobilization call to the country's anti-Semites, many of whom had been dormant in recent years.

The Swiss government decided this week to set up a compensation fund, but said it would not decide whether to contribute until it receives a report on Swiss banks' wartime activities. The decision came after the nation's three largest banks announced that they would give \$71 million to such a fund.

The majority of Switzerland's 20,000 Jews support the WJC's efforts, despite the feeling by some that a more aggressive communal stance on restitution would fuel anti-Semitism.

The Federation of Jewish Communities in Switzerland, the communal umbrella group, though preferring a more passive role on the restitution issue in the past, has voiced its wholehearted support for the WJC and its "hardliners" in New York.

Members of the country's Orthodox community, however, feel uncomfortable with stands taken by the federation and the WJC. In a recent statement, six rabbis called on Swiss Jews to be very careful about their public statements. There was some basis for their caution.

In recent weeks, the offices of Jewish communal groups, along with other organizations and individuals, received hundreds of anti-Semitic letters daily.

In comparison, "in normal times, we got one or two such letters a month," said Sigi Feigel, honorary president of Zurich's Jewish community, the country's largest. Such letters usually are anonymous, but now they are arriving signed and include the addresses of the senders, Feigel added.

Christian rally to protest anti-Semitism

In addition, the Swiss newspapers contain pages of anti-Semitic letters to the editor, though their editorial pages are calling for the government to clarify the Swiss role during the war years.

Observers familiar with Swiss anti-Semitism say most of the anti-Semites are from the older generation. Many of them served in the Swiss army and still believe that the only reason Hitler did not invade Switzerland was because he knew of the Swiss army's full resolve to fight back, the observers say.

Most Swiss people are shocked by the new wave of anti-Semitism, say representatives of the Jewish community. They point to a rally held over the weekend by a Christian group to protest the rising wave of anti-Semitism and to express solidarity with the Jewish people.

Several thousand Christians from across Switzerland attended the rally, at which organizers solicited contributions for a fund, separate from that announced by the banks, to help Holocaust survivors. More than \$100,000 was donated, organizers said. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Foreign visitors overwhelm
Albright family's hometown***By Randi Druzin*

LETOHRAD, Czech Republic (JTA) — Until last week, Magdalena Navratilova spent her time organizing cultural events in this small Bohemian town where she works as an administrator.

But since the Washington Post reported earlier this month that U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had Jewish ancestors here, Navratilova has spent her days showing visiting journalists around the town and discussing its Jewish history.

She and other inhabitants of Letohrad have paid little attention in recent years to the history of the town's small Jewish community.

But all that changed after journalists started descending on the town, turning the lives of its residents upside down.

While reporters from around the world are stirred up about Albright's connection to the town, its inhabitants are not.

Letohrad had 12 Jewish families before World War II. It has none today.

The Jews who once lived in this sleepy town, at the mouth of the Orlici River, were so assimilated they never built a Jewish cemetery or a synagogue.

Albright, who was raised a Roman Catholic and is now an Episcopalian, expressed surprise at the revelations about her Jewish past in the Washington Post story, which stated that at least three of Albright's grandparents were Jewish and that they, along with more than a dozen other relatives, died in the Holocaust.

But the question of whether Albright previously knew about her past surfaced after The New York Times ran a follow-up story suggesting that the mayor of Letohrad had sent her a letter three years ago about her Jewish roots.

Indeed, according to people here, the town made three additional but also unsuccessful attempts to correspond with Albright by mail, as well as to contact her by phone.

Town was 'really excited'

The town's mayor, Petr Silar, is unconcerned by the diplomat's failure to respond.

"It's not a problem for us," he says with a shrug. "She has devoted her life to politics, and people in that field deal with major problems every day.

"They don't have time to tend to personal matters. We're pleased her roots are here, but there is no reason to make a big deal about it."

Navratilova says the town had phoned Albright at the United Nations in March 1994, after sending the first of the letters.

"We left a message on her machine in English, and she still didn't answer," says Navratilova.

She adds that the parish priest, Pavel Ruml, who speaks English, made the call on the town's behalf.

She said the town was "really excited" about making the call and hoped that Albright would answer.

Ruml said he remembered calling, but did not remember whether he had left a message because it was so long ago.

Josef Koloc, 86, was a childhood friend of Albright's father, Josef Korbek, whose family had co-owned a factory that manufactured matches.

Koloc has fond memories of Korbek.

"We were about 9 years old at the time," Koloc remembers, his blue eyes twinkling.

"We got on famously, and he treated me very well even though his family was rich and mine was poor."

Albright's family fled to the United States in 1948 after a Communist coup in Czechoslovakia.

In 1994, when Koloc discovered that the visiting U.S. ambassador to the United Nations was Josef Korbek's daughter, he prompted town officials to send her a letter asking her to visit Letohrad.

In the following months, he visited town hall every day, hoping to find a letter from her.

He has since given up hope, but is not bitter.

"She must determine how she feels about her past and decide how important it is to her. It's her choice," he says with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"I don't know if she feels as connected to us as we do to her."

Koloc has met so many journalists in recent days that he has started a collection of business cards from major publications.

Three years ago, Vera Ruprechtova sent a letter to Albright in which she discusses the factory their grandfathers once co-owned.

It is a topic she has discussed a lot in recent days as she entertains visiting journalists and the town officials who escort them to the farmhouse that Ruprechtova's family has owned for more than a century.

She is friendly and enthusiastic, but grows tired of answering questions about Albright's Jewish roots in Prague.

"They were Jews, but they were like everyone else," she says. "There was nothing exceptional about them." □

**Margalit Har-Shefi, indicted;
is friend of Rabin's assassin***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Tel Aviv court has indicted a friend of Yitzhak Rabin's assassin on charges of failing to notify the authorities of Yigal Amir's plan to kill the prime minister.

Margalit Har-Shefi, 22, also was charged Tuesday with giving Amir information about explosives and about how to set up an anti-Arab underground.

Appearing in the Tel Aviv Magistrates Court, Har-Shefi said she never took Amir's plans to kill Rabin seriously.

Amir is serving a life sentence for the Nov. 4, 1995, assassination of Rabin at a peace rally in Tel Aviv.

Amir has said he wanted to prevent Rabin from ceding land to the Palestinians.

Har-Shefi testified during Amir's trial that she had heard him discuss killing the prime minister.

She testified at his murder trial in July that "hundreds of people heard him talk about [killing Rabin], but no one thought it would happen."

According to court documents, Har-Shefi had phoned Amir's home immediately after hearing the news of the Rabin assassination, wanting to know whether he had carried out the slaying.

Har-Shefi was detained two weeks after the assassination and later released without any charges filed.

Har-Shefi, a resident of the West Bank settlement of Beit El, knew Amir from their studies at Bar-Ilan University and from rallies they both attended to protest against the peace process.

Amir's brother, Hagai, and a friend, Dror Adani, were convicted in a separate conspiracy trial of plotting to kill Rabin.

Hagai Amir was sentenced in October to 12 years in prison; Adani was sentenced to seven. □

Presidents Conference embarks on the quest for a new leader

By Lawrence Cohler-Esses
New York Jewish Week

NEW YORK (JTA) — Behind the scenes, a political ritual is taking place far removed from the view — and perhaps the interest — of American Jews, in whose name a leader will soon be chosen.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, organized Jewry's official voice to presidents, kings, dictators and the public on foreign policy issues it deems of concern to American Jews, is deep into its biennial contest to select a leader.

There are no bylaws or constitution that spell out just how this leader is chosen. But rules there certainly are.

And while there is no election in which candidates publicly explain just what they would say or do in American Jewry's name, the campaign is definitely on.

The new leader is currently scheduled to assume office in June for what is usually a two-year tenure. A seven-member nominating committee is in the process of interviewing candidates.

Several sources say Israel's premier already has a favorite. Conservative Republican Ronald Lauder — the cosmetics heir, philanthropist, former diplomat, failed New York City mayoral candidate and reportedly one of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's biggest political fundraisers — is seen as a major candidate for the position.

The others are Thomas Baer, president of B'nai B'rith; Mandell Ganchrow, president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America; Melvin Salberg, immediate past president of the Anti-Defamation League; Rabbi Arthur Schneier, immediate past president of the Religious Zionists of America; Rabbi Alan Silverman, immediate past president of the Rabbinical Assembly of America; and Milton Wolf, a former U.S. ambassador to Austria and immediate past president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Mortimer Zuckerman, the real estate and publishing tycoon, had been considered a favorite for the chairmanship until he married a non-Jewish woman earlier this year.

Exclusive Upper East Side dinner

Insiders believe that Lauder, who threw Netanyahu an exclusive dinner at his Upper East Side apartment in June, during his first U.S. visit as prime minister, has the inside track. Besides his closeness to Netanyahu, he is also said to have the support of Malcolm Hoenlein, the conference's powerful executive vice chairman.

Lauder, 53, only qualified as a candidate this week when the board of the Jewish National Fund of America voted to name him its new president, effective immediately. Any candidate to head the Presidents Conference must be a sitting president or immediate past president of an organization within the conference's umbrella.

Lauder declined to comment last week about his reported candidacy for the Presidents Conference job.

However things turn out, the person ultimately selected as chairman will, for many here and abroad, represent the public face of organized American Jewry — or at least a public face.

Composed of 53 Jewish groups, the Presidents Conference was formed in 1954 by a much smaller coterie when Secretary of State Allen Dulles complained about the seemingly endless stream of Jewish groups marching through his office with often contradictory advice.

Today, the much-expanded conference meets with the president and other administration leaders as the official consensus voice of the organized community on international affairs. Israeli and other foreign leaders also speak

frequently at the conference's New York headquarters, where it offers one-stop shopping to those seeking dialogue with the diverse entity known as organized Jewry.

Conference members include such high-profile groups as the ADL and Hadassah, and lesser-known groups such as the America-Israel Friendship League and Bnai Zion, a fraternal group. On key issues involving Israel and the peace process, the conference's members also run the gamut, from the Zionist Organization of America on the right to Americans for Peace Now on the left. Finding someone with the political skills to effectively shape and forcefully represent a consensus of all these groups is, not surprisingly, a sensitive and sometimes contentious process.

And in recent years, the challenge has grown. The peace process initiated by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, which so deeply divided Israel, provoked a similarly bitter and debilitating schism within American Jewish leadership.

Indeed, one Jewish leader, Lynn Lyss, was solicited by the nominating committee to become a candidate, but declined after contemplating the "emotional drain" she would face if chosen. Said Lyss, immediate past chair of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council: "Achieving consensus and bringing people back to the center is the major challenge that will face whoever is chosen."

Some critics maintain that the conference's deep schism in recent years limited the nature and vigor of its support for Israel under Rabin and his dovish successor, Shimon Peres. They further contend that this divided leadership contrasted sharply with the views of ordinary American Jews as expressed in repeated polls that showed support for Rabin's policies by large margins.

Still, many of these polls also showed that the hawkish minority, which tended to be more heavily Orthodox, also tended to be more deeply involved with Israel and better informed about its political developments.

Some hope for an echo

Now the Hebron accord marks for the first time Netanyahu's concrete commitment to the Oslo peace process and his unambiguous acceptance of Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat as his negotiating partner.

Some hope that the huge new centrist majority that crystallized in Israel to back the accord will find an echo in the Presidents Conference.

As the nominating committee proceeds with its work behind closed doors, some voices can be heard questioning the manner in which it was assembled. Others — though not many — are voicing concern about the non-democratic nature of the process.

Still, Seymour Reich, president of the American Zionist Movement and himself a former conference chairman, voiced what was probably the more typical view.

"I'm satisfied with the process," said Reich. "It's not perfect. But it's probably about the best system one can achieve with an umbrella group."

To the critics, the problems begin with just nailing down what that process is. Although it has grown enormously, the conference conducts this leadership selection — as it does all its work — without any bylaws or constitution to codify the rules that govern the proceedings.

Instead, the rules, though some are written in various memos, are mostly "a product of tradition and precedent," said Julius Berman, a former conference chairman now serving on the nominating committee.

Lyss is one activist critical of this system. "Maybe it's time to develop a constitution," she said, "so that anyone who wants to know how the process works can look it up and see how things go." □

(New York Jewish Week staff writer Eric J. Greenberg contributed to this report.)