



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Tension over controversial conversion legislation in the Knesset eased slightly after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met privately with Reform and Conservative leaders.** Netanyahu appeared committed to searching for a creative compromise and launched a series of consultations for that purpose, participants said. [Page 3]

■ **Two Palestinians were killed and more than 100 wounded in clashes with Israeli troops in Hebron.** President Clinton called the incident "troubling" and said that it should not "get in the way of moving the path toward peace forward." [Page 2]

■ **Foreign ministers of the Non-Aligned Movement, meeting in New Delhi, called on members to freeze diplomatic ties with Israel.** The move comes after a similar recommendation recently made by the Arab League.

■ **Brazil established a special commission to determine whether Jewish wealth that was plundered by the Nazis ended up in the South American nation.** After the Second World War, numerous Nazis found a safe haven in South America. [Page 4]

■ **Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy arrived in Ankara for talks with Turkish leaders.** In spite of tensions preceding the visit over Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's last-minute decision to meet with Levy, the foreign minister said he believed that most of the Turkish population supports expanding ties with the Jewish state.

■ **Pope John Paul II cleared the way for Edith Stein, a Jewish-born nun who was killed at Auschwitz, to become a saint.** The Vatican announced that the pope officially recognized a miracle attributed to her prayers, the final hurdle before canonization.

■ **A U.S. federal judge dismissed a request by Hamas leader Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzook to be released from jail or deported.** Israel recently withdrew its request to have Marzook extradited to the Jewish state.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israeli premier basks at AIPAC after cool White House session

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — After the White House gave Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's proposals a cool reception this week, he turned to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee for support.

Netanyahu's meetings Monday with Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright produced no breakthroughs on the quest to get Israeli-Palestinian talks at any level back on track.

But the premier later found comfort in the cheers of some 2,000 American Jews attending the pro-Israel lobby's policy conference, and from the group's plans to mobilize support for his peace process strategy.

At the same time, Netanyahu's meetings with American Jewish leaders this week were not all smooth. He held a tense meeting with Reform and Conservative Jewish leaders on controversial conversion legislation pending in the Knesset.

Whether this issue will affect pro-Israel activism remains to be seen.

The diplomatic impasse in the Middle East thrust religious pluralism aside at the annual gathering, which included speeches by Vice President Al Gore and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich in addition to Netanyahu.

In a fiery 45-minute speech Monday night, Netanyahu called on the United States, Israel and AIPAC "to ensure that everyone does their part to wage the battle against terrorism."

"We will never accept terrorism. Nothing justifies terrorism. Nothing. Period," Netanyahu said to cheering delegates at the group's banquet.

Earlier in the day at the White House, Clinton backed Netanyahu's stand that the Palestinians renounce violence before talks can resume.

"No one should have to bargain to be free from terrorism," Clinton said before meeting with Netanyahu. "It's a precondition."

On the broader issue of how to revive the peace process, however, the two leaders failed to agree. For the first time in his administration, Clinton described a meeting with an Israeli prime minister in the frosty diplomatic language usually reserved for sessions that fall short of U.S. goals.

"We had a very specific, frank, candid and long talk," Clinton said. U.S. officials later said that the president intentionally did not include the adjectives "productive" or "fruitful," terms usually assigned to meetings with allies.

In a veiled reference to recent Israeli actions that he has criticized, including construction at Har Homa, Clinton said, "We do need to continue the peace process in an honorable way that will bring it to an honorable conclusion."

'Administration will never let Israel down'

Israeli-Palestinian talks broke down after Israel began building at Har Homa, a Jewish neighborhood in eastern Jerusalem, and Palestinians responded with violent protests in the West Bank.

The Palestinians say they will not return to the talks until Israel stops building Har Homa and freezes settlement activity. Israel is demanding, in the wake of last month's suicide bombing at a Tel Aviv cafe, a clear commitment by Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat to end terror.

While Clinton and Netanyahu differed on peace process strategy, Gore used his AIPAC address to reiterate that U.S. support for Israel runs deeper than the current impasse. "I'm here tonight to declare that during this complex period, in which the Israeli people continue to take meaningful risks every day in search of peace, this administration will never let Israel down," said Gore in a speech filled with Hebrew phrases and prayers.

"Simply put, we will never permit anyone to drive a wedge between the United States and Israel."

For now, however, the U.S. and Israel appear far apart on proposals to get the peace process back on track.

Clinton put the brakes, at least temporarily, on speculation that Israel and the Palestinians will move soon to Camp David-like talks. "It's important not to jump the gun" on Camp David-style talks, Clinton said.

"The first thing we have to do is get the process going again. There

is a pre-existing process," he said. "I think it's important that we not put form over substance here." The presidential retreat at Camp David was the site for intensive Egyptian-Israeli peace negotiations in 1978.

Speculation that a similar round of Israeli-Palestinian talks could ensue arose after Netanyahu proposed that the two sides move immediately to permanent-status negotiations and aim to complete them in six months.

But Clinton was cool to Netanyahu's proposal to expedite the final-status talks that will address the thorny questions of Jerusalem, settlements, refugees and Palestinian statehood. According to Netanyahu, he and Clinton discussed "very crude and preliminary ideas" on reinvigorating the peace process.

U.S. and Israeli officials refused to comment on the emerging strategy until Albright — and perhaps Clinton — have a chance to brief senior Palestinian officials, who were expected here by week's end.

In the meantime, Clinton "gave the prime minister some serious things to think about," said White House spokesman Michael McCurry.

AIPAC delegates, meanwhile, sought to give Clinton and members of Congress something to consider.

"Clearly the war for Jerusalem has begun," said AIPAC President Melvin Dow. "We're at a critical period now."

Delegates fanned out on Capitol Hill to muster support for a congressional resolution declaring U.S. backing for a unified Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty. The measure will be timed to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the city's reunification in June.

AIPAC delegates convened against a physical backdrop of Jerusalem. Speakers stood in front of a 40-foot replica of the Western Wall topped with the skylines of Jerusalem and Washington.

From that stage, Netanyahu declared that Jerusalem will never be divided. The Palestinians "still cling to an impossible idea. They cling to the idea that we will return to the '67 boundaries, that we will redivide Jerusalem, that we will build a Palestinian state," Netanyahu said.

"We certainly under no circumstances will ever redivide Jerusalem," he said to thunderous applause and a standing ovation from a portion of the audience. "No other people will have Jerusalem as their capital."

'Congress will not stand idly by'

House Speaker Gingrich echoed the premier's calls on Jerusalem. We need to end this "fantasy on the part of the Palestinians" that they will win diplomatically what they lost militarily, Gingrich said.

Criticizing the White House, Gingrich said, "There should be no question of any pressure on the Israeli government to make any concessions" until Arafat complies with the accords with Israel.

The burden of resuming peace talks "should be placed on Arafat and the Palestinian Authority," he said.

Members of Congress have begun to consider suspending the \$75 million in cash assistance to the Palestinian Authority until there is a sustained crackdown on terror.

A letter is circulating on Capitol Hill calling on Clinton to halt the aid.

"Initially this is a shot across the bow to try to change the behavior on the part of the Palestinians," said Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), the letter's author.

"This will send a clear message to Mr. Arafat that the United States Congress will not stand idly by while terror is used as a chip in the peace process," Engel said.

AIPAC and the Israeli government support all measures to gain Arafat's compliance but have not endorsed Engel's initiative. □

Fatal clashes erupt in Hebron after Jewish students kill Arab

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Another round of deadly Israeli-Palestinian violence erupted this week, as discussions centered in Washington offered little hope for a resumption soon of the two sides' suspended negotiations.

Two Palestinians were killed and more than 100 wounded in clashes Tuesday with Israeli troops in Hebron.

The clashes were sparked by the death of another Arab in Hebron earlier in the day, when two Jewish seminary students opened fire. Palestinian police identified the dead man as Assam Arafah. Hospital officials said he died of a bullet wound in the chest.

In ensuing clashes, Palestinians threw rocks and bottles at Israel Defense Force troops, who responded with tear gas and rubber bullets. Five Israeli border police and IDF troops were lightly wounded.

President Clinton, who met a day before with Premier Benjamin Netanyahu in an apparently unsuccessful effort to breathe life into Israeli-Palestinian relations, called the incident "troubling" and said that it should not "get in the way of moving the path toward peace forward."

In the wake of the clashes, the IDF clamped a curfew on the center of Hebron, where the attack took place, and sent border police and troop reinforcements into the city to restore order.

Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat denounced the violence and forwarded a complaint to Washington via Palestinian officials, who were to meet with Clinton administration officials later in the week.

Netanyahu returned to Israel on Tuesday after telling Clinton that building a Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem would continue, as would expanding West Bank settlements.

'Building in Jerusalem will continue'

"Our policy is clear: The building on Har Homa will continue. The building in Jerusalem will continue. The building in settlements will continue," he said Monday night after meeting with Clinton. Israel's decision to start building at Har Homa three weeks ago has sparked violent protests by Palestinians on a near-daily basis.

The Palestinian Authority has condemned the Har Homa project as an attempt by Israel to determine unilaterally the future of Jerusalem, an issue reserved for the final-status discussions. Netanyahu in turn has rejected the Palestinian demands for a halt to all construction activity as a precondition for resuming security cooperation with Israel as "extortion."

In the wake of the decision to build at Har Homa, Palestinian officials said they would suspend sharing intelligence information with Israeli security.

There were conflicting reports about the circumstances surrounding the shooting by the two Jewish seminary students. Palestinians said the attack was unprovoked and that the two opened fire as they walked toward the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Settler leaders said the two students, who were detained by police, opened fire in self-defense after they were pelted with stones and tear gas.

A police official said the two had suffered tear-gas burns on their faces.

"I'm just surprised that something like this has only happened now," said Noam Arnon, spokesman for the Jewish community in Hebron. "There are daily provocations by the Palestinians."

Under the Hebron agreement signed in January, the IDF redeployed from about 80 percent of the West Bank town, but remained in control over the town's center, where about 450 Jews and 20,000 Palestinians live. □

Netanyahu aides to seek compromise on conversion

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — At a private meeting Monday night with Reform and Conservative movement leaders, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu managed to buy some time in the conflict over pending conversion legislation.

The controversial measure would give the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate exclusive control over conversions performed in Israel, in effect barring the recognition of Reform and Conservative conversions performed there.

The Knesset last week passed the bill in the first of three votes known as readings. The legislative process has been temporarily suspended to allow for a possible compromise to be negotiated.

The private meeting in Washington came after a nationally televised news conference at which Netanyahu downplayed the significance of the legislation, saying that it “won’t change anything” and that it only “formalizes something which has been informal” throughout the history of the state.

But at the meeting, after participants told him that such “dismissive rhetoric” was “unacceptable,” they said he showed a new understanding of the impact of the law on American Jews and made a commitment to search for “creative solutions.”

Most important, they said, he asked two key advisers to stay in the United States for several more days to begin a process of crafting compromises with leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements.

But some of the participants made it clear that they would remain guarded until they see results.

“It is fair to say we remain skeptical,” said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement’s Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

“He’s made no public statement of a conciliatory nature, so how far will he go out on a limb?” he said, referring to the prime minister.

At the same time, he added, “There’s enough on the table that we feel a responsibility to pursue it.”

Any compromise would require the approval of the Orthodox parties in Netanyahu’s governing coalition, which have made the passage of the legislation a condition of their remaining in the government.

It also would necessitate consultations with the Reform and Conservative movement leadership in Israel.

‘A difficult and delicate moment’

The prime minister stayed at the meeting for one hour. Discussion continued for another hour with his aides, including Bobby Brown, his Diaspora affairs adviser, and Alexander Lubotsky, an Orthodox Knesset member from the Third Way party who is the coalition’s point man on religious matters.

Yoffie said Lubotsky “made it clear he favors pluralism because it is good for Israel and good for the Jewish people.”

Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, was also tempered in his tone after the meeting. “This is a difficult and delicate moment and we’ve all agreed to try very hard to find creative solutions,” he said. “We all agree this is a first step.”

Meyers is one of the two Conservative representatives on the newly formed team to explore compromise strategies. There also will be two representatives of the Reform movement, along with Israeli officials.

For its part, organized Orthodox Jewry in the United States is united in favor of the legislation.

The closed meeting with Netanyahu included

representatives of the Council of Jewish Federations and the United Jewish Appeal.

Dr. Conrad Giles, president of the CJF, told the prime minister, according to others present, that the issue was not solely a religious one, but one that was having a major impact on Jewish communities nationwide. □

Prosecutor to issue decision by Passover on criminal charges

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel’s state prosecutor is expected to issue recommendations by Passover on whether criminal charges will be filed against any government officials in connection with the short-lived appointment earlier this year of an attorney general.

State prosecutor Edna Arbel and other senior legal officials held lengthy consultations this week with members of a police investigating team to review police recommendations in the case.

The recommendations come after an inquiry into the January appointment of Jerusalem lawyer and veteran Likud activist Roni Bar-On as attorney general.

When asked whether she expected to make any decisions before April 21, which is Passover eve, Arbel said, “We all want to burn the leavening before the holiday.”

Police officials have questioned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other members of the government to determine whether there were any illegalities behind the Bar-On appointment.

Bar-On won Cabinet approval Jan. 10, but stepped down two days later.

The police investigation was launched after an Israel Television report alleged that Bar-On was appointed as part of a deal to provide a plea bargain to one of Netanyahu’s political allies, Shas Knesset member Aryeh Deri, who is on trial for corruption.

A legal source downplayed this week growing speculation that police evidence indicated that charges could be filed against Deri and Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi. Arbel had not yet made a final decision, the source said. □

E.U. sends Clinton proposal on resuscitating peace process

By Joseph Kopel

BRUSSELS (JTA) — The European Union has sent a letter to President Clinton outlining a proposal for joint action to breathe life into the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, according to diplomatic sources here.

Monday’s decision to make the proposal came during a meeting here of the political directors of the 15 E.U. member-states’ foreign ministries.

The meeting was attended by the European Union’s special Middle East envoy, Miguel Angel Moratinos, who later told reporters that the proposal outlines the terms of a “code of behavior” that Israel and the Palestinians would have to follow in order to “try to find again the dynamic of dialogue.”

In recent months, the European Union has sought an enhanced role in the Middle East peace process, a move welcomed by the Palestinians, but viewed more cautiously by the United States and Israel.

Although the 11 points of the E.U. “code of behavior” have not been disclosed for diplomatic reasons, well-informed sources said it calls on the two parties to refrain from taking unilateral actions — a reference to the Israeli construction — and calls on the Palestinian Authority to clamp down on terrorism. □

**Effort launched to pursue
Nazi loot brought to Brazil***By Rochelle G. Sidel*

BRASILIA (JTA) — Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso has signed a decree creating a special commission to trace gold and other assets stolen from Holocaust victims and believed to have been smuggled into the country by Nazis after World War II.

The commission also will attempt to determine whether any former Nazis, many of whom found a safe haven in South America after the war, are still living in Brazil. According to the World Jewish Congress, which has spearheaded an international effort at returning looted properties to their rightful Jewish owners, some 1,500 Nazi war criminals may have entered Brazil after the war.

The decree mandates that the commission study how much gold confiscated from Jews by the Nazis was smuggled into Brazil, determine what was done with it and to work with the WJC to make restitution of whatever funds are found.

Cardoso, who signed the order Monday in the presence of four Cabinet ministers, said the action was a repudiation of all kinds of violence, "especially the barbaric violence that was practiced by the Nazis."

The commission of seven people, whose names are to be announced by the president in 30 days, will have one year to present its findings. They are expected to give weekly reports to the justice minister.

The commission will have the right to request documents and information from all public and private institutions, and will be able to have access to the confidential archives of the government.

The commission's first goal will be to verify whether the Bank of Brazil, the country's central bank, is holding any assets deposited by former Nazis. There is no estimate of how much money may have been deposited by former Nazis in Brazilian bank accounts.

Rabbi Henry Sobel, who represented Brazil's 130,000-member Jewish community at Monday's ceremony, said the presidential decree reflected the government's resolve to work with the WJC in returning plundered property to Holocaust survivors.

Sobel has been pressing the Brazilian government to open up banking records and archives as part of a probe into the country's wartime past. □

**Journalist loses Israel Prize
after Ethiopian olim protest***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Criticism of an article about Ethiopian immigrants that was selected to receive an Israel Prize for journalism has led to the withdrawal of the honor.

Veteran Ma'ariv columnist Shmuel Schnitzer was announced earlier this month as one of this year's three recipients of the Israel Prize for journalism.

The other winners are Israel Television news announcer Haim Yavin and photojournalist David Rubinger. The awards are presented annually on Independence Day, which falls this year on May 12.

The naming of Schnitzer drew a sharp protest from the leaders of the Ethiopian community, who claimed that he is a racist who incited hatred.

Leaders of the community, including Labor Knesset member Adisu Massala, petitioned the High Court of Justice in an effort to block Schnitzer from receiving the prize. Massala cited an August 1994 article by Schnitzer in which he referred to Ethiopians who immigrated to Israel as "thousands of apostates carrying dangerous diseases."

Schnitzer's column was written in response to an article in the Ha'aretz newspaper that reported on the high incidence of tuberculosis among Ethiopian immigrants.

It also followed a request by the Ethiopian community to block the broadcast of a television news story on the high incidence of AIDS in the community.

Schnitzer wrote that the public's right to know superseded the Ethiopians' wish to preserve the reputation of the community.

Israel's Association of Journalists later said that the article was unfair toward the Ethiopian community.

This month, the Israel Prize committee said it was not aware of the particular article when it chose Schnitzer as a winner.

President Ezer Weizman met with Schnitzer this week and urged him to apologize to the Ethiopian community.

Schnitzer refused and was quoted as saying that he would rather give up the prize.

Weizman subsequently called Massala and told him that Schnitzer had decided to forego receiving the award.

But Schnitzer later told Israel Radio that he did not give up the award, adding that it had been taken from him.

Massala, meanwhile, said he did not intend to drop the High Court petition. □

**Jordanian investigators meet
with survivors of border attack***By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Members of a Jordanian investigative committee met this week with teachers and students who participated in a fateful field trip during which a Jordanian soldier opened fire on a group of Israeli schoolgirls.

The soldier shot and killed seven Israeli schoolgirls, and wounded six others, while they were on a field trip last month to a border site, Naharayim, called "The Island of Peace."

The Jordanian panel investigating the incident met with the teachers and students this week at Beit Shemesh, near Jerusalem, for discussions later described as being held in a pleasant atmosphere, according to Israel Radio.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Jordanian delegation presented one of the teachers and three of the students with watches as gifts from the Jordanian army.

An Israeli committee appointed by the Education Ministry is also investigating the incident to determine who, if anyone, was responsible for taking the students to Naharayim. □

Fire erupts at military facility*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A fire erupted this week in a storeroom at a military facility in central Israel, causing one person to be treated for smoke inhalation.

Police said the fire Sunday was set off at the Malam company, a subsidiary of Israel Aircraft Industries, in Be'er Ya'acov, south of Tel Aviv.

The fire, which sent smoke billowing into the air and caused sharp fumes, was brought under control and posed no danger to the surrounding area, said an IAI spokeswoman. She also said no explosion took place.

Officials from Israel's Environment Ministry said there were no toxic materials in the area and that no evacuations were necessary.

Firetrucks, ambulances and police cars rushed to the scene of the blaze. Israel has been on high alert for terrorist bombings since a suicide bomber killed three Israelis last month at a Tel Aviv cafe. □