



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ **Secretary of State Madeleine Albright** dispatched top Middle East troubleshooter **Dennis Ross** in the latest American effort to break the impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Sources in Washington say Ross will be carrying specific U.S. proposals to rebuild trust between the sides and get the talks back on track.

■ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** may be seeking a compromise on the controversial new Jewish neighborhood of **Har Homa** in southeastern Jerusalem. The premier is suggesting that construction of the first buildings could be delayed until the year 2000, which is after the scheduled completion of final-status talks with the Palestinians, according to the Israeli daily *Yedioth Achronot*.

■ **Thousands of Jewish activists** gathered on **Capitol Hill** to protest cuts in federal welfare for legal immigrants and refugees. Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union were among those speaking out to restore the benefits at the rally, sponsored by the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews.

■ **Religious pluralism and a planned partnership with the United Jewish Appeal** topped the agenda of the quarterly meeting of the **Council of Jewish Federations in Washington**. Federations were also examining their relationship to the Jewish Agency for Israel, the primary recipient in Israel of funds raised by federations and the UJA.

■ **Former SS Capt. Erich Priebke** went on trial again for his role in the **World War II massacre of 335 men and boys at the Ardeatine Caves outside Rome**. An earlier verdict was quashed on appeal, and a retrial was ordered. Also on trial is ex-SS Maj. **Karl Hass**, charged in connection with the same killings.

■ **The Israeli restaurateur** who employed the suicide-bomber who carried out last month's attack at a **Tel Aviv cafe** was given a **five-month suspended jail sentence and fined**. The court convicted **Moshe Zanzouri** of employing Palestinians without proper permits.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Israelis nonplused by debate over pending conversion bill

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Reform and Conservative Jews in the United States have been up in arms over Israel's pending conversion bill.

But many Israelis are essentially indifferent to both the legislation and to the Reform and Conservative movements in general.

The bill "really isn't important to me or to most of the people I know," says Eyal Biger, a 26-year-old graduate student.

"Frankly, there are more vital things to worry about at the moment. Things like security and the peace process. Compared to this, the issue of conversion is a non-issue."

The legislation 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 passed the measure earlier this month in the first of three votes known as readings.

The bill is now on legislative hold as government mediators seek a compromise between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.

Biger and his Danish-born wife, a practicing Hindu whom he met during a trip to India, do not object to the Orthodox Rabbinate's long-standing monopoly on marriages, divorces and conversions performed in Israel.

"My wife doesn't plan to convert, but if she ever changes her mind, I hope she will do so within a religious framework," says Biger.

"In that case, I would like her to sit for half a year and study Judaism. I don't object to the beautiful, real way to convert," Biger said, referring to Orthodoxy.

"But as I said, the issue isn't that important."

Unlike many Israelis, who have never experienced Judaism from a Reform or Conservative perspective, Biger personally knows many Conservative Jews.

"I'm familiar with Conservative Judaism — about half the people in my army unit belonged to the movement — but I just don't abide by their approach.

"If I go to synagogue, and I admit that's not often, I go to an Orthodox one and recite Orthodox prayers.

"I can't relate to movements that permit people to drive to synagogue, or to smoke in one."

The Reform and Conservative movements' "obvious role in keeping North American Jews connected to Judaism," says Biger, "are right for America but unnecessary in Israel."

Biger's opinions — which are shared by large numbers of Israelis — point to the very real differences between Israelis and Diaspora Jews, according to those involved in religious pluralism issues.

And until these differences are addressed, they say, the gaps between Israeli and Diaspora Jews will grow even wider.

'The shul I don't go to is Orthodox'

"American Jews must understand that religious pluralism in Israel is different," says David Clayman, director of the American Jewish Congress office in Israel.

"For most Israelis, religious pluralism means their right to pick and choose what they will observe of the tradition, but the tradition itself, in their view, should remain the Orthodox one.

"Professor Shlomo Avineri of the Hebrew University said it very succinctly: 'The shul that I don't go to is Orthodox.'"

While Reform and Conservative Jews in North America see their struggle for recognition in Israel as part of a broader fight to overcome what they perceive as religious coercion in Israel, most Israelis view things differently.

According to Clayman, the majority of Israelis do not view the non-Orthodox movements as their salvation from the Orthodox Rabbinate's control over marriages and conversions, or even from such controversies as

the closure of streets on Shabbat or bans on non-kosher meat.

"If anything, Israelis aren't seeking alternate religious forms," says Clayman. "What they're seeking are non-religious civil ceremonies for marriage, divorce, burial, conversion.

"There's more pressure in Israel to institute civil marriage and to establish civil cemeteries than to recognize the authority of Reform and Conservative rabbis."

Ithamar Gruenwald, professor of Jewish philosophy at Tel Aviv University, maintains that Israelis' relative lack of interest in the conversion bill is actually quite natural.

While American Jews are not too upset about the controversy over closing Bar Ilan Street in Jerusalem on Shabbat, "most Israelis aren't too concerned about the conversion bill, since it doesn't affect most of them in any significant way," says Gruenwald.

"Really, what people ultimately care about are things affecting their own lives."

Reform movement spokeswoman Anat Galili says Israelis "have a total misunderstanding about American attitudes toward Judaism, and that's where the gap on the conversion law comes into play."

"Growing up in Israel, you don't have to do anything to feel Jewish.

"Everyone knows about Pesach and Yom Kippur because everything is closed or we learned about them in school," Galili said.

"Israelis don't realize that Jews in a non-Jewish environment must do something every single day to assert their Jewishness."

"And just as Israelis take their Jewishness for granted," Galili adds, "Americans take the separation between church and state, the concept of religious pluralism, for granted. To Israelis, these are foreign concepts."

Rabbi Einat Ramon, spokeswoman for the Conservative/Masorti movement in Israel, believes that Israelis' traditional lack of enthusiasm for non-Orthodox Jewish streams stems more from ignorance than indifference and that local interest in the movements is actually starting to grow.

'Great deal of antagonism'

"When the conversion bill passed its first reading in the Knesset, Israelis didn't really understand what it all meant," says Ramon.

"Then, all of a sudden, the journalists starting calling and the newspapers were full of articles and opinion pieces, and people started calling the talk shows.

"Slowly, the conversion issue and its implications for religious pluralism in general have begun to enter the Israeli consciousness."

Ramon is optimistic that the Conservative and Reform movements will ultimately find their niche in Israeli society.

But for now she acknowledges that "Israelis have very little energy for anything not related to peace.

"That goes for women's issues, for poverty issues, for religious pluralism. That's one reason we are marginalized."

Another problem, according to Ramon, is the negative image many Israelis hold of the non-Orthodox streams.

"There's a great deal of misinformation in the community, in school textbooks, or the textbooks ignore us completely. Often, children are told that non-Orthodox Judaism is anti-Zionist.

"Until the last government, the State of Israel never supported us, financially or otherwise, and the money the Religious Affairs Ministry earmarked for us for 1996 still hasn't materialized.

"There is a great deal of antagonism coming from the government," Ramon says.

Still, Galili maintains that there is growing interest among Israelis in the non-Orthodox streams.

"There are tens of thousands of people all over Israel who are interested in non-Orthodox movements," she says.

"Every day we receive several phone calls from those who want to support our cause, and calls from those interested in a non-Orthodox marriage ceremony or conversion."

She says, "It's taken quite a while, but people are listening." □

Netanyahu-Peres talks fuel rumors of unity government

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Speculation is growing in Israel over whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will form a national unity government to put the peace process back on track.

The speculation increased in the wake of media reports Sunday of a secret meeting two weeks ago between Netanyahu and opposition leader Shimon Peres to discuss a unity government.

In interviews over the weekend, Netanyahu said he would "soon decide" whether to form a national unity government.

Netanyahu said last Friday that he is seeking a "national consensus" before launching into the final-status negotiations with the Palestinians.

He indicated that his current coalition government might not give him the support he needs to reach a final agreement with the Palestinians.

"We are talking about the most fateful negotiations in the history of the state," Netanyahu told Israel Television.

Although a final-status arrangement "may have public support, it doesn't mean that it will gain support in the Knesset, and that question is what's guiding me," the prime minister said.

Communications Minister Limor Livnat expressed surprise at the latest reports.

Livnat told Israel Radio that she and other Cabinet ministers had not been consulted by Netanyahu.

Peres, who returns from a trip to South America this week, is expected to meet with fellow Labor Party members to discuss the matter. □

Christian, Muslim groups in rift over Jerusalem church

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Church officials in Jerusalem have filed complaints against the group that administers Islamic holy sites here for annexing part of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

According to church officials, members of the Islamic Waqf broke through a wall in the Greek Patriarchate and annexed a number of rooms for a mosque being renovated next door.

Church officials filed a complaint this week with the Israeli police and demanded that the status quo in the area be restored.

Given the sensitivities of the matter, Israeli security and municipal officials were unable to decide at a meeting this week whether to intervene.

For the time being, the Israeli officials urged the Christian and Islamic leaders to try to reach an understanding among themselves. □

Congress urged to consider cutting foreign aid to Egypt*By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's failure to condemn anti-Jewish editorials in government-supported newspapers has eroded the historically unified Jewish support for U.S. aid to Egypt.

Together with Egypt's adversarial stance in the Middle East peace process, the unchecked anti-Semitism in Egypt has put at least part of the \$2.1 billion in annual foreign aid in danger.

Anti-Defamation League National Director Abraham Foxman asked members of Congress last week to withhold \$100 million from Egypt's aid package until Mubarak publicly condemns anti-Jewish and anti-Israel statements by leading government officials and Egyptian media.

The Egyptian leader's silence "is tantamount to tolerating it or legitimizing it, and even supporting it." Foxman told the House International Relations Committee at a hearing on U.S. policy toward Egypt. "There must be consequences for such continued disregard, dismissal and, if you will, total indifference."

Egypt has faced a crescendo of criticism from members of Congress and Jewish officials in recent months. In addition to anti-Semitic cartoons in the Egyptian press, Cairo's sponsorship of a recent Arab League resolution encouraging its members to reinstate the Arab boycott of Israel drew sharp condemnation.

'An unfortunate step backward'

"Egypt's leadership role in that vote puzzles and dismays many of its friends in the United States," said Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), the committee's chairman. "The Arab League appears to have taken an unfortunate step backward through the failed politics of confrontation with Israel."

Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) indicated that he might call for a vote to cut aid to Egypt when the foreign aid bill comes before Congress later this year. "The multibillion dollar U.S. aid program to Egypt is not an unchangeable entitlement," he said at the hearing.

"I do not think that the American taxpayer can be expected to continue the level of aid to Egypt that we have undertaken for years in the light of a pattern of policies hostile to U.S. foreign policy interests."

Ever since the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the pro-Israel community has lobbied for U.S. aid to Israel and Egypt as one package.

While the American Israel Public Affairs Committee has not endorsed Foxman's initiative, the pro-Israel lobby is considering supporting a cut in aid to Egypt.

"There are a number of initiatives reflective of congressional concern about Egypt's behavior in the peace process," said AIPAC spokeswoman Toby Dershowitz. "All are aimed at sending messages to Egypt."

But not all proposals are punitive.

"The objective must be to change our economic relationship to improve the prospects for economic growth in Egypt," said Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"Given the great strides Egypt has taken in structural reform in recent years, now is the time for us to reshape the \$815 million economic assistance package," Satloff said at the hearing. He said reductions in U.S. economic assistance to Egypt could help "to improve Egypt's prospects for a healthier, sounder economy."

The ultimate decision on whether to seek a cut in Egypt's aid rests with the House Appropriations Committee.

"We're coming to a point where the government of Egypt continues to believe that there are no consequences for its behavior," Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.) said in an interview after the hearing.

"We will explore every avenue," said Lowey, a member of the Appropriations Committee. □

European Parliament approves trade accord with Palestinians*By Joseph Kopel*

STRASBOURG, France (JTA) — The European Parliament has approved a trade and cooperation accord between the European Union and the Palestinian Authority.

The agreement passed by an overwhelming majority, with 372 members of the European Union's legislative body voting in favor and five against. There were four abstentions.

While the agreement covers economic issues, diplomatic sources here say its true significance is political, because it reflects the European Union's desire for closer ties with the Palestinian Authority.

E.U. officials have sought an enhanced role in the Middle East peace process. The Palestinian Authority has welcomed the E.U. initiative, but Israeli officials have been wary, citing what they say is Europe's pro-Arab bias.

The accord, which was signed in February in Brussels by Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat, covers a five-year period and offers enhanced economic cooperation, including reduced tariffs for Palestinian exports to E.U. member-states.

Under the accord, the Palestinians are recognized as full partners of the European Union. Several Mediterranean countries, including Israel, have similar association accords with the 15-member European Union.

The Palestinian Authority and European Union will begin negotiating no later than May 1999 on a full association agreement to replace the current interim accord.

The European Union has been the leading financial supporter of the Palestinian Authority. European aid has gone to education, infrastructure development and the administration of the Palestinian self-rule areas. □

Israeli air force head claims Russia aiding Iran on missile*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The commander of the Israeli air force said this week that Iran, with the aid of Russia, had conducted a ground test of a ballistic missile capable of reaching Israel.

In an appearance Monday before an aviation club, Maj. Gen. Eitan Ben-Eliahu said Russia had been helping Tehran develop a ballistic missile with a range of some 930 miles, which means that it could reach Israel.

Both Israel and the United States have been closely following recent developments in light of an agreement Moscow signed with Tehran to supply the Islamic state with missile technology.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu voiced his concern about Russian transfers of missile technology to Iran when he visited Moscow last month and met with Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

The matter is also expected to be raised when the Russian deputy foreign minister visits Israel next week on the first leg of a regional tour.

Ben-Eliahu also maintained Monday that in addition to Iran, other Arab states had been developing non-conventional weapons.

He added that the Israeli air force required additional resources to contend with these potential threats. □

Israeli government considers additional cut in 1997 budget*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu convened top economic and banking officials this week to discuss whether additional budget cuts would be needed to keep the deficit within target levels.

At issue is an additional cut of some \$300 million that would come on top of a \$2.2 billion cut approved by the Knesset at the start of the year.

The government has set a deficit target of 2.8 percent of the total gross national product.

The additional cuts may be needed in the wake of Israel's ongoing economic slowdown.

Last week, the Bank of Israel reported that the slowdown in the final quarter of 1996 had continued into the first quarter of this year.

Finance Minister Dan Meridor indicated that he would support the new budget cuts, but did not propose any specific cuts, according to participants at the economic planning session.

Meridor said at the meeting that economic growth this year is estimated at 3 percent.

The estimate was a full percentage point lower than initial Finance Ministry projections for the Israeli economy this year.

Meridor blamed the continuing economic slowdown on the tight monetary policy of the Bank of Israel governor, Jacob Frenkel.

For his part, Frenkel voiced support for additional budget cuts, but warned that they should not be taken from such areas as education or infrastructure investment, moves he said could lead to higher taxes.

Frenkel also dismissed the position of the prime minister's economic adviser, Moshe Leon, that additional budget cuts be accompanied by a drastic reduction of 1.5 to 2 percentage points in interest rates.

Members of Israel's Manufacturer's Association have called for an urgent meeting with the government and the Bank of Israel leadership to discuss what they describe as an "emergency plan to rescue the economy from the deepening recession."

The plan includes the association's repeated calls for sharp cuts in interest rates along with a 1 percent increase in the value added tax and cuts in government spending. □

Former KGB officer who aided dissidents immigrates to U.S.*By Lev Krichevsky*

MOSCOW (JTA) — A former captain in the KGB who attempted to help Soviet dissidents in their struggle for freedom has emigrated from Russia after he was unable to clear his name.

Victor Orekhov emigrated last week from Russia to the United States after fighting unsuccessfully for years to be rehabilitated by the post-Soviet justice system.

Orekhov was sentenced nearly 20 years ago to eight years in prison for tipping off Soviet dissidents to secret police plans to search or arrest them.

Orekhov's case has drawn widespread attention from human-rights activists and dissidents.

Among those whom Orekhov attempted to help in the mid-1970s were Jewish dissidents Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky and Alexander Ginzburg.

He also attempted to provide help to Andrei Sakharov and members of the human-rights Moscow Helsinki Group.

Orekhov and Sharansky, who now serves as

Israel's trade and industry minister, were freed from the Soviet gulag system in 1986.

At a news conference last month, Orekhov said that his latest effort to win rehabilitation was rejected by top military court officials, who maintained that Orekhov was tried and sentenced correctly for disclosing state secrets.

The former KGB officer had argued that his name should be cleared because his former agency's activities are now widely considered illegal.

Russia's refusal to rehabilitate him left Orekhov with an official criminal record that prevented him from getting many jobs.

Russia's leading human-rights activist, Sergei Kovalyov, who himself is a former Soviet dissident, has voiced his support for Orekhov.

"If a crime is committed to prevent an even bigger crime, it shouldn't be tried," said Kovalyov.

A reporter for Russian television who interviewed Orekhov at the Moscow airport shortly before he left Russia last week, said it was ironic that a man who had struggled along with Jewish and other dissidents for freedom of emigration has now been forced to leave the country. □

Frankfurt opening of exhibition on German army results in arrests*By Daniel Dagan*

BONN (JTA) — Two people were arrested this week in Frankfurt after scuffles outside the opening of an exhibition on the crimes of Hitler's army.

The exhibit, which shows the involvement of the German army in the mass killing of Jews during World War II, has been shown in dozens of towns across Germany since it was launched two years ago in Hamburg.

The exhibit gained attention three months ago, after right-wing politicians and neo-Nazis in Bavaria demonstrated against it, calling it biased and badly researched.

On display are photographs and letters from soldiers that support the claim that the regular German army, as well as SS units, took part in massacres of Jews and other atrocities.

On Sunday in Frankfurt, those protesting the exhibit and those demonstrating in support of it clashed, despite a police presence at the opening, which 700 people attended.

Speakers at the opening ceremony in Frankfurt included Ignatz Bubis, the leader of the German Jewish community.

Petra Roth, the city's mayor, refused to attend.

The location of the exhibit, the Paulskirche, was the meeting place of the first nationwide German Parliament.

It symbolizes the quest to unify Germany under a democratic rule.

Last Friday, the city of Frankfurt had banned a neo-Nazi demonstration against the exhibit.

Meanwhile, a notorious German neo-Nazi has been convicted in a Mannheim court of denying the Holocaust and other charges.

Gunter Deckert, 57, a former leader of the extreme-right National Democratic Party, was sentenced to two years and three months in prison.

He was also convicted of slander, inciting racial hatred and defaming the dead.

Deckert was convicted in connection with his appearances along with other known Holocaust deniers at which he disputed the extermination of the Jews under Hitler.

Deckert has previously served time on similar convictions. □