



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ President Clinton may ask Congress to divert tens of millions of dollars to Jordan from Israel's \$3 billion and Egypt's \$2.1 billion annual foreign aid package. Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy is slated to discuss the issue with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at a State Department meeting Friday. [Page 2]

■ The U.S. State Department called on Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat and other Palestinian officials to publicly condemn death threats against Palestinians who sell land to Jews.

■ A Swiss official said his country is still being treated as an "international outcast" despite moves to deal with its wartime past. Testifying before the Senate Banking Committee, Ambassador Thomas Borer also said a new U.S. government report fails to adequately address the "extremely difficult situation that our country found itself in, both militarily and economically, at that time."

■ Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat rejected the idea of freezing public and private funds that Switzerland invests in the United States if Switzerland fails to provide a substantial amount of money to Holocaust survivors. At a Senate Banking Committee hearing, Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) and Jewish leaders agreed that such a step would not be appropriate at this time.

■ The Argentine Jewish umbrella group DAIA will release a "searing" report on Nazi activities in Argentina. The report probes the role of former Argentine President Juan Peron in helping Nazi officials enter the country and the role of other government officials in protecting them from deportation after the war.

■ Former Israeli Justice Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman was acquitted of charges of perjury and obstruction of justice, prompting speculation that he might be reinstated.

■ An Israeli court detained a Palestinian police officer and a woman suspected of involvement in last week's murder of a known Arab land dealer who apparently sold property to Jews.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Societal schisms mute rejoicing as Israel marks its 49th birthday

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israelis marked their Independence Day this week with all the traditional ceremonies and family festivities.

But behind the smoke of barbecues and amid the bustle of countless street parties and official receptions, there was an undercurrent of concern.

Societal schisms — between the Orthodox and secular, between Sephardim and Ashkenazim — that suddenly have resurfaced in recent weeks with ominous vigor seemed to mute the national rejoicing.

At many gatherings celebrating Israel's 49th birthday Monday, conversations turned to the fervently Orthodox protesters in Jerusalem who threw stones and dirty diapers at policemen standing at attention as the mourning sirens wailed the day before, marking Memorial Day for slain Israeli soldiers.

And the fervently Orthodox Shas Party's decision to keep its religious schools open Monday — in effect preventing its young people from attending the popular Yom Ha'atzmaut festivities — was seen in secular circles as a new and disturbing stage in religious-secular polarization.

Israelis have long known that deep social problems lie close to the surface and will need to be addressed "when the time comes." That time, it was widely hoped, would come after peace was finally achieved between the Jewish state and its Arab neighbors.

Then, it was believed, Israelis would have the spiritual and physical strength to confront the dangerous divisions within their society that could, if left to fester, yet blow the Zionist homeland apart.

As they celebrated the start of their jubilee year as an independent nation, however, Israelis were facing the sobering realization that the course of history is not so kind.

Peace is not yet at hand. Indeed, the peace process has suffered a major setback over the past year, and the prospects for the future are less rosy than they were a year ago.

But the societal ills are nevertheless bursting onto the national agenda, furnishing grist for the mills of cynical politicians.

The political scandal known as the Bar-On affair, which has bedeviled political life in the country for three months, climaxed just before Passover in an unexpected twist.

The attorney general's decision to indict Shas leader Aryeh Deri but not any other political figure involved in the affair — including the prime minister — roused a great cry of ethnic resentment from the country's Sephardi community. How much of that protest was spontaneous and how much was coaxed by Deri's colleagues is not clear.

But it is clear that beyond the initial, instinctive outpouring of resentment, Shas politicians, who look primarily to the Sephardi electorate for support, have deliberately "worked the crowd" to sustain and even heighten the dormant ethnic tensions.

Accusations of discrimination and elitism

Deri's speech to some 20,000 followers at a Jerusalem stadium during Passover was viewed by many as a model of calculated ethnic incitement.

He insisted that the decision to indict him now, like an earlier decision to put him on trial for bribery and fraud — a case that is now in its third year — was motivated by a deep-seated desire in the "Ashkenazi establishment" to destroy Shas. "But the more they persecute us, the more we will grow," Deri assured the crowd.

Deri's rhetoric, repeated by hundreds of his supporters at meetings across the country in recent weeks, has struck a responsive chord.

Shas activists believe that if elections were held now, their party would gain more than the 10 seats it now holds in the 120-seat Knesset.

Journalists visiting the Shas heartland — development towns and low-income city suburbs — find accusations of discrimination and elitism.

Meanwhile, leaders of the two major parties are pandering, in a backhanded way, to the cynicism exhibited by the Shas Party.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Labor leader hopeful Ehud

Barak, among others, proclaim that "the ethnic genie" must be pushed back into the bottle before it does lasting damage.

Ostensibly, these are bravely spoken words.

But they carry the implication that there indeed is an ethnic genie, even though Israel has strived for years to redress the open discrimination in the state's early development.

Improvements in social mobility, educational opportunity, "mixed marriages" — while perhaps not moving fast enough — militate against the perpetuation of ethnic tensions.

But in urging action against the "genie," Likud and Labor have, in effect, confirmed the Shas leader's insistence that the genie still lives, ready to emerge and drag Israeli society down.

On religious-secular tensions, which both sides feel are increasing, Deri is a factor as well. The corruption trial and indictment in the Bar-On affair of Deri, the leader of an Orthodox political party, also are widely seen as reflections of anti-Orthodox prejudices, not just ethnic.

But a far more potent cause of religious-secular frictions — and even violence — is the ongoing dispute in Jerusalem over whether Bar-Ilan Street, which runs through fervently Orthodox neighborhoods, should be open or shut on the Sabbath.

A High Court of Justice decision to keep the street open until a compromise can be negotiated has done little to ease the conflict. For both sides, the battle has come to symbolize a profound clash here over the future character of the capital city and, ultimately, of the nation as a whole.

Israel's secular majority is well aware of the shifting demographics in Jerusalem, the result of rapid Orthodox population growth.

The non-Orthodox fear — perhaps irrationally — a wave of fundamentalism sweeping other Israeli cities, too.

Thus, an attempt by an Orthodox developer to keep his new shopping mall in secular Ramat Aviv closed on Shabbat has, like Bar-Ilan Street, taken on national and even historic import.

Meanwhile, another area of religious-secular conflict has raised a veritable firestorm between Israel and Diaspora Jewry.

The new "Who is a Jew" controversy focuses on Orthodox efforts to cement in legislation a long-standing ban on recognizing non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel.

While Reform and Conservative Jews in the United States are in an uproar over the issue, secular Israelis, on the whole, are less exercised about it.

Yet, the presence in Israel of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are not halachically Jewish provides the conversion issue with an immediacy for the Israeli people that it has lacked in the past.

For the time being, the issue is on hold as government officials seek to negotiate a solution amicable to both sides. Resolving any or all of these deep conflicts in Israeli society now appears to be the biggest challenge to achieving "shalom bayit" by the 50th anniversary of Israeli statehood. □

Israel, Palestinians differ on possibility of new talks

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM(JTA) — Senior Israeli and Palestinian officials came away from U.S.-brokered discussions this week with starkly different assessments, demonstrating the depth of the crisis in the peace process.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said a basis had been found for continuing talks on reviving the negotiations.

However, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who took part in Wednesday night's talks, said nothing was resolved and that the gaps between the sides remained wide.

The discussions took place at the home of Martin Indyk, the U.S. ambassador to Israel.

Erekat said U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross' shuttle to the region was a failure.

Ross was expected to leave the region Friday.

Despite the pessimistic outlook, the Palestinians said they were willing to attend a three-way meeting between Israeli, Palestinian and American security officials Friday to discuss security cooperation.

Israeli-Palestinian talks and security cooperation broke off in mid-March, when Israel began constructing a Jewish neighborhood at Har Homa in southeastern Jerusalem and a Palestinian suicide bomber attacked a Tel Aviv cafe.

The Palestinians have demanded a halt to Israeli settlement activity as a condition for returning to the negotiations.

For its part, Israel has demanded that Palestinian security officials resume sharing intelligence with their Israeli counterparts as a condition for resuming the negotiations.

Briefing Jewish leaders in New York on Thursday, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy said a terrorist incident in the absence of such cooperation would be politically disastrous.

It would collapse Israeli public trust in the peace process by making it seem that the Palestinians "allowed the terrorist incident to take place."

In his remarks to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Levy said it was the obligation of the Palestinian Authority to "combat terrorism, eradicate the terrorist infrastructure and speak in peaceful terms and not in terms of jihad."

Levy staunchly defended Israel's right to build in Jerusalem, though he said such activity was being kept to a "minimum" so as "not to give anyone the excuse to derail" the peace process.

U.S. aid may be diverted to Jordan

His remarks came a day before a scheduled meeting in Washington with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to discuss the impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Levy is expected to convey to Albright on Friday Israel's interest in reaching an understanding with the Americans on the parameters for the final-status talks, according to foreign ministry officials.

Officials close to the prime minister were quoted by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz as saying that unless such agreement existed, it would be impossible to reach a permanent accord with the Palestinians.

Levy also is expected to discuss the issue of foreign aid in his meeting with Albright.

The meeting comes amid new revelations that President Clinton may ask Congress to divert tens of millions of dollars to Jordan from Israel's \$3 billion and Egypt's \$2.1 billion annual U.S. foreign aid package.

Despite differences between the Clinton administration and the Netanyahu government, most recently over the Har Homa project, Levy told Jewish leaders that Israel would make sure the relationship with the United States would not be undermined. □

(JTA staff writer Cynthia Mann in New York contributed to this report.)

FOCUS ON ISSUES

North American college students value Israeli university programs

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM, May 15 (JTA) — It is easy to spot them — lounging on the lawn or sitting in loose circles, laughing and joking in exuberant voices.

Even from a distance, before one can hear the English, it is obvious that these tanned, smiling young adults, gathered at the Hebrew University to attend a daylong Hillel seminar, are Americans.

It is not so much the stone-washed denims and cotton T-shirts they wear on this hot spring day, but the overwhelming sense of confidence they exude.

"They act as if they belong here, as if they own the place," says Jennifer, one of the organizers of the recent seminar, which attracted North American students from five Israeli universities.

"Sure, they brought a lot of confidence with them from the States, but Jewishly speaking, I think it really came together for them here in Israel."

The students, who are just completing a semester or full year of study at one of Israel's universities, readily agree.

"This was the best, best, best year," says University of Wisconsin student Elizabeth Lamin, who spent her junior year studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Sporting a button proclaiming, "I Love Israel," Lamin says, "This was my first time in the country, and it really blew me away." During her freshman year at Wisconsin, Lamin was the only Jew among 63 students on her dorm floor.

"On Yom Kippur and other holidays, I felt compelled to go from room to room and explain what being Jewish is all about," she says.

In Israel, "there's nothing to explain," she adds. "I don't have to be a teacher. I can just participate with other Jews."

Lamin, who in 1979 moved with her family from Russia to St. Paul, Minn., says that her experience in Israel has changed her life.

The product of a day-school education, Lamin says she was already interested in Judaism before coming to Israel.

After spending a year in Israel, she says, "my love for the religion has grown."

'Judaism is an integral part of my life'

Her experience has led her to believe that after college, she should move to New York or Los Angeles or "even Israel."

"I need to be a part of a bigger Jewish community. Judaism is an integral part of my life now."

Comments like these are music to the ears of David Harman, director general of the Jewish Agency for Israel/World Zionist Organization's Joint Authority for Jewish-Zionist Education.

Harman, who oversees dozens of programs for teens and young adults, believes that the most effective Israel-based programs are the ones designed for post-high school or college students, as well as recent graduates.

Referring to the 2,000 to 2,500 overseas students — three-quarters of whom are North Americans — who attend Israeli universities and programs every year, Harman says: "In terms of an Israel experience, you could not ask for a better age group."

While he wholeheartedly supports summer programs for high school students as a means of strengthening Jewish identity, Harman maintains that older students "can assimilate a lot more."

After high school is the time when young adults "are searching for an identity, content and meaning, when they are in a period of flux. They can assimilate a lot more because they are searching for something."

While acknowledging that some Diaspora students spend more time partying than studying, Harman maintains that "a period of time spent well in Israel contributes significantly to the formation of the students' Jewish identities, and helps form the Jewish attitudes and behaviors they will carry with them in the future."

This view is shared by Yisrael Roe, vice provost of Hebrew University's Rothberg School for Overseas Students.

Citing follow-up surveys conducted by the university one or two years after the foreign students have returned to their home countries, he says, "The uniform picture is of greater commitment and involvement in Jewish practice, whether that be social, religious, or in a leadership context."

"Our former students tell us that they're more committed to their Jewish communities in the Diaspora thanks to their studies with us," he says.

Harman, who would like to see the number of overseas students quadruple within the next few years, says that Israeli and American educators are constantly trying to find ways to make post-high school study in Israel a more attractive option.

"The post-high school students we get are self-motivated. They're coming because they want to, not because their parents are forcing them to come. Their expectation is to have a good time and to bond with the country."

The real challenge, says Harman, is to attract those with fewer ties to their Jewish roots.

"Done right, an Israel experience at this age is the defining experience in [the students'] Jewish identity."

"Unfortunately, the lure of Israel and Judaism isn't as great as we'd like it to be," he says, noting that young people have many alternatives and many want to move straight into their careers.

'This year has been fantastic'

To woo college-age youths, the Joint Authority was involved last year in launching a marketing consortium called Israel Experience Inc., which is designed to promote Israel programs to high school seniors and college students.

Harman says that it is "equally important to provide programs that young educated people will be interested in."

Courses in ecology and sports have been offered, and Harman hopes next year to attract computer, science and pre-med students with programs tailored to their needs.

Roe, whose university attracts about 1,000 North American students every year, agrees. "The key is to provide courses that students feel contribute to their goals, not detract from them."

Like many overseas students, Adrienne Pollack, a University of Cincinnati student who just completed her junior year at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba, stresses that "the most important part of an Israel Experience program is experiencing Israel. Coursework isn't everything."

Pollack said she chose Ben-Gurion University, away from a big city, so she could have the "experience of living with Israelis, of going to the supermarket, and really learning the culture without a lot of Americans around."

Pollack, who says she hopes to go on to rabbinical school, echoes the view of many students when she sums up her experience this way: "This year has been fantastic." □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Anti-Semitic rhetoric arises before Hungarian elections

By Michael J. Jordan

BUDAPEST (JTA) — Parliament may have moved on, but not Hungary's Jews.

Jewish communal leaders are still upset by the Hungarian Parliament's lack of action against a prominent right-wing politician who recently called attention to the Jewish origins of a former Communist prime minister.

In a speech before lawmakers in late March, Deputy Speaker of Parliament Agnes Nagy Maczo recalled Matyas Rakosi's crimes against society — his rule of the party and country was brutal — and casually referred to him as "Roth Mano." Rakosi, who headed the Communist Party, served as prime minister from 1952 to 1953.

The term "Roth Mano" literally means "red dwarf," but is widely interpreted here as anti-Semitic code language for "red Jewish dwarf."

This week, Jewish leaders met with Parliament Speaker Zoltan Gal to voice their displeasure that the comment had gone unpunished. "It's a shame for Hungarian democracy and has left a cloud over the Parliament," said Peter Feldmayer, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Hungary.

"In 1920s Germany, they divided people by their origin, Jews from non-Jews. Now it's becoming acceptable to do it here."

Jews here fear that the Maczo incident sets a dangerous precedent, and gives the green light to fringe politicians to use thinly veiled, scapegoating rhetoric during the upcoming campaign for next year's national elections.

Clash of politics and principles

The liberal Free Democrats — the ruling coalition's junior partner and the party of a number of high-profile Jews — denounced Maczo and pushed for her immediate removal.

Several other major parties joined in criticizing Maczo, who is a vice president of the populist Smallholders Party.

But in the clash of politics and principles, politics won handily. The Free Democrats stood alone in their crusade to remove Maczo from Parliament. Nobody, not even their coalition partner, the Socialists, backed them.

At the same time, Smallholders President Jozsef Torgyan — who polls say is the front-runner to be Hungary's next prime minister — shrewdly flipped the argument upside down. He brushed aside the allegations of anti-Semitism and accused the Free Democrats of defending the former Communist regime.

Soon after, the anti-Maczo motion fizzled.

The scapegoating rhetoric Maczo employs goes over well in some quarters, particularly in the poorer, rural provinces. As Hungary continues its painful transition to a free market economy, extremists repeatedly pin the blame on the Communists, the Free Democrats or on "international financial circles."

In each case — as communicated in read-between-the-lines code — the clear reference is to Jews, who number anywhere between 80,000 and 130,000 in a country of 10 million.

The former Communist era provides hatemongers with plenty of ammunition.

Shortly after some 600,000 of Hungary's pre-war population of 800,000 Jews perished in the Holocaust, several survivors played key roles in ushering Communist rule into Hungary.

In fact, during the brutal oppression of the early 1950s, the regime's top five leaders were Jews.

At the time, noting this publicly could have landed one in jail.

Not surprisingly, it is a sensitive subject today.

"We know Rakosi was a terrible dictator, but so what?" said Feldmayer. "He wasn't acting as a Jew."

But this is irrelevant in the current politics of the ultraright. Just the same, local Jewish leaders say anti-Semitism today is less intense than it was earlier this decade.

This appears to be a direct result of the absence from Parliament of one man: Istvan Csurka.

As a member of the country's first post-Communist, democratically elected government, Csurka tarnished the country's image abroad by routinely playing the race and nationalist cards.

Csurka was ultimately forced out of Parliament and formed his own party, the Hungarian Truth and Justice Party. It won just over 1 percent in the 1994 elections.

But today those same policies have an influential new mouthpiece, albeit from another party: Maczo.

Now, Maczo, who is regarded as something of a loose cannon, appears to be challenging Torgyan for the Smallholders Party leadership. And she is popular enough with the party faithful that he cannot afford to dump her.

Torgyan, according to analysts, is not personally anti-Semitic. But he also is not above benefiting from anti-Semitism to reel in voters.

He is believed to be vying with Csurka for the extreme right, even as he positions himself as a premier who would be palatable to the West.

Within the Smallholders Party, Maczo's "Roth Mano" comment sparked sharp internal debate, said Gyorgy Timar, another party vice president.

Timar, who has been criticized by Feldmayer as a "house Jew" for the Smallholders, said he "couldn't look in the mirror" unless he personally chastised Maczo. He believes, though, that she made "a mistake." □

Controversial group seeking 'converts' among non-Orthodox

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Orthodox rabbinical group that prompted recent fury from just about every other Jewish religious group in the United States is now beginning a campaign to bring Reform and Conservative Jews into Orthodoxy.

The effort will involve staffing the Lower East Side offices of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada with volunteer rabbis who will respond to the flurry of phone calls and letters that the group says it has received since last month, when it declared the Reform and Conservative movements "not Judaism."

The rabbis will help direct people to Orthodox synagogues and rabbis for counseling, said Rabbi Hersch Ginsberg, director of the organization, which claims more than 500 members and proudly describes itself as "right wing."

He said the group has received some 100 letters in the last month, some negative, but the majority were "extremely encouraging to us."

Dozens of Reform and Conservative Jews, he said, are "asking for help" to become Orthodox.

Rabbi Lennard Thal, vice president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said of the effort: "Such a campaign is patronizing, unwelcome and ultimately pathetic."

The chancellor of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, declined comment, saying, "I don't want to demean myself" by responding to the plans of a group as marginal as the Union of Orthodox Rabbis. □