



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The Clinton administration is preparing to introduce new federal guidelines that would make it easier for federal employees to observe religious holidays, wear religious garb and engage in discussions about religion. [Page 4]

■ U.S. envoy Dennis Ross said Israeli and Palestinian leaders had agreed to a means for restoring security cooperation. A U.S. State Department spokesman said that if the cooperation materializes, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's trip to the region is "highly likely." [Page 1]

■ The family of Leon Klinghoffer, a disabled American passenger killed by Palestinian terrorists aboard an Italian cruise ship 12 years ago, settled a lawsuit with the Palestine Liberation Organization for an undisclosed sum. [Page 2]

■ Thousands of Palestinian demonstrators marched in the West Bank town of Nablus to condemn Israel and the United States. Some of the protesters burned an effigy of U.S. envoy Dennis Ross, who was portrayed as an Orthodox Jew holding a doll of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The protest was jointly organized by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. [Page 1]

■ The U.S. State Department told the Palestine Liberation Organization to "suspend operations" at its Washington office due to the expiration of the Middle East Peace Facilitation Act. In reality, however, U.S. aid to the Palestinians will continue and the office is expected to remain in operation.

■ Conservative Jewish activists in Israel said they would petition the High Court of Justice to clarify whether egalitarian prayer was allowed in the Western Wall plaza. The move came as the committee charged with staving off a crisis over conversions in Israel faces a deadline. [Page 3]

■ More than 20,000 people have called claims offices around the world for information about dormant Swiss bank accounts, according to news reports.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Ross takes the political pulse to judge viability of U.S. initiative

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As U.S. special envoy Dennis Ross spent his latest Middle East mission taking the political pulse of Israel and the Palestinians, those he was surveying seemed intent on scoring political points.

Despite long hours invested in meetings, it was clear that any major concessions Israeli and Palestinian leaders might be willing to make would come only when — and if — U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright makes her first official visit to the region.

Despite little progress, Ross did manage to secure an agreement between the two mistrustful parties on a means for re-establishing security cooperation.

"This has been a good start and the process has been set in motion," he said.

The Ross shuttle mission took on new urgency in the wake of the July 30 double suicide attack in a Jerusalem market. It also became the first test of a new U.S. initiative intended to accelerate the peace talks if a climate of security can be achieved.

Ross' mission, therefore, was plainly being used by Israelis and Palestinians to win points — with the Clinton administration, with their respective domestic constituencies and, perhaps most importantly, with U.S. political and public opinion.

There was barely a prestigious American television news show that was not granted an interview with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

For their part, the familiar Palestinian spokesmen and women did their best to vie with Netanyahu at what he does best — persuasive sound bites crafted to win sympathy from the viewing public.

Apart from adding tension to the diplomatic crisis and urgency to Washington's mediation effort, the terror attack in Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market provided Netanyahu with ammunition for his allegations that the Palestinians aren't doing enough on the security front.

In one television appearance after another, Netanyahu flayed Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat and his security officials for failing to take tough action against terrorism, failing to arrest Islamic militants and failing to root out the "infrastructure" of armed terrorism in the self-rule areas.

Netanyahu and his close aide, Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh, struck a responsive chord when they referred repeatedly to the Palestinian Authority's "revolving-door" policy of arresting suspected terrorists only to release them a short time later.

The metaphor was quickly adopted by American officials.

Bombing provided Palestinians with sound bites

Indeed, every statement in Washington and by Ross on the need to combat terror was held up by Israel as evidence that the friendly superpower had accepted the government's basic position of "linkage" — that a resumption of the long-stalled peace negotiations will take place only after effective and sustained action by the Palestinian Authority against terrorism.

Israel's charges were given added poignancy this week when a man wounded in the double suicide bombing died of his injuries, bringing the number of Israeli victims to 14.

Eli Adorian, 49, was married and had four children.

In a backhanded way, the attack also provided Palestinian officials with material for their sound bites during this week's public relations sparring.

Israel responded to the attack with its most drastic punitive measures yet, including a full closure that prevents Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from entering Israel and a temporary "internal closure," which blocked Palestinian travel within the self-rule areas and paralyzed communications among Palestinian-controlled towns for almost a week.

In addition, Israel for the first time suspended tax payments that were owed to the Palestinian Authority.

Some of these payments are taxes on earnings by Palestinian workers

with jobs in Israel. Until the July 30 attack, Israel regularly remitted such taxes to the authority.

This last step prompted some criticism within Israel as well as in Washington and several European capitals.

Arafat vociferously complained against Israel's "collective punishment" of his people for a deed that, he insists, Israel has no solid evidence to pin on the Palestinian Authority.

Arafat's position appears to be popular with his constituency.

On Tuesday, thousands of Palestinian demonstrators marched in the West Bank town of Nablus to condemn Israel and the United States and to praise the Palestinian Authority for refusing to implement a crackdown on militants.

Some of the demonstrators burned an effigy of Ross, who was portrayed as an Orthodox Jew holding a doll of Netanyahu in his hands.

Arafat maintains that the bombers, who have yet to be identified, came from abroad. Netanyahu insists that even if the bombers came from outside the self-rule areas, they had to have been assisted by people within.

During their talks with Ross, the Palestinians spent much of the time complaining about the security measures Israel imposed in the wake of the attack.

Israel demanded that this week's talks focus on the need for the Palestinians to address the security threat.

Ross managed to get the two sides talking about security, but he acceded to the Palestinian demand that Americans participate in the high-level meetings between Israeli and Palestinian security officials.

He tried to get them to cooperate to identify who was behind the latest terror attack, but without much luck.

Given that Ross' visit was likely to be used for sparring rather than for genuine give-and-take, why did Washington go ahead with it?

Ross' mission, called off but quickly rescheduled after the bombing, presumably had a crisis-management component, intended to defuse dangerous tensions that erupted after the attack.

But beyond this, Ross likely spent the week taking the political pulse on both sides — in order to bring Albright an up-to-date and informed assessment regarding the Israeli and Palestinian will to re-engage in serious negotiations.

Albright's trip based on security cooperation

Albright, in a major policy address last week in Washington, stated that she would visit the region if Ross achieved progress with the two sides.

U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin said the tentative re-establishment of security cooperation did not represent a "breakthrough" and that a date had not been set for Albright's trip. But, he said, if the cooperation materializes, the trip would be "highly likely."

The U.S. initiative outlined by Albright accepts Netanyahu's suggestion that the permanent-status talks be accelerated.

But it also accepts the Palestinians' rider that this acceleration be accompanied by an implementation of the Interim Agreement, particularly the redeployments of Israeli troops from rural areas of the West Bank.

The next redeployment is scheduled to take place in September.

The Palestinians are still rejecting Israel's first redeployment earlier this year, charging that the amount of land turned over to them was insultingly small.

Netanyahu maintains that his rightist-religious coalition would not survive a generous second-phase redeployment — one that turns over as much as 10 percent of the rural West Bank lands.

Arafat, for his part, faces growing disillusionment among his people — and this, according to experts, seriously threatens his political standing.

Now it is up to Ross and Albright to determine whether these two leaders, each with his own political troubles and his own ideological agenda, are capable of taking the steps necessary for a U.S. initiative to bear fruit. □

Klinghoffer family finds closure after settling legal battle with PLO

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — The family of Leon Klinghoffer, a disabled passenger killed by Palestinian terrorists aboard an Italian cruise ship 12 years ago, has closed a long and painful chapter of their lives by settling a lawsuit with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The sum agreed upon was not disclosed, which was a condition of the settlement, according to a family spokeswoman.

The PLO also settled with Crown Travel, the New Jersey tour operator that booked the fateful cruise.

The attack on Klinghoffer, whose body was thrown off the Achille Lauro into the Mediterranean Sea, for years exemplified the scourge of random violence emanating from the Middle East conflict.

"Terrorism is a horror and sometimes it becomes impersonal," said Kenneth Jacobson, ADL's director of international affairs, who has worked with the family.

"The Achille Lauro affair and the tragedy of Leon Klinghoffer became a symbol, a specific focus of the horror of terrorism and seemed to stay in people's minds," he said.

The lawsuit originally was filed by Klinghoffer's widow, Marilyn, who died soon after her husband.

The case and a broader fight against terrorism was pursued relentlessly by the couple's two daughters, Ilsa and Lisa.

A tentative settlement between the family and the PLO in 1986 broke down. That settlement would have created an institute of peace studies that, according to a letter signed at the time, "would memorialize the tragic death of Leon Klinghoffer as well as other victims of violence."

The PLO has maintained that the attack was carried out by renegade members of the organization and it apparently has admitted no wrongdoing in the current settlement. Nonetheless, some speculate that the settlement reflects increasing pressure on the Palestinians to demonstrate they are doing their utmost to fight terrorism.

This week the daughters were referring questions to a longtime family friend, Letty Simon.

She said they were "pleased and relieved the long-standing litigation reached amicable conclusion." She refused to elaborate on their reaction.

But she did say that the Klinghoffers had been "an extremely close family unit" and that "the loss of Leon Klinghoffer as a result of such a heinous crime is never easy to put behind you."

For his part, Jacobson said of the settlement, "If the family feels satisfied, we're supportive."

In 1986, the Klinghoffers established the Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer Memorial Foundation of the Anti-Defamation League, dedicated to countering terrorism through education and legislation.

The settlement was approved last week by a federal judge in Manhattan, Louis Stanton, just weeks before the suit was to go to trial.

The PLO's attorney in the case, Ramsey Clark, was unavailable for comment. □

Conversion committee faces deadline with lack of consensus

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — The committee charged with staving off a crisis over conversions in Israel faces a deadline this week as media leaks cloud its conclusions and consensus appears elusive.

The committee, headed by Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman, was formed by the government to forge a path acceptable to the three major Jewish streams to avert the passage of controversial pending legislation.

That legislation would codify the Orthodox monopoly over conversions performed in Israel.

Friday is the slated deadline for the committee's recommendations, to be followed by the government coalition's approval by Sept. 5.

Members largely have kept the deliberations to themselves according to an agreement by all involved.

But a recent unconfirmed report by the daily Ha'aretz said the discussions included a proposal by Ne'eman for the establishment of a "joint conversion school for all streams of Judaism." The conversion itself would be performed in an Orthodox rabbinical court according to halachah, or strict Jewish law.

Such a proposal, the newspaper said, could be applied to other rituals, including marriage.

At the same time, the report continued, the Reform and Conservative synagogues would for the first time receive government funding "similar to those of Orthodox synagogues."

The proposal presupposes that the Conservative and Reform movements would give up their demand for equality in matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce and conversion.

But that is by no means a safe presupposition, given the movements' goal of "registration of Reform and Conservative converts on an equal basis with Orthodox converts," according to a document issued by the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations in June.

Yoffie 'not overly optimistic'

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the UAHC, refused to discuss the substance of the proposals, saying only that parts of the leak were accurate and parts inaccurate.

But asserting that there is currently "no consensus" on the proposals, Yoffie said, "I'm not overly optimistic about the ability of the committee to reach a resolution on the conversion bill."

In Jerusalem, Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center and a member of the commission, declined to comment on the reported proposal, saying, "I really prefer to leave it to discussion in committee" rather than talk about it in a way "that may jeopardize the process."

Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, also declined to comment on the substance of the Ha'aretz report.

"Whoever leaked it was irresponsible," said Epstein, who was part of a four-member North American committee that triggered the formation of the Israeli commission and is in daily contact with it.

Epstein said he also hoped that the commission's participants would take a look at the "bigger picture" and not be slowed in their efforts by recent external developments.

He was referring to the authorities' forcible removal of Conservative Jews gathered to pray at the Western Wall plaza during Tisha B'Av and a recent High Court decision upholding the appointment of a Reform

woman to the religious council in Netanya. The move angered some fervently Orthodox leaders.

Meanwhile, Conservative leaders in Israel vowed to continue their struggle to hold egalitarian prayers at the Western Wall and accused the police of using unnecessary force when they removed them on Tisha B'Av.

"Instead of dealing with the attackers, the police turned the victims into double victims, both of haredi Orthodox aggression and of police violence," Conservative Rabbi Ehud Bandel told Israel Army Radio.

Conservative activists were also considering whether to pursue legal action against one policeman they said had punched a woman in the face.

However, Jerusalem Police Chief Yair Yitzhaki defended the actions, saying they were preventing a possible confrontation.

"There were thousands of worshipers present, and it looked as though their feelings were offended," he said, referring to the haredim.

Yitzhaki said the Conservative group had been informed that it could pray in the upper plaza, but "in accordance with the custom of the place," a reference to a separation of men and women.

Einat Ramon, spokeswoman for the Conservative movement in Israel, said, however, that her group would petition the High Court of Justice to clarify whether egalitarian prayer was allowed in the Western Wall plaza.

Ramon said their legal adviser had been told by police that the group could conduct mixed prayers. □

(JTA correspondent Naomi Segal and Michael Arnold in Jerusalem contributed to this report.)

Officials in Stalin-created area may erase 'Jewish' from name

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — The Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan may soon drop the word "Jewish" from its name because so few Jews are left in the area.

The region's name may be changed since it has "lost its meaning," according to Birobidzhan's official newspaper, Birobidzhanskaya Zvezda, or Birobidzhan Star.

Jews constitute a small minority among the population of the area, located in the Russian Far East.

The percentage of Jews emigrating from the region to Israel and other countries is one of the highest in Russia.

During the last 8 years, 8,600 Jews left Birobidzhan for Israel, and hundreds of others emigrated to Germany and the United States.

The region's Jewish population is now estimated to be about 5,000 out of a total population of 200,000.

It was not until this week that local officials and the government press began discussing the idea of renaming the region.

The area adjacent to the Russian-Chinese border, which became a destination for Jewish immigration in 1928, was officially designated the Jewish Autonomous Region by Stalin in 1934. It was long touted by Soviet authorities as a place where Jewish life could flourish in the Soviet era. Indeed, some pre-World War II Jewish Communists declared the area the Soviet alternative to Palestine.

The town of Birobidzhan has two government-supported Jewish day schools. Earlier this year, the head of Birobidzhan's regional administration said he was committed to creating a favorable climate for the local Jewish community.

Nikolai Volkov said then that he was seeking the support of Russian Jewish businessmen who could sponsor a new Jewish community center in Birobidzhan that would house the region's first-ever synagogue.

New federal guidelines codify religious freedom at the office

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — New federal guidelines will soon be in place that would allow Jewish federal employees to take off for Shabbat and wear a yarmulke if they so desire.

The guidelines, which President Clinton was slated to unveil at the White House on Thursday, cover a broad range of issues related to religious expression.

They would make it easier for federal employees to observe religious holidays, wear religious garb, engage in discussions about religion and keep a Bible or Koran on their desks during breaks.

"There is a need to recognize rights to free religious practice in the workplace and to address religious harassment," said Marc Stern, a lawyer for the American Jewish Congress who helped write the guidelines.

"These guidelines do that," he said.

While most of the rights and protections are currently on the books, the guidelines, Stern said, serve as a "reiteration and lending of presidential weight to the duty of accommodating religious practice in the federal workplace."

Religious freedom advocates hope that the new federal guidelines can serve as a model for private employers.

The guidelines come as a broad coalition of religious and civil liberties groups have begun to rally around the Workplace Religious Freedom Act. The bill, which is aimed at preventing religious discrimination in the private workplace by forcing employers to accommodate their employees' religious needs, has strong backing from just about every leading Jewish organization.

Its proponents, including sponsors Sens. Dan Coats (R-Ind.) and John Kerry (D-Mass.), hope to convene hearings and make a concerted push for the measure after Congress returns from its August recess.

The administration's action also comes about two months after the Supreme Court struck down as unconstitutional the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act — a law that made it harder for government to interfere with the free practice of religion.

An attempt to provide answers

While most of the protections afforded under RFRA remain valid at the federal level, the new guidelines are intended to lay out parameters for religious practice in clear, non-legalistic terms.

"This was an attempt to have something in a personnel manual that people could look at for answers to commonly asked questions," Stern said.

The AJCongress worked to develop the guidelines in conjunction with several religious and civil liberties groups, including the Christian Legal Society and People for the American Way.

A proposed copy of the guidelines recently obtained by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency states: "Federal employers shall permit personal religious expression by federal employees to the greatest extent possible, consistent with requirements of law and interests in workplace efficiency.

"Federal employers shall not discriminate against employees on the basis of religion, require religious participation or non-participation as a condition of employment, or permit religious harassment."

The guidelines set parameters dealing with religious expression in private work areas, religious discussions among employees and religious expression in work areas accessible to the public.

They also lay out standards for accommodating a variety of religious practices — such as mid-afternoon Jewish or Muslim prayers — stating that accommodations should be made "unless it would cause an actual cost to the agency or to other employees or an actual disruption of work." □

Prominent evangelical clearly advocates proselytizing Jews

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — Richard Mouw has been a conflicted man — until now.

The president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. — known as "the Harvard of evangelical seminaries" — has been torn between fealty to his faith, which requires him to proselytize "the Jew first," and his desire to respect all religious people.

In private conversations and in public presentations last January during a conference at Fuller convened with the American Jewish Committee, Mouw made clear that he was struggling to mediate those tensions.

Mouw, an influential voice in the national evangelical community, had come under fire from members of his own faculty, particularly those involved with the Jewish evangelism courses offered at Fuller, where Jews for Jesus sends its Southern California leaders for training.

They took strong issue with Fuller's partnering with a mainstream Jewish organization while excluding what they call the messianic Jews, including Jews for Jesus, whom they view as a bridge between the Jewish and evangelical communities.

Mouw has responded to his critics in a strongly worded editorial in the Aug. 11 issue of Christianity Today, perhaps the pre-eminent evangelical publication.

In his editorial, titled "To the Jew First — Witnessing to the Jews is Nonnegotiable," Mouw makes clear that he is, above all, an evangelical Christian.

"I have a nonnegotiable commitment to evangelism — and this includes witnessing to Jewish people about my firm conviction that Jesus is the promised Messiah."

Mouw softens his position, though, by adding, "I also oppose treating Jews as if they were only 'targets' for evangelism," apparently referring to last year's resolution by the Southern Baptist Convention, which said that Jews should be targeted for conversion.

He also writes, addressing his evangelical audience, that "we must cooperate with Jews in working for the health of society," specifically citing fighting "racism and Jew-hatred" as part of his agenda.

But he also writes: "We need to keep reminding Jewish friends that if they are serious about having better relations with evangelicals — which many of them are — they cannot demand that we think and act like liberal Protestants or Roman Catholics."

Rabbi A. James Rudin, the American Jewish Committee official who organized the conference on religious pluralism at Fuller, said that he views Mouw as a "religious pilgrim" whose search is not yet over.

But, he said, Mouw's new statement reflects "the irreconcilable tension which is so much a part of evangelical-Jewish relations, and between his faith commitment and his commitment towards Jews and society."

Rudin said Mouw's clearly articulated pro-proselytizing position will not deter the AJCommittee from pursuing joint work with Fuller.

Fuller students may soon join other Christian and Jewish seminary students from the Los Angeles area on retreats, Rudin said. He also hopes that Fuller students will soon learn about Judaism from a real rabbi, rather than a "messianic" Christian using the same title. □