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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli Cabinet sets 'ceiling'

Israel's Cabinet did not issue a specific set of guidelines for a West Bank redeployment during its meeting Sunday. Instead, it agreed to set a "ceiling" on the redeployment after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu returns from his visit to the United States.

Meanwhile, President Clinton sought to reassure Jewish leaders that his commitment to Israel is "unshakable" as he prepared for his meeting Tuesday with Netanyahu. Clinton told the heads of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations that he was optimistic about the talks, according to Malcolm Hoenlein, the group's executive vice chairman.

Arafat receives invitations

Two Israeli Holocaust memorial sites extended invitations to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

The invitations were issued after the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum said it would not receive Arafat in an official capacity. [Page 3]

Iran supplied via Britain

Iran is using Britain as the hub of a supply network for technology and materials to accelerate its program for producing missiles and nuclear warheads.

The findings were released after a two-year investigation by Britain's MI5 intelligence agency and its European counterparts. [Page 4]

Lithuania's new leader accused

A spokesman for the Lithuanian president-elect denied allegations that Valdas Adamkus fought on the side of the Nazis during World War II.

The allegation was made by Vladimir Lukin, chairman of the international affairs committee in the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament. [Page 4]

E.U. may review Israel policy

The European Union's executive body said it would review its ties to Israel if the Jewish state "continues to be unable to reach tangible results" in the Middle East peace process.

In a policy paper adopted by the 20-member European Commission, E.U. officials also indicated they might review their financial aid to the peace process if they did not see significant improvement in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Showdown or compromise?

Time will tell for Ne'eman effort

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Showdown or compromise? Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews in Israel are preparing for both as a committee working to find a solution to the conversion bill crisis closes in on its deadline.

Tensions mounted as the committee, headed by Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman, was expected to finish its work by Jan. 25 — one week ahead of schedule.

Members said the early completion was a result of Ne'eman's planned trip to the United States to participate in an Israel Bonds event next week.

Much is at stake as the clock ticks for the committee, which was established last year to help avert a crisis that threatened to widen the gap between American Jews and Israel. The issue has already sparked widespread resentment among American Jews, the overwhelming majority of whom identify with the Reform and Conservative movements' push for recognition in Israel.

For their part, American Orthodox Jews, like their Israeli counterparts, appear divided over the issue, with some opposed to any change in the status quo, which gives Israel's Chief Rabbinate exclusive control over personal status issues such as marriage, conversion and burial.

Others have expressed the hope that the Ne'eman Committee, which includes representatives of the major streams of Judaism, would succeed in reaching a compromise resolution.

But even as a compromise began to take shape, prominent Orthodox Israeli rabbis unleashed a fresh barrage of anti-Reform and anti-Conservative rhetoric.

Reform leaders, meanwhile, said they do not trust the rabbinate to carry out the committee's conclusions and demanded guarantees. Their Orthodox counterparts accused them of trying to torpedo a compromise.

And in the Knesset, Orthodox parties, anticipating the committee's failure, prepared to push through the very bill — one that would enshrine in law the Orthodox monopoly over conversions in Israel — that ignited the controversy in the first place.

Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center and a Ne'eman Committee member, said he hoped that enough coalition members would keep the bill from passing if it came to a vote.

If not, he warned, the bill would spark outraged Israelis into a full-scale war against religious coercion.

"This will be fueled in part by growing support from Diaspora Jewry, which will translate its frustration into anger," he said, predicting a backlash of political, charitable and even economic support for Israel by American Jews.

Even as both sides are preparing for a renewed battle, the main elements of a compromise are in place, prompting speculation that the tough positions are last-minute bargaining tactics.

Committee members outlined two main components of the compromise package:

- A joint, interdenominational educational conversion program, under the auspices of the Jewish Agency for Israel, which would be established as an accepted alternative for potential converts who seek a non-Orthodox alternative.

- The formal conversion process would be conducted by Orthodox religious courts established by the Chief Rabbinate.

Several key elements of the agreement, however, are still being disputed.

One of the key sticking points, according to several parties involved, is whether the Reform and Conservative will agree, as the Orthodox are demanding, to stop

MIDEAST FOCUS

Hussein refuses Mossad office

Jordan's King Hussein rejected an Israeli request to reopen the Mossad office in Amman and is insisting that the chief of the Israeli foreign intelligence service be fired.

The Mossad station in the Jordanian capital was shut down after a bungled attempt to assassinate Hamas political leader Khaled Mashaal on the streets of Amman last September.

According to Israeli sources quoted by the London-based newsletter Foreign Report, Hussein rebuked Mossad head Danny Yatom after realizing that the Mossad was behind the operation.

Pope meets Israeli minister

Pope John Paul II sees a visit to Israel "on his horizon," according to Israel's tourism minister.

Moshe Katzav met with the pope last Friday to discuss plans for celebrations in Israel during the year 2000, which the pope has declared as a holy year to mark the start of Christianity's third millennium.

Two Hamas members convicted

Two Hamas members were sentenced in the West Bank town of Jericho to 15 years in prison with hard labor for preparing explosives and recruiting the bombers for two suicide attacks in Jerusalem last July and September. The men were arrested after the discovery last week of a Hamas bomb-making factory in the West Bank town of Nablus.

Israeli dump site to close

The main garbage dump in central Israel will close down, and trash will be transported to alternative sites in southern Israel until a new dump in the Negev is ready in about eight months.

A ministerial committee headed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced the decision to close the Hiriya dump site, prompting an outcry from people who live near the alternate sites.

performing their own conversions once a compromise takes effect. While the Conservative movement appears likely to agree to that demand, the Reform movement has not accepted it.

Many had hoped that a compromise allowing for the recognition of weddings officiated by non-Orthodox rabbis would be part of the conversion compromise, but that is not going to happen, according to Alex Lubotzky, a Knesset member from the centrist Third Way Party who has been a driving force in the campaign for a compromise.

Regev said he accepted the basic formula of the compromise — a joint conversion school coupled with Orthodox conversion. However, since the rabbinate was not represented on the committee — and has refused regular contact with the Reform and Conservative movements — Regev said he wanted a firm commitment from Israel's chief rabbis that they would abide by the decisions.

"As far as we're concerned, the package and even the two elements of conversion can only be agreed to by us if we know for a fact, explicitly, that the rabbinate is going to deliver the goods," he said. "We are not interested in going back to a situation whereby all we have is a piece of paper and a claim that we simply didn't understand what the rabbinate was willing to do."

But Rabbi Simcha Meron, an Orthodox member of the committee, accused Regev of creating an excuse for not signing on to the conclusions in an attempt to blame the Orthodox if the committee fails in its mission. "They know that the committee is working with the knowledge of the rabbinate," Meron said.

He said the chief rabbis were likely to meet the committee before it submits its findings to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

However after statements made last week by Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, it is difficult to imagine the Chief Rabbinate signing on to the package.

In a meeting with a mission of 75 Orthodox and fervently Orthodox rabbis from the United States who came to lobby for the conversion legislation, Lau said Reform and Conservative rabbis did not deserve recognition. "If you don't accept the oral law, if you don't even agree upon the fundamentals, that the Torah was given in Sinai," he said, referring to liberal rabbis, "how can you demand that the Jewish people accept you as rabbis, as spiritual leaders, as religious figures?"

Meeting the same group, called Am Echad, or One Nation, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, spiritual leader of the Sephardi Orthodox Shas Party, called Reform rabbis "priests" and charged them with bribing politicians to win support for their cause.

For his part, Shas Knesset member Shlomo Benizri said he did not expect the chief rabbis to accept the compromise and was preparing to revive the conversion legislation.

"The committee's compromise proposals will explode at some point," he said. "We don't want to take down the government, but if need be, we will go to legislation. If the government must fall, it will fall."

Meanwhile, Yuli Edelstein, minister of absorption and member of the Yisrael Ba'Aliyah Party, which has a largely Russian immigrant constituency, said his party would not bow to Shas' pressure.

"If we are convinced there is a reasonable solution, but the coalition pushes for immediate legislation, we won't support the government," he said.

Meanwhile, other moderate forces were at work behind the scenes to try to ensure that a compromise is reached. Lubotzky said he believed an agreement was imminent.

To help ensure success, Lubotzky convened a group of 130 moderate Orthodox rabbis and lay leaders at the Knesset on Monday to try to influence Orthodox Israelis to accept the conclusions of the committee.

In New York, Shvil Hazahav, a group of Orthodox rabbis and lay leaders, issued a statement endorsing the Knesset gathering and the Ne'eman Committee.

"The very future of the unity of klal Yisrael (the Jewish people) may very well rest on the outcome of these deliberations," said Dr. Steven Eidman, a member of the group's executive committee. For his part, Regev believes that such Orthodox efforts could be the key to averting an all-out religious war if the Ne'eman Committee fails.

"There is a quiet dialogue going on between us and some of the younger generation of [Orthodox] rabbis," he said. "Ultimately, they, too, realize the need for a change on policies of religion and state in Israel." □



Daily News Bulletin

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JEWISH WORLD

Britain to release property list

Britain promised to publish a list of 25,000 companies and individuals in Nazi-occupied Europe whose assets in Britain were seized during World War II and still have not been returned.

Trade and Industry Minister Lord Haskel told Parliament that a report on the seized assets had been drafted and would be published "as soon as possible."

"The list and the report will give a history of the government's handling of enemy property, which will contribute to a better public understanding of this complex issue," he said.

A statement by the Trade and Industry Department said the study came "in response to concern expressed by the international Jewish community" about the way the British government treated assets it seized during World War II belonging to residents in Nazi-occupied Europe.

U.S. criticizes Turkish court

U.S. officials described as undemocratic a decision by Turkey's top court to ban the Islamist Welfare Party.

The court also banned six legislators, including former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, from serving in the Turkish Parliament. The court said the party violated the country's secular doctrines.

Poland marks 'Day of Judaism'

Churches all over Poland held special masses over the weekend to mark the first-ever "Day of Judaism" sponsored by the country's Roman Catholic Church.

Saturday's nationwide initiative, designed to bring Jews and Catholics closer together, operated under a slogan taken from a quotation by Polish-born Pope John Paul II: "Whoever meets Jesus Christ, meets Judaism."

Belarus leader levels charges

President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus accused foreign organizations of backing a coup against him.

Among the foreign groups he cited was the Soros Foundation, funded by Jewish billionaire George Soros. One ultranationalist newspaper in Belarus responded to Lukashenko's charges by describing the foundation as a "Zionist spy organization."

New member of Swiss fund

The vice president of the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors was appointed to the advisory council of the Swiss Holocaust Memorial Fund.

Sam Bloch succeeds Benjamin Meed, the American Gathering's president. The fund was created last February by Switzerland's three largest banks.

Museum's 'no' to Arafat ignites a heated debate

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Two Israeli Holocaust memorial sites have extended invitations to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat — after the Washington museum dedicated to those who perished at the hands of the Nazis said it would not receive Arafat in an official capacity.

The position taken by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum set off a heated debate in Israel and the United States over whether it was appropriate for the Palestinian leader to visit the site.

Meanwhile, against the backdrop of the uproar, the administration of the museum in Washington was reportedly reconsidering its position.

Arafat had apparently been persuaded by the Clinton administration to add a visit to the museum during his visit to Washington this week. Arafat is scheduled to meet with President Clinton on Thursday, two days after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is slated to meet with Clinton.

But Arafat canceled his visit to the museum after he was told he would not be extended the protocol reserved for world leaders.

Dr. Ahmed Tibi, an adviser to Arafat, said the museum's stand that Arafat could visit as an individual, but not receive the official reception of state leaders was an "insult" based on political considerations.

Among Israelis, opinion was mixed.

"Every day there are anti-Semitic remarks by Palestinian officials, anti-Semitic caricatures in the Palestinian press. Is it conceivable in this situation to invite the Palestinian Authority head to a visit at a Holocaust museum?" said Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh, who heads a government forum on anti-Semitism.

Efraim Zuroff, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Israel, said he doubted that Arafat's motive for visiting the Holocaust museum was to learn about the Holocaust or sympathize with its victims.

Instead, he said, it was likely "a ploy to gain support in Western public opinion."

However, some Holocaust survivors said such a visit could have been an opportunity for reconciliation and understanding between the Palestinian and Jewish people.

"In my view, this was a missed opportunity," Labor Knesset member Shevach Weiss, himself a Holocaust survivor, told Israel Radio. "With all of the ambivalence, with all of the understanding, with all of the pain, such a visit could have been a historic event."

Others said that just as Arafat, in the past five years, went from enemy of the Israeli people to peace partner, a visit to a Holocaust museum by the Palestinian leader was part of the same process.

"I saw Arafat shake hands with Clinton and Rabin, I saw him shake hands with Netanyahu," said Noah Flug, head of the umbrella organization for 25 Holocaust survivor groups in Israel.

Flug said he supports a visit by Arafat to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem.

"The doors are open to everyone — even to Arafat — so that he will see what fascism and racism and anti-Semitism brought about. I hope that he and others will also understand what Hitler and the period of Hitler were," Flug said.

Avner Shalev, director of Yad Vashem, said official visits from dignitaries were determined by the Foreign Ministry.

However, Shalev said he believed that the U.S. Holocaust museum had made a mistake by becoming embroiled in the question of whether to host Arafat.

"To the best of its abilities, an organization which is involved in the documentation of and memorializing the Holocaust should try not to get involved in political matters," he said.

In response to the debate, two Israeli Holocaust centers located on kibbutzim issued invitations to Arafat. There was no word on whether he would accept. □

Report: Iran using Britain as center of its weapons network

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Iran is using Britain as the hub of a sophisticated supply network to accelerate its program for producing missiles and nuclear warheads, according to the results of a recent investigation.

The two-year probe by Britain's MI5 intelligence agency and its European counterparts uncovered a trail that leads from London — through Vienna and Dusseldorf — to Tehran.

British customs officials say they have evidence that Iran planned to use Britain as a conduit for acquiring high-strength steel of a quality used in missile casings, and centrifuges for weapons-grade uranium.

Iranian military scientists have reportedly already acquired other vital components for their program, some disguised as medical equipment and auto parts. An Iranian-born businessman, who allegedly posed as a commercial buyer in Britain while working as an agent for the Iranian military, has been indicted on charges of breaching British export controls.

The indictment apparently followed a raid by German police on a Dusseldorf company that acted as a front for the Defense Industries Organization, an arm of the Iranian Defense Ministry.

German authorities are said to have discovered documents detailing a huge purchasing operation to obtain weapons of mass destruction, and experts fear that the technology acquired by the front company will significantly assist the Iranian missile and nuclear programs.

The disclosures are likely to embarrass British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who challenged U.S. calls for tough trade sanctions against Iran during a visit to Washington last week.

Cook, echoing the view of the 15-nation European Union, said economic sanctions would not have a "serious effect on Iran's attempts to acquire weapons of mass destruction." □

U.N. weapons inspectors lodging at terrorist's hotel

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — The team of U.N. weapons inspectors in Iraq are living at a Baghdad hotel owned by terrorist Abu Abbas, whose Palestine Liberation Front rose to international attention when it hijacked the Achille Lauro cruise ship in 1985.

The Bourj al-Hayat, or Tower of Life, is officially registered in the name of Abu Abbas' wife, Nimr, but Middle East intelligence sources report that the hotel in fact serves as a front for a drug-trafficking operation run by Abu Abbas.

The sources say Abu Abbas runs drugs from Iraq to Kuwait. Abu Abbas, then a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's executive committee, masterminded the hijacking of the Achille Lauro while it was cruising in the Mediterranean.

During the hijacking, a crippled American Jewish passenger, Leon Klinghoffer, was killed by a single shot to his head.

Abu Abbas now enjoys the protection of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and is said to maintain a network of 300 terrorists who can be mobilized for attacks. □

Lithuania's president-elect rejects charges of Nazi ties

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — A spokesman for Lithuania's president-elect has denied reports that Valdas Adamkus fought on the side of the Nazis during World War II.

The allegation was made last week in a radio interview by Vladimir Lukin, chairman of the international affairs committee in the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament.

Lukin, Russia's former ambassador to Washington, is a co-founder and leading member of the liberal Yabloko political bloc and parliamentary faction. Adamkus' spokesman told a news agency that Lithuania's president-elect participated in the anti-Nazi resistance during the German occupation of the Baltic nations.

As a high school student, Adamkus distributed an underground anti-German newspaper during World War II, the spokesman said.

In 1944, after the end of the German occupation, Adamkus, then 18, left Lithuania with his parents for Germany, but returned a few months later.

Historians believe that many of those who fled Lithuania after the end of the German occupation were Nazi collaborators.

Adamkus' spokesman said that after Adamkus returned, he joined the Homeland Defense Force, an underground group that fought against Soviet domination in Lithuania.

In 1944, after a short time in Lithuania, Adamkus returned to Germany. The family moved to the United States five years later and made its home in Chicago.

Until he entered the presidential campaign in Lithuania, Adamkus had been working as a regional director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. □

New Israeli party creates buzz: Will Milo challenge Netanyahu?

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A new, secular, centrist party believed to be affiliated with Tel Aviv Mayor Roni Milo has announced its intentions to run in the next general elections.

The party, calling itself Atid, Hebrew for future, submitted founding papers to the political party registrar last week.

Milo, a member of the Likud Party, did not appear among the 140 people signed on to the party's founding paper or constitution.

However, speculation that Milo might run as the party's prime ministerial candidate in the next general elections against his current Likud colleague, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, swirled around the party's well-publicized founding.

The Tel Aviv mayor, a relative moderate, was among a group of senior Likud members who have been very critical of Netanyahu's leadership.

At a conference of mayors last week, Milo did not rule out any future association with Atid.

The new party's constitution contains nine general clauses, which proclaim, among other things: Israel as a democratic state with equal rights for all citizens; deepening the ties between the Israeli people and the Jewish Diaspora; support for peace with security; and improving the status of impoverished areas. □