



Daily News Bulletin

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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Negotiators meet in Washington

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators said they made no progress in talks in Washington with U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross and other State Department officials.

One of the participants, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political adviser, briefed a small group of Jewish representatives on the talks. Uzi Arad gave a spirited defense of Netanyahu's peace policies, according to participants at the closed meeting, which was sponsored by B'nai B'rith.

Orthodox man fatally stabbed

A fervently Orthodox Jew was stabbed to death while on his way to morning prayers in a Jerusalem neighborhood near Arab-populated areas.

Police officials said the circumstances surrounding the attack suggested it was the work of militants. Soon after the killing, a Palestinian was wounded in a stabbing attack in a nearby Jewish neighborhood, but officials said the incidents appeared to be unconnected.

Sharansky to meet Gore

Israeli Trade Minister Natan Sharansky is slated to meet Vice President Al Gore Thursday in Washington to discuss Russia's alleged support in developing Iran's missile program. Meanwhile, the State Department said U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright could decide this week whether to slap sanctions on European countries who have multibillion dollar contracts to develop Iran's oil and gas fields.

Clinton, NOI minister in photo

President Clinton was photographed with a Nation of Islam minister at a meeting with clergy after he gave a speech on cultural diversity last month.

Democratic officials tried to play down the "accidental encounter" and vehemently denied minister Robert Mohammed's claims that Clinton said during the encounter that he has a good relationship with the Nation of Islam.

Jewish vets call for pullout

The Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A. called on President Clinton to remove all U.S. troops and bases from Saudi Arabia because the Persian Gulf state will not allow the United States to launch air strikes against Iraq from bases within the country.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Religious persecution bill gains momentum in Congress

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Legislation aimed at fighting religious persecution abroad has a fighting chance in Congress now that religious leaders, lawmakers and human rights activists have worked out some of the wrinkles.

From the beginning, proponents of the cause have sought input from Jewish leaders, seeking to model their campaign after the Jewish community's successful efforts to free Soviet Jews in the 1970s and 1980s.

While most Jewish activists support the concept of combating religious persecution, they have been conflicted about the proposed legislation, known as the Freedom From Religious Persecution Act.

The bill would bar all but humanitarian aid to countries engaged in the persecution of religious minorities. It would also make it easier for those fleeing religious persecution to be granted asylum, and it would ban exports of equipment that could be used as instruments of torture by oppressive governments.

Fears have centered around whether the legislation would do more harm than good and whether it would elevate the cause of religious persecution over other human rights concerns.

Recent changes have made the bill more palatable to Jewish groups, though most activists say some additional improvements may be needed before they can get behind it.

So far, only the Reform movement's Religious Action Center and the National Jewish Coalition, a Republican group, have endorsed the bill.

Over the course of the past year, the fight against worldwide religious persecution has emerged as a leading political cause.

At a summit meeting here last week, proponents of the campaign — a vocal coalition of religious groups ranging from the Christian Coalition to the International Campaign for Tibet — sought to build new momentum to pass the legislation.

Congressional leaders, for their part, declared the bill a high priority and say it could become law as early as this summer in spite of opposition from the Clinton administration.

After several months in which the campaign has stagnated, supporters were upbeat, noting that what has been seen as a crusade led mainly by Protestant evangelicals and religious conservatives now includes support from influential Jewish, Catholic, Buddhist and human rights groups.

"I believe the groundswell is increasing geometrically," said Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), who, along with Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) in the House, authored the act.

The bill originally sought to establish a new office within the White House to monitor the treatment of religious minorities around the world. But the new version, crafted to satisfy critics, moves that office to the State Department and gives the president authority to waive sanctions in certain instances.

Proponents hope the Wolf-Specter legislation can provide a shot in the arm for their cause, similar to what the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment did for the Soviet Jewry movement. That legislation linked U.S. trade policy to a country's emigration practices.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center, said the original legislation was problematic, but he agreed to support it after the changes related to the State Department and presidential waivers were made. "We cannot turn our back against

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak backs Palestinian state

Israel's opposition leader said he would accept a Palestinian state provided it accepted limitations favorable to Israel's security interests.

Ehud Barak also told visiting American Jewish leaders that he believed the stalemated Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are leading the two sides toward war.

Women allowed into combat

The Israeli army decided to let female soldiers serving as doctors go into combat areas.

The soldiers will now be able to take part in missions such as treating wounded soldiers in the southern Lebanon security zone, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz. Until now, female soldiers women were granted permission to go behind enemy lines only on a case-by-case basis.

Israel launches celebrations

Israel launched its 50th anniversary celebrations at a tree-planting ceremony marking Tu B'Shevat, the new year for trees.

In the Knesset, legislators took a break from their usual debates to mark the parliament's 49th birthday.

Settlers over haven

Settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip announced a campaign to welcome any Israelis who wish to flee to the territories to escape a possible Iraqi missile attack. The campaign was dubbed "Israelis Look After One Another."

Netanyahu to appear online

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is slated to appear on a live Internet chat at the CNN Web site, www.cnn.com. Hosted by CNN senior anchor Bernard Shaw, the chat will take place on Feb. 15 at 1:00 p.m. EST. Internet users from around the world can pose their questions to the premier at the Web site.

innocent people whose sole 'crime' is the expression of their deepest religious beliefs," Saperstein wrote in a recent letter to Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), chairman of the House International Relations Committee.

Citing the experience of Jewish refugees turned away from the United States during the Holocaust, Cheryl Halpern, national chairwoman of the National Jewish Coalition, said, "To the extent that 'Never again' is the Jewish 'community's rallying cry, then never again should American shores be closed to those fleeing religious persecution."

The campaign has also found an ally in one of the key symbols in the movement to free Soviet Jewry — former Russian dissident Natan Sharansky, now Israel's minister of industry and trade.

In a letter to supporters of the campaign, Sharansky said the growing American movement to combat worldwide religious persecution "reflects what is best and noblest about America."

"When the West stood up for its most basic values and spoke up for persecuted Soviet Jewish communities, Soviet chains around churches and political dissidents also began to shatter," he wrote.

Jewish activists who have been working on the issue say that with the changes the Wolf-Specter legislation is clearly moving in the right direction. Most, however, say they are either withholding judgment until they have more time to study the reworked version or until additional modifications are made.

Some activists continue to raise questions about the efficacy of the proposed sanctions and how they would work in conjunction with existing human rights law.

Some human rights activists, meanwhile, remain opposed to the idea of focusing only on religious persecution — and not on human rights abuses more broadly.

The Clinton administration continues to oppose the bill, expressing many of the same reservations.

Testifying before the House International Relations Committee last year, John Shattuck, assistant secretary of state for human rights, said that although the administration "strongly supports the objectives of eliminating religious persecution," the Wolf-Specter legislation threatens to do more harm than good in addressing religious freedom issues.

"We fear reprisals by repressive governments against victims, as well as an end to any dialogue on religious freedom, in retaliation for the sanctions," the assistant secretary of state said, adding that it might hurt "vital bilateral relations with key allies and regional powers."

For its part, the administration has been addressing the issue through an advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad, established in 1996 to recommend policy actions to President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Last month, the committee released a 35-page interim report stating that the followers of all the world's major religions — Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is — all suffer detention, torture and death.

The report urged the president to give "greater weight and enhanced importance" to religious freedom in foreign policy decision-making.

To that end, Albright has announced the establishment of a new senior-level post in the State Department's human rights bureau to coordinate U.S. foreign policy with efforts to promote religious freedom abroad.

In a related effort, three prominent American religious leaders arrived in Beijing this week for a three-week tour of China to examine the climate of religious freedom there.

Supporters of the campaign against religious persecution have identified China as a key trouble spot, criticizing Beijing for what they describe as widespread persecution of Christians and Tibetan Buddhists.

Clinton and Chinese President Jiang Zemin agreed to the mission during their summit meeting in October.

The delegation, which includes Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, is looking at the trip as a vital chance to start a dialogue with China.

"We're not looking to this mission as a one-time event," Schneier said before departing the United States. "It's the beginning of a process." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Banks committee plans hearings

The U.S. House Banking Committee is scheduled to hold hearings this week to address the legal status of art objects seized by the Nazis and the insurance claims of Holocaust victims and their heirs.

The total value of those assets likely far exceeds the value of the more publicized Holocaust-era dormant Swiss bank accounts and personal gold plundered by the Nazis from death camp victims, according to Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress.

Court rules against extremist

France's highest legal body ruled that the election of the extreme right National Front's sole member of Parliament was illegal due to campaign spending irregularities.

As a result, Jean-Marie Le Chevallier will have to abandon the National Assembly seat he won last June, leaving the xenophobic Front with no representation in Parliament. Party chief Jean-Marie Le Pen described the ruling as an "ignominy worthy of totalitarian regimes."

Education bill approved

The U.S. Senate Finance Committee approved a bill that would allow parents to set aside \$2,000 per year for each child in tax-free education savings accounts that could be used for public and private school expenses.

The Orthodox Union praised the move. A Democrat-led filibuster killed a similar bill in the Senate last year, while the House of Representatives passed its own version.

Farrakhan gets visa

Australia granted a visa to Louis Farrakhan, but warned that he risks being kicked out if he offends any segment of Australian society during his planned visit.

A spokesman for the Nation of Islam leader was quoted as saying that Farrakhan and his entourage would decide whether they still want to visit, adding, "We want to make sure the [visa] document doesn't infringe on our rights as human beings or attempt to muzzle us like a dog."

Wiesenthal film up for Oscar

A film produced by the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center was nominated for an Academy Award in the documentary feature division.

Through archival footage and interviews, "The Long Way Home" dramatizes the fate of post-Holocaust refugees between 1945 and 1948 and their desperate attempts to reach the Jewish homeland. The center's first production, "Genocide," won an Oscar for best documentary in 1981.

Israeli immigrant soldier is buried in southern Russia

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Thousands of miles from the southern Lebanon zone where he was killed, an immigrant Israeli soldier was laid to rest this week.

The 150 mourners at the funeral in the southern Russia city of Krasnodar filed silently behind the Israeli flag-draped casket that contained the body of Sgt. Nikolai Rappaport, who was killed by Hezbollah gunmen Saturday.

Rappaport's body was flown to Russia on Monday at the request of his family.

Nikolai, 23, lived in Krasnodar until he and his father, Ilya, immigrated to Israel two years ago. His sister moved to the Jewish state two months ago.

Nikolai was drafted into the Israeli army last year and volunteered to serve in southern Lebanon.

Ilya Rappaport and his 22-year-old daughter, Olga, said upon arriving in Krasnodar for the burial that they did not know whether they would go back to Israel. They said they would leave the decision in the hands of Nikolai's mother, who is not Jewish and still lives in Krasnodar.

In Israel, a scandal erupted after Israeli President Ezer Weizman paid a condolence call this week to Rappaport's family in Tel Aviv and saw the squalor in which they lived. The family lived in a small, windowless shack and the father was unable to find employment.

The Jews of Krasnodar were shocked by the death of Rappaport, one Jewish activist said in an interview from the city, which is located about 750 miles south of Moscow. "This is a tragedy for us as well," said Yuri Teitelbaum, who heads the Krasnodar regional branch of the Russian Jewish Congress.

Teitelbaum said local Russian authorities refused to help conduct a memorial ceremony for Rappaport in a city cemetery. City officials also refused to provide police to ensure public order at the ceremony.

Like thousands of others, the Rappaports fled to Russia in 1992 following the civil war that erupted after the Georgian region of Abkhazia declared its independence.

Each year, about 200 Jews leave Krasnodar for Israel. Some 2,000 Jews live in the city of 600,000.

Teitelbaum's own son — who emigrated to Israel a year ago — is slated to join the Israeli army in two weeks. "We, like all parents whose kids are in Israel, will be on pins and needles waiting for letters from him," said Teitelbaum. □

Female Israeli soldiers can enter combat zones

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Israeli army has decided to let female soldiers serving as doctors enter combat areas.

The soldiers will now be able to take part in missions such as treating wounded soldiers in the southern Lebanon security zone, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

The report said the decision was taken after deliberations between the air force and the Israel Defense Force personnel branch. Until now, female soldiers were granted permission to go behind enemy lines only on a case-by-case basis. "It's a totally natural development," Israel's surgeon general, Ariel Dan, told Israel Radio.

While female doctors would be permitted in principle to take part in such military missions, the report said that it would still be up to the squadron commander to decide whether or not to assign one to such an operation.

The decision was taken about a month ago following lengthy deliberations. Questions were raised then regarding whether the decision would lead to renewed discussion about women being assigned to combat field positions in elite units.

Last year, the air force opened its pilots' training course to women, following a ruling by the High Court of Justice. □

NEWS ANALYSIS**Palestinians cheer Saddam as if not a thing has changed***By Gil Sedan*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It could have been a scene from the streets of Baghdad.

Instead, it was the West Bank towns of Jenin and Ramallah — and the Gaza Strip — where hundreds of demonstrators lined the streets waving Iraqi flags, holding posters featuring Saddam Hussein and chanting slogans in support of the Iraqi leader.

"Saddam, Saddam, ya habib (Saddam darling), hit, hit Tel Aviv," they chanted.

Once again, the Palestinians were spearheading Arab support for Saddam Hussein.

Seven years ago, on the eve of the Persian Gulf War, Palestinians burned flags of Israel and the United States. Then, the target of Palestinian rage was President Bush — now it is President Clinton.

"Clinton, Clinton, you coward," chanted demonstrators in Ramallah, "go look for your women."

In Ramallah, scores of demonstrators threw stones at Israeli soldiers on the border between the Palestinian- and Israeli-controlled areas.

Israeli soldiers fired rubber bullets, wounding one Palestinian in the leg.

It was as if nothing has changed — as if the United States is not the main sponsor of the Oslo peace process.

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat tried to appear neutral.

He met Monday with the president of the European Union's executive body, Jacques Santer, and called for a diplomatic solution to the Iraqi conflict.

On the ground, however, it was different.

Arafat's Fatah group organized most of the demonstrations — a move that only increased tensions with Israel.

"The rallies are a way for Palestinians to let out their frustrations over the deadlock in the Mideast peace process," said Marwan Barghouti, leader of the Fatah in the West Bank.

As fear swelled among Israelis that Iraq would repeat the Scud attacks of 1991, Saddam was perceived by some Palestinians as the only Arab leader who could do something to belittle the Israelis.

Thus it was the relatively distant issue of Saddam Hussein, not the stalled peace process, that brought the Palestinians to the street.

The Palestinian leadership, in fact, may have sponsored the rallies in an attempt to allow the Palestinian people to deflect their rage from the peace process.

But if demonstrations in support of Saddam were thought to be more controllable, this turned out not to be the case.

In addition to the violence in Jenin, Israeli troops fired rubber bullets at Palestinian demonstrators in the West Bank town of Bethlehem.

Fourteen people were wounded, including three Palestinian police officers and three journalists.

In response, the Palestinian police Tuesday banned any demonstrations that violate the Oslo peace accords, including pro-Iraq rallies. The Americans wouldn't need to worry about Palestinian support for Saddam, except for the fact that it reflects a

general mood in the Arab world. Major partners in the Gulf War coalition — the Syrians and the Egyptians, for example — are publicly criticizing the possible use of force against Iraq.

A close ally like King Hussein of Jordan — who supported Saddam during the Gulf War — met Britain's prime minister, Tony Blair, in London this week and told him that he would not support a strike against Iraq.

Even Saudi Arabia, a staunch ally during the Gulf War, told the U.S. secretary of defense, William Cohen, that it would not allow American planes to take off from Saudi soil.

In Cairo, the secretary-general of the 22-member Arab League, Esmat Abdul Megid, tried to defuse the crisis by proposing the creation of a special new team to inspect Saddam's palaces.

"The Palestinian people, like all Arab peoples, oppose any American aggression against Iraq," said Arab Knesset Member Azmi Bishara of Hadash.

"But this does not mean that someone has an ideological political plan in support of Saddam Hussein."

Some Palestinian activists, such as Fathi Abu-Jab of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, tried to downplay the significance of the pro-Saddam demonstrations.

"Support for Saddam Hussein in the Palestinian street is very limited," said Abu-Jab.

"Likewise, the Palestinian Authority has no interest to support the Saddam Hussein regime."

Abu-Jab suggested that the rage of the Palestinians is directed as what they see as a double standard — the Americans say they intend to punish the Iraqi people because of Saddam's failure to respect U.N. resolutions, but they do nothing against a perceived failure on the part of the Israeli government to stand by its obligations.

Last weekend's Cabinet session of the Palestinian Authority was mostly devoted to the Iraqi crisis.

Arafat sent Minister Azzam al-Ahmad, the Palestine Liberation Organization's former ambassador to Iraq, to Baghdad to convey two messages to Saddam: the sympathy of the Palestinian people and the hope that the conflict with the United States would be resolved peacefully.

For their part, Israeli Arabs living in Israel proper kept a low profile over the issue.

Some representatives of the Bedouin population, however, made some alarming remarks.

"The Bedouin have eaten straw for 50 years," said Khalil al-Baz, spokesman of the Bedouin municipality of Tel-Sheva in the Negev Desert. "It would not hurt the Israelis to eat a little straw," he said.

And hundreds of Druse living in the Golan Heights marched in support of the Iraqi leader.

Unlike the Palestinians, the Druse did not burn Israeli or American flags.

As it did seven years ago, the Palestinian stance on the Iraqi issue has increased tensions with the Israelis.

Israel's defense minister, Yitzhak Mordechai, said this week that most of the Arab countries did not agree with Saddam's way.

"The Palestinians would do best if they choose another way — and other models," he said.

But many Palestinians appear to be confident that whether America launches air strikes or not, Saddam Hussein will be the winner. □