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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Albright meets Jewish leaders

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright pledged that the Clinton administration's "commitment to Israel's security does not come with a time limit," adding that it would "continue today, tomorrow and as long as the sun shall rise." She made the statement at a news conference after summoning a small group of Jewish officials to her office for an unannounced meeting. [Page 1]

TV ad to focus on Israel

A group opposed to the Clinton administration's Middle East peace policy launched an unprecedented television advertising buy in New York and Washington urging the president to allow Israel to determine its own security needs. The Committee for a Secure Peace, which is chaired by former Minnesota Sen. Rudy Boschwitz and has refused to release its membership list, has direct ties to the American political consultant who orchestrated Benjamin Netanyahu's 1996 campaign for the Israeli premiership.

Premier makes Har Homa pledge

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged that houses would be built at the controversial Har Homa construction site in southeastern Jerusalem by the next elections. Netanyahu made his remarks, which came in a meeting with members of the National Religious Party, on the eve of a scheduled meeting in Washington with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to discuss Israeli proposals for breaking the deadlocked peace process.

Shells fired from Lebanon

Two Israeli soldiers were wounded when Hezbollah forces in Lebanon fired mortar rounds across the border. No civilians were injured and no shells hit northern Israeli communities during what was the first instance of cross-border shelling in months.

Hezbollah seeks dialogue

The Iranian-backed Hezbollah fundamentalist movement wants to establish dialogue with Americans and to improve its image in the West, according to a spokesman.

But the movement does not want better ties to the U.S. government as long as it supports Israel, the spokesman was quoted as saying.

NEWS ANALYSIS

U.S. administration responding to Jewish concerns of pressure

By Matthew Dorf

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The organized American Jewish community is warning the White House that it has gone too far.

After giving President Clinton a pass as he sought for months to get Israel to break the Middle East impasse, Jewish groups this week objected with near unanimity as Israel increasingly faced pressure, blame and perceived ultimatums.

Stung by the charges, the Clinton administration was quick to respond to the Jewish concerns, sending U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright before the cameras to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to Israel's security.

For the first time since Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to power nearly two years ago, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations rallied to oppose aspects of U.S. policy in the peace process.

In a rare vote, 27-3, the umbrella body of 55 Jewish groups decided to send a letter to the president and issue a statement critical of the administration. The statement accuses the Clinton administration of crafting policies that are perceived to "complicate the negotiations" and have "given rise to significant concerns and have created perceptions of a shift in U.S. policy toward Israel."

The Jewish response comes at a time of delicate and intense U.S. efforts to revive what many see as a dying peace process. It also comes as Netanyahu was embarking on a lengthy visit to the United States to shore up support for his policies.

While American Jews remains deeply divided on the core issues of the peace process, most activists supported the Conference of Presidents' statement, saying that they are increasingly uncomfortable with the Clinton administration's stance.

While some hard-line Jewish groups have spoken out during the past few months against U.S. policy, most organizations gave Clinton their blessing as he sought to pressure the parties to move forward. But when a proposed summit in Washington didn't occur this week because Netanyahu rejected the U.S. condition that he approve a 13 percent further withdrawal from the West Bank, the tone changed.

"People are concerned that they have seen a shift in the approach and policy of the United States," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents. Albright had set the deadline and issued the invitation only if Netanyahu would agree to the plan. If not, she told him in London last week, the United States would re-evaluate its approach to the peace process.

By Monday, the White House and State Department had softened their rhetoric but continued to demand that Netanyahu agree to an American peace plan, which also requires the Palestinians to take concrete steps against terrorism.

In an effort to ease the growing tensions between the administration and the American Jewish community, Albright met Tuesday with a small group of Jewish organizational officials.

During the meeting, which lasted more than an hour, Albright went to great lengths to deny that the administration was imposing any pressure on Israel and promised to support Israel's security.

The meeting came after the Clinton administration hosted a Monday Oval Office strategy session with Vice President Al Gore; Sandy Berger, the national security adviser; and the Middle East peace process team. Following that meeting, the administration announced that Albright would meet with Netanyahu in Washington

MIDEAST FOCUS

Barak meets with settlers

Israeli Labor Party leader Ehud Barak said his party would not allow Jerusalem to become divided.

Barak also told the residents of the Jewish settlement of Beit El that "we will stay in Beit El forever" — and that the only guarantor of security is a separation of the Israeli and Palestinian populations.

Israel names Arab judge

Israel named the first Arab judge to sit on its Supreme Court. Abdel Rahman Zuabi will fill one of the 14 seats on the court, on a temporary basis, beginning in a year's time.

The judge served on the five-member commission that investigated Baruch Goldstein's murder of 29 Palestinians in a Hebron mosque in 1994.

Separation plan presented

A senior Israeli army official appeared before a Knesset committee with a plan for separating Israel and the self-rule areas by using minefields and fences.

The public security minister, Avigdor Kahalani, said he had a similar plan that he expected to present in the future.

New IDF chief approved

Israel's Cabinet endorsed Maj. Gen. Shaul Mofaz's appointment as Israel's chief of staff. Mofaz is slated to take over from Lt. Gen. Amnon Shahak in July.

All the ministers present at the meeting approved Mofaz's appointment.

Cabinet mulls construction plan

Israel's Cabinet met to discuss a plan to fight unemployment.

The plan, which would increase infrastructure investment by some \$265,000 in the 1998 budget, was expected to encounter stiff opposition from a number of ministers.



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again on Wednesday. At a Tuesday news conference, Albright addressed the concerns presented by Jewish groups. "Our commitment to Israel's security does not come with a time limit," said Albright, wearing a gold dove pin given to her by Leah Rabin.

"It will continue today, tomorrow and as long as the sun shall rise," she said.

Albright stressed that the administration's proposals were a direct response to concerns raised by Netanyahu. She also said the United States would not walk away from the process, regardless of whether Israel accepts the U.S. plan.

For months there was no consensus in the Conference of Presidents about how to respond to the U.S. administration. But all that changed after last week's London meetings. According to Jewish organizational officials, it was a combination of many U.S. policies that, taken together, had crossed the line. These included:

- the demand that Israel withdraw from a specific percentage of land, regardless of Netanyahu's claim that it would endanger the security of the Jewish state;
- opposition to such a demand on the grounds that it violates previous agreements that the size of the withdrawal is Israel's decision and not subject to negotiations;
- setting a deadline with a perceived ultimatum for an Israeli decision on turning over land to the Palestinians; and
- first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's statement of support for a Palestinian state, which came last week in an exchange with a group of Israeli and Arab teen-agers.

In addition there was a perception that the Conference of Presidents' previous failure to reach a consensus on the administration's peace policy amounted to an endorsement. There were enough forces in the umbrella organization that did not want to leave that impression. At the same time, there are deep divisions among American Jews and Jewish groups over whether Netanyahu is pursuing the right course and whether the Clinton administration needs to exert pressure on both sides.

"The Jewish community is such that you can find validation for any point of view you want, from the left to the right," said David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, whose group was slated to hear from Netanyahu at its annual meeting in Washington on Thursday.

In fact, the dovish Israel Policy Forum released a poll last week taken after the London talks showing 43 percent of American Jews believe the level of U.S. pressure on Netanyahu is "about right." Another 11 percent called for more pressure, while 33 percent said there's too much.

Overall, the poll of 500 subjects, with a 4 percent margin of error, found, that 80 percent of those surveyed "support the Clinton administration's current efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations." The three Jewish groups that opposed the conference statement were Americans for Peace Now, the Jewish Labor Committee and the umbrella organizations for the Reform movement.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie said the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, though generally supportive of Clinton's policies, was concerned about Clinton's ultimatum to Netanyahu. However, he said his group voted against the Conference of Presidents' decision to send a letter, fearing that it would be used to broadly criticize the American role. It is against this backdrop that Netanyahu was coming for a planned trip to meet with key lawmakers and address the annual policy conference of the pro-Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Acutely aware of the possibility that Netanyahu would use the trip to rally the Jewish troops against Clinton, White House and State Department officials planned to urge the Israeli premier to avoid stoking the rhetorical fires. But the outcome of the talks with Albright were likely to determine Netanyahu's message to the Jewish groups.

For their part, delegates to both the AJCommittee conference and AIPAC were slated to take their own message to Capitol Hill in the coming days.

A draft of the AIPAC policy statement that will be debated at next week's conference softens the lobby's position on Palestinian statehood. Instead of calling on the United States to oppose a Palestinian state, this year's policy draft proposes "opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state with full, unlimited sovereign powers." The same statement also calls for supporting a political solution for peace between the Israel and Palestinians that would "permit the exercise of Palestinian self-government while excluding those elements of sovereignty that endanger the security of Israel." □

JEWISH WORLD

Nazi book-burnings remembered

Author Salman Rushdie emerged from seclusion to appear at a Berlin event marking the 65th anniversary of a Nazi book-burning of thousands of books.

Rushdie called for greater protections for persecuted authors, who he said "burn much more easily than books."

Iranian religious leaders issued a death edict against Rushdie in 1989, saying his book, "The Satanic Verses," was blasphemous.

Klan rally turns violent

Police used tear gas against demonstrators who threw bottles and rocks in an attempt to disrupt a Ku Klux Klan rally in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Police used more than 100 volunteers to separate hundreds of demonstrators from some 35 Klan members who played music and made speeches during the hourlong rally.

At least five people were treated for injuries, but there were no arrests.

U.S. holding white supremacists

U.S. officials are holding four white supremacists in Orlando, Fla., for an alleged plot to plant bombs throughout the tourist city to create a diversion while they carried out bank robberies.

The plot fell apart last year when one of the bombs blew up in the face of one of the suspects, according to officials.

'Drive for Peace' leaves London

A fleet of British cars left London for a 17-day "drive for peace" to benefit the Jewish National Fund. The event is expected to raise more than \$200,000 for the JNF.

The rally, made up of 26 vehicles ranging from a 1928 Ford Model A Roadster to a state-of-the-art Jaguar, will take participants south and east until they reach Haifa later in the month.

'Nazi Gold' reaches Hollywood

MGM executives signed a deal for a film tentatively titled "Nazi Gold." The script deals with a planned heist from a Swiss bank of gold looted from Holocaust victims. The thieves then plan to turn the gold over to the victims' descendants.

Yiddish Forward editor dies

The editor of the Yiddish Forward newspaper died at the age of 76. Mordechai Strigler, who was born in Poland, studied as a child at one of Poland's most distinguished yeshivas.

During World War II, when he was sent to Majdanek and Buchenwald, he was a member of the Resistance.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Russians share joy, anxiety of sons serving in Israeli army

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — Every week, the Gorelikov family anxiously awaits a phone call from their son in Israel.

Pavel Gorelikov, who left for the Jewish state five years ago, has been serving in the Israeli army since last year. His parents, who remained in Russia, are proud, but they are worried about his safety.

Gorelikov is just one of hundreds of young Russian Jews who immigrated to Israel without their parents and were later drafted into the army.

Many of these young Russians went to Israel as participants in Na'aleh, a Jewish Agency for Israel program that encourages Jewish high school students in the former Soviet Union to live in Israel. Some left for Israel to avoid serving in the Russian army.

More than 2,000 participants in the program, which began in 1992, have already graduated from Israeli high schools — most of them have decided to stay in Israel and join the army. While one of the program's objectives is to influence students' parents to join their children in Israel, many parents fear that their age would prevent them from finding a good job in Israel.

Their worst nightmares were transformed into headlines in Israel earlier this year, when after a young Russian immigrant soldier, Sgt. Nikolai Rappaport, was killed in action, it was discovered that his family was living in squalor.

Still, for the most part, parents whose children have moved to Israel without them believe they are ensured a better future in the Jewish state.

But this belief doesn't make these parents miss their children any less.

"It is very hard to me to realize that the son is far away," says Moris Fiks, a Moscow physicist whose son David, now 21, left for Israel five years ago.

Recently, Jewish Agency representatives in Russia decided that parents such as Fiks need special attention.

"These parents need to know where do their children serve, what are the conditions there, says Rachel Vilenski of the Jewish Agency's Moscow office. "Parents want to share their problems and also to share pride for the children."

The agency has organized several dozen of these parents into a group known as Dargot — Hebrew for "ranks." The group meets once a month, allowing parents to pose questions to agency and Israeli military officials, as well as to meet with psychologists.

At a recent meeting, parents proudly showed photographs of their children in Israeli army uniforms. Some read letters from the children aloud.

Many immigrant soldiers — perhaps feeling the need to prove that they are as tough as their Israeli counterparts — seek difficult positions or tasks in the army.

But few parents are complaining. Indeed, many of them say they sent their sons to Israel so their children would not have to serve in the Russian army, where violence and crime are rampant. Two to three years of military service is obligatory for young men in Russia.

Oskar Loitzker, the father of another immigrant soldier, says his family cannot forget the difficulties his son had while serving in the Russian army in Siberia.

"It was almost 10 years ago, but even today my wife and I recall those two years with horror," he says.

Many of the soldiers' parents have visited Israel and have seen the difference between the two armies.

"I visited my son in the [Israeli] army and I saw how different are the conditions there," says Sergei Lyamichev, whose son volunteered to serve as a paratrooper in southern Lebanon.

He says there is a better sense of camaraderie in the Israeli army. Recently, Lyamichev's son, Dima, called his parents in Moscow and told that his officer had invited him for a Shabbat dinner to his home.

"I just can't imagine such relations between soldiers and officers in the Russian army," Sergei Lyamichev said. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Netanyahu strives to satisfy competing U.S., Israeli demands*By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The space between a rock and a hard place would represent for Benjamin Netanyahu a veritable paradise compared to his current predicament — stuck between Madeleine Albright and Ariel Sharon.

The Israeli prime minister, staring at the daunting prospect of a full-scale confrontation with the Clinton administration, must have been relieved to receive an invitation from the secretary of state to meet him in Washington this week.

But there was little time to celebrate.

Within hours, a bombshell came crashing in upon the premier from Sharon, his hard-line infrastructure minister.

Netanyahu had hinted to U.S. officials, Sharon told the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot, that he was ready to accept an American plan for Israel to redeploy from an additional 13 percent of the West Bank in exchange for Palestinian steps to improve security.

Sharon also ominously reiterated that anything more than a 9 percent redeployment was dangerous to the unity of the coalition.

Netanyahu's government, he implicitly threatened, would not continue to exist if the premier went ahead with a concession to American pressure.

For his part, Netanyahu knows that he has hardly felt the full force of that pressure. The Clinton administration has so far been reluctant to go public with its quarrel with Israel over advancing the peace process. But Netanyahu knows that U.S. patience is rapidly running out.

President Clinton, after consulting with his senior foreign policy aides Monday, agreed that Albright should postpone her scheduled departure for Europe in order to meet with the Israeli leader in an effort to bridge their differences.

The decision to have Albright meet with Netanyahu was to a large degree based on an assessment from U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross, who reported at the Monday meeting that his weekend visit to Jerusalem had elicited some creative thinking from the Israeli side.

While a Clinton-Netanyahu-Arafat summit originally slated for Monday in Washington had to be canceled in the face of Israeli opposition to the 13 percent redeployment figure, the Clinton administration still hopes that Israel's belated creativity can lead to a summit before the end of May.

As they did with Monday's failed summit, U.S. officials have made it clear that the rescheduled meeting would only take place if there is Israeli agreement on the pullback figure.

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat has signaled his own agreement to the American plan — a step that he says represents a huge compromise compared to the Palestinians' original demand for a 40 percent redeployment.

The American diplomatic team has taken credit for lowering the Palestinians' expectations, which, they recall, was Netanyahu's key priority in the earlier months of this 14-month negotiating stalemate.

The Palestinians say they are not about to accept anything less than the 13 percent figure. At the same time, Sharon and other hard-liners in the Cabinet appear not about to budge from 9

percent. All of which is going to require some fancy footwork on Netanyahu's part.

The Israeli creativity that Ross alluded to is reported to hinge on the idea of an "escrow" under which Israel would "deposit" several percentage points of West Bank land with the United States for transfer to the Palestinian Authority at a later date, conditional upon the Palestinians' adherence to already-signed agreements.

It remains unclear when that later date would be.

According to Sharon, whose interview with Yediot was spread over the paper's front page Tuesday, that state of ignorance affects not only media reports but members of the Cabinet as well.

Sharon maintained in the interview that even the members of Netanyahu's Inner Security Cabinet — which includes Sharon, Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai and Industry and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky — have been kept in the dark as the premier seeks to placate both Washington and his own political allies.

Sharon insisted that Netanyahu had at a previous stage indicated to the United States that he would agree to the 13 percent — although the premier has in recent weeks insisted that he does not have the authorization of his Cabinet to make such a commitment.

"He got into complications then, and he can't get out of them now," Sharon said.

Underscoring Sharon's published threats, National Religious Party leaders met with Netanyahu on Tuesday to warn him not to take actions that could threaten the survival of his own government. Some political observers believe that the NRP as a whole, or at least some of its nine Knesset members, oppose any withdrawal at all, even the 9 percent to which Sharon has given his grudging assent.

This is the position, too, of some members of the so-called Land of Israel bloc, a group of 17 hard-line legislators in the governing coalition who have consistently threatened to bring down the government if it signs away any portion of Greater Israel.

While in Washington, Netanyahu expects to drum up support for his stance. He was slated to address two major American Jewish conventions: the American Jewish Committee later this week and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful pro-Israel lobby, next week.

The prime minister also intended to do some energetic lobbying on Capitol Hill, where he feels he finds more sympathy for his positions than among the Clinton administration.

His choice as he left for Washington — and it was a delicate one for him, fraught with dangers — was whether to use these sessions with Jewish and Congressional leaders to launch a head-on confrontation with the Clinton administration.

Recent letters from a large majority of Senators and Congressmen urging the Clinton administration not to pressure Israel have been a major source of support for the embattled premier.

But the White House was reported in Israel to be touting a poll conducted among American Jews that showed a high level of support for its Middle East peace policy. Netanyahu was being told by some diplomats and advisers that he runs the risk of coming to be seen as an ally of the Republicans, thereby weakening Israel's traditional ties with the Democratic Party.

On the other hand, if he creates the impression that he is moving toward acceptance of the 13 percent figure, the forces on the right flank of his coalition will prepare an uncomfortable landing for him when he flies back home. □