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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Netanyahu visits New York

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the safety of Israeli schoolchildren traveling on West Bank roads was one of the main reasons he could not agree to a 13 percent redeployment as proposed by the United States.

Netanyahu spoke at a joint news conference Sunday with New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani after some 2,000 predominantly Orthodox Jews gave the premier a rousing welcome on the lawn of Gracie Mansion, the mayor's residence.

The gathering was held in advance of the city's annual Salute to Israel parade.

A day earlier, Netanyahu called for Jewish unity to create a bulwark of support for the peace process and help resolve the pluralism debate in Israel.

He made the call at New York's Park Avenue Synagogue during what was his first address before a Conservative congregation in the United States since becoming prime minister.

AIPAC activists convene

Some 2,000 Jewish activists gathered in Washington for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual policy conference.

Before ending his visit to the United States, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was slated to address the AIPAC conference after he met with U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross in the latest attempt to overcome the prolonged deadlock in the peace process.

Argentina recalls diplomats

Argentina recalled all but one of its diplomats from Iran because of what it said were "increasing certainties" of Iranian involvement in two bombing attacks of Jewish sites in Buenos Aires.

Iran retaliated by saying it would reduce its economic ties with Argentina.

The 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center there killed 115 people.

Jewish groups praise House vote

American Jewish groups praised last week's overwhelming passage by the House of Representatives of legislation aimed at punishing countries guilty of religious persecution. [Page 3]

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Activists turn to states to ensure religious rights

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — In the year since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, lawmakers and activists have been scrambling to find ways to ensure that Americans are able to practice religion free from government intrusion.

Much of that effort has centered around crafting new federal legislation to restore some of the protections that existed under the now-defunct law. The legislation — shaped in large part by a broad coalition of religious and civil liberties groups — is expected to be introduced in Congress in coming weeks.

Activists concede, however, that even the meticulously constructed bill will amount to little more than a shadow of the original law.

For that reason, the coalition has undertaken an arduous task: working state by state to pass religious freedom statutes that mirror the original federal law. The goal is to win passage in a few states this year, and then build on the momentum.

RFRA was enacted in 1993 to provide broad protections against government interference with the free practice of religion. While the First Amendment guarantees free religious exercise, activists say that in the absence of the law it has become more difficult to secure religious rights when, for example, a law prohibits state employees from wearing hats or head coverings in the workplace, or when autopsies are required for Orthodox Jews or Muslims.

In striking down RFRA, the high court said in essence that it was unconstitutional for Congress to dictate a standard for religious freedom to the states. Now, seeking to restore the religious freedom protections eliminated by the court, advocates are trying to convince the states to dictate the RFRA standard to themselves.

To begin with, the coalition is targeting a handful of states where legislation modeled after RFRA stands the best chance of passing. Efforts to pass nearly identical measures are currently under way in states where the coalition has the most resources and where lawmakers are more or less favorably disposed to enacting new religious freedom laws.

So far, Florida is leading the way. A RFRA bill passed the state legislature last month and now awaits the governor's signature. If it is enacted, Florida would join Connecticut and Rhode Island, both of which adopted similar legislation in the early 1990s, as the only states with RFRA statutes on the books.

In Alabama, a state constitutional amendment securing free religious exercise passed the legislature last month and will be sent to voters in November.

Meanwhile, activists remain optimistic about the prospects of passing RFRA legislation this year in California, Illinois, Michigan and South Carolina. But in some of those states concerns about reconciling the bills with anti-discrimination laws and exemptions for prisoners are holding up efforts.

Elsewhere the lobbying effort has been fraught with even more difficulty.

Attempts to pass a RFRA statute in Maryland were met with resistance from municipalities who argued that religious groups should not be exempted from zoning ordinances and other laws. The bill eventually was withdrawn.

And bills are stalled in the New York and New Jersey state legislatures, largely as a result of partisan wrangling.

Chief among the obstacles the coalition faces across the country is getting the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Pollard applauds Israeli action

Jailed spy Jonathan Pollard told Israel Radio that he believes Israel's decision last week to acknowledge that he was an agent of the Jewish state will hasten the day of his release from an American prison. Pollard, a former U.S. naval intelligence analyst, has been serving a life sentence since 1987 for spying for Israel.

Meanwhile, in an interview with CNN, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged the Clinton administration to release Pollard, saying his spying was never intended to harm the United States.

Fourth day of Hebron clashes

At least six Palestinians were wounded during clashes with Israeli troops in Hebron.

The often volatile West Bank town has been the site of four consecutive days of unrest, starting when Palestinians took to the streets May 14 to mark "al-nakba," Arabic for "the catastrophe" caused by the creation of Israel 50 years ago.

Weizman makes condolence call

Israeli President Ezer Weizman said he believed Israel and the Palestinians would make peace at some point — but that it was unclear how much blood would have to be shed until then.

Weizman made the comment after making a condolence call to the family of an Arab worker stabbed to death in a fervently Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem last week.

Deputy IDF head appointed

Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai appointed Maj. Gen. Uzi Dayan to serve as the next deputy chief of staff of the Israel Defense Force.

Dayan is currently head of the IDF central command. Last week, the Cabinet approved the appointment of Maj. Gen. Shaul Mofaz as the next chief of staff.

attention of state lawmakers. Many simply do not see it as a problem, said Michael Lieberman, Washington counsel for the Anti-Defamation League and co-chairman of the coalition working to enact the state RFRA's. For that reason, he said, activists have worked to document and dramatize hardships individuals have experienced without RFRA's protections.

But the fact that such a broad coalition — including such varied groups as the Christian Legal Society and the American Civil Liberties Union — has come together to promote the legislation has also helped to catch lawmakers' attention, Lieberman added.

At the same time, some Conservative Christian groups that were members of the original RFRA coalition have splintered off as they look for other ways to restore the protections. Some of the groups are advocating a constitutional amendment — possibly in the form of Rep. Ernest Istook's (R-Okla.) sweeping "Religious Freedom Amendment" — which would give the go-ahead to government subsidy of religion and prayer in school.

But members of the coalition — which include Jewish groups across the political spectrum — see that as a dangerous path.

Indeed, RFRA activists are skirting the issue in certain states in the South and elsewhere out of concern "that the whole effort will be hijacked and turned into a prayer in schools effort," said Lieberman.

The task to revive RFRA has been further complicated by the lack of an organized religious lobby in most states, according to Marc Stern, co-director of the American Jewish Congress' legal department. "You don't have the same degree of organization as you do in Washington," said Stern, who has played a lead role in drafting the new federal religious freedom legislation.

Once RFRA laws are on the books in states such as Florida, California, Illinois and Michigan, Jewish activists hope to focus on other states with large Jewish populations, including Maryland, New York, New Jersey, Ohio and Virginia.

"When we get done with this year, we'll have to sit down and assess where we are," Stern said. □

Jewish group overcomes conflict with last 'Seinfeld'

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — An estimated 80 million people tuned in last week as the "Seinfeld" foursome signed off — from the slammer.

Among those not watching were some 1,000 Jewish activists who were locked up in their own right listening to speeches at an American Jewish Committee dinner.

Why? Jason Alexander, for one, wanted to know.

"What the hell are you all doing here? Don't you know what tonight is?" Alexander, who played George Costanza on the show, said in a video-taped message played before the crowd.

"I don't know what you're thinking. I don't know what the American Jewish Committee is thinking," said Alexander, an occasional spokesman for Jewish causes.

On a night in which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered the keynote address to the AJCommittee's annual meeting in Washington, Alexander stole the show. "The American Jewish Committee — Jews are always making committees. Everyone's got a committee," he said. "You know the day that Israel became a state, a nation, before Herzl lifted a shovel to make a house, somebody was forming a committee."

Alexander also had words of praise for the AJCommittee's incoming president, Bruce Ramer, and for the 50th anniversary of Israel. He then imparted some advice: "Keep the speeches moving. If nobody languishes or waxes philosophical, you have a shot at possibly getting there tonight" in time to watch the show. In the end, they weren't even close to catching the show's airing. Fortunately, AJCommittee arranged to have the show recorded, and 150 people gathered late at night to watch Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer stand trial for indifference to "everything good and decent." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Swastika on ADL headquarters

A swastika was found painted on the New York headquarters of the Anti-Defamation League.

The swastika appeared on the same day that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was visiting the United Nations, located across the street from the ADL's headquarters. Police are investigating the incident as a bias crime.

Clinton frustrated with delays

President Clinton expressed frustration at the lack of a breakthrough in the peace process.

"Delay is not the friend of the peace process. We need to move," he told reporters in Birmingham, England, where he was attending the G-8 summit of industrialized nations. Clinton also said that achieving a lasting Middle East peace agreement is his top foreign policy goal before leaving office.

Jewish leaders urge arrests

American Jewish leaders representing a broad spectrum of secular and religious organizations urged in a letter to President Clinton that NATO forces stationed in the former Yugoslavia be directed to arrest indicted war criminals still at large in Bosnia.

"Mr. President, we plead with you to ensure that the pursuit of justice in Bosnia is not abandoned," said the letter signed by 27 leaders.

The leader of the Bosnian Serbs during the fighting in Bosnia's three-year civil war, Radovan Karadzic, was among those whose arrest the Jewish leaders urged.

Extradition order signed

The president of Argentina, Carlos Menem, signed an extradition order for a former commander of a Croatian concentration camp.

Croatia has sought the extradition of Dinko Sakic to face war crimes charges in connection with the murders of an estimated 500,000 Jews, Serbs and Gypsies at the Jasenovac concentration camp during World War II.

Swiss president visits Israel

The president of Switzerland began an official trip to Israel with a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. Flavio Cotti, who also serves as foreign minister, is the first leader of the Swiss government to visit Israel in 13 years.

Longtime Aguda leader dies

The president of Agudath Israel of America, Rabbi Moshe Sherer, died just hours before the organization held its annual dinner in New York.

Sherer led the fervently Orthodox umbrella organization for more than 50 years.

Religious persecution legislation hailed by Jews and religious right

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Finding rare common ground, Jewish groups and members of the religious right are hailing the passage of legislation aimed at punishing countries guilty of religious persecution.

The House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved the Freedom From Religious Persecution Act on May 14 by a vote of 375-41.

The bill stands little chance of being adopted in the Senate, which has begun considering its own version of the legislation.

Religious conservatives provided the initial impetus for the bill and lobbied heavily to see it through.

But the coalition of support broadened in recent months to include several Jewish and mainstream Christian groups.

The Anti-Defamation League praised the House's action, saying it "sends a message around the world that America will not conduct business as usual with regimes that oppress individuals on the basis of their faith."

Although the bill passed by a lopsided vote, the numbers belied ambivalence among some lawmakers about a measure that some say will backfire against religious minorities, hamstringing American foreign policy and create a hierarchy of human rights abuses.

The vote was seen at least in part as an attempt to shore up support with the Christian Coalition and other religious conservatives who have complained that Republican leaders had failed to deliver on their promises to act on the legislative agenda of the religious conservatives.

The legislation, approved by the House and sponsored by Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) and Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), would bar all but humanitarian aid to countries engaged in the persecution of religious minorities, prohibit exports of equipment that could be used as instruments of torture by oppressive governments and make it easier for those fleeing religious persecution to be granted asylum.

The bill's sponsors say most of the abuses are occurring within militant Islamic countries and the few remaining Communist nations.

They have cited Sudan, China, Iran, Egypt, Pakistan, Algeria and Vietnam as some of the worst offenders of religious freedom.

The Senate bill, considered less stringent, would allow the administration to tailor its response to each situation rather than compelling the president to apply the comprehensive sanctions called for in the Wolf-Specter bill.

But the Senate measure also would rely on a broader definition of religious persecution, prompting concerns among some Jewish activists about its possible implications for Israel.

Because of this broader definition, some activists say certain Israeli practices toward Palestinians — such as detentions, interrogations, curfews and closures — could come under scrutiny, even though religious, not political, actions are the target of the proposed legislation.

Jewish groups are withholding judgment on the Senate bill for now.

The Clinton administration, for its part, has threatened to veto the Wolf-Specter bill, saying it would interfere with diplomacy and create a backlash against some religious minorities overseas.

Administration officials have also criticized the Senate version as counterproductive, although they have stopped short of a veto threat.

The sanctions called for in both bills would have little direct impact on many governments engaged in abuses, but the proposed sanctions "run the risk of strengthening the hand of those governments and extremists who seek to incite religious intolerance," John Shattuck, an assistant secretary of state, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week.

He added, however, that the administration was willing to work with lawmakers in crafting a bill targeted at the problem. □

ISRAEL AT 50**Israel's anniversary bash recalls Truman's bold move***By Tom Tugend*

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — On May 12, 1948, two days before David Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence, a tense meeting of momentous importance to the survival of the nascent Jewish state took place in the Oval Office.

At stake was whether the United States would recognize the as-yet unnamed State of Israel and thereby give it instant standing and credibility in the eyes of the world.

Arrayed against President Harry Truman and adamantly opposed to recognition were the president's closest advisers, led by Secretary of State George Marshall, the man most respected by Truman and the American people. Truman listened to his circle of "wise men" argue that if Israel were to come into existence, the Soviets might intervene, the Arabs would cut off oil supplies and the Jews would be pushed into the sea.

But the president kept his own counsel, and on May 14, just 11 minutes after Ben-Gurion's announcement, the United States became the first country to recognize Israel.

In making his solitary decision, perhaps Truman remembered a letter he had received a few weeks earlier from Dr. Chaim Weizmann, in which the future president of Israel wrote: "The choice for our people, Mr. President, is between statehood and extermination. History and providence have placed this issue in your hands, and I am confident that you will yet decide it in the spirit of the moral law."

The 50th anniversary of Israel's independence has refocused scholarly and popular interest in the role the 33rd president of the United States played in the dramatic events of 1948, and what his motives were in defying the almost unanimous opposition of his foreign policy and military advisers.

Leading the re-examination is the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Mo., which has mounted two exhibits on the period, one at the library itself, the other at the Skirball cultural center in Los Angeles.

At the same time, a feature-length documentary on Truman's life has been completed by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Charles Guggenheim. And a new book, "Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel," by Michael Benson, a political scientist at the University of Utah, has just been published.

At the recent opening of the Skirball exhibit, Benson and Larry Hackman, director of the Truman Library, discussed the character and motives of Truman that shaped his policy toward Israel and the Jewish people.

A common charge at the time was that Truman's actions rested on a shrewd political ploy to attract Jewish votes and money in the 1948 presidential election, which every pundit predicted would result in a humiliating defeat for the incumbent.

Such an assessment constitutes a "cynical misunderstanding" of Truman's character, said Benson. Indeed, in the same year, Truman took much larger political and principled risks, thereby splitting the Democratic Party, with his stand on civil rights and the integration of the armed forces.

Rather, Truman's actions were based on a genuine sympathy for the Jewish people and their right to a homeland, anchored in his religious background, Hackman said in an interview.

"By the time he was 14, Harry Truman, a Southern Baptist, had read the Bible cover to cover five times," Hackman said.

Truman expressed his feelings as early as 1942, when he advocated the admission of Jewish refugees to the United States during World War II. Within months of assuming the presidency, he wrote a strong letter to Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, urging better treatment for Jewish displaced persons in the American zone of occupation.

There were some lighter moments in Truman's relationship to the Jewish people, particularly in his encounters with Weizmann.

When the Israeli president presented a Torah scroll to the American chief executive, Truman wasn't quite sure what he was getting, but nonetheless assured the startled Weizmann, "Thank you, I always wanted one of these."

Though a modest man, Truman was well aware of the importance of his May 1948 actions. Once, after his retirement, he was introduced as "the man who helped create the State of Israel."

Without a moment's hesitation, Truman shot back, "What do you mean, helped create? I was Cyrus, I was Cyrus" — referring to the Persian monarch who enabled the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem after the first dispersion.

Truman never worried too much whether his contemporaries approved of his decisions. He once said that a public man "must live in the present, do what he thinks is right, and history will take care of it." The past 50 years, concluded Benson, "have proven that Harry S. Truman was right." □

Some religious leaders open to discuss military deferments*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Fervently Orthodox leaders have given their qualified backing to a committee that will deal with the controversial issue of exempting yeshiva students from military service.

Prime Minister Netanyahu told the Cabinet last week that he was creating a committee, headed by retired Supreme Court Justice Zvi Tal, to address the issue of draft deferments granted to fervently Orthodox, or haredi, yeshiva students.

Netanyahu's announcement prompted Knesset member Meir Porush of the United Torah Judaism bloc to threaten to bring down the government. But over the weekend, Knesset member Avraham Ravitz, also of United Torah Judaism, amended that stance, saying that if the committee limits its deliberations only to those people who have already finished their yeshiva studies, and not consider a general draft for all yeshiva students, "We would not create a crisis over it."

A day after Netanyahu announced plans to create the committee, opposition leader Ehud Barak presented to the speaker of the Knesset a bill to draft yeshiva students. Barak's proposal comes amid growing public debate about the increasing number of yeshiva students seeking exemptions from compulsory army service. Barak estimated that some 3,000 exemptions or deferrals are granted annually to haredi men. Under Barak's bill, the annual number of deferrals would be limited to 700.

In the wake of Barak's proposal, Deputy Housing Minister Meir Porush of Agudat Yisrael published an open letter accusing Barak of inciting secular Israelis against the haredi population. □