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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Netanyahu considers vote

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he is considering holding a referendum on a further Israeli redeployment from the West Bank.

A senior aide to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat said such a referendum would be a "waste of time."

The comments came a day after an Israeli newspaper reported that U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright set a deadline of July 24 for Netanyahu to reply to the U.S. proposal for a second Israeli redeployment in the West Bank.

Albright looks to Iran

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called on Iran to work with the United States to draw a "road map" for normalizing relations between the two countries.

In a speech to the Asia Society in New York, the secretary of state called on Iran to end its support for terrorism, improve its human rights policy and prove that it is not seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction.

Albright also acknowledged Iranian President Mohammed Khatami's public statements of support for Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat over more radical leaders from Hamas as well as Khatami's January condemnation of terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians.

Holbrooke nominated as envoy

President Clinton nominated Richard Holbrooke to serve as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Holbrooke, whose parents fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, is best known for his role in crafting the 1995 Dayton peace accords that ended more than three years of fighting in the former Yugoslavia.

Clinton discusses persecution

Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, and two other religious leaders met with President Clinton to discuss the climate of religious freedom in China.

The clergymen traveled to China in February at Clinton's request to help open a dialogue with Beijing on religion.

The president is scheduled to visit China next week. [Page 2]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Russia returning to Syria to aid military expansion

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — The Moscow-Damascus axis is up and running again.

In a move that has the potential to alter the political landscape of the Middle East, Russia has returned to the region, where it is picking up the pieces that slipped from the grasp of the dissolving Soviet Union.

Ties with Damascus, formerly Moscow's closest ally in the region, will be reinforced in the autumn when Syrian President Hafez Assad, who rarely travels outside his country, makes his first visit to Russia since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet empire.

The announcement of Assad's trip was made at a news conference last week by the Russian ambassador to Syria, Viktor Gogitidze, and coincides with media reports that the two countries have concluded their biggest arms deal in years.

It also comes against the backdrop of growing Syrian perceptions of American weakness in the region, exemplified by Washington's apparent failure to convert declarations of political determination into action — in the crisis earlier this year with Iraq, in getting Europe to agree to U.S. sanctions against Iran and in advancing the Middle East peace process.

During his news conference, Gogitidze said Russian-Syrian ties — which have been cool in recent years — had started to improve in all sectors, including cooperation in military and economic fields.

In a statement rife with significance to all Middle East watchers, the envoy said Russia was "keen to strengthen Syria's defensive military capabilities because this would help maintain stability in the Middle East."

The ambassador confirmed that Russian and Syrian forces had conducted joint military exercises in Russia last year and that many Russian military experts were working in Syria.

But he declined to confirm reports of new arms sales to Syria.

According to the Russian daily newspaper Segodnya, an arms plant in the Russian city of Tula has started supplying the Syrian army with more than 1,000 Cornet anti-tank guided missiles.

The sale of the mobile missiles, which have a range of about eight miles, would be the largest deal concluded between Russia and Syria since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Segodnya also reported last week that Syria would soon receive long-range surface-to-air missiles from Russia.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz, which also reported last week on the missile deal, cited Israeli security officials, who said they were concerned by the latest developments and that the new anti-tank missiles were "a big step forward" for the Syrian army.

At the same time, however, the newspaper said the Israeli security establishment had not changed its basic opinion that while Syria is preparing a military option, it would probably not trigger a war with Israel in the near future.

The growing ties between Russia and Syria come amid a steadily growing rapprochement between Israel and Turkey — an alliance that has provoked angry outbursts from Iran and Syria, who are themselves close allies.

In recent months, Israel and Turkey have implemented major economic agreements and far-reaching military accords that permit each to use the other's air space and air bases. Among other advantages, the agreements provide Israel with the ability to

MIDEAST FOCUS

Jerusalem plan unveiled

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu unveiled a plan aimed at boosting the Jewish presence in Jerusalem. The plan calls for enlarging Jerusalem's boundaries, building housing and infrastructure in the western section of the city and creating transportation links between Jerusalem and some West Bank settlements.

Change in Arutz-7 status possible

Israel's Justice Ministry is examining ways to grant a right-wing pirate radio station a license to operate legally.

The move regarding Arutz-7 came after members of the nationalist and settler camps protested a police raid on the offices of the station. Meanwhile, Jewish settlers in the Binyamin area of the West Bank began broadcasts for a pirate station they said would become a local community station.

Arafat meets with Hamas, Jihad

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat met in the Gaza Strip with leaders of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. An Islamic Jihad official was quoted as telling reporters that the group had told Arafat to break off negotiations with Israel because the Oslo peace accords had failed.

Arabs make U.N. request

Arab countries asked the U.N. General Assembly to reconsider a resolution that would give the Palestinians member-state status at the U.N. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned the Palestinians against taking steps that would send the sides into an "unwanted spiral" of unilateral measures. A statement released by the Government Press Office cited the interim status agreement in which both sides agreed not to take steps to change the status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip pending the outcome of permanent-status negotiations.



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maintain surveillance of military movements in northern Syria and places its aircraft within potential striking distance of Iran's nascent nuclear facilities.

The Israeli-Turkish relationship is likely to come up during Assad's scheduled visit to Moscow as part of discussions regarding the balance of power in the region.

During last week's news conference, Gogitidze said several economic cooperation agreements, including deals on oil and gas, would be signed during Assad's visit, his first since April 1990. Gogitidze said the current volume of trade between Syria and Russia — about \$150 million a year — falls far short of its potential.

He added that Assad would discuss ideas for breaking the deadlock in the Syrian-Israeli peace talks, which were broken off in March 1996. The envoy also announced that the issue of Syria's debts to Russia — a topic that has long been a source of friction between Moscow and Damascus — had been resolved.

Gogitidze did not reveal a figure, but the debts, which resulted from Syrian purchases of Soviet arms supplies and include still unpaid loans from the former Soviet Union, are generally estimated at \$11 billion.

For years, Syria had reportedly disputed the size of the debt and the legality of Russia's claim to be the creditor. Syria is also said to have demanded millions of dollars in compensation for Soviet contracts that it claims were not fully honored by Moscow.

Assad's upcoming visit, observers believe, signals that the days of those disagreements with Moscow have come to an end. □

Religious leaders urge Clinton to raise freedom issue in China

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Clinton is seeking to bring a high profile to religious freedom issues before his trip to China.

"When in China, I will speak as clearly as I can about human rights and religious freedom," Clinton told a gathering of religious leaders at the White House on Thursday.

"Our message is clear: We in the United States believe that all governments everywhere should ensure fundamental rights, including the right of people to worship when and where they choose," Clinton said.

As Congress weighs legislation aimed at fighting religious persecution overseas, Clinton also urged lawmakers to provide him with new tools to address the issue, but to give him "as much flexibility as possible to advance the cause of religious freedom."

He was referring to legislation pending in Congress that would require the president to impose sanctions automatically against countries engaged in the persecution of religious minorities. The House of Representatives passed the Freedom From Religious Persecution Act last month. Attention is now focused on a Senate bill that the White House and some advocates of religious freedom see as an improved approach.

Clinton's comments came as he concluded a meeting at the White House on Thursday with three clerics who traveled to China in February at his request to help open a dialogue with Beijing on religion.

The delegation included Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation in New York, an organization that promotes religious freedom and dialogue.

Schneier, along with the Rev. Don Argue, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and Theodore McCarrick, archbishop of Newark, N.J., shared with Clinton their findings that the climate for religious freedom in China had improved over the last 20 years, but still lags behind international standards.

In the meeting, Schneier underscored the need for China to recognize Judaism as an official religion. China has said it has no reason to recognize Judaism because it has no Jews, but Schneier said that the issue has become more important now that Hong Kong's population of some 2,500 Jews is part of China.

Schneier is planning to travel to China again next week — separately from the president, who departs June 25 for a weeklong trip — along with a delegation from the Park East Synagogue in New York, Schneier's synagogue, that will bring a Torah scroll to a restored synagogue in Shanghai. □

JEWISH WORLD

Reform delegation dismayed by premier's conversion stance

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appealed for patience when he met with a U.S. Reform movement delegation.

But by the time the meeting was over last Friday, the premier seemed to have succeeded only in angering the visitors.

During the meeting, which focused on the government's attempts to resolve the ongoing conversion crisis in Israel, Netanyahu pledged to ensure that the liberal streams of Judaism are treated as equals.

"I will not have second-class Jews," he said, "and I do not want Jews to think of themselves as second-class."

But he incensed the 170 lay leaders and rabbis from the North American Reform movement when he implied that Israel's recognition of Reform converts to Judaism would open the door to the mass conversion of foreign workers or "quickie" conversions performed via fax machines.

"How do we prevent 4,000 Romanians and millions from other countries from declaring themselves Jews? Where is the barrier? The question we have here is how do we prevent fax conversions," Netanyahu said.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and leader of the delegation, called Netanyahu's suggestion "outrageous."

During their mission to Israel, the U.S. Reform leaders warned the government of a severe response from American Jewry if they pushed through a bill that would codify into law the Orthodox monopoly over conversions performed in Israel.

Orthodox parties in Israel have been pressing Netanyahu to revive legislation regarding the conversion bill. The premier signaled two weeks ago during a meeting with his coalition partners that the government would indeed revive the legislation.

During last Friday's meeting, the prime minister insisted that a solution to the conversion crisis could only be reached through a process of "slow transformation."

"You do not want revolution here," said Netanyahu, "You want incremental and controlled evolution. That's what we're trying to do."

But after hearing Netanyahu, Philip Meltzer, president of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, said the prime minister's calls for moderation and dialogue "should probably be addressed to those in the haredi community and the Chief Rabbinate who refuse to dialogue" with the more liberal Jewish streams.

David Saperstein, director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center in Washington, was also unimpressed. "There is still an enormous gap between his perception of the issue and ours," he said. □

Australians veto Jewish dating service

By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY (JTA) — An Australian government agency has struck a blow against a Jewish dating service.

The Anti-Discrimination Tribunal in the state of Victoria has informed Ann Ivamy-Phillips that her plan to set up an agency that would serve only Jewish clients would be considered a violation of the state's anti-discrimination laws.

The president of the tribunal said Ivamy-Phillips had failed "to show there is a strong social need or that the exemption would redress a cultural disadvantage."

Ivamy-Phillips had told the tribunal that it was a commandment in the Torah for Jews to marry Jews and that the aim of her agency would be to preserve Jewish culture.

The president of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria, Nina Bassat, said in an interview that "it is difficult to see what group of people would have been disadvantaged by the operation of such an agency."

Bassat said "the only aim of the agency seemed to be to increase the possibilities of Jewish people who sought to meet other Jewish people."

Approximately 45 percent of Australia's Jews live in Victoria. □

Sakic arrives in Croatia

A former concentration camp commander arrived in Croatia, where he is scheduled to face a war crimes trial.

From 1942 to 1944, Dinko Sakic was commandant at the Jasenovac concentration camp, where an estimated 500,000 Jews, Serbs and Gypsies were murdered under Croatia's Nazi puppet regime.

Sakic was extradited from Argentina, where he was discovered living earlier this year.

Holocaust museum supports Roth

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's governing body voted overwhelmingly to reaffirm the appointment of John Roth to head the museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.

Roth has come under intense criticism for a 1988 article in which he compared the treatment of the Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II to the way Israel treats Palestinians.

The internationally renowned Holocaust scholar apologized for the analogy, but concerns were subsequently raised about some of his other writings.

Swiss bank refuses to negotiate

Switzerland's central bank reiterated that it would not join in negotiations aimed at reaching a global settlement on settling claims dating from the Holocaust era.

The Swiss National Bank also defended its actions in buying Nazi gold during World War II as necessary for maintaining the country's financial stability.

AJCommittee testifies

The American Jewish Committee told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that legislation to decrease religious persecution overseas should be designed to complement efforts addressing broader human rights concerns.

Testifying about the International Religious Freedom Act, the AJCommittee said the bill could effectively reduce certain instances of religious repression if key changes were made.

Similar legislation passed the House of Representatives last month, but attention is now focused on the Senate's version, which some advocates of religious freedom see as a better solution.

Valuables returned to Jews

Valuables stolen by the Nazis from Jews of the Italian city of Trieste during World War II were returned to the Jewish community.

The gold, jewelry and coins were found in Italian Treasury vaults earlier this year. The valuables were stolen from Jews in the Nazi death camp of Risiera San Sabba.

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**The Far East meets the South
at popular kosher Chinese eatery***By June D. Bell*

ATLANTA (JTA) — The Far East meets the Deep South here, where a thriving kosher Chinese restaurant serves customers who hunger for eggrolls, won ton soup and chicken with cashews.

Tucked in one of the city's busiest supermarkets, the tiny business has been so successful since its November debut that owner Raymond Robbins says he's considering franchising.

He and his staff dish out more than 700 pounds of chicken each week and more than 300 pounds of rice. Customers gobble at least 700 eggrolls rolled in Atlanta with skins shipped from New York.

Word of Chai Peking is spreading quickly through cities across the South.

Robbins has sent meals by Greyhound bus and private van to parties in Charlotte, N.C., and Memphis, Tenn. Robbins says residents of Savannah, Ga., have driven for several hours for a kosher Chinese dinner.

The former senior vice president for an international shoe franchise, Robbins says his restaurant's popularity caught him by surprise.

But now he's thinking that maybe the concept would flourish in other communities, too.

Robbins, 48, says his own craving for Chinese food prompted him to find some sesame chicken he could eat. When he began observing the laws of kashrut about six years, he stopped patronizing Chinese restaurants.

"I wanted Chinese food and I couldn't get any," he says as a line forms at Chai Peking's steam table near the Kroger supermarket's produce section.

After he organized a few well-received Chinese dinners for his synagogue, congregants began to urge Robbins to expand the concept.

"Everyone said, 'Why don't you open a Chinese restaurant?' I said, 'Ain't no way I'm opening a Chinese restaurant!'" Robbins says with a laugh.

But the idea percolated. Robbins did some research. He figured kosher Chinese food could attract enough patrons in Atlanta, which boasts the South's fastest-growing Jewish population.

It would thrive, Robbins thought, if he could keep prices competitive, appeal to non-Jewish customers, too, and limit his expenses.

"My emotional side wanted a sit-down restaurant, but my business end said no way," says Robbins, who has also been a department store buyer.

"The Jewish community here has not been able to support fleishig (meat) restaurants, probably due to the numbers of what I call 'kosher stomachs' — people who keep strictly kosher.

Before he spent his bank loan, Robbins visited Yaakov Portnoy, owner of the Mainly Chow Chinese Restaurant in Passaic, N.J., for a crash course in "How to Run a Kosher Chinese Restaurant."

"It was like getting a four-year degree in three or four days," Robbins says gratefully.

Portnoy generously shared his expertise about everything from how to properly package a take-out order to how to find a supplier of kosher water chestnuts.

When he returned to Atlanta, Robbins hired Moon Get "Jimmy" Lee as his cook. He employed five workers and opened for business Nov. 25 in a supermarket in one of Atlanta's Orthodox neighborhoods.

The Toco Hills Kroger supermarket is in northeast Atlanta, a few miles north of Emory University and about a mile from an Interstate 85 exit.

The location in a 24-hour supermarket meant Robbins could pick up business from non-Jews who wanted a convenient and affordable nosh while shopping.

About 40 percent of his customers are not Jewish, he says. They probably do not know that Chai Peking is supervised by the Atlanta Kashruth Commission or that the restaurant serves only glatt kosher beef.

But for customers who do keep kosher, those facts matter.

"Chinese is a good idea," says Michael Strizhevsky, an Atlanta math professor who says he visits Chai Peking weekly.

Before Chai Peking opened, Strizhevsky's only dining options in the city were a kosher vegetarian restaurant and a kosher pizza shop.

"It's good," he says, sitting in a supermarket booth as he polishes off a meal of chicken with rice.

"A little too spicy, but generally speaking, it's all right. Unfortunately, we don't have much to choose from."

Other Southern cities have even fewer choices. That may help explain why residents there are willing to order from a kosher Chinese restaurant hundreds of miles away.

Mariashi Groner, director of The Jewish Day School of Charlotte, N.C., arranged to have Chai Peking cater the school's Purim dinner for 200 guests.

She paid a driver \$100 to make the four-hour trip through three states to pick up and deliver large foil pans of moo goo gai pan, egg rolls and fortune cookies.

"It was delicious," says Groner, whose 185-student school is the city's only Jewish day school.

The meal was a treat for Charlotte Jews who keep kosher, she says, because residents can buy only deli sandwiches from a small kosher market.

Joanne Kahane, a Memphis speech pathologist, became another out-of-state customer after a friend tempted her with a few of Chai Peking's eggrolls.

Her order of sesame beef, vegetable lo mein, vegetable chow mein, wonton soup and eggrolls made an eight-hour trip via Greyhound bus.

Packed in dry ice, the food needed only to be reheated, she says.

"The sesame beef was out of this world. Really unbelievable," Kahane says, admitting: "He's come as close as I've tasted to the non-kosher kind."

She has received several phone calls from friends who want to place a bulk order, which makes her think that Tennessee's Jews would support their own Chai Peking.

"I'm really trying to convince him to open one up here in Memphis," she says of Robbins.

"We have a Kroger right around the corner from my home. I'm waiting for him!" □