



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 76, No. 114

Thursday, June 25, 1998

81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S. calls for Iraqi apology

The United States called on Iraq's foreign minister to apologize for referring to a senior State Department official as a "known Jew and Zionist."

Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf criticized Martin Indyk, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, in a letter to the U.N. Security Council. Al-Sahhaf wrote, "The statements of the United States Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk, who is a known Jew and Zionist, are simply an official and documented reaffirmation of the enmity of the United States administration toward Iraq."

U.N. Security Council President Antonio Monteiro of Portugal said he would raise the matter with Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations.

Clinton rejects Palestinians

The Clinton administration rejected a Palestinian request to publish an American plan to jump-start the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

At the same time, State Department spokesman James Rubin said the Clinton administration would be concerned if an Israeli referendum on a further redeployment from the West Bank would delay the peace process. But Rubin said a decision on the referendum was up to Israel.

Ne'eman: I'll find rabbis

The Israeli official who tried to broker a compromise on conversions said other rabbis would be found to convert graduates of pluralistic conversion training institutes if the Chief Rabbinate refuses to do so.

Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman made these comments while addressing the Jewish Agency for Israel's Committee for the Unity of the Jewish People, which met this week during the Jewish Agency's Board of Governors meeting in Jerusalem.

Senate passes school tax breaks

The U.S. Senate passed an education bill that includes tax breaks for private and parochial school expenses. The measure, supported by Orthodox and Republican Jewish groups, would expand tax-free savings accounts that Congress created last year, allowing people to contribute up to \$2,000 a year for school expenses beginning with kindergarten. Both the House and Senate lack the two-thirds majority needed to override a promised veto by President Clinton.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israelis debate wisdom of plan to hold redeployment referendum

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Referendum fever swept Israel this week as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu blew hot, then cold, then hot again over the idea of holding a national plebiscite on the next Israeli redeployment from the West Bank.

As legal experts debated precedents for the idea and technological wizards proposed state-of-the-art methods for conducting such a referendum, some Israelis wondered why the premier would want to go ahead with a procedure that has never before been employed in Israel.

The very notion of turning to public opinion to decide a major policy issue — in an apparent attempt to circumvent opponents in the Cabinet and the Knesset — raised concerns among some Israelis already uneasy about developments that are seen as weakening the country's democratic institutions.

Just the same, the referendum idea, not yet crystallized, quickly prompted sharp criticism from Palestinian officials — who derided it as a delaying tactic — and even ridicule from Netanyahu's own defense minister.

"I don't know what a national referendum is, how it is done, over what period of time, what it costs, what is needed," Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai told reporters in the Knesset. "The main thing is to keep the momentum and progress going in the process with the Palestinians."

In fact, Netanyahu first dismissed as "a joke" hard-line Geshet Knesset member Michael Kleiner's idea that the whole country be asked for its opinion of the proposed redeployment.

But he quickly seems to have taken a liking to the notion.

On Monday a panel of ministers and legal aides convened, on Netanyahu's orders, to consider the practicalities of holding a referendum. Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi announced that he would recommend holding a non-binding referendum that could be organized in about two months. "The government cannot ignore its results," he said.

On Tuesday, Netanyahu said canvassing the nation's views on the proposed pullback was "no joke." But he did not explicitly commit himself to holding a referendum.

Israel has been under pressure for months to carry out a 13 percent further redeployment in the West Bank as part of an American compromise proposal aimed at breaking a 16-month deadlock in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The Palestinians have accepted the plan, which also would require them to step up security measures to counter terrorism.

But Netanyahu faces staunch opposition from far-right members of his coalition who have threatened to bring down the government if any more land is transferred to Palestinian control.

Since recent opinion polls are united in showing strong support for the pullback, political pundits see the referendum idea as a possible way of advancing the peace process.

Netanyahu, the pundits reason, may hope to implement the redeployment if his right-wing partners can cite the 'cover' of a referendum to remain in the coalition.

But legal experts question the wisdom of going over the heads of the country's elected officials.

David Libai, a former Labor justice minister, said there was no government in the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Palestinians abort U.N. move

The Palestinians agreed to put off a request to upgrade its observer status at the United Nations, according to an Israeli official.

The move came at the urging of the United States. It was unclear when and if the matter would return to the agenda.

Afghanistan refuses Israeli aid

Afghanistan said it would not accept Israeli aid for victims of an earthquake last month.

While it was unclear why Afghanistan did not want to accept the aid, it was believed to be for political reasons.

The International Red Cross was reportedly negotiating to convince Afghan authorities to accept the shipment, which includes tents and blankets.

Yassin crosses through Egypt

Hamas spiritual leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin was returning through Egypt to the Gaza Strip after a four-month regional tour in which he was believed to have raised millions of dollars for the fundamentalist group.

Israeli security officials recommended that Yassin be allowed back into the Palestinian Authority areas, saying the decision would be the easiest way to do damage control.

Yassin was released from Israeli prison last year as part of a deal to free two Mossad agents arrested in Jordan after a failed attempt to assassinate a Hamas political leader.

Israeli satellite delayed

The launch of an Israeli satellite was delayed by two weeks to allow time for the inspection of the launcher rocket. The satellite, designed at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa, was scheduled to be launched June 23 from a Russian military facility in Kazakhstan.

world that would summon the entire country as advisers on a policy issue.

He added that referendum proponents would be hard-pressed to find the support in the Knesset needed to pass legislation to hold such a poll.

The referendum proposal is the latest in what some Israelis see as troubling developments affecting the country's central institutions — the government, the Knesset, the prime minister, the president and the Supreme Court.

- The government: The prime minister, now directly elected by the people under Israel's new election law, has chosen to conduct policy, at home and abroad, with scant reference to his Cabinet. He sends his personal aides to negotiate with the Palestinians and with Washington; other aides play a key role in economic policymaking. Ministers complain incessantly that they are kept in the dark.

- The Knesset: The new election system has seriously eroded the standing of the Knesset as the repository of ultimate sovereign power. Week after week, the government loses votes of no-confidence in the legislature, but these actions have no impact. A majority of 61 in the 120-seat Knesset is now required to unseat a government, but such action would also result in the Knesset's dissolution. That outcome makes it much less likely that legislators would want to bring down the government.

- The president: Ezer Weizman, on paper a constitutional head of state bereft of political power, has been intervening ever more vigorously and publicly in politics and policymaking.

This week, in a particularly bitter outburst, he poured scorn on Netanyahu during a conversation with opposition Knesset members, reportedly casting aspersions on the premier's sincerity in advancing the peace process.

Weizman, in fact, is shaping up as the strongest single source of opposition to Netanyahu's peace policy. The Labor Party leader, Ehud Barak, though strongly critical, is careful always to seek the middle ground for fear of alienating potentially disgruntled Likud voters.

- The Supreme Court: This traditional bastion of liberties finds itself almost daily at the center of controversies, many of them reflecting the deepening Orthodox-secular divide in Israeli society.

While the court's rulings are, of course, open to criticism as are those of every court in a democracy, a situation is developing in which the very legitimacy of the court is being challenged in wide circles.

Orthodox Israelis, among them lawyers and intellectuals, say openly that they have little respect for the court. They demand a higher representation for the religious sector among the justices.

Under its current president, Chief Justice Aharon Barak, the Supreme Court involves itself in political issues more than it did in the past. Thus the controversy around its composition often cuts across raging political debates and drags the court, which should be above politics, into the turmoil of political life. □

Israel set to recover soldier's body

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The remains of an Israeli commando killed in Lebanon last year were expected to be returned to Israel later this week.

Itamar Ilya died in a failed naval commando raid Sept. 5. Eleven other commandos died in the raid, but Ilya's was the only body not returned to Israel.

Now, in a deal mediated by France and the International Red Cross, Israel is due to return the bodies of 40 Hezbollah fighters to Lebanon in exchange for Ilya's remains. The exchange was slated to take place Thursday night.

Israel Television broadcast pictures Wednesday night of workers digging up the coffins containing the Hezbollah fighters in northern Israel.

As part of the deal, Israel also was expected to release 10 Lebanese fighters being held in Israeli jails, while the Israel-allied South Lebanon Army would free another 50 it was holding in southern Lebanon.

In July 1996, Israel exhumed and returned to Lebanon the remains of 120 Hezbollah fighters in exchange for the bodies of two Israeli soldiers who were taken captive in Lebanon in 1986. □



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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JEWISH WORLD

Lubavitch can't stay at school

New York City's school superintendent overturned a decision that would have allowed 1,000 Chasidim to stay at a Queens elementary school this Shabbat. The Lubavitch Jews are making a pilgrimage to a nearby Queens cemetery to mark the fourth anniversary of the death of their spiritual leader, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson. Lubavitch officials said they would seek accommodations at nearby synagogues a few miles away.

Group calls for bill withdrawal

A Jewish fund-raising organization called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to withdraw a new compromise bill on religious conversions in Israel. The New Israel Fund's letter came as a Knesset committee was expected to rule on whether recommendations from Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman's commission to solve the crisis on religious pluralism could be merged into an already existing conversion bill and after Ne'eman said an institute for joint conversions in Israel would open in three months, according to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Vandals hit Philadelphia shuls

Vandals targeted three synagogues in suburban Philadelphia with hate messages spray-painted in Arabic and German. Local police are investigating the incidents at the Bucks County synagogues, where officials found the word "intifada" in Arabic, along with the date May 4, 1999, and the outlines of a Palestinian flag. Palestinians have threatened to declare an independent state on that date.

Norway issues arrest warrant

Norway issued an international arrest warrant for an ex-Mossad agent it believes mistakenly killed a Moroccan waiter in Lillehammer in 1973.

The warrant calls for the arrest of Michael Harari regarding the shooting of Ahmed Bouchiki, who was killed in a bungled revenge attempt for the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre, when Palestinian terrorists killed 11 Israeli athletes. The Israeli government, which has refused to accept official responsibility for the shooting, paid compensation to Bouchiki's family in 1996.

Syria asked to look for Nazi

A French Nazi-hunter called on Syria to allow investigators to search for a Nazi war criminal believed to be living there. Serge Klarsfeld was quoted by the Reuter news agency as saying that he and his wife had unsuccessfully tried to enter Syria four times to look for Alois Brunner. Brunner is accused of deporting tens of thousands of Jews from Austria, Greece, France and Czechoslovakia during World War II.

Jewish organization considers call for end to embargo of Cuba

By Kenneth Bandler

NEW YORK (JTA) — Cuba has become one of the most popular destinations for American Jewish delegations.

Now one national Jewish organization wants to do more than bring humanitarian and religious supplies to the island nation's tiny Jewish community.

The American Jewish Congress is moving toward calling on the United States government to end its decades-old economic sanctions against Cuba. Such a move would break with the general Jewish position to stay on the sidelines of the volatile issue.

"We are looking at it very seriously and want to see what we can do," Phil Baum, executive director of AJCongress, said in an interview.

Baum said he could not say for certain that his group will formally call for an end to the embargo, but added, "My hunch is yes." A decision will be made after the group's leadership visits Cuba within the next few weeks, he said.

"The purpose of the trip is to help be influential in improving the situation of Cuban Jews and to evaluate the impact of U.S. sanctions," said Baum, who acknowledged that the "two issues are linked."

Cuba's estimated 1,800 Jews enjoy freedom to practice their religion, but they share the same severe economic hardships — food rations and paltry salaries — that the rest of the population endures. "The American embargo has had a serious impact on the quality of life in Cuba and as a result there is diminished economic opportunity for everyone," the AJCongress president, Jack Rosen, said after he visited Cuba last month.

U.S. sanctions have had "little apparent effect on government policy," said Rosen, who met with Cuban leader Fidel Castro for six hours during his visit.

Baum said this week that U.S. policy enforcing economic sanctions is inconsistent.

He cited President Clinton's recent move to waive sanctions against European firms investing in Iran's energy sector, a move that the AJCongress and other U.S. Jewish groups protested. "There is a reluctance to maintain sanctions against countries that have a far worse human rights record than Cuba," Baum said.

American Jewish groups dealing with Cuban Jewry traditionally have avoided engaging in any political issues.

Some have supported the easing of travel restrictions between the United States and Cuba as a means of facilitating the flow of humanitarian aid to the Jewish community.

But at least one Jewish organizational leader would like groups to continue to stay out of the Cuban political fray.

"It would be somewhat counterproductive" for a Jewish organization to call for an end to sanctions against Cuba, said Tommy Baer, president of B'nai B'rith International.

"There are pros and cons with respect to the embargo. The political situation is such that the United States will not lift the embargo — at least not yet."

B'nai B'rith has a Cuban chapter in south Florida and "we have to respect their views as well," Baer said, referring to Cuban Jewish expatriates who support the embargo. B'nai B'rith has maintained a chapter in Havana since 1943, and in recent years has stepped up its involvement with the Jewish community there, regularly sending medical supplies, clothing, books and religious items.

The United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism maintains ongoing relationships with several congregations in Cuba.

And during the past two years, local Jewish federations across the United States, as well as delegations of the United Jewish Appeal, have frequented Cuba.

So heavy was the traffic that the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which coordinates much of the U.S. Jewish interaction with Cuban Jewry and maintains a staff presence in Havana, has appealed for groups to cut back on the number of visits, which have been somewhat overwhelming for the community.

For its part, the AJCongress has been intermittently involved with Cuba over the years, said Baum. Cuban Jewry has become a priority for the group this year because of Rosen's personal interests, Baum said.

Rosen, who became president of AJCongress in May, was traveling and unavailable for an interview. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**Son of German Jews, Holbrooke points to wife as his 'Jewish story'***By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Richard Holbrooke only spent a year as the U.S. ambassador to Germany, but he tried to make sure that his hosts would not forget this son of German Jews.

Visitors to Holbrooke's official residence were greeted by an ambassador who proudly displayed a photograph of his grandfather, a Jewish businessman, in his World War I Germany army uniform.

"I show it to German visitors as a symbol of what they lost," Holbrooke told *The New York Times* in a 1994 interview.

Four years, three jobs and a marriage later, Holbrooke is Clinton's nominee to serve as the American ambassador to the United Nations.

Raised in the United States after his parents and grandfather fled Germany in the 1930s, Holbrooke is slated to join Clinton's inner circle.

Many are speculating that this posting is his tryout for the top diplomatic job, as secretary of state, if Vice President Al Gore wins the 2000 presidential election.

If confirmed by the Senate, Holbrooke, 57, would replace Bill Richardson, whom Clinton tapped to become his secretary of energy.

Although Holbrooke remains a relative unknown when it comes to Middle East issues, he will not be setting policy at the United Nations. Much of his direction will come from the State Department.

The United Nations has remained relatively quiet the last couple of years on the peace process front, but the Palestinians are beginning to once again use the world body to try to pressure Israel to make concessions in the peace process.

This week, the Palestine Liberation Organization mission in New York was working to force a General Assembly vote to upgrade its status at the United Nations from observer to nearly that of a state.

At the urging of the United States, the Palestinians agreed to put off the move.

But it was not clear when or if the matter will return to the agenda.

At other U.N. bodies, the PLO is trying to convene the signatories to the human rights convention to sanction Israel for its treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and eastern Jerusalem.

A 36-year veteran of the foreign service, Holbrooke has become best known for his chief role in negotiating the end to the Bosnian war.

He would become the most seasoned diplomat to represent the United States at the United Nations since the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

After losing the nomination for secretary of state to Madeleine Albright at the beginning of Clinton's second term, Holbrooke returned to work on Wall Street, where he had worked in between the Carter and Clinton administrations.

He has continued to work as a special envoy for Cyprus, and from time to time on Bosnia.

Holbrooke is currently vice chairman at Credit Suisse First Boston, an affiliate of one of the Swiss banks facing a class-action lawsuit to settle Holocaust-era claims.

Holbrooke, who will leave that post to move to the United Nations, early on urged Switzerland to return assets to Holocaust victims.

President Carter made Holbrooke the youngest person ever to hold the rank of assistant secretary of state, naming him to run East Asian and Pacific affairs.

Holbrooke returned to Washington to that same rank under Clinton as assistant secretary of state for European and Canadian affairs.

Clinton cited these experiences as well as his work as one of the chief architects of the 1995 Dayton accords that ended the war in Bosnia when he nominated Holbrooke last week.

Like most nominees facing Senate confirmation hearings, Holbrooke is not granting interviews.

He has been widely praised in the Jewish community for his role in ending the Bosnian war.

He received awards for his efforts from the Anti-Defamation League and the World Jewish Congress.

According to friends, Holbrooke's Jewishness has not played a role in either his career or private life.

In newspaper interviews, he has pointed to his third wife, Kati Marton, as the interesting "Jewish story."

While working on a book about Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat stationed in Budapest who saved Jews during the war, Marton traveled to her native Hungary.

Her parents had fled from Hungary during the 1950s Communist takeover.

It was there that an old friend of her mother's told her that Wallenberg had come too late for Marton's grandparents.

It was the first time that she had heard about her Jewish roots.

Like Madeleine Albright's parents, Marton's family hid their Jewish identity when they came to the United States.

When Albright found out about her own Jewish family history last year, she is said to have turned to Marton for advice and support.

Although Holbrooke has not written extensively on the Middle East, in his latest book, "To End a War," he wrote about the impact the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, which came during the Dayton peace talks, had on the parties to those talks.

Rabin "had been murdered because he had been willing to consider a compromise for peace. The reaction of the Balkan presidents was cold-blooded and self-centered; this showed, each said separately, what personal risks they were taking for peace," Holbrooke wrote.

"None expressed sorrow for Rabin or the Israeli people or concern for the peace process. The only Bosnian who seemed stricken was the ambassador to the United States, Sven Alkalaj, who was from an ancient and distinguished Sephardic Jewish family from Sarajevo."

Alkalaj left Ohio immediately to represent Bosnia at Rabin's funeral, Holbrooke wrote.

Praising Rabin, Holbrooke wrote, "The contrast between Rabin and the Balkan leaders could not have been more evident than it was in the following days as we watched the funeral on television and simultaneously struggled to find a way forward in the Balkans." □