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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel rejects U.N. decision

Israel is standing firm in its decision to expand the boundaries of Jerusalem despite a U.N. Security Council call to halt the plans.

The council's presidential statement, which described the plans as "serious and damaging," was milder than a proposed Arab-sponsored resolution that would have condemned Israel and demanded that its decision to expand the boundaries be rescinded. The statement carries less weight than a Security Council resolution, which the United States vehemently opposed and was expected to veto. [Page 3]

Mordechai, Abbas to meet

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai is slated to meet later this week with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's deputy, Mahmoud Abbas, and perhaps with Arafat as well. Israeli officials rejected a statement by U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin, who said the ball is now in Israel's court to conclude a deal with the Palestinians. [Page 1]

E.U. officials to visit Tehran

A delegation of European Union officials is slated to visit Tehran on Friday for the first talks with Iranian leaders since an E.U. ban on such contacts was lifted in January.

Ties between Europe and Iran hit a nadir last year after a German court ruled that Iranian leaders had ordered the 1992 slayings of Kurdish dissidents in Germany.

E.U. officials lifted the ban on visits in light of the relatively moderate statements made during the past year by Iranian President Mohammad Khatami.

ADL criticizes prosecutors

The Anti-Defamation League criticized prosecutors in Vienna for deciding not to bring charges against an Austrian lecturer for reviving the blood-libel slander against Jews.

The prosecutors said there was "not enough evidence" to bring hate-crime charges against Robert Prantner.

The ADL said Prantner had propagated anti-Semitism when he published an article last December in an Austrian right-wing journal claiming that Jews had killed Christians in the Middle Ages to use their blood for ritual purposes. [Page 4]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Peace progress remains elusive despite latest diplomatic deadline

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Yet another deadline has been set to break the long impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

But despite the flurry of diplomatic activity in recent days — with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright talking directly to top Israeli and Palestinian officials — it is still far from certain whether any agreement is imminent.

In her latest effort, Albright is now urging Israel and the Palestinians to resume direct negotiations — and the two sides are heeding the call, agreeing to hold meetings after Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat returns from a trip to China by the end of the week.

Albright's call for such a meeting clearly represents a new step by the Clinton administration, which for months has been acting as a go-between for the two sides.

She is in effect sending the two parties back to where they were more than a year ago, when their negotiations collapsed amid a series of mutual recriminations.

Israel, in fact, had favored direct negotiations with the Palestinians — until they reached such a stalemate that Jerusalem asked the United States to intervene as mediator.

In recent days, too, Israeli officials welcomed the suggestion that they meet with their Palestinian counterparts.

But in a sign that Jerusalem and Washington had different expectations from such a meeting, U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin said Monday that the "ball is in the court of the Israelis to try to work with the Palestinians and with us" to reach an agreement on the American plan for breaking the stalemate in the negotiations.

The Palestinian Authority had months ago agreed to the U.S. plan — under which Israel would redeploy from an additional 13 percent of the West Bank in exchange for Palestinian steps on security issues.

Rubin was making it clear once again Monday that the administration believes it is time for Israel to sign on as well. For its part, Israel rejected that assessment.

American officials have given the two sides until the end of the month to reach an agreement.

But there have been many previous deadlines — and they came and went without any breakthrough.

Although Israel seems reluctantly to have accepted the general outlines of the U.S. plan, Netanyahu is still holding out for several conditions that the Palestinians — who claim they have already made a large concession by agreeing to the 13 percent further redeployment — oppose with equal obstinacy.

While the prospect of a high-level Israeli-Palestinian meeting raises expectations, many obstacles remain.

Within Netanyahu's Cabinet, moreover, there are powerful figures — such as Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon — who have not agreed to the 13 percent figure. Given the opposition from hawkish Cabinet and Knesset members, Netanyahu is said to be fearing — as he has for months — the possible fall of his coalition in a Knesset vote of no-confidence in the redeployment agreement, if and when one is reached.

At the same time, moderate figures in the Israeli government are joining U.S. officials in citing the end of July as the deadline for reaching an agreement.

The Third Way Party, which holds four Knesset seats, says it will reconsider its

MIDEAST FOCUS

Jiang backs Palestinian state

Chinese President Jiang Zemin told visiting Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat that China supported the creation of a Palestinian state.

Jiang also said he wanted to increase trade with the Palestinians. Arafat's three-day trip to China comes after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a similar visit in May.

Egyptian minister plans to lobby

Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa is planning a series of Capitol Hill meetings with lawmakers to push for as favorable terms as possible when Congress restructures Egypt's \$2.1 billion in annual U.S. foreign aid. Egypt is following Israel's lead in seeking a cutback in U.S. assistance, which Cairo expects to be trimmed anyway when Congress takes up the foreign aid bill later this summer.

Thousands mourn Sephardi rabbi

Tens of thousands of mourners attended the funeral of Rabbi Yosef Abba-Shaul, who died in Jerusalem at the age of 74.

Abba-Shaul, who was the head of the Porat-Yosef Yeshiva in Jerusalem, was known for his knowledge of the scriptures and his modesty. Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau described him as one of the greatest rabbinical leaders the Sephardi community ever had.

Assad to visit Paris

A French Foreign Ministry official said President Jacques Chirac will tell Syrian President Hafez Assad that American initiatives remain the basis for resuming Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Assad is slated to visit France this week and is expected to press for greater European involvement in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Meanwhile, Chirac's office announced that Jordan's King Hussein would visit Paris next week.

participation in Netanyahu's government if that date passes without an accord.

The fervently Orthodox Shas Party, with 10 seats, is also voicing its commitment to the peace process and the conclusion of an agreement.

Meanwhile, within the Cabinet, Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai has made it clear that his patience is wearing thin.

Mordechai was slated to meet this week with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's deputy, Mahmoud Abbas, and perhaps with Arafat as well.

He is ready, he says, to negotiate with any top Palestinian officials — but only if he is empowered by the Cabinet to clinch a deal.

As part of his effort to bolster the moderate position at the Cabinet table, Mordechai has been attempting to persuade David Levy — who resigned as foreign minister last year, citing differences with Netanyahu about the peace process and social policy issues — to return to the government.

Beyond the upcoming meeting between the two sides — and despite the recent diplomatic activity — there appears little new in the atmosphere surrounding the negotiating impasse.

With her suggestion that Israel and the Palestinians talk directly to each other, Albright was sending a message to the parties that the United States cannot play intermediary forever.

But Washington has sent this message repeatedly in the past six months, to no avail.

Last week, there was speculation of an imminent breakthrough after it was reported that Albright had had seven telephone conversations with Netanyahu in a matter of three days. Nothing apparently came of the calls.

Then, at the end of last week, she met with two Palestinian officials in Washington.

Similar expectations were raised when Netanyahu convened his Inner Security Cabinet — which includes Mordechai, Sharon and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky — this week and last. But those sessions were inconclusive.

There has been this sort of flurry before — with little to show for it.

The pronouncements coming from Israel also create a strong sense of *deja vu*.

Israeli officials have repeatedly been stating that an agreement is close — if only the Palestinians agree to a series of Israeli demands relating to security issues.

These demands — all of which have been put forward for many months, include:

- abrogation of the Palestinian Covenant by the Palestine National Council, the Palestinians' parliament in exile.

The Netanyahu government has always contended that an apparent repeal of anti-Israel clauses in the covenant by a large majority of the PNC in April 1996 was inadequate.

During his news briefing on Monday, Rubin made it clear that the United States does not share Israel's concerns on this issue.

- extradition of terrorists by the Palestinian Authority to Israel. The Palestinians have never accepted this provision of the Cairo Agreement of 1995, which was one of a series of Israeli-Palestinian accords.

They point to a clause under which a person convicted and jailed by the Palestinian courts need not be handed over to the Israelis.

A solution reportedly proposed by U.S. officials, and yet to be accepted by either side, involves the creation of an American observer unit that would monitor those terrorists serving sentences in Palestinian jails to ensure, as Israel has long charged, that they are not subject to a "revolving door" judicial system that soon sets them free.

- confiscation of weapons from the Palestinian populace. Israel complains that there are many thousands of rifles and heavier weapons in the West Bank and Gaza Strip — in contravention of the accords, which require all licensed weapons to be registered.

Given the relative ease with which small arms can be smuggled into the territories, this demand by Jerusalem will be difficult to satisfy.

- reduction in the number of Palestinian police. The ceiling set by the accords is 16,000; the actual number is more than twice that.

The Palestinians argue that Israel's insistence on stiff anti-terrorism measures requires a bigger police force. Israel contends that in an armed confrontation, Israel would face a sizable foe. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Israel stands firm on Jerusalem despite U.N. call to halt expansion

By Julia Goldman

UNITED NATIONS (JTA) — Israel is standing firm in its decision to extend the boundaries of Jerusalem.

Reacting to a U.N. Security Council statement issued late Monday night calling on Israel to halt plans for expanding its capital city, Israeli officials reiterated the contention that the issue is a municipal matter.

"We do not believe the Security Council should have dealt with this to begin with," Dore Gold, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, said in an interview.

The 15-member U.N. body unanimously approved a "presidential statement" describing the plans as "serious and damaging." It was the second U.N. action of concern to Israel in a week. On July 7, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution enhancing the status of the Palestinians at the world body.

Sources at the U.S. mission said the United States had worked hard "at high levels" to bring about a compromise that would maintain council unity in passing the presidential statement, rather than an Arab-sponsored resolution that would have condemned Israel and demanded that its decision to expand the boundaries be rescinded. A presidential statement carries less weight than a Security Council resolution, which the United States vehemently opposed.

In a brief statement released after the late night council meeting on Monday, U.S. Ambassador Bill Richardson said, "The United States feels that the presidential statement is the appropriate response to current circumstances. We believe that the presidential statement is preferable — significantly — to a resolution.

"The United States would have vetoed a resolution condemning Israel or blocked any action designed to nullify what had happened.

"Most importantly," the U.S. statement continues, the Security Council document "expresses support for the Middle East peace process."

Israeli officials were reluctant to comment on the U.S. position, but Palestinian officials criticized the U.S. role in averting a resolution.

"It is unfortunate that once again the United States has deflected the work of the Security Council to dilute its position and come up with a non-binding statement," Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian minister, was quoted as saying. But the statement leaves open the possibility that the issue may resurface in the Security Council.

Its fifth and final point states simply that "the Security Council will keep Israeli actions under review."

Israel countered the Security Council document, saying it ignored the fact that the June 21 decision to include settlements within Jerusalem's jurisdiction extends only to areas west of the city. "Under the Oslo agreements," Gold said, "Jerusalem clearly remains under exclusive jurisdiction of Israel. We have the right to do what is necessary to preserve its security." □

Drivers: Beware of dress code

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The religious-secular conflict in Israel has made its mark on driving license exams.

An Orthodox driving inspector in Haifa refused this week to give a driving test to an 18-year-old on the grounds that she was provocatively dressed.

"I didn't understand what he wanted from me," said Shiran Friedman, who showed up for the test in jeans and a bikini top. "All he needs to do is to test my driving and not my dress."

Her teacher agreed with her and complained to Yisrael Barami's superiors. The Transportation Ministry summoned Barami for a disciplinary hearing Tuesday.

But Israel's Histadrut labor federation intervened, saying the instructor had a right not to test a person who offended his sensibilities and should not be subject to a disciplinary hearing.

Friedman received her license after being tested by another inspector. □

Touro plans Mideast campus

Israel and Jordan welcomed the announcement of plans to establish a joint college in the Jordan Valley. Touro College, a private institution in the United States, said it is building a school of business and agriculture in the central Arava region that will extend on both sides of the Israeli-Jordanian border.

U.S. Rep Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), who joined with Israeli, Jordanian and Touro College officials in announcing the venture at a Capitol Hill news conference, said the new campus "will mark a new, impressive demonstration of the cooperative and creative potential that awaits the blooming of the Middle East."

Pataki addresses Hadassah

New York Gov. George Pataki declared his unequivocal support for Jerusalem as Israel's capital in a speech before the 84th annual Hadassah convention in Manhattan. "All of us of good will realize Jerusalem must be the eternal, undivided capital of Israel," he said before the crowd of more than 3,000 national delegates of the women's Zionist group. In April, New York State opened its first Israeli trade mission office in Jerusalem.

Israeli, Palestinian teens hosted

Republican National Committee Chairman Jim Nicholson hosted a group of eight Israeli and Palestinian teen-agers for a Capitol Hill discussion group about American politics.

Participating in a program sponsored by the United States Information Agency, the young Likud and Fatah leaders are spending the week in Washington to learn about the U.S. political system.

New leader of Italian Jews

Dr. Amos Luzzatto was elected leader of Italy's Jewish community. Luzzatto, 70, replaces Tullia Zevi, who stepped down last month as president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities after 16 years in office.

A physician living in Venice, Luzzatto is also a respected scholar in Jewish studies and has long been an active participant in interreligious dialogue.

Genetic research on Kohanim

Genetic tests conducted in Britain, Canada and Israel have confirmed that today's Kohanim are indeed direct descendants of the priestly class founded by the biblical Aaron.

The research was conducted on 306 Kohanim and the results published in the latest edition of the scientific journal "Nature." The study found that Kohanim bear a consistent genetic "fingerprint" and are genetically distinguishable from other Jews.

Jewish debate stalls agreement on plans for preserving Auschwitz

By Daniel Kurtzman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The shadow of a 26-foot cross over Auschwitz-Birkenau is marring efforts to reach a deal on the future of the memorial site.

An agreement on how to protect and preserve the concentration camp, originally slated to be signed in Poland this week, has stalled in the face of criticism from some Jewish activists who say it sanctions existing religious symbols adjacent to the camps.

Miles Lerman, chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, has been leading a coalition of Jewish groups over the past two years in an attempt to work out a deal with the Polish government, which approached Lerman in 1996 to discuss a master plan for the site.

Last year, the coalition led by Lerman, which includes the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors, the World Jewish Congress, the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and Yad Vashem, successfully negotiated the removal of eight crosses from the area known as the Field of Ashes.

But religious symbols still stand just beyond the boundary of the memorial site, including a church with a large cross on top and in front, as well as another large cross alongside the old Carmelite convent, which was moved from its location next to the camps in 1993 after years of controversy.

The draft agreement states that no religious symbols can "henceforth" be introduced to the site. Some Jewish activists have criticized that language, which would allow existing symbols to remain. The WJC, for its part, decided it could not sign the agreement after consulting Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, who advised against negotiating "in the shadow of the cross."

In addition, the museum, and Lerman in particular, has been hit with stinging criticism from Rabbi Avi Weiss, who heads the Coalition for Jewish Concerns — AMCHA. Weiss called the sanctioning of the religious symbols "an intolerable desecration of the largest Jewish graveyard on the planet."

Moreover, he believes the museum is inappropriately using its federal status to sign international agreements when it has no authority to do so. Lerman is giving "the impression" the declaration "has the imprimatur of the U.S. government and it doesn't," Weiss said. He is calling for Lerman and Ruth Mandel, vice chair of the museum's governing body, to be removed and is urging a congressional investigation of the matter.

For his part, Lerman declined to go into specifics, citing the "complex issue," but he said the museum is in "full cooperation with the State Department." Lerman criticized Weiss for "irresponsible statements that whipped up a firestorm in Poland."

Lerman pointed with pride to last year's agreement to remove the crosses, saying "we accomplished by negotiation, not by demonstrating" what "no one else has been able to."

David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, insists that the declaration "does not validate any existing religious symbol," but simply creates "a framework to discuss and resolve the issue of religious symbols."

"I do believe that failure to sign such an agreement would be short-sighted for our Jewish interests," he added.

The draft agreement attempts to preserve and protect the concentration camps, while physically linking the two sites with a walking path. Relatively few visitors currently visit Birkenau, where the vast majority of Jews were killed, and the plan attempts to remedy that.

The agreement seeks to balance the commercial and development interests of the two towns — an important concern on the Polish side — against the Jewish imperative, as Lerman has described it, of preserving "for posterity the sacredness, physical integrity and centrality of Jewish suffering and martyrdom at Auschwitz-Birkenau."

Further complicating the issue, the situation in Poland has changed since the government first asked for Jewish input.

At the same time that the Polish government is trying to reach an agreement with Jewish groups, it has also directed all cities in Poland to submit plans for developing their urban areas.

This means that a plan developed by the municipality that encompasses Auschwitz-Birkenau could supercede any agreement on the area reached between Poland and Jewish groups.

Because of this concern, two prominent Holocaust scholars who were selected by the museum to help draft the Auschwitz-Birkenau plan — Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt — decided to disassociate themselves from the process.

The coalition led by Lerman, meanwhile, is looking to go ahead and sign the declaration, but Lerman said there is no deadline in place right now. □

Austrian will not face trial for reviving blood libel slander

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — The Anti-Defamation League has criticized prosecutors in Vienna for deciding not to prosecute an Austrian lecturer for reviving the blood-libel slander against Jews.

The ADL's central and east European office said Robert Prantner had violated hate-crime laws when he published an article last December in an Austrian right-wing journal claiming that Jews had killed Christians in the Middle Ages to use their blood for ritual purposes. The prosecutors said there was "not enough evidence" to bring charges against Prantner.

The ADL, along with a group called the Documentation Center of Austrian Resistance, issued a joint statement saying they were "deeply concerned about the rejection of the charges."

Prantner was a lecturer at an Austrian Catholic theological seminary, but was removed from his post after publication of his article, according to an ADL official.

In his article, Prantner claimed that a "holy martyred child" named Anderl von Rinn was indeed a victim of ritual murder in the 15th century. Rinn was the object of a local cult following as a martyr in the Tyrol region of Austria. The bishop of Innsbruck, Reinhold Stecher, outlawed the cult in 1994 and strongly condemned the blood-libel slander. Despite the ban, Rinn's memory was celebrated Sunday in Tyrol.

The cult's continued activities prompted Stecher's successor as bishop, Alois Kothgasser, to publish a statement this month declaring that "the Catholic Church repudiates every form of denunciation, allegation and insinuation against the Jewish people." □