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81st Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Knesset approves Wye accord

Israel's Parliament approved the Wye peace accord by a vote of 75-19, with nine Knesset members abstaining.

Absent from the Knesset during the vote were seven of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's own Cabinet ministers.

The vote came at the end of two days of heated debate on the latest Israeli-Palestinian agreement, including a review of maps detailing the West Bank areas from which Israel will redeploy.

Arafat backs off threat

Israel's Cabinet appears likely to approve a further West Bank redeployment after Yasser Arafat backed off a threat of violence, political observers said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described as "positive" a statement from the Palestinian leader that any problems in the final-status negotiations "will be resolved through amicable and peaceful ways."

The premier had threatened to postpone the redeployment, slated for this week under the terms of the Wye agreement, before Arafat issued the retraction.

Birthright Israel launched

A group of Jewish philanthropists joined forces with the Israeli government to make a trip to Israel possible for all Jewish teens and young adults worldwide.

Birthright Israel will support a first visit to Israel on existing accredited programs for all Jews aged 15 to 26. The plans' organizers, who expect to raise \$300 million for the program, hope to enlist local federations and communities across the globe to join philanthropists and the government of Israel in providing \$1 million for each of five years beginning in January 1999.

Court upholds life sentences

Italy's highest appeals court upheld the life sentences imposed on two former Nazis convicted of helping carry out the worst Nazi war crime committed on Italian soil. The court rejected an appeal to overturn the life sentences handed down by a lower appeals court in March against former SS officers Erich Priebke and Karl Hass, both of whom are in their mid-80s. [Page 2]

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Israel decides, amid protests, to aid Ethiopians, speed aliyah

By Mark J. Joffe and Julia Goldman

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In the face of a groundswell of public pressure, the Israeli government has decided to accelerate the immigration of Jews from Ethiopia who qualify for entry into Israel under the Law of Return.

At the same time, the government is standing firm on its refusal to recognize as Jews the group referred to as Falash Mura.

But it is authorizing the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and other Jewish groups to provide limited humanitarian relief to the estimated 15,000 Falash Mura still hoping to come to Israel, many of whom are said to be languishing in hunger and poor health in Addis Ababa and towns in the Gondar region.

The plight of the Falash Mura — and as many as 4,000 other Ethiopians from the Kwara region whose Jewishness is not in dispute — surfaced as a major issue this week at the General Assembly of the UJA Federations of North America.

On Tuesday, Ethiopian immigrants staged a massive protest outside the Jerusalem convention center where the 4,000-plus delegates from North America were meeting. Estimates of the crowd — many of whom traveled hours by bus to attend the rally — ranged from several hundred to 3,000.

Scores of uniformed police officers sealed off the main entrance of the convention center as the demonstrators, many wearing skullcaps, prayed, chanted slogans and waved brightly colored banners emblazoned, in Hebrew or English, with such messages as, "All Jewish Life Is Priceless" or "Reverse Discriminatory Policies."

The largest banner, stretching several feet long, was spray-painted in black English letters that read: "In Ethiopia, Jewish children are starving and dying today."

Other signs of protest were buttons worn by members of Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies, which read, "I Believe in the Ethiopian Dream."

Disagreements over the Israeli government's Ethiopian immigration policy also erupted at an afternoon session of the G.A. on Tuesday that was supposed to be devoted to the subject of the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants already in Israel — some of whom arrived close to 20 years ago.

Knesset member Adisu Massala, himself an Ethiopian immigrant, was addressing a packed room of some 100 convention delegates when an Ethiopian activist named Yafete Alem screamed out that Massala's description of the Falash Mura as Christian converts was "not true."

"The truth is closed in front of your eyes!" exclaimed Alemu, who is a member of the activist group South Wing to Zion.

The moderator of the session restored calm by promising to set aside time at the end of the program for a full discussion of the issue.

The moderator lived up to his promise, and a passionate volley of conflicting positions ensued.

At issue is whether the Falash Mura deserve to immigrate to Israel. The Israeli government's position is that Falash Mura are the descendants of Jewish converts to Christianity.

Some 2,800 Falash Mura were brought to Israel following Operation Solomon in 1991.

They were brought to the Jewish state under a special application of immigration law. But according to the Israeli government, neither they nor their relatives are covered

MIDEAST FOCUS

U.S. warning remains in effect

A U.S. government warning advising citizens to avoid traveling to Israel, Kuwait and Palestinian self-rule areas issued last week in anticipation of a military strike against Iraq remains in effect, the State Department announced.

"Private American citizens may want to consider departing" Israel, said the warning issued last week. The language used is among the mildest travel warnings issued by the State Department.

Hussein to undergo transplant

Jordan's King Hussein will undergo a bone marrow transplant operation as part of his treatment for non-Hodgkins lymphoma. In the operation, stem cells earlier taken from the king will be reintroduced into his body as a way to prevent a recurrence of the disease. Earlier this week, King Hussein pronounced himself cancer-free.

Pollard petition denied

A petition filed by an American serving life in prison in the United States for spying for Israel was rejected by an Israeli court.

Jonathan Pollard had asked Israel's High Court of Justice to block the release of Palestinian prisoners until he was freed.

Pollard claimed President Clinton promised to release him last month during the negotiations that led to the Wye agreement.

Olmert resigns seat

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert resigned his Knesset seat, ending a 25-year career in the Israeli legislature.

Olmert stepped down in accordance with a new law that bars legislators from holding more than one elected position.

The law went into effect during Olmert's previous term as mayor, but did not affect him at the time.



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by the Law of Return, which requires immigrants to have at least one Jewish grandparent.

Last summer, Israel called on the JDC and the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, an advocacy group, to close down their Ethiopian operations, because, it contended, all eligible immigrants had been evacuated.

Since that time, thousands of additional refugees have arrived at the Jewish organizational compounds in Addis Ababa and Gondar, in the hopes of making aliyah. As a result, NACOEJ continued to provide food and religious services. Many Falash Mura are now practicing Judaism.

Israel's government claims that NACOEJ reneged on its agreement to close shop and has rained criticism on the organization in government meetings this week regarding the situation in Ethiopia.

Barbara Ribakove Gordon, NACOEJ's director, said she plans to continue serving the needs of the estimated 15,000 refugees in Addis Ababa and Gondar until their immigration applications are processed.

In one recent meeting, Israeli government ministers announced that they would sanction Jewish groups, including the Jewish Agency for Israel, the JDC and the UJA Federations of North America, to fund humanitarian aid for the refugees, but that the work on the ground must be handled by a third party, one with no connection to the Israel's government.

Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman also said he expects the Israeli government to contribute to the effort.

Israel will also streamline its procedures for processing the immigration of Jews remaining in the Kwara and Gondar regions, who have been waiting to be cleared for aliyah for several years.

Much of the background about the situation in Ethiopia was explained in a pamphlet that the UJA Federations of North America distributed to all G.A. delegates at registration, in anticipation of the massive demonstration that took place Tuesday.

Ethiopian activist groups, in turn, distributed their own literature, including reports of the refugees' abysmal living conditions and appeals for donations. □

Court upholds life sentences imposed on former Nazi officers

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Italy's highest appeals court has upheld life sentences imposed on two former Nazis convicted of helping to carry out the worst Nazi atrocity on Italian soil.

The court rejected an appeal to overturn the sentences handed down by a lower appeals court in March against former SS officers Erich Priebke and Karl Hass, both in their mid-80s.

The two were sentenced for their role in the March 1944 massacre of 335 Romans at the Ardeatine Caves south of Rome.

There were about 75 Jews among those killed.

The massacres were ordered by the Nazis in retaliation for a partisan attack in Rome the day before that killed 33 German soldiers.

Monday's ruling may be the last word on the Priebke affair, which has been marked by drama since Priebke was discovered living in Argentina in 1994.

Extradited to Italy 18 months later to face war crimes charges, Priebke was tried twice on charges of involvement in the Ardeatine Caves massacre.

The verdict of the first trial, which freed him, was annulled after protests from relatives of the victims.

In the retrial, he was sentenced to several years in prison.

Priebke appealed that verdict, and last March the appeals court toughened the verdict to a life sentence.

Hass was a witness in the first Priebke trial.

He was later charged with involvement in the massacre and tried alongside Priebke in the second trial. □

JEWISH WORLD

Jew assumes leadership post

U.S. Rep. Martin Frost (D-Texas) became the first Jewish member of Congress elected to a House of Representatives leadership post.

Frost, who served as the chairman of the Democratic congressional campaign committee, was elected caucus chairman, the party's third highest post.

Russia plans extremism law

Russia is drafting a law to ban political parties that support political extremism, the nation's justice minister announced.

The move came after the lower house of Parliament, the Duma, refused to censure anti-Semitic remarks made by Gen. Albert Makashov, a Communist lawmaker.

It remains unclear whether the law will make any specific mention of anti-Semitism.

ADL claims victory

The Anti-Defamation League claimed victory in a court decision affirming that its files and sources are protected by the same confidentiality rules that apply to journalists.

A U.S. appeals court ruled that ADL can keep information it gathered about pro-Palestinian and anti-apartheid activists confidential, but must turn over any material that was illegally obtained and distributed. The ADL was appealing a judge's order to hand over files it gathered during the early 1990s on 17 activists, who later sued the ADL for invasion of privacy.

Le Pen conviction upheld

A French appeals court upheld the conviction of far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen for assaulting a Socialist politician. But the court reduced his punishment, banning him from politics for one year instead of two.

Le Pen lashed out at the decision.

He said its goal was to prevent him from leading his anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic National Front Party in next June's elections for the European Parliament.

Shipbuilder settles suit

Ingalls Shipbuilding agreed to pay \$2.25 million to settle Justice Department charges that it improperly billed the U.S. Navy for costs which should have been billed to the Israeli government.

Israel was not accused of any wrongdoing and was unaware of the billing discrepancies, officials said. A former employee brought the lawsuit under a federal law that allows private citizens to sue on behalf of the government and collect a portion of a settlement.

Survey of U.S. lay leaders shows preference for funding local needs

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — It's not just the average American Jew who is feeling less connected to Israel these days — the leadership of American Jewish organizations is as well.

A growing sense of estrangement from Israel, which has been well documented in recent surveys of randomly selected American Jews, is also true of professional and lay leaders of Jewish communal organizations, according to Gerald Bubis and Steven Cohen. They released their study this week in Jerusalem to coincide with the massive gathering of Diaspora Jewish leaders at the General Assembly of the UJA Federations of North America.

The estrangement is being felt by Israeli leaders as well. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in his keynote address at the G.A., which was held for the first time in Jerusalem, announced government plans to spend \$5.1 million in the coming year on Zionist education among Diaspora Jews.

Cohen, who teaches at the Melton Center for Jewish Education at Hebrew University, in Jerusalem, and Bubis, a vice president and fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, the study's major underwriter, found that both lay and professional leaders of Jewish federations, national agencies, community centers and social service organizations consider Israel and other Jewish communities overseas a less compelling philanthropic cause than needs closer to home.

About three-quarters of respondents said Jewish social and human services and Jewish education should get a lot of support from Jewish federations.

Just over half — 58 percent — said the same of Israel and other overseas needs.

The more than 100 Jewish federations in the United States and Canada raise money from donors in their local communities and then disburse it to local agencies such as nursing homes, soup kitchens, synagogues and day schools. Some of the money — a shrinking percentage in many federations in recent years — is sent to Israel for charitable causes there; some is sent to aid needy Jews in other parts of the world.

When asked how they would like to see funds divided from their own community federation, just 2 percent of respondents said they would keep the local-overseas split the same as it is now.

A majority of the volunteer and professional leaders — 58 percent — said they would like to allocate more funds locally.

Some 40 percent said that they would like to see more sent overseas.

"This study should serve to provoke those who are committed to a strong relationship to search for ways in which American Jews can develop meaningful relationships with Israel in a philanthropic context," Cohen said in a telephone interview from Jerusalem.

Shoshana Cardin, a longtime national Jewish leader in the United States said, "It is wrong to focus on percentages by geographical boundaries. It is best to focus on the challenges and how to address them together," citing education and identity programs as two of the challenges confronting world Jewry.

While there are other historical factors at work, underlying the estrangement between philanthropists and professional leaders of Jewish institutions, Cohen said, is frustration with the Israeli government's stance on religious pluralism.

"My research shows that American Jews are more concerned about the perceived slap in the face, the rejection of their Jewish identity by Israel than they are with Israel's position on the peace process," Cohen said.

One way to potentially change the declining enthusiasm that American Jewish philanthropists have regarding giving to Israel, Cohen said, would be to help them build relationships with specific causes close to their hearts. A few federations have begun to do such targeted giving.

"American Jews need to have the opportunity to support institutions, or projects, that speak to their vision of Israel, even if we talk about allowing them to support competing visions of Israel, be it Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, the vision of feminists or of civil rights activists," he said. □

NEWS ANALYSIS**Local election results spurs drive to repeal direct election of premier***By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The results of Israel's local elections may well mark the turning point in the fragmentation of the country's politics during the past decade.

A movement has been gathering steam in the Knesset to repeal the direct election of the prime minister — and last week's election results might provide the impetus to fuel this change.

The concern now preoccupying politicians and academics alike is that the last round of national electoral reform, put in place by legislation in the early 1990s and first applied in the 1996 election, has gravely backfired.

It has seriously eroded the large parties, increased the representation in the Knesset of the country's many small- and medium-sized parties, and thus weakened rather than strengthened the prime minister, as it was intended to do.

Along with what happened in the Knesset elections two years ago, last week's local elections also resulted in a drastic weakening of the two major parties, Likud and Labor, and a further strengthening of ethnic and other special-interest parties like the fervently Orthodox Shas Party and the immigrants-rights Yisrael Ba'Aliyah Party.

Mayors who were swept to power in many of the main cities pay little or no fealty to Likud or Labor, preferring to identify themselves as independents or as loosely affiliated with one of the big blocs.

The accentuation of special interests over the collective, of the ethnic over the national, is deeply worrying to many Israelis. In the political community, there is growing concern for the future of Israeli democracy if the fragmentation of the electorate continues.

The new shape of Israeli politics was particularly evident in last week's election results in places like Ashdod and Jerusalem.

In Ashdod, the port city that formerly had a heavily Moroccan population, an immigrant list called Ashdod Beitenu — or "Ashdod, Our Home" — became the largest party on the new city council.

The swing of the political pendulum in Ashdod, mirrored in other towns with large immigrant populations, has elicited bitter comments from some political veterans.

But it has also prompted the leader of Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, Trade Minister Natan Sharansky, to speak in a New York Times interview of a social revolution.

Both reactions may prove overstated, as the new immigrants become older immigrants and cease viewing life solely through their immigrant-oriented prism.

That process of assimilation, however, shows no sign of overtaking the country's fervently Orthodox, or haredi, population, who, along with another well-defined special-interest group, Israeli Arabs, achieved by far the highest voter turnouts.

In Jerusalem, where large numbers of secular Israelis did not bother to vote, the haredim will now hold half of the council seats, making Mayor Ehud Olmert more beholden to them than ever.

Meir Porush, the leader of the fervently Orthodox United Torah Front who also serves as deputy housing minister, charged this week that the secular factions in the capital ran "scare cam-

paigns" against the haredim while in fact secular life, especially on the Sabbath, is burgeoning in the city.

Porush insisted that most of those who are leaving Jerusalem are not secular Israelis but the Orthodox, who have been driven away by rising housing prices.

But the experience of countless secular families tells a different story, and there is a widespread sense across Israel that the capital is in danger of becoming a haredi-Palestinian city.

As the movement for national electoral reform gathers adherents, it should be remembered that this reform began in the 1980s on the local level. It was the local elections system that was first changed by legislation to give voters two ballots: one for mayor and another for a slate of council members.

In the past, voters could only select the party of their choice. Party bosses would then decide who held which municipal post.

The reform on the local level seemed a breath of fresh air blowing through the musty and often corrupt corridors of Israeli politics. Younger leaders were chosen as mayors — and the two big parties repeatedly scrambled to belatedly back candidates who seemed set to win based on their own popularity.

But this fresh breeze rapidly soured when the reformed voting system was translated, in 1996, from the municipal to the national level.

The 1996 national election was the first in which Israelis had two ballots: one for a party slate seeking Knesset seats and one for the direct election of the premier.

Labor and especially Likud emerged from that election with a sharp loss of Knesset seats. Between them, the two major parties can barely scrape together a majority of the Knesset's 120 seats.

The outlook for the next election, if it is held under the same system, has them losing yet more seats to Shas and Yisrael Ba'Aliyah.

The logic, understood too late by the reformers, is that when people are given two votes, they tend to split their vote.

In 1996, a vote for Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud or for Shimon Peres of Labor did not necessarily translate, in the second ballot for Knesset seats, into a vote for their respective parties.

Instead, many voters threw their support to other parties that they felt better represented their interests.

Netanyahu's premiership, as a result, has been characterized by the premier's ongoing dependence on unruly and demanding coalition partners.

Granted, under the amended electoral system, these partners have no alternative to Netanyahu — unless they are ready to dissolve the Knesset and risk their seats in a new election.

This was supposed to have been the glue that kept the coalition welded together. But in practice the imbalance between the Likud and its partners has made for constant instability.

Now, however, the tide may be turning back to the previous electoral system, in which voters cast one ballot for a party, and the winning party had the task of forging a government with its leader as premier.

While Netanyahu and Labor leader Ehud Barak are still unsure of how to position themselves in the growing debate, their party colleagues increasingly seem to favor reverting to the previous system. Ironically, therefore, the striking successes of narrowly based groups in the latest local elections may prove the high point of sectoral politics as Israel makes a return to the electoral patterns of the past. □