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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Lawmakers vow conversion 'war'

Israeli legislators are planning to revive legislation that would give the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate sole control over conversions performed in the Jewish state.

"If the court wants to declare a war with us, we will answer with war," Knesset member Shlomo Benizri of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party said after a Jerusalem court ordered that conversions performed by the Conservative and Reform movements be recognized by the Interior Ministry.

Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau called the court decision a "miserable verdict that empties Jewish content from the state."

U.S. Embassy closes amid threat

The U.S. ambassador to Israel closed the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv after receiving a "credible and specific threat."

Discussing the move by Edward Walker, an embassy spokesman would not discuss the nature of the threat, but he denied a report that the ambassador's life had been threatened.

Germany begins payments

Germany began making monthly pension payments to Holocaust survivors living in Eastern Europe. About 800 survivors, mainly in the Czech Republic and Baltic countries, have already begun receiving the payments of some \$150, according to an official with the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany, which negotiated the payments with the German government. [Page 3]

Monet oil won't go to London

French authorities are preventing an oil painting by Impressionist Claude Monet from moving to a London exhibition because it is believed to have been looted by the Nazis.

Currently on loan to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, "Waterlilies" has been claimed by the descendants of Paul Rosenberg, a prominent Jewish art collector in prewar Paris. The 1904 painting has an estimated value of some \$10 million.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, Jan. 4, 1999.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Election reform advocates battling to change law now

By Kenneth Bandler

NEW YORK (JTA) — Election reform proponents in Israel are racing against the clock to restore the old system of selecting a prime minister before voters return to the polls next spring.

"If we don't succeed before the next election, it will be a tragedy," says Arye Carmon, president of the Israel Democracy Institute, a research and advocacy group in Jerusalem that is spearheading the campaign to repeal the law governing the direct election of the prime minister.

That law, first implemented for the 1996 elections, is the underlying source of factionalism that has bedeviled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, say the reform advocates.

They believe it is likely to lead to an Israeli government that is no stronger — and perhaps weaker — than the Netanyahu coalition.

The campaign has gathered steam in the weeks after the two major political parties suffered large losses in municipal elections across the country.

Fears that the next round of national elections may produce further erosion for Labor and Likud on top of the Knesset seat losses in 1996 have given new impetus to the campaign.

The Knesset gave preliminary approval to the bill to rescind direct election of the prime minister on the same day it voted to hold early elections. But the bill still needs a 61-vote majority on each of two more votes to become law. And even if it passes, the chances of its implementation before May are uncertain.

Netanyahu, the first prime minister elected directly, opposes the measure. Labor Party head Ehud Barak also is opposed, mainly because he does not want to seem unwilling to face down the incumbent in direct elections, according to Israeli political analysts.

But in a sign of the urgency felt by many leaders in the two major parties, two former prime ministers — Shimon Peres of Labor and Yitzhak Shamir of Likud — jointly called on the Knesset this week to work expeditiously to complete the process of restoring the one-ballot system.

Two years ago, Israeli voters for the first time cast two separate ballots in national elections, one for premier and one for a political party's list of candidates for the Knesset.

Until 1996, Israelis would vote only for a Knesset list. The leader of the major party, Labor or Likud, that won the most seats would become prime minister.

In recent years, Israelis had debated various proposals for election reform, many of them aimed at making elected officials more accountable to their constituencies.

On the local level, such a reform was introduced in 1975, with separate elections for mayor and a party's list for City Council. When this model was instituted at the national level, it was apparently with some hope that directly electing the prime minister would make him or her more accountable to the voters, while also strengthening his or her position in the Cabinet.

But those best intentions were not realized.

"Direct elections devastated the big parties," Carmon said in a recent interview in his Jerusalem office.

Given the opportunity to split their vote, Israelis voted for either the head of Labor

MIDEAST FOCUS

Clinton, Arafat plan meeting

President Clinton and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat are planning a meeting to discuss the Middle East peace process, according to a Palestinian negotiator. Saeb Erekat said the meeting would take place in late March or early April. He added that Palestinian negotiators would be traveling to Washington for a Jan. 24 meeting with U.S. officials.

Israeli officials block flights

Israeli officials delayed the departure of two flights from the Palestinian airport in the Gaza Strip. The officials charged that the Palestinian Authority was not living up to mutually agreed upon security arrangements for the airport's operation.

Poll puts Barak in lead

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would be defeated by opposition leader Ehud Barak if national elections were held this week, according to an Israeli opinion poll. The poll, published in the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv*, also showed support slipping for the former army chief of staff, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, who has not yet declared his candidacy.

Israel assessed withdrawal

Israel secretly assessed how much Jewish settlers on the Golan Heights would need to be paid if Israel returned the territory to Syria, according to Israeli press reports. The reports of the assessments, which reportedly occurred between 1992 and 1996 under the governments of Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, comes as some Israeli legislators are pressing for a bill under which Israel could return the Golan only after a vote by Knesset members.

Knesset bars cloning

Israel's Knesset passed a law barring human cloning. The law carries a two-year prison sentence for anyone who violates the ban.

or Likud for prime minister, and then flocked to smaller parties for the Knesset. Labor's representation in the Knesset dropped from 44 seats to 34 after the 1996 vote. Likud fell from 32 seats to 23, though part of its loss resulted from merging its list with two other parties, Geshet and Tsomet.

For the first time in Israeli history, the country's two major parties held fewer than 50 percent of the seats in the 120-member Parliament, and the premier's own party occupied less than half of the Cabinet, which is made up of eight parties.

As a result, the imminent collapse of the Israeli government has been a persistent theme overshadowing Netanyahu's tenure.

Until the Knesset voted Dec. 21 to call early elections, Netanyahu had already faced countless threats of defection by one or more of his coalition partners — and the resignations of three Cabinet ministers — over a variety of issues, not just the peace process.

The election reform campaign has attracted leading Likud and Labor figures who believe that the electoral system, not the personality or policies of the premier, is the problem and that Israel's political paralysis is likely to worsen if the system is not changed.

Former Likud Defense Minister Moshe Arens, for example, chairs the Council on Parliamentary Democracy, the body created earlier this year by the Israel Democracy Institute to lobby for repeal of the direct election law.

The institute projects that under the current system, the Labor and Likud representation in the Knesset will decline further in the next election: 28 seats for Labor and 19 for Likud.

The fervently Orthodox Shas Party, which currently holds some 10 Knesset seats, will increase to 13, and other smaller parties will make gains as well, the institute predicts.

"The collapse of the large-party system, on which democracy is anchored, now appears inevitable," the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* said in an editorial after last month's local elections.

"The large parties have ceased fulfilling their traditional function as a unifying force for various segments of society," said *Ha'aretz*.

"Now each group is represented directly in the Knesset with national decisions subordinated to sectarian interests."

That warning was echoed by Peres and Shamir at their news conference Monday in Tel Aviv.

"There is a real danger that the State of Israel will lose its ability to make decisions," said Peres. "Whoever is elected prime minister, the coalition will chain his arms and legs."

The two elder statesmen, joined by Arens and Carmon, urged the Knesset members who voted for the bill Dec. 21 to press for its adoption and implementation before the next election.

"A Knesset consisting of sectarian parties is bad for the state. It pushes aside the national agenda," said Arens.

Despite their appeals, the chances of restoring the one-ballot system before next May appear slim.

The bill was narrowly approved, 62-57, after its Labor and Likud sponsors announced that even if the direct election law is abolished, the change would not be implemented until the elections slated for 2003.

Carmon, however, believes that the law can be changed and implemented in the coming months.

Once the measure passes the first vote, it is sent to the Knesset's Constitution and Law Committee, and that body has the power to amend it, he said in a telephone interview from his home Sunday.

But the committee chair is a member of the National Religious Party — one of several Orthodox parties that have benefitted under the two-ballot system. The religious parties won a total of 23 Knesset seats in 1996.

And some smaller party Knesset members who voted for the bill, including four lawmakers from the left-wing Meretz Party, are threatening to withdraw their support if the promise to maintain the direct election in the 1999 ballots is not honored. □



Daily News Bulletin

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THE EMERGING CANDIDATES**Barak stumps on Shabbat as battle for Arab vote begins***By Gil Sedan*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Ehud Barak's weekend visit to Arab communities in northern Israel has made two facts clear early in the election campaign: The Labor Party leader absolutely needs the Arab vote to win the premiership, and he has little hope of securing support among fervently Orthodox Jews.

But Barak's Christmas tour of Arab Christian communities last Saturday may already have been too late.

For once, there are strong voices within the Israeli Arab community calling for an Arab candidate for prime minister.

"Surely, we cannot win," said Hadash Knesset member Azmi Beshara, "but we should make it quite obvious to the Zionist parties that we are not their captives. If they want our support, they will need to prove that they are worth it."

The scenario is simple: Any Arab candidate would probably get fewer votes than the leaders of the Likud and Labor parties and any other Jewish candidates in the race.

However, assuming that no candidate wins more than 50 percent of the vote, forcing a runoff election, the Arab candidate would have a sufficient number of votes to try to bargain with the leading candidates and trade his or her support for more social spending for Israeli Arabs.

The list is long: larger municipal and educational budgets, more jobs, more housing, support for the indigent Bedouin population in the Negev — all of that before a word is uttered regarding the negotiations with the Palestinians.

Barak would like to avoid that scenario by gaining the support of the 18 percent of the Israeli electorate who are Arab in the first round of elections.

In the 1996 elections, 95 percent of Arab voters cast their ballots for Shimon Peres, but the Labor premier still earned 14,000 votes fewer than Netanyahu overall.

Barak knows that other candidates, including Netanyahu, will also be campaigning for the Arab vote, but the former Israel Defense Force chief of staff is determined to prove to the Arabs that he is their best choice.

Apart from the race for premier, the Labor Party itself may have cause for concern as Israeli Arab leaders ponder creating a single list of candidates for the Knesset.

Knesset Members like Beshara and Abdel Wahab Darawshe, of the Arab Democratic Party, have called for a unified Arab list that potentially could become the third largest party in the Knesset.

Currently, there are 10 Arabs serving in the Knesset with four parties. In addition to the Arab Democratic Party, there are two Zionist parties — Labor and Meretz — and a joint Jewish-Arab list, Hadash.

Previous efforts to establish a single Arab party never took hold because the Arabs were too divided among themselves to form a unified party.

While this inability was mainly based on personality differences, it was also ideological. Hadash, for example, has insisted on preserving its multiethnic nature. "How can we join forces with Muslim fundamentalists?" asked Jewish Knesset member Tamar Gozansky of Hadash. Beshara believes he has the answer: A joint

election list, in which each party preserves its own character.

The Arab electoral scene becomes even more complicated if one takes into account the baits offered by the ruling Likud Party and the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, which runs the powerful Interior Ministry, the government office overseeing the allocation of budgets to local communities.

Both Likud and Shas have demonstrated in past elections that they can muster enough Arab support to win one or two Knesset seats. □

Germany begins payments to survivors in Eastern Europe*By Deidre Berger*

FRANKFURT (JTA) — Fulfilling a landmark agreement reached one year ago, Germany has begun making monthly pension payments to Holocaust survivors living in Eastern Europe.

About 800 survivors, mainly in the Czech Republic and Baltic countries, have already begun receiving the payments of some \$150 per month, according to Karl Brozik, director of the Frankfurt office of the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany.

The Claims Conference, which reached an agreement with the German government about the payments last January after months of negotiations, is administering the pension fund.

With some 6,000 to 7,000 survivors already having made requests for pensions, Brozik said he expects a total of about 30,000 applications. Due to eligibility restrictions, which already depend largely on the length of persecution a survivor suffered under the Nazis, he estimates that about 18,000 Eastern European survivors will eventually receive the pensions, which will switch to a quarterly payment basis starting in February.

Germany has paid more than \$54 billion in compensation to Holocaust survivors since World War II, but no payments were made to those living in Soviet-bloc countries during the Cold War.

After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Germany maintained that it could not afford to pay individual pensions to survivors in Eastern Europe. Instead, the German government set up general funds in those countries to be used mainly for social services that would benefit the survivors.

Germany had refused to negotiate until last year, when it was embarrassed by press reports that former SS officers, including alleged war criminals, were receiving monthly pensions.

In the wake of pressure from the American Jewish Committee and other Jewish organizations, Bonn officials agreed to begin negotiations on pension payments.

While the \$150 monthly payments are only half the size survivors living in Western countries receive, Brozik believed the money will nonetheless be helpful for many of the mostly aged and often sick survivors.

"I have been in the compensation business a long time," Brozik said, "and I have never heard so much as a thank-you. This time, I got numerous thank-you letters from pension recipients."

There are still unsolved payment problems, Brozik said, adding that the banking system is not yet developed enough in some parts of Eastern Europe to make it possible to rely solely on bank transfers.

He also noted what he described as a disturbing development: Some governments are trying to tax the pensions. □

Move toward Palestinian state advancing in stages, Israelis warn

By Julia Goldman

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Palestinian Authority is working to get the weight of the world behind the idea of a Palestinian state, and the effort is causing mounting concern among Israeli officials.

The push over the last year has occurred in what Israel's ambassador to the United Nations sees as a "strategy of stages," moving "from the phase of talking about the principles of Palestinian statehood, to a stage where they're talking about a date for Palestinian statehood, May 4."

Indeed, the Palestinian Authority has an elected government and diplomatic presence recognized throughout the world, a new airport that was visited by President Clinton and enhanced status at the United Nations, with the right to participate in General Assembly debates.

"Our people are still acquiring, piece by piece, these things we need ultimately to satisfy our dream and the people's dream of an independent state on the land of Palestine, with Jerusalem as its capital," Ahmed Karia, chairman of the Palestine legislative council and one of the architects of the Oslo peace accords, wrote in a Dec. 21 newspaper article.

In that same article, the Palestinian official may have also begun to outline the geography of that state, according to the Israeli ambassador, Dore Gold.

His insight is based on a comment that Karia, a Palestinian moderate, made in the London-based, Arab-language newspaper Al-Hayyat al-Jadida, in which he referred to the 1947 U.N. Partition Plan as the basis for the legitimacy and the borders of a Palestinian state.

English excerpts of the article were disseminated by the Middle East Media and Research Institute, an organization that monitors the Arab-language press and is run by Yigal Carmon, a former Israeli intelligence officer.

In the Dec. 21 article, Karia, who is also known as Abu Alaa, spoke of "a Palestinian state, with all the rights and duties that other states possess."

Karia wrote that the state should have internationally recognized borders, "which are the borders set in the partition resolution."

U.N. Resolution 181, adopted Nov. 29, 1947, divided mandatory Palestine into an Arab state, a Jewish state and an international zone that included Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

The 1947 borders would have allotted nearly 60 percent of the territory to the Jewish state — more than half of which was the Negev Desert — and 40 percent to the Arab state, including the entire contemporary West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the northern towns of Acre and Nahariya.

Israel accepted the plan and then declared independence in May 1948.

The Arab League forcefully rejected the plan, precipitating the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

The cease-fire lines after the war pretty much served as Israel's borders until the Six-Day War of 1967, when the Jewish state gained control of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and Sinai Desert.

Past Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations — including the 1991 Madrid Conference and the 1993 Oslo accords — have been

based on U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, which called on Israel to return territories occupied during the Six-Day War.

Gold stressed in a recent telephone interview that "Israel itself has stated emphatically that it won't be pushed back to the '67 borders, and certainly not the '47 borders."

The 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence does rely on U.N. Resolution 181 as a source of international legitimacy for a Palestinian state.

But Gold believes Karia's comments are the first published direct reference to the 1947 borders as a basis for the Palestinian state.

The Palestinian leadership has repeatedly articulated its intention to declare statehood on or after May 4, 1999 — the end of the five-year interim period of the Oslo accords.

Israel insists that any plans for Palestinian autonomy must be decided in mutual negotiations.

The Palestinian observer to the United Nations, Nasser al-Kidwa, said, through a spokesperson, that Karia's comments do not represent any change in Palestinian policy with regard to borders.

The spokesperson said references to Resolution 181 serve only to reaffirm the Palestinian right to statehood.

"The international community recognized the creation of the Palestinian state next to the Israeli state at the time of partition based on the partition resolution," Karia wrote.

"That means the legitimacy of the Israeli state stands alongside and as a condition of the creation of a Palestinian state," he continued, citing several U.N. resolutions that, he said, are based on the resolution.

Palestinian leaders, including Arafat, Karia and al-Kidwa, have stated their desire to reach an agreement with the Israelis by the end of the interim agreement, but are firm in their desire for statehood.

Israel has consistently said that it would view any declaration of Palestinian statehood as a "unilateral action" outside the peace negotiations, and that it would react with "all necessary steps, including the application of Israeli rule, law and administration" to the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"Israel has talked about secure, defensible borders," Gold said. "We're willing to compromise," but the borders must be negotiated, "not thrown out ahead of time."

"This doesn't look like compromise," Gold said. "It looks like moving the goal posts." □

Couple gets engaged at the movies

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli computer student made sure he and his girlfriend didn't miss the previews when they went to the movies this week.

Ronen Gottlieb, 26, arranged for the Tel Aviv Cinematheque to screen a short clip prior to the feature that had him in a starring role — proposing marriage to his girlfriend, 26-year-old Limor Tirkel.

Tirkel, a law student, burst into tears.

She accepted the proposal — to congratulations from the rest of the audience.

The happy couple didn't stay for the film, but instead went out for dinner to celebrate. □