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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

NEWS ANALYSIS

Barak looks for common ground with potential coalition partners

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak continued efforts this week to form a broad-based coalition from divergent political parties, but did not rule out the possibility of creating a narrow government if necessary. While his negotiating team worked at courting the Likud Party and, to a lesser degree, the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, Barak signaled that he was beholden to no one.

"I tell everyone: The door is open. I want a broad government, perhaps with the Likud, perhaps with the Likud and Shas," Barak said, but added. "I do not have a problem establishing a narrow government in a few days, and perhaps in the end this is what will happen."

In order for Barak to form a broad coalition, however, he needs to build bridges between his own policies and those of other parties. Among the thorny issues:

- Negotiations with the Palestinians: Barak may propose that Israel and the Palestinian Authority move directly to final-status negotiations and forego implementation of the Wye accord, which includes additional phased withdrawals from the West Bank in exchange for security measures by the Palestinians.

According to sources within Barak's Labor Party, such a proposal may make it easier for Likud and the National Religious Party to join his government. Outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud, who suspended implementation of the accords in December, has also suggested moving right to final-status talks, which would address issues of settlements, borders, refugees and Jerusalem.

- Syria and Lebanon: Netanyahu confirmed this week that his government had conducted secret talks with Syria for a year during his term, but they concluded without an agreement. On Tuesday, Netanyahu met with Barak to update him on political and security issues. If Likud were to join a coalition government, Barak could have broad support for continuing negotiations with Syria over the Golan Heights and a possible Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.

- Settlements: Seeking a middle ground on the issue of Jewish settlements on the West Bank, media reports this week said the coalition negotiating team has drawn a blueprint for halting construction of new settlements but allowing for the natural growth of existing ones.

It was this issue of settlement policy that provoked objections from Palestinians, who declared Thursday a "Day of Anger" over Jewish settlement activity.

In the days following the Israeli elections, the warm congratulations showered on Barak by the Palestinians quickly turned to appeals to reverse settlement expansions endorsed by the outgoing government and warnings not to continue in a similar vein.

Barak has appeared to have made headway on the settlement issue with the left-wing Meretz Party and the National Religious Party. However, sharp disagreement could emerge once the sides get to the issue of whether to continue the Likud government's policy of settlement expansion.

"From our standpoint, a government we are part of will not develop the settlements. They are an obstacle to peace and come at the cost of developing [low-income] neighborhoods and finding new jobs for the unemployed," Meretz Knesset member Ran Cohen told reporters this week before heading into another negotiating session with Barak's team.

Meanwhile, representatives from Likud appeared interested in further talks, but

'Day of Rage' protests erupt

Thousands of Palestinians clashed with Israeli troops Thursday during demonstrations throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In one incident near the West Bank town of Hebron, a Palestinian was killed by Israeli troops when he tried to drive through a roadblock. At least 10 Palestinians were wounded during the dashes.

The Palestinian Authority had declared Thursday a "Day of Anger" and urged widespread protests against Jewish settlement activity. [Page 3]

Har Homa housing units sold

Some 700 of 840 housing units planned for the first phase of construction at a controversial Jewish neighborhood in southeastern Jerusalem have been sold. Another 800 will be released for sale Friday.

Israel's Housing Ministry has so far approved construction of 2,000 of 6,500 housing units at Har Homa. The start of groundbreaking at Har Homa in March 1997 led to nearly two years of paralysis in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

Militia completes withdrawal

The Israel-allied South Lebanon Army on Thursday completed its withdrawal from a Christian enclave north of the security zone.

Ending 14 years of control over the enclave, the SLA militia left a trail of abandoned equipment as it made a hasty retreat to Israeli positions within the zone.

Russian premier seeks tolerance

Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin called Thursday for more religious tolerance.

"In this country we have many faiths: not only Christians but also Muslims, Buddhists, Jews. They are also our roots, our Russia," he said during a news conference devoted to his new government's plans.

Barak to start Cabinet talks

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak plans to start discussions on specific Cabinet assignments next week, a Labor Party source was quoted as saying Thursday. According to the official, Barak's negotiating team intends to hold marathon sessions Friday with potential coalition partners in an effort to hammer out the basic guidelines of his new government.

MIDEAST FOCUS

Netanyahu delays resignation

Outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delayed his resignation from the Knesset and will be sworn in as a legislator when the 15th session of Parliament opens Monday.

The director of Netanyahu's office said Thursday that Netanyahu decided to remain in the Knesset until his successor, Ehud Barak, presents his government.

Terrorist handover demanded

Israel called this week on the Palestinian Authority to hand over Islamic militant Mohammad Deif, who Israel suspects is hiding in the self-rule areas.

Deif, a leader of Hamas' armed wing, tops Israel's most-wanted list. Israeli officials hold him responsible for planning terror attacks against Israel in which 47 people were killed and 96 wounded.

Report: Iraq seeks new weapons

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is exploiting NATO's preoccupation with the Balkans by accelerating the search for components used in nonconventional weapons, according to the London-based newsletter Foreign Report.

Quoting Middle East sources, the newsletter said Saddam's representatives abroad have been ordered to purchase equipment for developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems. They have been instructed to "collaborate with Palestinian extremists ready to punish the West," the newsletter said.

Pentagon wants U.S. out of Sinai

Senior Pentagon officials want to end U.S. participation in the peacekeeping force in the Sinai Desert because U.S. forces are stretched too thin in other missions, USA Today reported last week.

State Department officials oppose ending U.S. involvement in the force, which began in 1982 to enforce the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt.

took pains not to appear too eager. Outgoing Communications Minister Limor Livnat said her party can't expect the new government to have the same policy as that of the outgoing government, "but we were impressed with their desire to prevent the situation" which occurred when Labor gained power in 1992 and Jewish settlements in the West Bank were "dried out."

"But it is clear that the gaps are not simple, and it is possible we will not find a way to bridge them," Livnat said Monday after talks with Barak's coalition negotiating team.

On Wednesday, Barak's staff issued a statement saying that he considers the immediate resumption of the peace process of utmost importance and that he would like to see Likud become part of the broad government he's trying to build.

Barak's statement appeared to carry two messages — one to Likud and the other to the Palestinians, who fear his efforts to bring the party into his coalition could mean a continuation of the Netanyahu government's settlement expansion policy.

Barak and acting Likud Chairman Ariel Sharon met Wednesday in talks that Sharon described as "interesting." Sharon would not say whether Likud would now enter formal coalition negotiations with Barak.

Sharon also refused to comment on speculation about contact between Likud and Shas regarding the possible formation of an opposition bloc. Such a move could also undermine efforts by Barak's negotiating team to try to play the two parties off one another in coalition negotiations.

Meanwhile, in an apparent shift of attitude, Barak issued a statement Monday saying that he is interested in seeing Shas within his government.

Previously, Barak had made clear he was not interested in negotiating with Shas, the third largest parliamentary faction with 17 seats, as long as Aryeh Deri, its corruption-tainted leader, continued to pull political strings.

Commentators suggested the overture might have been intended as a signal to Likud not to try to use Barak's distancing from Shas to raise the negotiating stakes. They also suggested it could reflect a realization by the Labor leader of having gone too far in freezing out the fervently Orthodox party.

One development that could have precipitated the statement was the unusual meeting this week at the presidential residence between President Ezer Weizman and Shas' spiritual mentor, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Political observers said the gesture by Yosef, who is usually on the receiving end of visits, could indicate a willingness by Shas to meet Barak's terms. □

British rabbi: Millennium should be Christian, religious celebration

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — Britain's official millennium celebrations should be marked with Christian prayers, according to the nation's chief rabbi.

Citing the religious nature of the millennium, Jonathan Sacks said this week that it is by definition a Christian celebration.

"It is not and cannot be a Jewish moment or a Muslim moment," he said. "But neither can it be a secular moment, a party celebrating nothing in particular but the passing of time."

Sacks made his comments when he delivered the first City Lecture, an event sponsored by the lord mayor of London and the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral.

"As a Jew, I want to live in a country that takes faith seriously," Sacks said. "Someone who takes their own faith seriously is more likely to respect my faith than someone for whom all faith is superstition and all religion an irrelevance."

"It is quite wrong to argue that an inclusive society is one in which religion is absent from our public celebrations. An inclusive society is one in which our many faiths are valued, each in its own way and time."

"The millennium is a Christian time in a country where Christianity has not merely shaped our common culture and morality," he added. "It has helped those of us who are not Christians feel that our faith has a voice in the conversation, a part to play in the building of society." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Pope to lead Shoah prayers

Pope John Paul II is scheduled to lead prayers for Jewish victims of the Holocaust during his planned visit to Warsaw on June 11.

The service will be held at the site from which the Nazis transported Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to concentration camps. The pope's visit to Poland is slated to begin Saturday and end June 17.

German court convicts Le Pen

A German court convicted a French far-right leader for inciting racial hatred and ordered him to pay a fine, German prosecutors said Wednesday.

The charges stem from a 1997 news conference in Munich at which Jean-Marie Le Pen repeated his oft-quoted remark that the Holocaust is a "mere detail of history."

Christie's to auction manuscripts

A collection of Hebrew manuscripts and books from London's rabbinical court is slated to be auctioned off June 23 in New York by Christie's auction house. A hand-decorated Siddur originally printed in Prague in 1515 and a prayer book signed by leading 17th-century Polish rabbis are among the items to be auctioned.

Professor charged with denial

Polish prosecutors charged a history professor Monday for writing a book that allegedly denies that the Holocaust took place.

"Dangerous Themes" by Dariusz Ratajczak violates a Polish law banning the public denial of Nazi and Communist-era crimes, the prosecutors said. The book claims that gas chambers at Nazi death camps were used to kill lice on prisoners. If convicted, Ratajczak, who has been suspended from his teaching position, could face up to three years in prison.

Allianz downplays estimates

Estimates of the number of claims against a German insurance firm that is being sued for its failure to pay out policies dating from the Holocaust era are greatly exaggerated, according to the firm's chief executive officer.

Henning Schulte-Noelle recently told a news conference that Allianz officials found only 18 cases in which it is unclear whether such policies were not paid. Schulte-Noelle said the majority of unpaid claims were written by Eastern European insurers.

Israeli musicians win in Japan

An Israeli string ensemble won first prize at a chamber music competition in Osaka, Japan. The Jerusalem Trio, which defeated some 260 competitors, was invited to play a concert tour in Japan.

Palestinians vent anger at Israel as protests over settlements rage on

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Thousands of Palestinians have clashed with Israeli troops during demonstrations throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The demonstrations reportedly took place in at least nine locations on Thursday, with Palestinians marching on settlements and Israeli army posts.

In one incident near the West Bank town of Hebron, a Palestinian was killed by Israeli troops when he tried to drive through a roadblock. The troops said the driver, who died of his injuries after being taken to a local hospital, had tried to run them over.

At least three Israeli soldiers and 10 Palestinians were wounded during the widespread clashes.

The Palestinian Authority, which declared Thursday a "Day of Anger" and urged widespread protests against Jewish settlement activity, warned that the protests would continue if Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak does not reverse the settlement policies of his predecessor.

Palestinian officials, determined to put the settlement issue at the top of the incoming premier's agenda, have warned that continued Jewish construction in the territories and in disputed parts of Jerusalem could lead to an "explosion."

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat is concerned that Barak will harden his position on settlements as part of an effort to lure hard-line parties into his governing coalition.

Earlier this week, Barak issued guidelines for his ongoing coalition negotiations indicating his opposition to the construction of new settlements, but allowing for the natural growth of existing ones — a position not unlike that of his predecessor.

Thursday's demonstrations were a "message from our people to Mr. Barak that peace with settlements is not possible," a spokesman for the Palestinian Ministry of Information said Thursday.

In scenes reminiscent of the Intifada, the 1987 to 1993 Palestinian uprising, Israeli soldiers used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the crowds during the widespread demonstrations. At a hilltop near the West Bank town of Nablus, where demonstrators protested the expansion of two Jewish settlements, an Israeli soldier shot a man in the face with a rubber bullet. The man, later identified as a plainclothes Palestinian policeman, was listed in serious condition at a Nablus hospital.

In Hebron, Israeli security forces prevented hundreds of Palestinians from marching toward the Cave of the Patriarchs.

Near the West Bank village of Youssouf, several Palestinians were wounded by rubber bullets fired by Israeli troops. One Israeli border police guard was also hurt.

In Gaza, three Israeli soldiers were lightly wounded as hundreds of Palestinians gathered near the Netzarim settlement and threw firebombs and rocks.

In predominantly Arab eastern Jerusalem, where merchants observed a strike, marchers carried banners reading, "Barak, Listen, the Palestinian People Will Not Kneel."

Israeli security officials expressed overall satisfaction with efforts by Palestinian police to maintain order in those areas under their control.

Near Bethlehem, Palestinian police dispersed demonstrators trying to throw rocks at Israeli troops stationed at Rachel's Tomb, and the police also prevented some 2,000 demonstrators from marching on a West Bank settlement near the village of Dir Kadis.

Israeli troops had been put on heightened alert in the territories prior to the demonstrations, which were expected to continue into the weekend.

Security was also beefed up in eastern Jerusalem, where police said they would not permit a planned procession from the Temple Mount to the Ras al-Amud neighborhood following Friday prayers.

Ras al-Amud became a focal point for Palestinian protests after construction work for Jewish housing recently began there.

In a bid for votes, outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave the go-ahead for construction at Ras al-Amud in the days preceding Israel's May 17 elections. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD**European Jews meet to debate and celebrate their new identity***By Ruth E. Gruber*

NICE, France (JTA) — Nearly 600 Jewish community leaders and representatives from 39 countries gathered here last weekend for what they described as a major step toward the goal of creating a new European Jewish identity.

Organizers and participants at the first General Assembly of the European Council of Jewish Communities also said the gathering reflected a new vision of European Jewry as a “third pillar” of world Judaism alongside the Jews of Israel and the Americas.

Bringing together Jews from communities of all sizes throughout Europe — with Orthodox, Reform and secular representatives, and age groups ranging from students to senior citizens — the meeting was unprecedented in size, scope and objective.

“This is the first time in Europe that 600 Jews have sat down together to discuss policy for the future,” said incoming ECJC President Cobi Benatoff of Milan, who put forward a challenge to those gathered for the conference: “What can European Jewry contribute to the new Europe of the 21st century?”

Throughout the conference, one key theme emerged: an increasing sense of self-confidence among European Jews — at least among its leadership — in its relations both with Israel, as well as with North American Jews and international Jewish organizations.

Expressions of self-confidence clearly emerged during a heated debate that focused on how to approach the process of seeking restitution for Jewish property seized during the Holocaust.

European speakers, including representatives of the Dutch, Czech and French communities, criticized international organizations such as the World Jewish Restitution Organization for being insensitive to local conditions and for bypassing local communities in negotiations with governments for the return of Jewish property.

“Interference from [international] Jewish organizations is not appropriate or wanted,” said Fred Ensel of Amsterdam. “They have done a wonderful job — but we will call them in when wanted.”

Several Israeli speakers at the meeting were dismayed that more emphasis was not placed on Israel’s centrality for Jews.

Israel’s ambassador to France, Eliahu Ben-Elissar, urged all European Jews to make aliyah and bemoaned the fact that, in conference hall decorations, the Israeli flag was hung, side by side and the same size, with flags of European countries. But at least one participant considered this sought-after emphasis on Israel an “outdated” attitude: “Anyhow, for us by now, the centrality of Israel is a given — we don’t have to keep repeating it.”

During the conference, participants also focused on the serious challenges that render the new European Jewish identity a still-fragile concept. These challenges, discussed in workshops, include: Jewish education; students’ issues; Jewish heritage; social welfare programs; Jewish community centers; and Jewish media.

Because of the fragility of the vision of the newly emergent European Jewish leadership, said Helena Datner, president of the Jewish community of Warsaw, “It was really important to sit down and discuss common problems, and to realize that we all are confronting similar issues.”

The weekend conference followed up on a series of other Jewish gatherings during the past four years aimed at fostering European Jewish identity in the wake of the fall of communism and the opening of Eastern Europe.

These included smaller meetings of about 200 people, mostly academics, scholars and experts. Among such gatherings were a 1995 conference in Prague on planning for the future of European Jewry and a 1997 meeting in Strasbourg, France, on furthering Jewish life in Europe.

The ECJC is a Paris-based service organization that aims to encourage cooperation and communication among Jewish communities and organizations.

Along with fostering leadership training, it has set up an office to mediate contacts between Jewish communities and organizations and the European Union — including contacts for obtaining project funding.

The General Assembly devoted less time to formal sessions, placing more emphasis on allowing the opportunity for informal contacts and workshops. It was paralleled by a singles weekend organized for about 70 young adults from across Europe, who, between social events, joined some of the conference sessions.

“The importance is that we are all here from all over, and for many of us the only thing we have in common is that we are Jews,” said Ya’akov Bleich, the chief rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine. □

San Francisco candidate campaigns with Jewish flavor*By Tom Tugend*

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — A black, Jewish mayoral candidate in San Francisco is borrowing a page out of Ehud Barak’s campaign playbook — and making relations with Israel a centerpiece of his campaign strategy.

Mark “Moshe” Hardie, a 28-year-old lawyer and convert to Orthodox Judaism, has adopted “One San Francisco” as the central theme of his Republican campaign, “echoing the successful ‘One Israel’ campaign of Ehud Barak,” according to a report issued by his campaign team.

According to the report, Hardie has also promised to, among other things, open a San Francisco trade office in Jerusalem to promote bilateral trade; promote development of a state-of-the-art Jewish commercial center, with kosher restaurants, Jewish bookstores and Judaic shops; place an “eruv,” or a wall, around San Francisco to facilitate Shabbat observance; and launch a “War on Anti-Semitism and Hate Crime” in conjunction with Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

In his election bid, Hardie is taking on incumbent Mayor Willie Brown, also an African-American and one of California’s most skilled politicians.

But Hardie is encouraged by a recent poll in the San Francisco Examiner newspaper in which 71 percent of respondents said they were unhappy with Brown’s performance.

The nonpartisan election is scheduled for November.

Hardie, who served as a special assistant to former Gov. Pete Wilson of California, made news earlier this year when he erected signs along the Pacific Coast Highway in Los Angeles demanding freedom for Ron Arad, the Israeli airman missing since 1986, when his plane was shot down over Lebanon. □