



Daily News Bulletin

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82nd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel gets \$2.8 billion in aid

The U.S. Senate overwhelmingly passed a foreign aid bill that includes \$1.92 billion in military aid, and \$960 million in economic aid, to Israel.

The bill, which passed 97-2 on Thursday, also includes \$1.3 billion in military aid and \$735 million in economic aid to Egypt and \$150 million in economic aid for Jordan.

Israel's aid was reduced by \$60 million and aid to Egypt by \$40 million as part of plans to restructure aid to both countries. An additional \$350 million that the Clinton administration has been seeking in order to implement the Wye agreement will likely be considered at a later date.

Barak: I want to meet with Arafat

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak said Thursday that Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat is an "important and central partner in the diplomatic process" and that he would like to meet with the Palestinian leader soon.

Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority officials said they are "optimistic" about the prospects for peace under the governing coalition that Barak is establishing. The officials stressed that they first expect Barak to implement the Wye agreement signed last October.

Center Party joins coalition

Israel's Center Party agreed to join Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak's government on Thursday, bringing the total number of seats in Barak's coalition to 75. Barak is expected to present his government to the Knesset next week.

Mubarak vows to energize peace

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said he would try to meet with Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak, Syrian President Hafez Assad and Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat in an attempt to jump-start the Middle East peace process. Mubarak made the comments at a White House news conference Thursday with President Clinton.

REMINDER: Because of Independence Day, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, July 5.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Jewish pluralism issues may stay unresolved under Barak's coalition

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Religious pluralism issues are likely to remain unresolved under the new Israeli government, given the strength of the religious parties in the emerging Barak coalition.

But with Natan Sharansky's Yisrael Ba'Aliyah Party poised to take over the Interior Ministry from the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, it may be easier for Russian immigrants to enter the country and register as citizens.

These forecasts became common currency in the Jerusalem political community this week as details of the coalition agreements between Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak's One Israel bloc and its various partners came to light.

Barak has forged a coalition government with four parties, including Shas, in addition to his One Israel bloc.

While the accords express vague intentions to address issues of religious pluralism and personal status such as marriage, divorce and burial, there is no concrete commitment by the parties to pass specific legislation within a definite time frame.

Indeed, some political observers say, given the extremely awkward arithmetic involved in his coalition-building efforts, it is to Barak's credit that he has not actually conceded ground to the religious parties on state-synagogue issues.

While for Diaspora Jewry the most controversial issues involve the lack of recognition of non-Orthodox rabbis and institutions, the main focus for the Israeli public has been on army conscription for fervently Orthodox, or haredi, yeshiva students.

Many Israelis resent the exemption of most yeshiva students from the army.

In negotiations with the haredi United Torah Judaism bloc, Barak's representatives agreed to pass legislation lowering the age at which yeshiva students get full exemptions to 24. This means that haredi men, at a relatively young age, will be able to join the work force without having to serve in the Israel Defense Force.

On the other hand, the conditions of deferment until the age of 24 will be tightened.

A committee of rabbis, lay leaders and military men will draft new criteria to ensure that serious yeshiva students can remain exempt and that others who do not devote themselves to Torah studies will be conscripted into forms of military service in which they will be able to preserve their haredi lifestyles.

The recent successful conclusion of basic training for a group of haredi men within the Nahal Corps provides a favorable backdrop for the discussions between UTJ and One Israel politicians.

The UTJ bloc, which received no ministries or Knesset committee chairmanships under the agreement, claims that its support for the government is contingent not on jobs or political spoils but solely on the good-faith implementation of the agreement on conscription and other religious issues.

Shas, which will join the Barak coalition, effectively empowered UTJ to negotiate on its behalf over the yeshiva conscription issue, and Shas' rabbinical leaders have endorsed the accord between UTJ and Barak.

With UTJ (which has five Knesset seats), Shas (17 seats) and the National Religious Party (five seats) in the coalition, it appears unlikely that the Knesset will enact legislation instituting pluralism in the administration of marriage and divorce.

Non-Orthodox rabbis are likely to remain legally excluded from performing these

MIDEAST FOCUS

Missing airman may be dead

An Israeli air navigator who was taken captive in Lebanon 13 years ago may no longer be alive, according to a former commander of the Israel air force.

Maj. Gen. Avihu Ben Nun said this week that his comments regarding navigator Ron Arad were based solely on the fact that so many years have passed without any evidence that Arad is alive.

Palestinian to buy Zionist home?

A Palestinian official is reportedly trying to buy a Tel Aviv building that was home to a leading Zionist, Israeli media reports said this week.

According to the reports, Faisal Hussein, the Palestinian Authority official in charge of Jerusalem affairs, wants to buy the structure, built in 1922 for the family of Menachem Ussishkin, a former president of the Jewish National Fund.

The JNF said that it has decided to look into the possibility of purchasing the building.

Israeli Arab to sue El Al

An Israeli Arab who was refused entry into an El Al flight attendants' course is suing the airline for discrimination, according to the man's lawyer.

A spokesman for the airline, who said El Al has no Arab employees, but has employed them in the past, said Jabour Jabour, a 30-year-old travel agent, has failed the entrance exam three times.

Controversial school given award

A Lubavitch school in Israel was given a prestigious award in a reversal of an earlier decision by the country's Education Ministry.

Israeli President Ezer Weizman had originally canceled the award to the Chabad School for Girls in Kiryat Malachi after complaints that the school refused to admit Ethiopian students.

But the decision was reversed by a representative of the President's Office.

life-cycle rites. Moreover, the Reform and Conservative movements will likely still have to fight hard to receive their slice of state and local government support for their educational and cultural programs and institutions.

On the controversial issue of conversion, One Israel and the NRP, in their agreement, make reference to the Ne'eman Commission, a panel created under the Netanyahu government that proposed the creation of interdenominational conversion institutes which give Conservative and Reform rabbis a role in the education of potential converts.

Conversions performed in Israel by non-Orthodox rabbis are not currently recognized by the Israeli authorities.

Even with the new conversion institutes, the conversions will still be performed only by Orthodox rabbis.

Efforts to implement this proposal have been going ahead quietly despite the reservations of the official Chief Rabbinate and the outright opposition of some haredi rabbis.

Political observers note there is no firm commitment by Barak and his party to make the Ne'eman process law.

On the other hand, since the process is backed by the NRP, it may be allowed to go ahead, without fanfare, until it produces its first crop of conversion candidates — at which time the Orthodox establishment and the haredi parties may possibly agree to review their positions.

If the reference to Ne'eman in the agreement with the NRP is vague, the references to easing the restrictions on marriage, contained in One Israel's agreement with Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, are even vaguer.

"The government will act in order to promote a solution for couples wishing to marry who are not [both] Jewish, and will examine and guide the policy of the population registry" — a department of the Interior Ministry — "regarding the personal status of the immigrants," that agreement says.

The issue has taken on increasing importance since the influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, some of whom are not Jewish.

In a different political climate, one might expect an effort to introduce civil marriage in Israel, at least for couples who cannot marry under the existing law.

Indeed, a limited civil marriage option is more feasible in Israel's political reality than any scenario extending state recognition to the non-Orthodox denominations.

In practice, though, any legislative move toward civil marriage seems unlikely under Barak, given the balance of power in the evolving coalition.

Instead, the vague words signed by One Israel and Natan Sharansky's Yisrael Ba'Aliyah will probably stay vague and unimplemented.

Nevertheless, Barak's accession to Sharansky's unwavering demand that he receive the Interior Ministry will result in a new and much friendlier attitude in the ministry corridors toward newcomers who are not Jewish or whose Jewishness is not recognized under halachah, or Jewish law.

The immigrant party attracted enormous attention, and probably many votes, during the election campaign by focusing on what it charged was the Interior Ministry's often heartless and insensitive treatment of such people.

Yisrael Ba'Aliyah claimed that this policy grew harsher in recent years, especially under the present Shas minister, Rabbi Eli Suissa.

Under Shas' 15-year stewardship, and particularly under Minister Aryeh Deri, the formerly notorious Interior Ministry bureaucracy was thoroughly modernized and overhauled. Computerization and staggered hours made the ministry more accessible.

But its policies on admission to Israel, registration and citizenship grew steadily tougher in the face of waves of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and an influx of foreign workers.

Deportations, sometimes preceded by lengthy periods of incarceration, have become frequent occurrences.

To a certain extent, this will now be changed.

Within the confines of extant legislation, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah officials can be expected to show more empathy to their former compatriots and, by extension, to other foreigners. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Mubarak disappoints Jewish leaders, 'brushing aside' key issues of concern

By Julia Goldman

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish leaders came away from a meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak this week with few assurances that the Middle East leader would take an active role in promoting Jewish concerns in the region.

Given Egypt's substantial contributions to Middle East peace in the past, "the hope and expectation was that that level of commitment would re-emerge" at this "critical juncture," said Jason Isaacson, director of government and international affairs at the American Jewish Committee, which convened the meeting in Washington on Monday at Egypt's request. Instead, several of the two dozen Jewish participants said, Mubarak stressed Egypt's political solidarity with the Palestinians and with Arab states, and blamed Israel for the recent fallow period in the peace process.

"What we have heard over the last two-and-a-half or three years from Egyptian officials is that the reason for the disruption in the peace process has solely been lodged with Israel, and there was no dissent from that line today," Isaacson said.

He added, however, that Mubarak, who met with President Clinton on Thursday, repeatedly expressed his support for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and for a "comprehensive peace including Syria."

At an honorary degree ceremony at George Washington University on Tuesday, Mubarak appeared more optimistic, hailing a "new dawn" in the Middle East.

"A new government in Israel has come to power. It holds the promise of better days for the people of Israel and Palestine," Mubarak said.

But on other issues — such as the 13 Iranian Jews accused of espionage, anti-Semitism in Egypt and an upcoming meeting of the parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention to discuss Israeli settlements — Mubarak was less committal, sparking some vocal disagreement on the part of several Jewish organizational leaders.

Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, pressed the issue of the meeting in Geneva, currently slated for July 15.

This would be the first meeting of the signatories to the Convention, which protects the rights of civilians during wartime, since the treaty was signed in 1949.

The United States and Israel are currently working to cancel, or at least postpone, the meeting. They argue that to single out Israel, particularly using an international law established in the wake of the Holocaust, is immoral and politically motivated.

Mubarak downplayed the political importance of the Geneva meeting. He indicated that Egypt would favor postponement, but "he said there would have to be gestures from the Barak government on Har Homa and settlement policy," Hoenlein said, referring to the eastern Jerusalem neighborhood where Palestinians object to Israeli plans to build new housing.

The Jewish leaders who met with Mubarak viewed his suggestion of a quid pro quo as "little short of blackmail," in the words of one of the Washington participants.

On the question of the 13 Iranian Jews being held in custody on charges of spying for Israel, Mubarak would only "reaffirm the position that he disagrees with any action if taken against people on the basis of their religion or race," according to a statement issued by the AJCommittee.

Abraham Foxman, the Anti-Defamation League's national director, presented Mubarak with its second report of anti-Semitism in the Egyptian media.

The report found that anti-Semitic stereotypes appeared less frequently over the last year in Egyptian news publications, but that their severity had intensified.

Claiming that such was the nature of Egypt's free press — an institution the Jewish leaders questioned — Mubarak reportedly made no promises to curb further anti-Semitic portrayals in the media.

Foxman described the meeting as "very unsatisfying."

Calling Egypt "one of the most important Arab nations" and Mubarak "one of the most important Arab leaders," Foxman said, "For him to brush everything aside as if it's not for him to do or help was very unproductive." □

Austria won't return paintings

An Austrian commission refused to return to Jewish families in North America five paintings by Gustav Klimt that were looted by the Nazis.

But the commission, which ruled earlier this week, did agree to return 16 drawings by Klimt and 19 porcelain settings.

Lawyers for the family said they would sue if necessary to regain the five artworks, estimated to be worth tens of millions of dollars.

Banned businessman speaks out

A Ukrainian Israeli businessman banned last week from entering Ukraine accused the former Soviet republic of trying to control Ukraine's Jewish community.

In a news conference in Tel Aviv on Wednesday, Vadim Rabinovich, one of the leaders of the 500,000-strong Jewish community of Ukraine, also charged that Ukraine's State Security was behind a Jewish umbrella group that split off earlier this year from his All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress.

White supremacist sentenced

A white supremacist who killed a gun dealer and his family as part of a plan to set up a whites-only nation in the Pacific Northwest was sentenced last week to life in jail without parole.

Prosecutors say Chevie Kehoe, who was convicted last month of the murders along with Danny Lee, killed the three in order to use the guns to further their scheme.

Romania plans property bill

Romania's government agreed to propose a bill that would return property taken during and after World War II.

Among its provisions, the bill calls for reparations for the seized assets of companies owned by Romanian Jews during the fascist wartime regime of Marshal Ion Antonescu.

Baltimore yeshiva head dies

The head of a leading American yeshiva died Thursday at the age of 76.

Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg had been the head of the Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore since 1987, and before that headed the Ner Israel Yeshiva College in Toronto.

Sweden investigates attack

Swedish police are investigating a suspected neo-Nazi attack on a journalist who writes about the white supremacist movement in the Scandinavian country.

The attack on the journalist and his son earlier this week was the second such attack in a month.

Jewish Agency outlines vision, rejects calls for its dissolution

By Julia Goldman

NEW YORK, (JTA) — Just as the Jewish Agency for Israel was outlining a new vision for its future, Israeli legislators were offering motions in the Knesset questioning whether the agency should have a future at all.

The Jewish Agency's annual assembly closed on June 23, having ratified in principle a strategic plan that broadens its traditional mission of aliyah, rescue, absorption and Zionist education to include broader engagement in Jewish identity, Jewish unity and "strengthening the State of Israel as the State for all Jews." But the following day, Knesset members Reuven Rivlin of Likud and Yossi Beilin of One Israel introduced separate motions in the Knesset that envision vastly different relationships between the Diaspora and Israel.

According to a report in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, Beilin called for the agency's total dissolution, to be replaced by a "parliament of the Jewish people."

Rivlin, on the other hand, suggested that the agency's areas of activity be scaled back to cover only Jewish education in the Diaspora and immigration from countries where Israel's direct involvement would have precarious political consequences.

The Jewish Agency, traditionally the main recipient of American Jewish dollars for Israel, has periodically had to justify its existence during its 70 years. In those cases, as now, critics have charged that it is a bloated bureaucracy whose work could be done more efficiently by the Israeli government itself.

But advocates stress the agency's critical role in having absorbed millions of olim, or immigrants to Israel, and in serving as a link between Israel and the rest of the Jewish world.

The agency was founded in 1929 by Chaim Weizmann — then president of the World Zionist Organization and later Israel's first president — as a partnership between the WZO and Diaspora Jews who wanted to take part in the establishment of the State of Israel.

Since then, the Jewish Agency has become a quasi-governmental body responsible primarily for bringing new immigrants to Israel and resettling them. The agency receives support from the U.S. government through the United Israel Appeal and generates income from the sale and rental of public housing in Israel.

But most of the agency's funding has come from the United Jewish Appeal and local Jewish federations in North America, and from Keren Hayesod in other countries.

Now that relationship is changing, too.

This year, UJA and the Council of Jewish Federations merged with the United Israel Appeal to create the United Jewish Communities. Funding for Israel and global Jewish causes will be determined by the newly formed Overseas Needs Assessment and Distributions Committee.

Its 25 members will include representatives from federations and — for the first time — three members each from the Jewish Agency and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

While this arrangement gives the Jewish Agency a direct voice in funding allocations, it will also force the agency to defend all of its funding needs at a time when federations are demanding greater control over how collective moneys are spent.

Moreover, the contract between UJA and the Jewish Agency, which designates the agency as the exclusive recipient of Jewish

communal philanthropy in Israel, has been extended only until December 2000.

In May, Ami Uliel, a Zionist leader in Israel, called for the Jewish Agency to disband. He suggested instead the creation of an independent Zionist organization with its own sources of funding.

But defenders of the Jewish Agency strongly dispute the proposals of Uliel and the Knesset members.

"If the remarks made about the irrelevance of the Jewish Agency come from the mouths of imbeciles or cynics, they are not worthy of a response," said Sallai Meridor, the new chairman of the Jewish Agency and WZO.

"If they come from the mouths of those who do not know how to ask, then we have to explain to them about the Zionist idea," he said in a June 14 address to Zionist leaders in Israel.

Many Jewish community federations have also criticized the Jewish Agency in recent years, going so far as to reduce their annual campaign allocations to Israel. But Stephen Solender, UJC's acting president and the executive vice president of UJA-Federation of New York, said in a telephone interview with JTA that the apparent downturn in allocations is deceptive.

"Almost \$200 million continues to come to the Jewish Agency from the American federations," he said, calling that "a significant amount of money."

In addition, he said, "more and more federations want to direct some of their funds to specific projects, and one of the reasons that the overall allocations to the agency have diminished is because more and more federations are directing funds to these particular projects."

The agency's strategic plan, he noted, provides for greater opportunity for federations to direct their funds to specific projects through the agency itself.

Alex Grass of Harrisburg, Pa., the new chairman of the agency's Board of Governors, conceded that allocations from the UJA and federations "have gone down somewhat," but affirmed that they remain "very substantial."

Asked about Beilin's Knesset motion, Grass said, "If he had better knowledge as to what the agency has accomplished and continues to accomplish, and if he recognized fully the bond that the agency helps to create between Israel and world Jewry, I think he would recognize his position is totally wrong."

According to the Ha'aretz report, Beilin — who has long called for revolutionary changes in Israel-Diaspora relations — believes the agency has a damaging "monopoly" over the involvement of "Diaspora Jews in Israel and Israelis in Jewish affairs."

A proponent of greater intellectual exchange between the communities, Beilin reportedly proposed the "parliament," which would bring together Jewish luminaries from the humanities, politics and economics.

Solender said, however, that the Jewish Agency is already moving in that direction through its strategic plan. A refined version of the strategic plan is expected to be approved at the Jewish Agency's Board of Governors meeting in October.

Rabbi Daniel Allen, the executive vice chairman of UJA, said the agency is "much leaner" than in the past and "partisan politics-free," following bureaucratic reforms during the past decade.

In an interview, he noted that with the new strategic plan in place, the agency will work with other agencies to deliver services and administer programs, rather than maintain central control.

"This is not your father's Jewish Agency," he said, borrowing Oldsmobile's popular advertising slogan. □