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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Weizman to continue all duties

Israeli President Ezer Weizman said he intends to continue fulfilling all his responsibilities, including swearing in judges and granting pardons, while police probe allegations that he illegally received cash gifts from a French millionaire friend.

His comments Monday came after Justice Minister Yossi Beilin said that in the wake of Weizman's decision to remain in office, he should at least refrain from fulfilling his judicial roles while the criminal investigation proceeds.

Meanwhile, polls indicate public support for Weizman slipped after he told the nation Sunday he would not resign or take a leave of absence during the investigation. [Page 1]

February target may not be met

A mid-February deadline for reaching a framework agreement on a final Israeli-Palestinian peace accord will likely not be met, according to Israel's chief negotiator in the final-status talks.

"If I have to be realistic, it is difficult to reach this date," Oded Eran told a group of foreign journalists Sunday. [Page 4]

Bush balks at troops on Golan

Leading Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush said he hopes a peace deal between Israel and Syria would not require a U.S. troop presence on the Golan Heights.

Bush, appearing Sunday on the CNN program "Evans, Novak, Hunt & Shields," also said he was "sympathetic" to a \$17 billion aid request from Israel to support such a deal.

However, he was more cautious about aid to Syria, saying, "If money goes to Syria, we should expect Syria to renounce its terroristic activities" and support the peace process.

Suspected war criminal dies

A Nazi concentration camp officer and suspected war criminal died in a British hospital Monday.

Alexander Schweidler, alleged to have committed atrocities while a member of the SS Death's Head Battalion at Mauthausen in Austria, died after collapsing with chest pains.

Days prior to his death, several groups had lobbied for his prosecution.

NEWS ANALYSIS

While Weizman tries to tough it out, many worry ethical standards eroding

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Nixon or Clinton: Which model is President Ezer Weizman following?

Some politicians have called on Weizman to step down in return for a blanket pardon, such as that granted President Nixon by his successor, Gerald Ford.

But Weizman appears to want to emulate President Clinton and his dogged fight to remain in office despite the Monica Lewinsky affair. Weizman made it clear during a televised speech to the nation Sunday that he would neither resign nor take a leave of absence while police probe allegations that he illegally received cash gifts from a French millionaire friend. Weizman's decision not to step down has elicited across-the-board criticism from Israel's political community.

The Weizman affair, combined with other scandals that have shaken up Israeli politics in recent years, has also raised another, potentially more troubling question: Are the ethical norms that characterized the Zionist state in its early decades giving way now to a corrupt set of practices more worthy of a banana republic?

Weizman, Israel's seventh president, has acknowledged accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars in gifts from Sudan-born businessman Edouard Saroussi from 1988 to 1993, when he served as a legislator and Cabinet minister. Weizman claims the money was a gift and that his longtime personal lawyer, Hanina Brandes, who was also Saroussi's lawyer, advised him this was legally permissible.

Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein ordered a full-fledged police inquiry last week when evidence surfaced that Weizman had undertaken paid consultancy work for Saroussi's company in Africa in 1983 and 1984. Rubinstein was angered that the president's lawyers had not volunteered this information. The still-mushrooming affair is a source of shame and real pain to virtually every Israeli citizen, both because of the warmth and sympathy many feel toward Weizman and because of the shadow it casts over the political system.

While Israelis watch with growing unease as their president is investigated by police, they are also well aware that this is not the first time that a trusted political official has had a run-in with the law:

- Even as the Weizman affair unfolds, Prime Minister Ehud Barak is being hauled over the coals by the state comptroller over alleged election funding abuses. An official report is due out soon;

- Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is being investigated for allegedly misappropriating gifts given him while in office;

- Aryeh Deri, the head of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, was sentenced last April to four years in jail on charges of bribe-taking, fraud and breach of the public trust.

- A top aide to former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Sheves, is the subject of an ongoing bribery trial.

Add to these the high-profile case of Ma'ariv publisher Ofer Nimrodi, who is facing charges of being involved in a murder conspiracy and subverting justice, and you have a worrying picture indeed. Israeli political observers point to two key events in the country's recent history that play a significant role in shaping — and perhaps hyping — the current wave of exposures sweeping through the nation's political establishment:

- **The Bar-On Affair.** In January 1997, Netanyahu appointed a little-known

MIDEAST FOCUS

Report: Israel upped aid request

Israel reportedly nearly doubled the number of Tomahawk cruise missiles it is seeking as part of a U.S. military aid package linked to a future peace accord with Syria.

The updated wish list was presented to the Americans by an Israeli defense delegation that was recently in the United States, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported Monday. American officials have not yet responded to the request, the paper added.

Iranians linked to Mossad

Suspects in a series of murders of Iranian dissidents in 1998 reportedly said they have links to Israel and the United States. The suspects "admitted they were agents of Mossad, the CIA or the FBI," an Iranian legislator was quoted as saying Monday in the Iranian pro-reform newspaper Aftab-e Emrouz.

Debate rages over Arab villages

Israel is staking no claims to several Palestinian villages adjacent to Jerusalem, an Israeli Cabinet minister said Monday. Haim Ramon said Israel never had any sovereign claim on the villages of Abu Dis, Azaria or A-Ram, and calls not to include them in the next Israeli withdrawal from portions of the West Bank are irrelevant.

Ramon was reacting to protests from a coalition partner, the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, that transferring parts of these areas to Palestinian control in the next withdrawal would compromise the status of Jerusalem in the final-status talks.

Woman promoted to chief censor

Col. Rachel Dolev was named the Israel Defense Force's chief military censor. Dolev, 47, will be promoted to brigadier general and replace Brig. Gen. Yitzhak Shani, who has held the post for the past 23 years. There are now three female officers holding the rank of brigadier general in the IDF.

Jerusalem attorney, Roni Bar-On, as attorney general, but had to force him to resign 48 hours later under a storm of allegations that his nomination reflected an attempted "takeover" of the state's prosecution apparatus by a cabal of politicians.

There were allegations at the time that Bar-On was appointed as part of a deal to provide a plea bargain in the ongoing corruption case against Deri and to soft-pedal charges of telephone tapping then pending against Nimrodi.

Rubinstein, who was subsequently named attorney general, is now spearheading a veritable crusade by the state judicial machine to "purge" the political establishment of any vestiges of corruption.

This explains, say observers, the stern and unforgiving attitude adopted by Rubinstein and State Prosecutor Edna Arbel toward Weizman's alleged wrongdoing.

• **The Deri conviction.** After his sentencing last year, Deri's appeal before the Supreme Court is slated to begin soon. When he was sentenced to four years, the court said last year the bribes were general goodwill payments rather than a quid pro quo for specific services rendered.

Those circumstances are not all that different from those alleged against Weizman.

This explains the insistence by the nation's law enforcement officials and of most of its politicians that Weizman face the music — and their reluctance to turn a blind eye, despite the president's long service to the state as soldier and statesman. They fear that to do so would be to trigger huge Shas protests charging discrimination.

The prosecution and conviction of Deri set strict norms of conduct for public officials. Weizman is the first to be measured by them — and to be found lacking.

But the gruff and still widely popular president believes the public will ultimately vindicate him, giving him reluctant admiration and even support in his determined bid, as he said Sunday, "to fight for the truth, till the end."

His decision not to step down, not surprisingly, was criticized by right-wing politicians, who have been angered by his forthright support for Barak's peace policies.

But the criticisms have come from across the political spectrum, including from three Cabinet ministers. Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, who had publicly urged the president to take a leave of absence, said he "respected" Weizman's decision to stay in office. But he called on him not to discharge two of his principal constitutional functions — swearing in judges and considering pardons — while the police inquiry against him was in progress.

On Monday, Weizman indicated that he intends to continue fulfilling those duties.

Minister of Absorption Yuli Tamir termed Weizman's television address "disappointing." She said he would be pressed publicly on the Saroussi affair wherever he went, and this would inevitably detract from the dignity of his high office.

Another minister, Yitzhak Levy of the National Religious Party, also voiced "shame and disappointment," saying the president had done "the precise opposite of what was expected" by not stepping down.

Man-in-the-street reactions to the president's dramatic appearance were harder to gauge. There were certainly those who praised his courage and stubbornness — "Achla Gever," Hebrew for a "real he-man," was one of the phrases much in evidence on Sunday night.

But others felt he risked getting into even deeper waters by not quitting now. □

Israelis top poll of high-tech use

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When it comes to reaching out and touching someone using high technology, Israelis are in first place.

Israel ranks ahead of the United States and Britain in the use of cellular telephones, as well as personal computers, according to a study by the New York-based Global TGI market research company.

Of the 11 countries included in the survey, Israel placed first for cellular phone use, with 61 percent of its citizens owning them, compared with 39 percent of Americans. Britain ranked fourth, with 23 percent, while Russia placed last, with only 1 percent of the population owning cellular phones.

Israel also placed first in ownership of personal computers, with 64 percent of those surveyed reporting having a computer in their homes. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Lawyer defends Cuban boy

A Jewish man is the head of a 10-member team of lawyers representing Elian Gonzales, the 6-year-old Cuban who is the focus of an international tug-of-war.

Attorney Spencer Eig, who is Orthodox, said in an interview with the Richmond, Va.-based Jewish News that in Jewish law "there is no such thing as parental rights. The sole determining factor in a case such as this is the best interests of the child."

German firms urged to help fund

Germany's largest labor union is pressuring German firms to contribute to a \$5.2 billion fund for Nazi-era slave laborers by publishing a list of some 140 firms that have not pledged money so far. "Instead of paying 1 or 2 percent of their turnover to compensate forced laborers, many firms are denying their complicity and are scorning victims a second time," IG Metall said in a statement Sunday.

Meanwhile, German companies contributing to the fund said they believe they will be able to give their share by May. So far, 130 companies said they will help fund the \$2.6 billion industry contribution.

Poll: Deniers get little support

Claims that the Holocaust never happened have failed to gain much acceptance, according to a survey of 11 countries conducted by the American Jewish Committee.

The survey, released Monday before the start of an international Holocaust education conference later this week in Stockholm, found that the largest proportion of deniers reside in eastern Germany, where 10 percent of those surveyed held the belief.

The survey also found that 7 percent of British respondents, 5 percent of French and 1 percent of Americans also believe it is possible that the Holocaust never took place.

Dutch Jews oppose boycott

An official with the largest Dutch Jewish organization opposes a decision by the World Jewish Congress to launch a boycott of the American arm of Aegon, a Dutch insurance firm that has refused to join an international panel dealing with Holocaust-era insurance policies.

"I think this boycott is absurd," Ronny Naftaniel of the Central Jewish Board of the Netherlands told Reuters.

Funds planned for reservoir

Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, plans to give \$3 million in emergency funds to the Jewish National Fund.

The money will be used to build a new reservoir in Israel to help prevent water shortages.

U.S. Orthodox group goes to Israel to put positive spin on negative press

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An umbrella organization for U.S. Orthodox Jewry, Am Echad, has opened an office in Israel that will work toward improving the image of fervently Orthodox Jews in the world media.

The Israel office of Am Echad was inaugurated last week in the presence of a delegation of 120 Orthodox leaders and community activists, mostly from fervently Orthodox — or haredi — groups that dominate the organization.

The move reflects the group's frustration with the image of Orthodox Jewry in the international and Jewish media, especially as the battle between liberal streams and Orthodoxy has heated up in recent years.

It also marks the higher awareness haredim in the United States have regarding the importance of public relations as compared with their Israeli counterparts.

Although haredi Jews often shun the media, they are increasingly dismayed by repeated cases of erroneous reporting on issues relating to their community. For example, they cite reports that Orthodox Jews once hurled feces at Conservative worshippers near the Western Wall.

Although this story was never proven, it was reprinted in newspapers around the globe.

Jonathan Rosenblum, director of the new Am Echad office in Israel, said the high concentration of foreign journalists in Israel and the battles being waged by Reform and Conservative Jews have made improved media relations imperative for the Orthodox.

One reason for this, he said, is that many Israeli Orthodox leaders "lack the sensitivity of how to explain themselves in terms that would be intelligible to the press."

Rosenblum, a graduate of Yale Law School and a columnist for the Jerusalem Post, plans to serve as a conduit to the foreign media and as a source for an alternative perspective to Reform and Conservative leaders.

He also wants to promote apolitical stories about the haredi world that he believes will interest readers around the world.

"Most of the stories about Orthodox Jews that get worldwide coverage are generated in Israel," said Rosenblum. "Israel has sort of become the battleground for American Jewry, and in many respects, I think this is why the Reform and Conservative movements have decided to make war here."

Liberal Jewish leaders welcomed the challenge.

"I hope very much that they step up their efforts because we have never had it better than when fundamentalists like Am Echad attack us," said Rabbi Uri Regev, director of the Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center. "It is the best way of sensitizing world opinion and the Israeli public to the real parameters of the debate."

Regev even thanked Rosenblum in advance for his future efforts.

"His success will clearly give further exposure to our point of view and educate world Jewry and the world community on the anomaly of the lack of religious freedom in Israel compared to all other democratic countries."

Rabbi Avi Shafran, Am Echad's American director, said the primary reason for opening the Israel office is "to allow for a more accurate portrayal of our world."

However, he added, the growing conflict in Israel between liberal streams of Judaism and Orthodoxy was clearly a catalyst for the move.

"We feel that we know the dangers of the Reform and Conservative movements to Jewish society," he said. "We are in favor of free speech but we are not in favor of multiple Judaisms."

Am Echad was founded in 1997 by Rabbi Moshe Sherer, the late president of Agudath Israel of America.

The group launched public advertising campaigns in the United States to explain its opposition to liberal conversions in Israel.

In early 1998, a mysterious group in Israel bearing the same name ran a similar high-profile advertising blitz, but the U.S. organization denied any connection to the Israeli campaign. □

Barak is optimistic about talks, but Palestinians are not so sure

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak is optimistic that progress can be achieved in negotiations with the Palestinian Authority.

Israel and the Palestinians face a "window of opportunity," Barak was quoted as telling his Cabinet on Sunday.

His comments came after he and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat held a surprise meeting last week in central Israel which was followed by reports that the two sides plan to accelerate contacts to meet a mid-February deadline for concluding the framework for a final peace accord.

Briefing his ministers on the latest diplomatic moves with the Palestinians, Barak said there was a change in the atmosphere of the discussions, adding that Israel is ready to act with fairness while seeking a final-status accord that would preserve its essential interests. His optimistic assessment contrasted with comments made Sunday by Israel's chief negotiator in the final-status talks.

Speaking before a group of foreign journalists, Oded Eran said it is likely the February deadline would not be met.

"If I have to be realistic, it is difficult to reach this date," Eran said. But at the same time, he remained optimistic that the two sides would meet next September's deadline for reaching a final peace deal.

Palestinian officials are also saying the February deadline will not be met. Ahmed Karia, the speaker of the Palestinian legislative council, was quoted by the Reuters news agency as saying that deadline "is not credible anymore."

Meanwhile, Israel and the Palestinian Authority are disagreeing over whether President Clinton is planning to meet with Barak and Arafat during an international conference this weekend in Switzerland.

Palestinian officials say the meeting was firmed up when Arafat met with Clinton last week in Washington, but a source close to Barak said no such meeting had been set. U.S. officials were also quoted as saying the meeting had not been arranged.

While Israeli and Palestinian negotiators press on with the work confronting them, Israel's negotiations with Syria are on hold after talks slated to take place last week were suspended indefinitely.

During Sunday's Cabinet meeting, Barak said he has no intention of agreeing to a Syrian demand that he give Damascus a written commitment on final Golan Heights borders before negotiations resume.

Responding to reports from Syrian officials that they would not return to the negotiating table until Israel provides such a commitment, Barak said Israel would commit to a final border only after a full picture emerges on other relevant issues, including security, water rights and normalization.

Barak also said the interests of each side would ultimately lead to a resumption of the talks.

Israeli and Syrian experts were due to travel to Washington for separate talks this week with American officials on a U.S. proposal aimed at breaking the deadlock in negotiations.

Israel dispatched the head of the negotiating team with Syria, Uri Saguy, and the Defense Ministry's legal adviser, Moshe

Kochanovsky. The United States proposed the lower-level talks to keep momentum going after Syria postponed last week's round of talks.

Meanwhile, Israel's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, expressed confidence over the weekend that peace talks with Syria would succeed.

Interviewed on Israel Television, Mofaz said he believes both Syria and Lebanon have a real interest in concluding an accord. Regarding the Syrians, he added, "I believe the main reason propelling them is economic." In another development, the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence service was quoted this week as playing down expectations for full normalization of ties with Israel's Arab neighbors in future peace accords.

Addressing a group of Israeli representatives to Arab countries, Mossad head Ephraim Halevy said most Arab states view peace with Israel as a type of cease-fire and are not truly interested in cultivating ties. □

Holocaust revisionist admits that Nazis gassed some Jews

By Douglas Davis

LONDON (JTA) — A British Holocaust revisionist who is suing a U.S. Holocaust scholar in a London court has admitted that the Nazis "systematically" gassed 97,000 Jews in trucks.

David Irving, whose trial against Deborah Lipstadt, a professor at Emory University in Atlanta, is now entering its third week, said last week that he was "willing to eat humble pie" after he admitted that he had been "quite plainly wrong" for statements in which he said the Nazis used gassing trucks "on a very limited scale to experiment."

Irving is suing Lipstadt and her British publisher, Penguin Books, over passages in her book, "Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory."

He says that by labeling him a denier of the Holocaust and accusing him of distorting historical data to suit his own ideological goals, Lipstadt has ruined his career as a writer and historian.

Irving told the High Court that what he had said in the past about the scale and number of the gas truck deaths was based on his knowledge at the time.

But under cross-examination by Richard Rampton, Irving admitted he was mistaken after he was shown a document that specified that 97,000 Jews were gassed in three trucks in a period of just five weeks.

When the judge, Justice Charles Gray, asked Irving if he would describe that as "very limited and experimental," Irving replied: "No, this is systematic."

In another exchange, Rampton said Irving must be "mad or a liar" to suggest Jews who were deported to the East during the war were not being sent to their deaths.

He was responding to a claim by Irving that messages intercepted by British wartime intelligence indicated trains transporting Jews to the camps were equipped with a "very substantial amount of food" and "tools of the trade" for their occupants.

Irving said this indicated "the system that was sending them was apprehending that they would be doing something when they got there." □