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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

3 of 'Iran 13' released on bail

Three of 13 Iranian Jews arrested last year and accused of spying for Israel and the United States were released on bail Wednesday.

"We consider this a positive move, but it's very little and very late," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

"While we welcome this, we hope all 13 are allowed out and more importantly that the charges be dropped and they be allowed to return to their lives."

The three released are 16-year-old Navid Balazadeh, the youngest of the defendants, his uncle Nejad Bouroghi, who is a religious leader in the city of Isfahan, and Omid Tepilin of Shiraz, said Sam Kermanian, secretary-general of the Los Angeles-based Iranian American Jewish Federation.

Austria coalition delayed

Austria's president delayed approving a new government that includes far-right leader Jorg Haider's Freedom Party.

Thomas Klestil said Wednesday he would not give the approval until leaders of the coalition pledge to respect democratic values. Meanwhile, more than 10,000 people rallied in Vienna to protest the coalition deal.

Israel said it would recall its ambassador to Vienna if Klestil approves the coalition. Foreign Minister David Levy said Israel must be at the forefront in opposing such a coalition. [Page 4]

CIA warns about terror

Extremist groups including Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah continue to pose a "significant threat" to the Middle East peace process and are planning terrorist attacks against U.S. and Israeli interests, the CIA director said.

In the testimony, according to Reuters, George Tenet also said Wednesday that Hamas is seeking to conduct attacks with toxic chemicals and "may have achieved competence" in making such attacks.

Knesset debates nuclear policy

The Knesset held its first-ever debate Wednesday on Israel's nuclear policy. While no substantive information was revealed, it broke a long-held taboo on public discussion of the subject. [Page 4]

NEWS ANALYSIS

Jewish voices will try to be heard amid the din of election-year politics

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jewish groups are worried that legislation they have been supporting, like gun control and hate crime laws, will not get the attention of an ever-fractious Congress debating the budget in an election year.

"The number of things besides the budget that Congress can get to is limited," said Richard Foltin, the American Jewish Committee's legislative director and counsel.

The AJCommittee and other groups estimate there will be about 100 legislative days in this session, and the budget will take center stage, with little time left over for debate on policy issues.

The presidential campaign, combined with congressional races, will all play a part in determining which issues the legislators will consider, making for a turbulent fall.

An election year affects the status of all the different pieces of legislation "every day and in every way," said Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

"We have to be realistic," Pelavin said. "It's unlikely we'll see significant advances."

While he doesn't expect the status quo to change, Pelavin did say that there might be a sleeper issue or two that could interest Congress.

In fact, depending on the political winds of the presidential and congressional campaigns, some issues might get extra attention if congressional leaders attempt to use them to gain political points come November.

Hate crime prevention may top the list for some groups — and for the moment it is at least enjoying momentum and support from many members of Congress and President Clinton.

In his State of the Union address last week, the president mentioned recent high-profile shootings of African Americans, Asian Americans, and Jewish children.

"This is not the American way. We must draw the line," Clinton said. "I ask you to draw that line by passing without delay the Hate Crimes Prevention Act."

Jewish and civil rights groups are planning to band together to push for passage of the act.

Under current law, the Justice Department is limited to prosecuting crimes that occur in conjunction with a federally protected activity, such as voting.

The proposed bill would make it easier for the federal government to investigate and prosecute hate crimes.

In 1998 there were 7,755 hate crimes reported, and 18 percent of hate crime victims were targeted because of their religion, according to FBI figures.

Michael Lieberman, the Anti-Defamation League's Washington counsel, said that there is considerable grass-roots support for the bill, and that it has a good chance of passing.

Lieberman expects the Senate, which passed its version of the legislation last session, to attempt to pass it again.

The numbers to pass the bill still appear to be short in the House of Representatives, and the chances for passage may not have improved much since last session.

Strong Republican opposition has dogged the bill because it would extend federal protection to women, people with disabilities, and gays and lesbians.

GOP leaders say they do not want to create a special class of citizens and that these

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israeli pullback to occur soon

Israel's Security Cabinet approved maps for a third withdrawal from West Bank territory called for under interim agreements with the Palestinians. Reports said Israel intends to hand over an additional 6.1 percent of the territory in the next 10 days.

Most of the lands slated to be transferred to sole Palestinian rule are located around Har Hebron, Ramallah, Nablus and Jenin.

Meanwhile, U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross arrived in the region Wednesday to observe accelerated Israeli-Palestinian negotiations aimed at meeting a Feb. 13 deadline for concluding a framework agreement on a final peace accord.

PLO council discusses statehood

The PLO's policy-making Central Council convened in the Gaza Strip to discuss whether to set a date for declaring an independent Palestinian state. Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat has said he will do so if progress is not made in the final-status negotiations with Israel.

2 arrested for sales to Iran

Two Israeli businessmen were arrested for allegedly selling vehicles and military equipment to Iran. The sales were estimated at millions of dollars and include armored personnel carriers and spare parts. The two suspects, Eli Cohen, 50, and Avichai Weinstein, 32, were detained following an investigation that lasted more than a year and involved authorities in the United States, Europe and the Far East.

Netanyahu's mother laid to rest

Cela Netanyahu, mother of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was buried Wednesday in Jerusalem.

Netanyahu, 87, died Monday night at Hadassah Mount Scopus Hospital. She is survived by her husband, Benzion, and two sons, Benjamin and Iddo.

groups are already protected under existing laws. The Workplace Religious Freedom Act is another issue that could have a chance of gaining ground this session, though it too has encountered opposition, particularly from business interests that do not want further federal restrictions on employment practices.

The bill, co-sponsored by Sens. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) is intended to protect workers from on-the-job discrimination related to religious beliefs and practices.

The current law requires employers to reasonably accommodate the religious belief of an employee or prospective employee, unless doing so would impose an "undue hardship."

Courts have had problems with this terminology, so the proposed new standard would require employers to prove that making an accommodation to a worker would pose a "significant difficulty or expense."

A Kerry staffer said there will be an attempt to bring business and labor together on the issue, and there is a chance the bill could be passed.

Nathan Diament, director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs, says the legislation's bipartisan support may be particularly helpful in an election year.

Gun control remains a hot topic for many groups, but the chance to pass new laws has slipped by before.

"It's unknown whether there's the political will to pass meaningful gun control legislation now," said Matthew Dorf, director of governmental and public affairs at the American Jewish Congress.

Together with other organizations, the AJCongress wants to close the "gun show loophole," which allows nonlicensed individuals to sell guns at shows without background checks for buyers.

In his State of the Union address, Clinton said he wants common-sense gun legislation to be the "very next order of business."

The president wants to fund research into smart gun technology and require all new handgun buyers to have a photo license indicating they have passed a background check and a gun safety course.

But, perhaps sensing that this Congress would not pass such measures, Clinton also asked that current gun laws be made stronger.

The issue of charitable choice has come under fire and also may be addressed. Part of the 1996 welfare law, charitable choice allows religious agencies to receive government funds to provide social services.

But the law did not ensure that church functions and state monies stay separated, and now charitable choice provisions are being attached to a variety of bills.

Most Jewish activists want some kind of security so services in federally funded programs do not become tied up with potentially coercive religious practices.

"We are against any government funding where there is promulgating of a religious message," said the AJCommittee's Foltin. "Are safeguards in place? No."

Other church-state issues, such as school vouchers and prayer in schools, also could come up during this congressional session as legislators may attempt to attach amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which must be reauthorized this year.

These and other related issues, such as public funding for private religious education, tend to be somewhat divisive in the Jewish community.

On the international front, all groups are watching the Israeli-Syrian negotiations closely, and many are preparing to help Israel should there be a peace agreement. Kenneth Bricker of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee said members of Congress appear "cautiously supportive" of assisting Israel, which has requested \$16.9 billion in military assistance.

There are many more policies Jewish groups would like to see considered, in areas ranging from the environment to foreign aid.

But even if there are more issues than legislative days, activists remain optimistic about their chances to bring some parts of their agendas to the fore and possibly accomplish long-awaited goals.

"There's going to be a lot of activity very quickly," predicts the AJCongress' Dorf. "If policy is going to be made, it will be made sooner rather than later." □



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JEWISH WORLD

Minute of silence approved

The Virginia Senate approved a measure requiring public schools to observe a minute of silence for meditation, prayer, or reflection at the beginning of every school day.

Current state law allows school boards to impose a minute of silence, but this measure demands teachers announce the purpose of the silent period. Opponents and supporters say the bill, which now faces a vote in the state's lower house, is likely to become law.

'Dirty war' vow disputed

Argentina's president vowed to help find the bodies of Jewish dissidents killed during that country's "dirty war" between 1976 and 1983, according to an Israeli Cabinet member.

But the Argentine government said in a statement that Michael Melchior's comments did not accurately reflect what was said when President Fernando de la Rúa met with Melchior during last week's international Holocaust conference in Sweden.

At least 1,500 Jews "disappeared" under Argentina's dictatorship, and Jews were often singled out for harsher treatment.

Slave payments face delay

Holocaust-era slave laborers will probably not receive payments until next year, a top German official said Wednesday.

"Even if we put the pressure on, I am not so optimistic as to expect payments before the end of the year," said German mediator Otto Lambsdorff.

His comments came after two days of talks in Washington at which negotiators discussed how to distribute a \$5.2 billion compensation fund that German government and industry agreed to late last year.

Suspect nabbed in Rome

Police in Rome detained a 23-year-old right-wing extremist on suspicion of having planted a rudimentary bomb last November outside a cinema in Rome where a film about the trial of Adolf Eichmann was being shown.

The bomb did not explode, but the attack was claimed by a group calling itself the Anti-Zionist Movement.

In another development, security chiefs at Italy's soccer stadiums will be able to request, starting Sunday, that matches be halted if fans display racist banners. The decision was made Tuesday during a meeting between the nation's interior minister and sports minister.

Militant fans, sometimes linked to extremist skinhead groups, have for years displayed racist and anti-Semitic banners directed against opposing teams.

Reform rabbis poised to endorse gay marriages

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — American Reform rabbis are poised to take pivotal action next month on the question of gay and lesbian Jewish marriage — one of the most divisive issues to be addressed by their professional organization in recent years.

A resolution to endorse rabbinic officiation at what are often called commitment ceremonies is expected to pass after much discussion on March 29, the last day of the convention of the 1,800-member Central Conference of American Rabbis, to be held in Greensboro, N.C. "I'm expecting a vigorous debate," said Rabbi Charles Kroloff, president of the CCAR. "I'm looking forward to an informed debate in which we respect each other's differences."

The resolution, submitted by the Women's Rabbinic Network, an independent group of female Reform rabbis within the CCAR, "resolves that the relationship of a Jewish, same-gender couple is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual."

The resolution goes on to say that "each rabbi should decide about officiation according to his/her own informed rabbinic conscience." The view of individual freedom is true of every religious position for Reform rabbis, who are not bound by any position adopted by the CCAR.

Debate over giving religious sanction to same-sex unions has roiled the CCAR for the last decade, but has only come into sharp focus over the last three years.

It has been a deeply polarizing, and passionate, issue for the Reform movement, which ordains openly gay male and female rabbis. The movement is grappling with the tension between the classical Jewish position, expressed in the Torah, which lists homosexuality among the clearest prohibitions, and the Reform movement's humanist, progressive orientation.

The resolution proposed by the Women's Rabbinic Network has been circulating widely among Reform rabbis, and debated and discussed at regional conferences over the last several months. Voting on the subject was deferred by CCAR officials at their 1998 convention after a report was presented by the Ad Hoc Committee on Jewish Sexual Values. At about the same time, a statement endorsing officiation at gay Jewish marriage was signed by 530 Reform rabbis.

That came against the backdrop of a 1997 decision by the CCAR's Responsa Committee, whose majority, by a vote of 7 to 2, said that officiation at commitment ceremonies is not permitted. That decision, while unusually long and detailed, echoed the same position taken in a 1985 decision by the Responsa Committee.

One rabbi opposing the resolution, Jeffrey Salkin, said he is concerned about the impact such a resolution will have on the Reform movement in Israel, where there is less support for such positions, and about "how it will affect relationships with other Jewish groups" here and in Israel. The Reconstructionist movement permits its rabbis to officiate at such commitment ceremonies. The Conservative and Orthodox movements do not.

Salkin, senior rabbi at The Community Synagogue in Port Washington, N.Y., said, "I am also concerned that this could potentially increase the pressure on rabbis to perform interfaith marriages. People have already said, 'If you will marry John and George, then why not John and Gretchen?' Lay people have difficulty understanding why we would depart from one ancient tradition so vociferously and cling to another one with equal strength," Salkin said.

The CCAR's Kroloff backs passage of the new resolution. At his synagogue, Temple Emanu-El in Westfield, N.J., Kroloff held an *aufruf*, or prewedding Sabbath celebration, and officiated at a later commitment ceremony for one lesbian couple about four years ago. At the same time, he noted the delicate nature of the issue, saying that he worked hard to lay the groundwork at his congregation for the commitment ceremony, which involved the daughter of a congregant.

"I took it step by step for about six months, preparing the congregation with a program of education and open discussion at many levels."

In the end, Kroloff said, "there was tremendous support" within the congregation for it. □

Israel to recall envoy if Austria goes through with government

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — Israel has threatened to recall its ambassador to Vienna if Austria's president approves a coalition that includes far-right leader Jorg Haider's Freedom Party.

"If such a coalition arises, there is no place for an Israeli ambassador in Austria — period," Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy told Israel Army Radio on Wednesday, adding that Israel must be at the forefront of opposition to such a development.

His comments came after Haider and the head of Austria's People's Party, Foreign Minister Wolfgang Schussel, agreed the night before to form a coalition government.

The move is now subject to the approval of Austrian President Thomas Klestil, who announced Wednesday that he had little choice but to approve the coalition. If Klestil were to refuse and call for new elections, it is widely believed in Austria that Haider could win that vote and become the nation's next chancellor.

Several Jewish groups have weighed in with sweeping condemnations of any Austrian government that includes Haider's party. The Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center was among those expressing "grave concern" about such a possibility.

In a letter to Klestil, Rabbi Marvin Hier, the center's dean, said Haider had visited the center's Museum of Tolerance twice to demand that his photo be removed from the museum's "Demagogue Wall." Haider was informed that "the only way the photo would come down was if he changed his policies and began telling the truth about the SS and National Socialism and stopped his attempts to curry favor with extremists," Hier said.

Haider's party came in second in last October's elections in Austria, capturing just over 27 percent of the vote. It was the best showing by a far-right party in Europe since the end of World War II. Haider's anti-immigrant stance and past comments praising Hitler and the SS prompted the European Union earlier this week to state that it would isolate Austria if the Freedom Party joined the government.

The Austrian government, in a formal statement, objected to the E.U. threat.

"Austria is a stable democracy where human rights are guaranteed by the constitution and protected by an independent judiciary," an Austrian spokesman said. "Austria is a tolerant country in which there is no place for xenophobia and discrimination against foreigners."

The United States has meanwhile threatened to re-evaluate its relations with Austria if Klestil approves the new coalition.

"We have made clear that we have real serious concerns about some of the positions taken by the Freedom Party," David Leavy, a spokesman for the National Security Council, said Tuesday.

Faced with international criticism, Haider has for years tried to rehabilitate his image. During one of his frequent trips to the United States, Haider caused a controversy when he visited Capitol Hill in June 1994 and met with several congressmen.

That visit also included meetings with State Department officials and a tour of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In an interview with JTA at that time, Haider defended his record and derided his critics as "erroneous" and "unfair."

Despite widespread news accounts that Haider has met with German neo-Nazi leaders, Haider categorically denied any contacts

with "these types of people." Reacting to his two-hour visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Haider said, "I think that even those individuals who don't know much about history will realize that we must do everything to enforce tolerance, everything to enforce human rights and everything to strengthen democracy."

Haider's father reportedly traveled to Munich in 1933 with Adolf Eichmann and Alois Brunner as part of the so-called Austrian legions.

When asked about the impact his family history has had on his political and personal life, Haider told JTA that his political activity has been shaped by his belief that "we must do everything to prevent from ever happening again a similar racist regime, a totalitarian regime as the Nazi regime was."

Haider said he is not a Holocaust denier. "We had a regime that committed murder on an industrial scale — 5, 6, 7, 8 million people. The numbers are not important. It is awful enough if it happens to one person." □

(JTA correspondent Tom Tugend in Los Angeles contributed to this report.)

Knesset debates nuclear program openly, breaks long-standing taboo

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Knesset has held its first-ever public debate on Israel's nuclear policy.

While no substantive information was revealed during Wednesday's debate, it broke a long-held taboo on public discussion of the subject. Israel has never acknowledged possessing nuclear weapons capabilities, and the debate drew heavy media coverage from local and foreign crews.

The discussion was initiated at the request of Israeli Arab legislator Issam Makhoul, a member of the left-wing Hadash Party, who recently appealed to the Supreme Court to force the debate.

Rather than permitting the court to rule, Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg allowed the debate to go ahead.

At the start of Wednesday's Knesset session, about two dozen right-wing lawmakers walked out in protest. The debate quickly turned into a shouting match between Arab and Jewish legislators. Five Israeli Arab lawmakers were expelled for heckling.

"The debate comes 40 years late," Makhoul said Wednesday. "It is also a sad day, for it reminds us that the Knesset shirked its role on the matter that threatens us with another Holocaust if we do no hasten to stop it before a disaster."

When Makhoul demanded that Israel go public with its nuclear program and eventually dismantle it, Cabinet Minister Haim Ramon, responding for the government, said Makhoul was hurting Israel's interests.

"Do you want us to tell Iran and Iraq exactly what we have and what we don't have? It's unheard of," Ramon said.

Instead, Ramon set out Israel's long-standing nuclear policy: that the Jewish state would not be the first to introduce such weapons, and that Israel supports a Middle East free from nuclear weapons after there is no more risk of war in the region.

Makhoul requested the debate after Israel permitted excerpts from the trial of former nuclear technician Mordechai Vanunu to be published last November. Vanunu has served 13 years of an 18-year sentence for disclosing Israel's nuclear weapons capabilities to The Sunday Times of London. □