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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Minister accused of harassment

Israel's transportation minister announced he is taking a leave of absence while police investigate allegations that he sexually harassed one of his female staffers. Yitzhak Mordechai denied the allegations against him and said he would not resign. [Page 3]

New Syrian government installed

Syrian President Hafez Assad dissolved his government and installed a new one with a provincial governor, Mohammed Miro, as the new prime minister.

It was unclear whether Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa, who recently conducted negotiations with Israel, would remain in the government.

Bush: Tolerance 'must be taught'

Tolerance "can never be assumed" and "must always be taught," Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush said during a visit to the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Bush, who donned a yarmulka and lit the eternal flame at the Los Angeles-based museum Monday, added that he believes "our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world of justice and inclusion and diversity without division."

Yad Vashem archives unveiled

The Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem unveiled its new archives and library. The building houses some 55 million documents relating to the Holocaust.

One-third of the funding for the \$66 million project came from the Claims Conference, which used moneys it had received as reparations for unclaimed Jewish properties in Germany.

The remaining funding came from individual donors.

Court allows Zhirinovskiy run

Russia's Supreme Court ruled that ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy could run in this month's presidential election.

The court overturned a decision by the Central Election Commission, which had rejected Zhirinovskiy's candidacy last month, saying his financial statement was invalid.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Gore warns Palestinians not to declare statehood

By Howard Lovy

NEW YORK (JTA) — Vice President Al Gore seems destined to become the next Democratic presidential nominee, but he's apparently not taking the Jewish vote for granted.

The day before Super Tuesday, he was in New York stumping for the Jewish vote by declaring himself always and forever a friend to Israel and an enemy of terrorists. He also issued a harsh warning to the Palestinians not make unilateral pronouncements of an independent state.

Speaking to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations on Monday, Gore shook his head, smiled and laughed slightly when he said that a declaration "would certainly fall in that category" of the kind of unilateral declarations that he and President Clinton have "actively and forcefully discouraged."

He said it would be "unwise" for Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to deliver on his promise to declare unilaterally a Palestinian state this fall, even if no final-status agreement with the Israelis has been reached.

Gore warned that Arafat should not assume a declaration "would have a positive outcome" for the Palestinians.

He would not elaborate on what the U.S. reaction would be to such a move, saying the scenario is still "hypothetical."

But he added that consultations with Israel would have "a great deal of influence for me."

While the vice president broke little new ground in Monday's appearance, he wanted to remind the Jewish community of what he believes to be his credentials on Jewish and Israel issues.

In comments and answers to questions, he addressed the list of Jewish concerns:

• **Transfer of weapons technology to Iran:** Gore said he views "very gravely" the issue of other countries and entities sharing knowledge on weapons of mass destruction. It is "a question that potentially involves the survival of Israel, and when survival of a friend is potentially at stake, everything else is secondary."

He said there is complete intelligence cooperation between the United States and Israel on the issue and that "there is nothing that we know about this that Israel does not now know."

Both the U.S. House and Senate have passed a bill that would grant the president authority to impose a range of penalties, including sanctions, on countries that supply technology or equipment to Iran for use in its weapons program.

The legislation, which the American Israel Public Affairs Committee has been pressing hard for, was prompted by reports that Russian scientists, academics and companies are the top suppliers of weapons technology to Iran.

The bill now goes to Clinton, who, according to sources, has dropped his objection to the bill after working out a compromise with Congress that gives him the ability to waive the sanctions.

Gore, who has been the administration's point man on the issue, did not say where he stands on the legislation.

But he said the administration has made progress in its talks with Russia on the transfers and that there is "no higher priority" for him.

Gore also said that as president, he would continue to impose sanctions on Iran

MIDEAST FOCUS

Settler may have helped Hamas

A Jewish settler is suspected of having transported from the Gaza Strip members of the Hamas terrorist cell uncovered last week in the northern Israeli town of Taiba. According to reports, the settler allegedly accepted money to transport the Palestinians, whom he thought were illegal workers.

Arafat: 'No turning back' on state

There is "no turning back on our decision" to declare this year a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat said.

His comments to the Palestinian legislative council on Tuesday came hours before U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross was due back in the region to try to restart the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Hezbollah renews attacks

Hezbollah gunmen killed two pro-Israel members of the South Lebanon Army in an ambush and a separate roadside bombing. Tuesday's attacks were the first by Hezbollah since Israel announced its plan to withdraw from southern Lebanon by July.

Israel, Jordan sign pact

Israel and Jordan signed a pact that will enable Jordanians to work in the southern Israeli city of Eilat.

The project is designed to advance economic cooperation between Eilat and the neighboring Jordanian city of Aqaba.

Iranians refuse to wrestle Israelis

Two Iranian wrestlers cited medical reasons for pulling out of matches with Israeli opponents during recent Olympic qualifying bouts.

In the round-robin qualifier, the medical defaults allowed the wrestlers to compete in their next matches. "Every tournament with Iran and Israel is like this," said a member of wrestling's governing federation.



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because, despite the recent elections that boosted the reformists in that country's Parliament, the hard-line clerical leadership still runs the "national security apparatus as a terrorist apparatus," as well as the military.

• **Support for Israel:** Gore said that even when he served in the House for eight years, representing a district in Tennessee that was "less than one-tenth of 1 percent" Jewish, without constant advice from Jewish constituents, he cast pro-Israel votes based on "instinct."

He repeated often that Israel is a nation that "shares our values" and that its "qualitative edge" over its neighbors should be maintained.

He said the peace process is also a process of maintaining Israel's security. The vice president was applauded when he said, "In the Gore administration, there will be one constant — absolute, uncompromising commitment to Israel's security."

• **Thirteen Jews accused of espionage in Iran:** He said the planned April trial of the Jews, who Iran says spied for Israel and the United States, should serve as a test of the seriousness of the reform movement in Iran. Even the words "reform" and "moderate," Gore said, should be treated with skepticism when it comes to Iran, because they are relative terms.

"Even so-called reformers have made statements that have been awful," the vice president said.

• **Moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem:** Gore said the issue has to be approached within the context of a final peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians.

He said the United States does not want to lose its credibility as a facilitator in the peace process.

But he suggested the move of the embassy from Tel Aviv is likely, saying, "The outcome I think is hardly in doubt, and my desires are the same as your desires."

• **Charitable choice:** Gore has faced criticism from some Jewish organizations for his proposal to expand a controversial charitable choice program that gives federal money to religious organizations.

Under the "New Partnership" program Gore has proposed, religious institutions could receive federal funds for drug treatment programs, services for the homeless and initiatives to combat youth violence "without having to alter the religious character that is so often the key to their effectiveness."

Gore emphasized that he supports the strict separation of church and state.

The vice president was applauded when he said that any charitable choice program that gives money to a religious institution should also include a secular alternative and that there must be a prohibition against public funds used for any particularly religious function. □

Settler who murdered gets early release

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A Jewish settler sentenced to life in prison for the execution-style murder of a Palestinian man has been granted an early release after serving seven years.

In 1993, Yoram Shkolnik, 31, shot a bound and blindfolded Palestinian terrorist who had stabbed another settler.

The parole board said that Shkolnik had convinced the panel of his remorse. He is expected to be released next month. □

Palestinian poet sparks controversy

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak reportedly opposes his education minister's proposal to teach the works of a Palestinian poet in high school classes.

Barak was quoted as saying that the time is not ripe to teach Mahmoud Darwish, who is accused of writing anti-Israel poems.

Yossi Sarid's proposal has threatened to cause another coalition crisis with the fervently Orthodox Shas and National Religious parties. □

JEWISH WORLD

Papon pardon denied

French President Jacques Chirac rejected a convicted Nazi collaborator's request for a pardon because of his poor health.

Maurice Papon, 89, is serving a 10-year prison sentence for his wartime role in deporting Jews to Nazi death camps.

He has a history of heart trouble.

Slave labor talks resume

German companies and representatives of Nazi-era slave laborers are meeting for two days in Washington to discuss how to distribute a \$5.2 billion fund that Germany agreed to create late last year.

The talks have already missed several target dates for completing a distribution plan, and the U.S. State Department said it doubts that negotiators will reach agreement on all the outstanding issues during this session.

Children assault rabbi in Berlin

Stone-throwing children attacked a rabbi at a Berlin cemetery.

The leader of the Berlin Jewish community, Andreas Nachama, called on the school the children attend to apologize and to take steps to prevent any similar incidents.

Last October, vandals damaged 103 gravestones at the Weissensee Jewish Cemetery.

Korean Hitler bar condemned

The Simon Wiesenthal Center urged South Korean officials to close a bar in the capital of Seoul that it describes as a "veritable shrine to Adolf Hitler and Nazism."

Waiters and waitresses wear Nazi uniforms at the Third Reich Bar, which is located in a busy commercial district near leading universities.

The drinks are named in Hitler's honor and the wall are decorated with Nazi-era posters.

Poll: Jospin's Israel trip hurt him

French voters were turned off by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's recent trip to Israel and he would lose an election against President Jacques Chirac, according to an opinion poll.

Voters disliked the prime minister's bid to play a more prominent role in foreign policy, according to the poll.

During his trip, Jospin was stoned by Palestinian students in the West Bank after he called Hezbollah gunmen fighting Israeli troops in southern Lebanon "terrorists."

Israel's Cabinet voted Sunday to withdraw from Lebanon by July, whether Israel and Syria reach an accord before then.

Israeli Cabinet member is accused of sexually harassing female worker

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A senior member of the Israeli government has announced he is taking a leave of absence while police investigate allegations he sexually harassed a female employee in his office.

"These things never happened," Transportation Minister Yitzhak Mordechai said in a statement Tuesday, adding he is taking the leave so the police can conduct an "effective investigation to reach the truth."

The Israeli daily Yediot Achronot broke the story Tuesday, when the Knesset held a special session to mark International Women's Day.

The newspaper report, which did not name the minister, said the alleged harassment began several months ago.

Within hours, several Israeli Internet sites were naming Mordechai.

The 23-year-old employee, whose name was not released, alleged that in one instance, Mordechai pulled her onto a sofa in his office and put his hand under her blouse.

She claimed that this was not the only time that Mordechai subjected her to such harassment.

The worker sought advice from Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg and Meretz legislator Zahava Gal-On on how to deal with the situation.

Burg said he and Gal-On urged the worker to file a complaint with the police, which she did on Monday.

Mordechai is taking the leave as Prime Minister Ehud Barak is trying to assemble support in his divisive coalition and in the Knesset for his peace moves with the Palestinians and Syria.

Mordechai was born in 1944 in Iraq to a Kurdish Jewish family. Five years later, the family immigrated to Israel and was housed in a transit camp until settling in Tiberias.

In 1962 he was drafted into the army, and initially was rejected from the paratroopers unit. Admitted to this elite unit only after he became an officer, he was awarded the prestigious medal of valor for his part in a famous battle during the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

A former general, Mordechai is considered a political moderate.

He also served on a recently formed committee, along with Barak and Foreign Minister David Levy, to decide on the scope of Israel's response to Hezbollah attacks in southern Lebanon.

Mordechai served as defense minister in the previous Likud-led government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

He resigned in January 1999 over disagreements with Netanyahu.

In last year's elections, Mordechai ran for prime minister as head of the then newly formed Center Party.

On the eve of the elections, he pulled out of the race and endorsed Barak. □

Groups collect for Mozambique victims

NEW YORK (JTA) — At least two Jewish organizations are collecting money to help aid victims of the recent floods in Mozambique.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is working in a partnership with the South African Jewish community, an Israeli nonprofit group and the Red Cross.

Donations can be sent to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, JDC — Mozambique Relief; 711 Third Ave., New York, N.Y., 10017, or on the Web at www.jdc.org.

Donations can also be made to the American Jewish World Service, 989 Ave. of the Americas, New York, N.Y., 10018, or on the Web at www.ajws.org. □

NEWS ANALYSIS**Down on his luck, Barak faces one political blow after another***By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Ehud Barak is down on that commodity so essential to a politician — luck.

On Tuesday, in a screaming headline, the country's largest-circulation daily, *Yediot Achronot*, announced that an unnamed minister was under investigation for sexually molesting a staffer.

Within hours, the name was out — Yitzhak Mordechai, the transportation minister and former defense minister, who now heads the Center Party.

By the end of the day, Mordechai announced he is taking a leave of absence while police investigate the allegations, which he vehemently denies.

On the face of it, this incident is not connected with the Cabinet's unanimous decision on Sunday to withdraw all Israeli troops from southern Lebanon by July.

In fact, though, that historic decision was intimately linked to Barak's sinking domestic political fortunes and to the increasingly perilous state of his uneasy "peace coalition."

Surfacing this week, the Mordechai affair deals Barak's motley coalition another awkward blow.

The Cabinet decision expressed the government's hope that the withdrawal would take place in the framework of an overall peace agreement involving Israel, Syria and Lebanon.

But the Cabinet ministers also made clear that they support the withdrawal even in the absence of such an agreement.

And there lies the crux of the problem for Barak, who has staked everything on reaching a peace deal with Syria.

By separating the two issues — withdrawal from Lebanon and a deal with Syria — Barak may find it more difficult to win the necessary popular support for a deal with Syria.

Sources close to the prime minister maintain, despite official denials in Jerusalem and in Washington, that intensive behind-the-scenes negotiations are taking place between Israel and Syria.

They say formal talks could resume soon and that if they do, it will signal that the basic elements of an agreement have been concluded in the back-channel contacts.

They claim that if this scenario plays out, a treaty-signing ceremony bringing together Barak, Syrian President Hafez Assad and President Clinton would be held before the summer.

The Cabinet's deadline for a Lebanon withdrawal — July 7 — would fit comfortably into this scenario.

The Cabinet decision culminates years of controversy over Israel's military presence in the southern Lebanon security zone, which Israel carved out 15 years ago.

It reflects the increasing impact on public opinion of the pro-withdrawal lobby, which cuts across party lines, embracing people like the dovish justice minister, Yossi Beilin, and, more recently, Likud leader Ariel Sharon.

It reflects, too, the impact of the Four Mothers, a grass-roots group of mothers — and fathers — of Israeli soldiers serving in the security zone who have been demonstrating and protesting for months in favor of a unilateral withdrawal.

The deaths of seven Israeli soldiers in Lebanon since the

beginning of the year, coupled with the frustrating suspension of the public Israel-Syria talks, has greatly heightened public sensitivity to the pro-withdrawal campaign.

But the Cabinet decision also reflects — and to no small degree — the domestic political considerations weighing on the prime minister.

Barak has staked his all, in political terms, on a treaty with Syria.

He pledged in last year's election campaign that the final decision on any treaty would be taken by a national referendum.

He needs to win that referendum convincingly if he is to continue as prime minister. A defeat would almost certainly trigger new elections.

Yet Barak's situation at the moment, with the Syrian deal not yet done and the public growing increasingly restive, is far from encouraging.

Opinion polls see the country split down the middle over surrendering all of the Golan Heights in exchange for peace with Syria.

Compounding his problems, the government last week suffered an embarrassing defeat in the Knesset, which gave preliminary approval to a bill requiring that the referendum be approved by more than 50 percent of all eligible voters rather than by the more easily attainable majority of those who actually vote.

In a dramatic blow to Barak's prestige, the opposition-sponsored bill was supported by three of his coalition partners — the immigrant-rights *Yisrael Ba'Aliyah* Party, the pro-settler National Religious Party and the fervently Orthodox *Shas* Party.

Opponents of the bill charge that the bill is designed to "neutralize" the Israeli Arab vote and thereby ensure that if the Golan is ceded, the decision is made by a majority of Jewish Israelis.

During the Knesset debate preceding the vote, spokesmen for the government termed the bill racist, adding that it reflected a deliberate effort to thwart the prospects for reaching an agreement with Damascus.

The subsequent Knesset vote provided an ominous warning for Barak. It meant his coalition is wobbling — and also that his hopes of carrying the referendum with a sweeping majority may not be realized.

Barak knows that the referendum would have a far greater chance of approval if the withdrawal from Lebanon is part of a peace deal with Syria.

For the same reason, the Likud opposition demanded this week that the two elements be uncoupled.

"If you've decided to withdraw from Lebanon," Sharon urged, "do so at once."

But the opposition's charge that the government is exploiting the army's embroilment in Lebanon by linking it to the talks with Syria is now hard to sustain — given the Cabinet's pledge to withdraw the troops by July even if there is no agreement with Syria.

This unequivocal pledge, the government's first formal commitment to Barak's central campaign plank last year, has become not only the touchstone of the premier's political credibility. It has also become the bastion of his survival.

So strong is the public yearning to end the Lebanon quagmire that Barak is now safe until the commitment is implemented. From there, it is not clear what will happen. □