



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 78, No. 107

Thursday, June 8, 2000

83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak: Knesset vote won't hold

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak vowed to take steps to ensure that his government would be stable and that "there won't be new elections." His comments came hours after the Knesset gave preliminary approval to a bill to hold early elections. [Page 1]

Anti-Zionist rabbis visit Iran

Four rabbis from the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta sect arrived in Iran on Wednesday from New York to weigh in on the impending verdict against 13 Iranian Jews accused of spying for Israel.

The delegation's mission, according to a spokesman, is "to proclaim and distinguish the difference between Zionism and Judaism."

The rabbis, members of a Chasidic group that does not recognize the State of Israel, were expected to meet with Iranian officials and possibly with Jews in Shiraz, where the trial has taken place. [Page 3]

Russian rabbi calls for parley

The leader of the Lubavitch movement in Russia called for a conference of Russian Jewish leaders to "straighten out" their differences.

The suggestion by Rabbi Berel Lazar came after Russia's chief rabbi, Adolph Shayevich, charged that the Lubavitch movement was conspiring to force his resignation.

U.S.: No Israeli-Syrian talks soon

U.S. officials downplayed expectations that Israeli-Syrian talks would resume soon as a result of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's meeting Wednesday in Cairo with her Syrian counterpart, Farouk al-Sharaa.

"It is going to take some time before we get a resumption of talks," one State Department official said.

Controversial judge wins primary

An Alabama judge who resisted a court order to remove a copy of the 10 Commandments from his courtroom won the Republican primary for chief justice of the state Supreme Court. Roy Moore said he is "very pleased that God has allowed us to be the nominee in the fall campaign."

The case involving the commandments was eventually dropped on a technicality.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Shas and Barak go to the brink, with peace process in the balance

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Prime Minister Ehud Barak is facing his most serious political crisis since his sweeping election victory just over a year ago.

Hours after the Knesset gave preliminary approval to a bill to hold early elections, Barak came out swinging, telling the Israeli public he was certain the measure would fail.

Wednesday's 61-48 vote did not signal an immediate end to Barak's term in office. The bill must still be approved in three additional votes, a process that can stretch out for months.

In each of those votes, the bill must get an absolute majority of at least 61 Knesset votes in order to pass.

Should that happen, the Knesset would be dissolved and elections would be held for a new prime minister and legislature.

In an interview on Israel Television on Wednesday, the prime minister said he would take steps to ensure that his government would be stable and that "there won't be new elections."

Without spelling out exactly what those steps would be, Barak said, "In the coming days, there will be a government either in a different composition or in a similar one, but it will act in a much more cohesive manner."

"What we've seen in recent weeks cannot continue to be accepted," he added, referring to ongoing disputes with coalition members that have threatened his government.

Earlier in the day, the decision by the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, which has 17 Knesset seats, to side with the opposition-sponsored bill raised questions about the premier's ability to maintain a functioning coalition that will be able to advance the peace process.

In addition to Shas, two other political parties in the prime minister's governing coalition — Yisrael Ba'Aliyah and the National Religious Party — supported the opposition bill.

This came as no surprise, since Yisrael Ba'Aliyah and the NRP have already been on an ideological collision course with Barak over his plans to make further territorial concessions to the Palestinians.

But the departure of Shas would cost Barak's coalition its legislative majority, which, on paper at least, now stands at 68 out of the 120-member Knesset.

Barak told Israel Television that the ministers from those three parties who sided with the opposition "essentially resigned," adding that the Cabinet would take up the matter at its weekly meeting Sunday.

At the same time, however, he said, "I'm not closing the door to Shas. It is open, not closed."

Political commentators suggested that the prime minister is hoping that by putting pressure on Shas, its officials will reach out to him to try to resolve the issue before Sunday.

Wednesday's vote by Shas was the result of a snowballing political dispute between it and Barak over the party's demand for funding for its debt-ridden school system.

Barak abruptly suspended negotiations with Shas this week, saying he would not

MIDEAST FOCUS

Laser system passes latest test

The United States successfully tested an anti-missile laser weapon that could be used to protect northern Israel.

During the test in New Mexico, the laser intercepted a single Katyusha rocket, the type Hezbollah used in attacks on Israel from Lebanon.

U.N. tells Israel to revise border

U.N. officials told Israel that it is violating the border with Lebanon.

The officials added that Israel would have to change the border at the northern settlement of Misgav Am before they could verify that the Jewish state had withdrawn completely from Lebanon.

Meanwhile, the senior liaison officer of the U.N. peacekeeping force in Lebanon expressed optimism about the state of the region.

"The situation is much calmer than we believed it would be," Lt. Col. James Roche told the University of Haifa's Jewish-Arab Center. He said Hezbollah and other Lebanese groups are adjusting to the recent Israeli troop withdrawal.

In another development earlier this week, an Israeli soldier was seriously hurt while clearing mines near the northern Israeli town of Metulla.

He was helping to mark the border following the Israeli troop withdrawal from Lebanon.

Israel marks Hebrew Book Week

Bookstands are being set up in cities around Israel this week for Hebrew Book Week. The theme of this year's event is "women writers."

At an official launch in Jerusalem, President Ezer Weizman, known for previous statements suggesting women should be "knitting socks," said he hopes one day to read a woman's depiction of her experiences as a pilot.

He was referring to the Air Force's recent acceptance of women into its pilot training courses.

succumb to party threats to back the early election bill.

On Wednesday, Shas made good on the threat.

Some of Barak's troubles can be attributed to reforms in the Israeli electoral system, first implemented in the 1996 election, in which separate ballots are cast for the prime minister and the Knesset.

As a result, according to critics, the new system greatly empowers smaller political parties with special interests and makes it more difficult for the prime minister to patch together an effective coalition.

Observers say Barak now faces several options.

One is to try to continue to advance his peace policies with a minority coalition that would rely on support from Arab parties outside the government.

Reports said Barak rejected the option of establishing such a coalition prior to Wednesday's vote.

This angered Knesset member Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, whose six-member secular Shinui Party voted with the opposition.

Lapid said after the vote that he had done so because Barak had refused to explicitly state he would fire any Cabinet member who supports the bill.

Lapid said this led him to believe that Barak and Shas would come to some agreement once the political storm blows over.

Other observers see Wednesday's vote as a "muscle-flexing" exercise for Barak and Shas.

The political fireworks would subside over the weekend, they say, and provide the sides with an opportunity to quietly resolve the funding crisis.

Under another scenario, Barak could go to President Ezer Weizman and ask for new elections.

But some commentators dismissed this as unlikely in the immediate future because Barak, Shas and the other political parties are far from interested in going to new elections.

What is certain is that Barak faces a difficult time ahead.

An aide to Barak said the premier was "seething" after the vote, though Barak himself tried to put on a brave face on the Knesset floor, smiling wanly as he left.

Coalition whip Ophir Paz's tense frown told a different story. It came in sharp contrast to the beaming grins and backslaps exchanged by opposition members — and Shas.

The vote's implications for the peace process were not immediately clear.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, on a shuttle mission to the Middle East this week, convinced Israel and the Palestinians to agree to send negotiators to Washington next week.

The two sides will continue their intensive talks to draft a framework for a final peace deal.

But Foreign Minister David Levy said Wednesday that perhaps the vote was also intended to send a message not to rush into agreements with the Palestinians.

Shas members rejected claims that their vote was a political bluff.

"It's time they took the Shas movement seriously," said the leader of Shas, Eli Yishai.

He went on to assail Education Minister Yossi Sarid of the secular Meretz Party, who has demanded that no funds be released to Shas until it commits to a rehabilitation plan for its school system.

Yishai accused Sarid of ethnic discrimination against Shas, whose supporters are mainly Sephardi Jews.

Meanwhile, Likud opposition leader Ariel Sharon said Wednesday's vote paved the way toward new elections.

"We will make every effort to change this government and establish a nationalist one," said Sharon, who ruled out joining a national unity government with Barak.

Meretz legislator Amnon Rubinstein, who heads the Knesset committee that has the task of preparing the bill for future votes, said he would like the next vote to occur before the Knesset recesses for a summer break at the beginning of August.

That way, Rubinstein said, legislators will at least know whether, and when, there will be new elections. □



Daily News Bulletin

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JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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JEWISH WORLD

Iran judge holds fate of 13 Jews and future of relations with West

By Michael J. Jordan

Gov't funds for schools supported

Leaders of two Jewish organizations urged the U.S. Jewish community to support some form of government funding for religious schools.

Jack Wertheimer, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and John Ruskay, executive vice president of the UJA-Federation of Greater New York, made the comments at a conference sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, which has long been a staunch defender of church-state separation.

RAC backs security adviser

U.S. Jewish groups that are calling for National Security Adviser Sandy Berger's resignation do not speak for the vast majority of Jews, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism said in a letter to President Clinton.

"Some opponents of the peace process are wrenching Mr. Berger's words out of context and distorting them beyond recognition," the center said, referring to comments Berger made after recent Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Doctors: Lileikis fit for trial

A Lithuanian medical commission decided that a 92-year-old alleged Nazi-era war criminal is fit to stand trial, according to one of the judges.

The trial of Aleksandras Lileikis was suspended last September, when the judges cited his poor health.

Shavuot protection sought

Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) urged New York's police commissioner to increase police presence in the vicinity of local synagogues over the Shavuot holiday.

Prayer and learning on Shavuot, which begins Thursday at sunset, takes place throughout the night and therefore Jews traveling to and from synagogue should receive police protection, Weiner said.

Russian cemetery vandalized

Vandals smashed 37 gravestones Sunday in a Jewish cemetery in the Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod, according to the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews. Last winter, six graves there were vandalized.

Austria official: We're scapegoats

France and Belgium are leading a campaign to maintain E.U. sanctions against Vienna because of Austria's far-right Freedom Party, Austria's foreign minister said.

In an interview with the French daily *Le Figaro*, Benita Ferrero-Waldner said the countries are using Austria as a scapegoat and that their real interest was to head off electoral challenges from far-right parties in elections in their countries.

NEW YORK (JTA) — Jewish activists around the world are making last-ditch pleas for justice as an Iranian judge decides the fate of 13 Jews accused of spying for Israel.

Attorneys for the accused submitted their written defense Tuesday, and according to Iranian law, the judge is required to announce a verdict within a week.

There had been concern that the recent arrests of two Muslims, who reportedly worked in connection with the "Iran 13," would further delay the trial. But little more has been heard about them.

Meanwhile, nationwide prayer vigils were planned in the United States for Sunday, and another public vigil was scheduled to be held Tuesday outside the Iranian Mission to the United Nations in New York.

CRIF, the umbrella organization of secular Jewish organizations in France, announced it hoped to gather 100,000 signatures demanding the "immediate liberation" of the Iranian Jews, and sanctions against Iran if they were found guilty.

And the leading American Jewish advocate for the "Iran 13," the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, issued another condemnation of the entire trial.

"It is now Iran that is on trial," read a statement. "The verdict will make clear to the world the kind of rule of law and system of justice in Iran."

In addition, a group of four anti-Zionist rabbis reportedly arrived in Iran — said to be the first rabbinical delegation to visit Iran since the trial began. The Neturei Karta rabbis were expected to meet with Iranian officials, and possibly to visit the Jews of Shiraz, where the trial has taken place.

It was unclear what role the rabbis would play.

Iranian hard-liners would likely view them as sympathetic to their cause, as they accuse the 13 Jews of spying for the "Zionist enemy," Israel.

A Neturei Karta spokesman, Rabbi Chaim Lefkowitz, was quoted as saying his group got involved because the trial "gives an image that the Jews are Zionist agents all over the world and that's a false impression."

Eight of the 13 have "confessed" to the crime, with a ninth claiming he gathered information but did not disseminate it. Western observers, however, suggest the confessions were coerced.

The lead defense lawyer has also attacked the entire proceedings, insisting that not a shred of credible evidence was provided to support the confessions.

"If the court is not politically influenced, the judge will have no choice but to clear all the charges against the defendants," Esmail Naseri, a lawyer and spokesman for the defense team, was recently quoted as saying.

The accused could have faced the death penalty for espionage. Several Iranians Jews have been executed in recent years for similar crimes.

It now appears the Jews targeted as the ringleaders may receive sentences ranging from two to 10 years in prison.

Foreign diplomats have threatened Iran with various punishments if the verdicts are severe. □

Group cheers as charges dropped in Russia

NEW YORK (JTA) — A Jewish group that monitors human rights in the former Soviet Union praised the dropping of charges against a former Russian municipal official.

The Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, along with Amnesty International and other groups, had worked on behalf of Larisa Kharchenko for three years.

Kharchenko, a housing consultant to former St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, endured harsh treatment when she was imprisoned for six months in 1997. She subsequently suffered a stroke that left her disabled. □

Jewish group to give survivors millions to meet their basic needs

By Brianne Korn and Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — After reviewing its formula for distributing money collected from the return of Jewish properties in the former East Germany, the Claims Conference has opted for the status quo.

Last week, the organization's planning committee voted to continue giving 80 percent of the funds it collects to humanitarian needs for Holocaust survivors and 20 percent to Holocaust education programs, such as museums, memorials and research.

Of the money allocated for each of these two categories, 60 percent will go toward programs in Israel and 40 percent toward efforts in the Diaspora. The money comes from the sale of heirless Jewish properties in the former East Germany.

In the past five years, the organization has allocated more than \$250 million, which came from Germany as compensation for the Nazi-era looting of Jewish property. It expects to collect and distribute about \$450 million more in the coming years.

At the May 31 session, the committee agreed that 80 percent of the allocations will go for humanitarian programs — including home care and food packages — for Holocaust survivors.

"The consensus was that it is important that the Claims Conference seek to fund the lifetime needs of Holocaust survivors," said Gideon Taylor, executive vice president of the Claims Conference. "Demographics show there will be a significant number of Nazi victims alive over the next 10 to 15 years."

The Conference estimates that there are 950,000 victims of Nazi persecution still living.

Before the May 31 session, the Jewish Agency for Israel had expressed concern that the proportion of funds distributed in Israel, as well as the total amount spent on Holocaust education, might be cut. When no such cuts were made, the agency issued a news release declaring "success" for Sallai Meridor, the Jewish Agency's chairman, and saying the decision to keep the status quo came "in response to Meridor's demand."

However, others involved in the process said the Jewish Agency was overplaying the level of controversy about the issue.

"They were pushing through an open door," said Michael Schneider, executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and a member of the Claims Conference's planning committee. "There was pretty much no controversy about it."

The committee's recommendations are expected to be accepted when the Conference's board of directors meets in July. □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Why on earth would Peres want to run for president?

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Shimon Peres — the former prime minister and Nobel laureate who has been hailed the world over as a peacemaker and statesman — stood on one side of the beaming great-grandfather.

Moshe Katsav — past tourism minister, middle-ranking Likud

Party leader, an unknown outside Israel and not especially well known inside it — took the other flank.

All three men smiled for the cameras.

This picture was taken Sunday at the circumcision of the great-grandson of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, spiritual leader of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party.

It played prominently in the television news that night and was featured in the national press the next day, giving proof to the political pundits' prediction: Yosef holds the key to the state presidency.

Peres said he "always" takes part in Yosef family celebrations.

Katsav, eagerly kissing the rabbi's hand, maintained that he, too, has a warm personal relationship with the celebrants.

Both candidates were exaggerating, naturally enough, although Peres has indeed, over the years, kept up a fairly close relationship with the Shas sage. He has visited him on festivals and briefed him on matters of state.

Indeed, that relationship goes a long way to account for what otherwise would be something of a mystery. In the presidential race, Katsav is both Sephardi and traditional, while Peres is Ashkenazi and secular. Yet Shas, the Sephardi-traditionalist party, is undecided and says it will make up its mind — or, more accurately, will be instructed by Yosef as to its decision — only in July, when the voting in the Knesset takes place.

Peres and Katsav announced last week that they are running for the presidency soon after Ezer Weizman announced that he would resign from office in July, three years before his second five-year term ends.

Some political observers link Shas' equivocation about whom it will back to an ongoing coalition crisis between Shas and the secular Meretz Party. Shas, they say, will seek further concessions from Prime Minister Ehud Barak in return for backing Peres.

Some observers also say the premier is unenthusiastic about securing Peres' victory. Beyond the speculation, many people here are asking why the former prime minister is in the running.

Why does Peres, 77, by far Israel's best-known statesman, need to fight yet another domestic political campaign, presumably the last in his long career of political battles at home?

One answer offered by those who know Peres is that he needs to fight this one in order to win it — and thereby, at least in his mind, cancel out the bitter and ignominious memories of past defeats. Ending his career as the nation's president would, in this view, make up for some of those past disappointments and leave his name emblazoned on Israel's history as a winner, not a loser.

But that theory begs a further question that is also being asked this week. Even if he does win, will Peres have the interest, let alone the physical and mental staying power, to carry out the largely ceremonial role of president for the full five-year term?

Peres himself declared last week that he was now no longer a political or party person. His primary commitment henceforth was national unity, he said, not the agenda of his Labor Party.

Peres' aides insist that his days of undercutting serving prime ministers — memorably documented in former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's 1979 autobiography — are long over.

Still, Peres-watchers find it hard to conceive of this active man restricting himself to making bland speeches and shaking innumerable hands. But some pundits, looking back over Peres' checkered performance as a candidate, say such concerns are premature.

"If he ran against himself, he'd lose," said one pundit. □