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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli lands up for negotiation

Camp David negotiators are discussing a proposal to swap unpopulated land within the Jewish state in exchange for West Bank lands on which Jewish settlements are located, according to Israeli Cabinet member Haim Ramon.

It was the first time an Israeli official had publicly acknowledged a willingness in principle to discuss such a deal.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat talked one on one for the first time during the Camp David summit on Wednesday night at Arafat's cabin, the U.S. State Department said.

The meeting was their idea, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

House OKs foreign aid

The U.S. House of Representatives passed by a vote of 239-185 the foreign operations bill, which includes \$2.8 billion in aid to Israel.

The bill now needs to be reconciled with the Senate version and be signed by President Clinton of a similar bill before it becomes law.

China protests canceled sale

China protested Israel's decision to cancel the sale of an advanced airborne radar system to Beijing, a move Israel took after coming under heavy criticism from the United States.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry was quoted as saying that no country has the right to interfere in the relations between two other countries.

U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen got some of the criticism firsthand during a 90-minute meeting Thursday in Beijing with President Jiang Zemin.

Israeli election bill passes hurdle

Israel's Knesset gave preliminary approval to a bill that would cancel the current law that provides for the direct election of the prime minister.

One of the sponsors of the bill, Meretz legislator Naomi Hazan, said recent events have proven that the current electoral system gives far too much political power to the smaller parties.

The bill, which was approved 37-15, must pass three more votes before becoming law.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Compromise on religious liberty slated for action in U.S. Congress

By Brian Seidman

NEW YORK (JTA) — Due to overcrowding, parents at the Young Israel of New Rochelle, N.Y., synagogue are not able to pray with their children, many members cannot find a seat for Shabbat or holiday services, and celebrations like Bar Mitzvahs must often exclude much of the community.

The synagogue members have stared across the street at their proposed expansion site for 15 years, without breaking ground.

Members of the synagogue board say they have been forced to deal with zoning restrictions, such as finding room for a required amount of parking spaces even when their Orthodox Jewish congregants walk to the synagogue for services, and conducting extensive ecological surveys.

"We've gone through a long, arduous, expensive process in order not to build an industrial plant, but a house of worship," said board member Michael Turek.

Now legislation that was scheduled to be introduced into the U.S. Senate this week could aid the congregation's battle to expand.

The legislation, known as the Religious Land-Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, is slated to be introduced in both the Senate and the House. It is a newer, more limited version of a bill that has had a rocky history.

The new compromise version is more limited than what was first envisioned by its proponents, including many Jewish groups. In contrast to the former, wide-reaching bill, the Religious Liberty Protection Act, the new proposed measure applies only to zoning regulations and the rights of "institutionalized persons," including prisoners.

It requires state and local governments to provide a compelling reason for blocking the establishment of a synagogue, for example — and proof that the governments are blocking religious liberties by the "least restrictive means" possible.

In the case of prisoners, the legislation would allow them to better argue for a religious diet, permission to wear religious objects, or participate in religious observances. The first version of RLPA weighed in on such issues as allowing Jewish children to wear yarmulkas in school, allowing minors to drink wine for religious purposes and laws that conflicted with the Orthodox prohibition against autopsies.

The legislation is the offspring of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act passed by Congress in 1993 and struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1997.

The court ruled that Congress had overstepped its bounds and declared the law unconstitutional.

Following that ruling, every major Jewish organization, as well as numerous other religious and civil liberties groups, joined together to craft new legislation that would pass constitutional muster. Jewish activists were surprised when a majority of Jewish lawmakers voted against the initial RLPA legislation which passed the House of Representatives by a 306-118 vote last July.

Support from many Democrats faded when critics said a loophole in the law would allow for the violation of civil liberties. Opponents said, for example, that landlords or employers could refuse to rent or hire gays and lesbians, citing religious principles.

The bill became a flash point in the debate over which rights — religious liberties or civil liberties — take precedence.

As a result, several Jewish groups withdrew their support from the legislation.

"There was the threat that religious liberties might become a partisan issue, where

MIDEAST FOCUS

Poll: Summit won't end with deal

Only one-third of Israelis believe the Camp David summit will end in a deal, according to a survey carried out for Israel Radio.

Close to 54 percent believe Prime Minister Ehud Barak has a mandate to make concessions, while close to 42 percent do not.

Kidnapped Israeli leaves hospital

Adi Sharon, the 12-year-old Israeli kidnapped by Chechen rebels and later freed, was released from a hospital in Israel on Thursday after about a month of treatment for an ulcer.

He was kidnapped during a visit to Russia last year by Chechen rebels, who cut off two of his fingers during his captivity.

Lebanese militants to stay in jail

An Israeli court extended by another three months the detention of two Muslim fundamentalist leaders from Lebanon. Israel has been holding the two — Sheik Abdel Karim Obeid, a Hezbollah leader, and Mustafa Dirani, a leader of the Amal movement — as bargaining chips for the release of captured Israeli air navigator Ron Arad.

Israel to train high-tech workers

Israel's Labor Ministry drew up a plan to train some 4,000 people for work in the high-tech sector.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz said the project seeks to interrupt plans to bring in thousands of foreign engineers to fill a labor shortage.

Former pop star sent home

Israel denied entry to a pop musician formerly known as Cat Stevens, charging that he is a Hamas supporter. The musician, who changed his name to Yousef Islam when he converted to Islam in 1977, was detained at Ben-Gurion Airport on Wednesday before being sent on a flight back to Germany.

the Democrats were on one side and the Republicans on the other, and it's not good to the cause of long-term religious liberties in America, which has a history of crossing party lines," said Matthew Dorf, director of government relations of the American Jewish Congress.

Last week, nearly a year after many abandoned the legislation, the coalition of religious and civil liberties that had been its driving force returned to the table to endorse a compromise proposal. The new bill escapes civil liberties problems by avoiding the issue, focusing instead on just zoning and prisoners.

"This more limited approach avoids some of the civil rights issues that we and others had raised in terms of needing to be sensitive to existing civil rights protections, so that religious liberty claims could not be used as a sword," said Michael Lieberman, the Anti-Defamation League's Washington counsel.

Though the supporting groups are confident that the new bill can pass, their chief enemy is time, with roughly six weeks left to have the bill passed by the Senate and the House of Representatives and be signed by President Clinton.

"We're pleased with the new bill," said Nathan Diament, director of the Orthodox Union's Institute for Public Affairs. "We certainly would have preferred that the Senate pass the broader bill, but we're clear-eyed about the political realities."

Dorf agreed, saying that the AJCongress sees the bill as a "down payment" and the "first step" toward a full religious liberties bill.

But not everyone sees this as a first step.

Christopher Anders, legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, which argued hard against the original bill but supports the current version, warned that his group wouldn't support legislation "that would cause even inadvertent harm to the enforcement of civil rights." □

Weizman's long public life ends under a cloud of scandal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Haunted by a scandal that overshadowed his decades of service to the Jewish state, President Ezer Weizman has submitted his resignation.

His resignation letter was delivered Monday to the speaker of the Knesset, Avraham Burg, who will fill the largely ceremonial post until legislators vote for a new president on July 31. Former Prime Minister Shimon Peres is the candidate of the governing One Israel Party. The Likud candidate is Moshe Katsav, a former tourism minister and longtime legislator.

Weizman, 75, who stepped down three years before his second five-year term was to end, resigned three months after police probing his financial affairs recommended that he not be charged — but at the same time gave him a less-than-blemish-free verdict.

A veteran public figure who held key posts in the military and politics before becoming president, Weizman served as president during a period that spanned both left- and right-wing governments.

The outspoken Weizman — the nephew of Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann — has frequently been a counterbalance to government policy, pushing for progress when the peace process faltered and urging a slowdown during waves of terrorist attacks. Most recently, he gave his unequivocal support to an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights in order to reach peace with Syria.

Police launched their investigation of Weizman after a free-lance journalist, Yoav Yitzhak, published allegations that he had received a regular stipend for years, starting in the late 1980s, from a French millionaire friend, Edouard Saroussi.

More than \$300,000 was involved, Yitzhak asserted — and the police confirmed the total. Weizman received the gifts when he served as a legislator, a minister and even as president, the police probe found.

Police also corroborated that Saroussi had given \$100,000 to Weizman's daughter and a car to Weizman himself.

Weizman, Israel's seventh president, acknowledged accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars in gifts from Saroussi. But he insisted they were personal gifts that he was not required to declare. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Bush: Adviser didn't speak for me

Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush distanced himself from the remarks of a foreign policy adviser who spoke with Israeli officials about the Camp David summit.

Bush told *The New York Times* that Richard Perle had been "speaking for himself" when he told the Israelis not to let the Clinton administration use the summit for political gain in the presidential campaign.

"It's important for Republicans to wish the administration well," Bush said.

Black, Jewish leaders meet

The Congressional Black Caucus hosted a nearly two-hour meeting Thursday with U.S. Jewish leaders to discuss areas of common concern, with a focus on health care issues. Among the Jewish groups attending were the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs and Agudath Israel of America.

Russian rabbi thanks police

Russian police arrested eight 15-year-olds who vandalized nearly 40 graves last month at a Jewish cemetery in Nizhny Novgorod. Rabbi Berel Lazar, the head of the Lubavitch movement in Russia, gave the arresting officers a reward of \$2,000 and police investigators a Xerox machine.

Jews lose ownership of shul

A court in the former Soviet republic of Georgia ruled against the local Jewish community in a long-running dispute over ownership of a synagogue in the capital of Tbilisi.

The ruling reversed several earlier court decisions returning the Abesadze Street Synagogue to the Jewish community, which sparked a wave of anti-Semitic rhetoric in the local media.

The chief rabbi of Georgia, Arye Levin, said the Jewish community would appeal the latest ruling to the nation's Supreme Court.

Poles cited for helping heritage

Seven non-Jewish Poles were honored this week for their volunteer work in preserving Polish Jewish heritage.

They include the former mayor of Bialystok, who oversaw the renovation of plaques in the city marking Jewish historical places.

TV film focuses on Mossad

A made-for-television movie about Israel's spy agency will air on U.S. cable television July 20.

"The truth behind some of the Mossad's operations is more remarkable than fiction," according to the History Channel, which will air "The Mossad."

NEWS ANALYSIS

In '78, a different set of campers occupied the Camp David cabins

By Mitchell Danow

NEW YORK (JTA) — When President Clinton invited Israeli and Palestinian leaders to a summit at Camp David last week, he said he hoped the setting "will help to inspire them."

Clinton was alluding to the success that capped the 13-day effort in September 1978 involving President Carter, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

While hoping for the best when announcing the summit, Clinton was also well aware that the issues facing Israel and the Palestinian Authority would be "far more difficult to resolve" than "any issues between Israel and the Egyptians."

Not that those issues were easily resolved.

Indeed, the differences between Begin and Sadat were so pronounced at the beginning of their summit that Carter kept the two apart for most of the negotiations. With the exception of the first few days, Begin and Sadat had no face-to-face meetings until the Camp David Accords were signed.

In the absence of such meetings, Carter spent the two weeks tirelessly shuttling between the cabins of the Israeli and Egyptian leaders.

For his part, Clinton has already proven himself as ready to put in the long hours that Carter did in pursuit of peace. In October 1998, Clinton burned the midnight oil with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat during the nine days of roller-coaster talks on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Although Clinton said this week he did not want to set an "artificial deadline" for the summit, he plans to leave July 19 for a meeting of industrialized nations in Japan. There are indications that a second summit could be held when Clinton returns.

Both presidents had an eye to their political legacy. But Carter had more than two years until the next election, when he unsuccessfully ran again. Clinton has only four months before he is officially a lame-duck president.

This puts more pressure on Clinton, a fact that will not be lost on either Barak or Arafat — and which each will likely try to play for his own benefit.

Carter made it clear to both Begin and Sadat that he was fully ready to assign public blame to either — or both — of them in case no agreement was reached. This has often been listed among the reasons why the summit ultimately proved a success.

Clinton, however, may not be ready to play the blame game — and without such pressure, it is unclear whether Barak and Arafat will be prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to reach an accord.

In certain ways, however, Barak and Arafat have an easier task ahead of them than the participants at the first Camp David summit.

When Begin and Sadat met, no Arab state had ever forged peace with the Jewish state. Now, the Israeli-Egyptian and Israeli-Jordanian peace treaties have already set important precedents. In both instances, analysts warned in advance of the talks that failure could lead to bloodshed. The first Camp David summit provided a framework for future Israeli-Egyptian talks that resulted in a full-blown peace treaty six months later.

If the second Camp David also results in a framework agreement, Israel and the Palestinian Authority could likewise take more time to draft a final peace treaty, even though the two sides have already set a deadline of Sept. 13 for such an accord.

A successful summit would enable the two sides to bypass that deadline.

While focused on the Egyptian track, the first Camp David also produced a framework for Palestinian self-rule. This was because Sadat had not wanted to be seen as pursuing a peace accord with Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.

While the framework for the Palestinian track was ignored following Camp David, much of it was fulfilled in the Oslo Accords.

As at the earlier summit, Israel will again have to trade land in order to achieve peace. But while Begin traded the Sinai for peace with Egypt, Barak now has to contemplate land transfers — including the possibility of handing over portions of Jerusalem — that Begin would never have been willing to contemplate. □

Bush's Jesus Day proclamation makes some Jews a little nervous

By Eric Fingerhut

Washington Jewish Week

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush is again coming under criticism for the role that his religious faith might play in his presidency.

Bush, the governor of Texas, signed a proclamation calling June 10, 2000, Jesus Day in Texas. The American Jewish Congress said the proclamation violates the "spirit and intention of the First Amendment of the Constitution."

Bush has previously been criticized for remarks he made stating that only Christians go to heaven and for naming Jesus as the political philosopher or thinker with whom he most identified.

The principal problem with the Jesus Day proclamation, said AJCongress Executive Director Phil Baum, "is not that it acknowledges the important civic contributions of a particular faith, but that it assumes the profound regard in which the teachings and person of Jesus Christ are held by the Christian community are the norm for all the residents of the state of Texas.

"Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, members of other faith groups and non-believers, all of whom are entitled to equal respect, would have difficulty responding to the governor's call to practice civic responsibility by 'following Christ's message' on June 10," said Baum.

A spokesperson for Gov. Bush's office provided a number of examples of other recent Bush proclamations concerning religion.

They included proclamations honoring the 100th anniversary of the Baha'i faith in North America and the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Khalsa, "a community of Sikhs committed to defending and upholding their faith."

Bush also has signed proclamations declaring Honor Israel Day and a week of Holocaust remembrance, and honoring the Austin, Texas, Chabad House, an Orthodox Jewish outreach center.

A Bush campaign spokesman said that while Bush is "sensitive" to the AJCongress' concerns, "he does not fully share them."

"The governor recognizes the importance of the separation of church and state," said Ari Fleischer.

But he said "it is a long American tradition" and "an appropriate function for governors to issue proclamations honoring groups both religious and secular in nature for important events," adding, "It doesn't mean the governor endorses those causes."

This year was the 10th annual March for Jesus, but the first year its organizers called the date of the march Jesus Day.

The event, which originated in Texas in 1991, has since spread throughout the United States and more than 170 countries.

The march began as a celebration of unity to bring all Christians, regardless of denomination, together in worship, said Paul Sanchez, who with his wife, Kathy, serves as central Texas state representative for March for Jesus USA and wrote a letter to Bush requesting a proclamation.

Bush's proclamation stated that "throughout the world, people of all religions recognize Jesus Christ as an example of love, compassion, sacrifice and service."

It also urges "all Texans to answer the call to serve those in need. By volunteering their time, energy or resources to helping

others, adults and youngsters follow Christ's message of love and service in thought and deed."

AJCongress called the proclamation "a recent and egregious example" of the common practice by elected officials "to seek to accommodate the religious view of their constituents by issuing proclamations endorsing or commemorating the view or practices of various sectarian groups or denominations."

Bush was not the only governor to commemorate Jesus Day.

According to the March for Jesus organization's national offices in Atlanta, two governors recognized the day with a letter or certificate and nine others issued proclamations.

Three of those nine are Democrats, including North Carolina Gov. Jim Hunt.

The National Jewish Democratic Council said the Jesus Day proclamation is another reason to worry about Bush's respect for the First Amendment.

"The fact that Gov. Bush affixed his signature and the seal of the state of Texas to a proclamation establishing 'Jesus Day' demonstrates the willingness to place the imprimatur of government literally on one faith," said Ira Forman, NJDC's executive director.

"When taken together" with "Bush's own statements supporting school prayer and the public posting of religious symbols," continued Forman, "it is one further example that the meaning of separation of church and state as we've understood it over the last 40 years would be dramatically changed in a Bush administration."

But Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, found the AJCongress criticism troubling.

"This is again a sad example of the American Jewish Congress and other organizations showing their anti-Christian bias," Brooks said.

"The Jewish community has to stop beating up on Christians for belief in their faith."

Brooks also said the criticism of Bush was "politically motivated," wondering why Vice President Al Gore — who has said that he asks himself "What Would Jesus Do?" when he faces a tough decision — has not taken heat for his own public professions of Christian faith.

In addition, Brooks asked why AJCongress had not spoken out when, for instance, Congress issued a proclamation commemorating Lubavitch Rebbe Menachem Schneerson.

Matthew Dorf, director of government relations for the AJCongress, noted that his group's statement did specifically single out the rebbe proclamation as improper and said the AJCongress would be "more vigilant" in the future in watching for similar proclamations.

Rabbi Levi Shemtov, director of the Washington office of American Friends of Lubavitch, also objected to the AJCongress' statement.

"As long as we are afforded equal access and rights for the Jewish faith, I don't see any point in unnecessarily offending other people's religious sensibilities," he said.

"The moment the Jewish faith is given inferior status, I will be the first one to object," Shemtov continued.

"So far in my experience, religious expression has not brought any discrimination, but has eased suspicion which might arise when one is reluctant to say what he really represents. While we need to be vigilant, we have to be careful not to be unnecessarily sensitive." □