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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak hints at new compromise

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak hinted that he would consider less than full Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

In a speech Sunday to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in New York, Barak said he hopes a solution could be devised that would not compromise both Israeli and Palestinian claims to the site.

Statehood delay welcomed

Palestinian officials said Sunday's vote by the mini-Parliament of the PLO to delay the declaration of a state until Nov. 15 was a vote for the peace process.

But Israeli officials were not optimistic an agreement would be reached the next few weeks.

Report: Israeli population to grow

More Jews will live in Israel than in the United States by 2020, according to a study in the upcoming edition of the American Jewish Year Book.

The study, conducted by researchers at Hebrew University, also said Israel's Jewish population will increase from around 5 million now to more than 10 million in 2080, while Diaspora Jewry will shrink from 8.3 million today to 5.3 million in 2080.

Clinton urged to move embassy

Twenty-three members of the U.S. House of Representatives sent a letter to the White House urging President Bill Clinton to cease delaying a move of the American Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Rep. Jim Saxton (R-N.J.) authored Monday's letter, which asked the President to "move our embassy as soon as possible."

Reburial paves way for building

The reburial by Czech Jews of the remains of nearly 160 bodies removed for anthropological research in Prague appears to pave the way for construction of an office building on top of one of Prague's oldest cemeteries.

But a foreign-based Orthodox Jewish group said it was "shocked and astonished" at the claim that the issue was now resolved and vowed to continue its fight to halt all building work at what is one of Europe's oldest Jewish burial grounds.

Barak good-humored, defiant in talks with U.S. Jewish leaders

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Efforts to arrange another peace summit with Yasser Arafat may have failed, but it seems Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak did not leave New York completely empty-handed.

After a round of meetings with world leaders and regional powers at the U.N. Millennium Summit, Barak and his delegation were cheered by what they say is a palpable shift in international opinion: in favor of Israel and its willingness to "go the extra mile" in negotiations with the Palestinians, and against Arafat for his intransigence and inflexibility.

There is reportedly puzzlement and consternation that Arafat continues to reject what is presumably the best offer an Israeli leader can make.

Israel is accustomed to generally hostile treatment by the United Nations. But in meeting after meeting last week with heads of state ranging from Jacques Chirac of France and Gerhard Schroeder of Germany to Yoshiro Mori of Japan and Abdurrahman Wahid of Indonesia, the Israeli delegation was surprised by how well their peace efforts have been received, said Colette Avital, a member of the Knesset who traveled with Barak.

"It's almost not even necessary to convince people of our position," Avital, a former counsel general in New York, told JTA.

"They see we've done our utmost and that the ball is in the other court."

Still, world opinion alone may not be enough to keep Barak in power.

So it is not surprising that Barak soon appeared to be turning his focus to Jewish public opinion and Israeli domestic issues.

Barak spoke twice at length to American Jews on Sunday: for 90 minutes to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, then for another hour in a folksy gathering of students, volunteers and professionals of the United Jewish Appeal of New York.

During the meetings, Barak, appearing upbeat and good-humored.

The Israeli premier defended his apparent willingness to compromise on Jerusalem, touted his economic record, pledged to heal the yawning religious-secular schism that plagues the Jewish state, and vowed to fight if the opposition attempts to bring him down.

At the first meeting, held in a mirrored, glittery hotel conference room, the audience, perhaps cautious not to antagonize the Israeli premier, asked generally gentle, softball questions.

Yet the niceties ended with a question from Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America.

Klein articulated what seemed to be at the fore of most minds, pressing Barak on concessions he has been willing to make regarding Jerusalem's religious sites and historic quarters.

Klein noted the opposition it has generated from Shimon Peres, Leah Rabin and one public opinion poll.

Rabin, in fact, was quoted last week saying her husband, assassinated in November 1995, would be "spinning in his grave" if he knew what had been offered to the Palestinians. Klein then went one step further, asking Barak what mandate he has to even offer such concessions.

"I have a mandate through the ballot, not the polls," Barak responded, adding that

MIDEAST FOCUS

Katsav: Leaders using Diaspora

Israeli President Moshe Katsav criticized some Israeli leaders for what he called their role in legitimizing Diaspora Jewry. Speaking at a reception at the president's residence marking a Bar-Ilan University conference on assimilation, Katsav said these leaders, whom he did not name, should cease justifying the Diaspora for their own "money and politics" and encourage immigration to the Jewish state.

Army recruits via Internet riddle

Israeli teen-age computer whizzes able to solve an Internet riddle can win cash prizes — and a chance to serve in an elite Israeli army intelligence unit.

The Israeli daily Yediot Achronot reported that the army unit posted the riddle at www.codeguru.co.il/instruction.asp to try to identify and attract top-notch recruits. Those who advance to the final rounds of the contest will be invited to interview for the unit. According to the paper, 60 percent of high-tech start-up entrepreneurs in Israel are graduates of the unit.

Minister blasts Hebron settlers

Some Jewish settlers in Hebron bear more responsibility for recent unrest in the West Bank town than Palestinian residents, Israel's deputy defense minister said during a visit there. Jewish settler leaders refused to meet with Ephraim Sneh, who toured the area with Israel Defense Force commanders.

Spraying begins for West Nile

Israeli authorities began limited spraying of areas in the center of the country believed to have dangerous concentrations of mosquitoes that can carry the West Nile virus.

Sixty-six cases of the virus, including seven confirmed deaths, have been reported in Israel this summer.

he operates "not by weather vane, but by inner compass."

He had earlier spoken of the "calculated risks" he was ready to take to achieve peace, but now, shaking his fist as if banging an invisible gavel, Barak declared, "There will never be an Israeli leader who will give up sovereignty over the Temple Mount to the Palestinians."

The statement drew loud applause, as it did at the second gathering, when Barak repeated it almost verbatim.

Afterward, dozens of Jewish leaders crowded around Barak, straining to shake his hand.

The second event, at UJA headquarters, was held under tight security.

Invitation-only guests, numbering some 300, began arriving two-and-a-half hours early, as security guards made a sweep through the building accompanied by bomb-sniffing dogs.

Rather than address the audience from the front, Barak sat on a bar stool, surrounded by the crowd, in an American-style town hall meeting.

Again, asked about the peace process, Barak answered with a series of expressions tailored to an American audience, like "It takes two to tango" and "We'll leave no stone unturned."

The audience asked an array of questions, from smoking-related deaths in Israel, to helping raise the standard of living for Palestinians, to uniting the various religious denominations.

Indeed, the pluralism issue was a hot topic at both meetings.

While threatening to abolish Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs, Barak said he "never initiated a secular revolution."

Rather, he will work to create Israel's first constitution and a "modern, democratic state," while being sensitive to and balancing the needs and traditions of the fervently Orthodox.

"We do not intend to separate religion from the state," he said.

"We are more modest. We intend to separate religion from politics."

However, when asked how he could be so optimistic about even holding on to power, given the current political climate, Barak countered: "I fought very hard to become prime minister.

"I do not intend to leave it easily."

The UJA crowd gave Barak three standing ovations.

However, even as he vowed to fight on, his former Cabinet minister, Natan Sharansky, predicted Monday that a national unity government will soon be formed in Israel.

The former interior minister is also a key figure in a new movement, One Jerusalem, which plans to lobby against any efforts to divide the Holy City.

Speaking before another gathering of the Presidents Conference, Sharansky gave a hint of how emotional domestic debate would be should the fate of Jerusalem be determined by referendum.

Sharansky, a former Soviet refusenik, told the gathering what Jerusalem meant to him, to the 1 million-plus Soviet emigres in Israel and to Jews living all around the world.

In 1967, he was one of millions of "absolutely assimilated Russian Jews, lost to the Jewish people."

Until the Six-Day War, he said.

Stirred by the reunification of Jerusalem and the Soviet anti-Israel, anti-Zionist rhetoric, hundreds of thousands of Jews suddenly began to utter "next year in Jerusalem."

Today, said Sharansky, "What I'm afraid of is, just as the reunification was some spiritual, mystic event for our people," an agreement "that divides Jerusalem may undermine, even destroy, that connection between Jews who are in Zion and those who are not."

Sharansky, who described himself as a "dove" among the Soviet emigres in Israel, said Jerusalem is the "common denominator, the glue" that holds Jews together, and Arafat wants the Holy City because "Jerusalem is our soul, and that's how he can destroy us."



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JEWISH WORLD

Arafat handshake fuels N.Y. race

The White House's release of a 1998 photograph showing a handshake between Rep. Rick Lazio and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat is the latest in the battle for the Jewish vote in the race for U.S. Senate from New York.

White House officials said they released the photo because Lazio had criticized President Clinton for shaking Cuban leader Fidel Castro's hand last week at the U.N. Millennium Summit and his opponent, first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, for kissing Arafat's wife, Suha, during a visit to the West Bank last year.

But Lazio criticized the Clinton administration for spending "taxpayer dollars" on the first lady's campaign. The race is a statistical dead heat, but Clinton is beating Lazio by 70 to 23 percent among Jewish voters, according to a Zogby International poll published in the New York Post.

Money sought to move disco

A local Polish official asked for money to help move a controversial disco located near the former site of the Auschwitz death camp. The mayor of the town of Oswiecim made his appeal to a delegation from the Simon Wiesenthal Center. The money would go to compensate the owners of the disco, he said.

Lynching remark sparks criticism

A rabbi in Atlanta is asking the National Football League to censure a part-owner of the Atlanta Falcons team for comments he made about the 1915 lynching of a Jewish pencil factory manager.

Rabbi Steven Lebow said he made the complaint after Tom Watson Brown said Leo Frank was lynched because his supporters bought off then-Gov. John Slaton, who pardoned Frank for the murder of 13-year-old Mary Phagan. The case was essential in the formation of the Anti-Defamation League.

Book: Church awaits conversions

A top Vatican official says in an upcoming book that the Roman Catholic Church hopes Jews will someday embrace Christianity, according to the German magazine Focus.

The book by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger says "Catholics don't want to impose Christ on the Jews, but they are waiting for the moment when Israel too says yes to Christ," the magazine reported.

Web site features Olympians

A Web site is featuring Jewish athletes slated to participate in the upcoming Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, which begin Friday.

The site, www.jewishsports.com/jewsin/olympics.htm, features links to some of the athletes' own home pages.

Barak has domestic issues on his mind during N.Y. trip

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak had just spent three days holding meetings at the U.N. Millennium Summit in New York on the future of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

So why was he using media interviews to talk about public transportation and El Al flights on the Sabbath?

For observers in Jerusalem, it said much about how the prime minister felt about the future of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Despite declarations by Palestinian officials over the weekend that intensive talks with Israel would resume this week, aides close to Barak have been playing down expectations unless the future of Jerusalem can be resolved.

The chances of that happening seemed further dimmed after Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat made clear during his meetings in New York that the Palestinians are not interested in anything short of full sovereignty over the Temple Mount.

Just the same, Palestinian officials decided not to take a major step that could jeopardize the peace process.

During a meeting Sunday, the mini-Parliament of the PLO postponed a declaration of statehood until at least Nov. 15.

The widely expected decision by the 129-member Palestinian Central Council to delay the declaration from the previously set Sept. 13 date came after a second and final day of meetings in the Gaza Strip.

It also came after Arafat made a tour of world capitals following July's failed Camp David summit. Virtually everywhere he visited, Arafat was urged not to take unilateral steps that could hurt the peace process.

Barak's clear and public focus on the domestic agenda has been viewed by some as positioning himself for the next political battle — at home — in the wake of a failed peace process.

Faced with the task of rebuilding his coalition, Barak has made clear that he will seek a secular coalition, possibly one that includes the Likud opposition.

Some of the measures he has recently mentioned — a constitution, civil marriages, national service — are opposed by the religious political parties, including his former coalition partner, Shas.

His call for instituting public transportation and El Al flights on the Sabbath has threatened to alienate his remaining One Israel bloc partner — the Meimad religious movement.

Cabinet Minister Michael Melchior said over the weekend the religious movement would consider such moves a violation of the coalition agreement with Barak on matters of religion and state.

The Likud Party has dismissed Barak's proposals as a "last-straw gimmick" of a failing government.

Though it may support some of the measures in principle, the Likud maintains that its official stand is to focus on changing the current government, not joining it.

Some members of Barak's One Israel bloc believe Barak went too far with his proposals about Sabbath transportation.

Sources in the party were quoted by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz as saying the steps contradict the Labor Party platform and a consensus within the party supporting the religious status quo.

They added that internal party surveys indicated that the majority of members support continuing the "Jewish" character of the state.

However, Transportation Minister Amnon Lipkin-Shahak of the Center Party defended the proposals.

Noting that El Al flew on the Sabbath until 1982, and that public transportation does indeed operate on the Sabbath in some parts of Israel, he told Israel Army Radio the proposals were drawn up to meet the needs of the population. □

Central European Jewish women discuss how to combat intolerance

By Ruth E. Gruber

KOSICE, Slovakia (JTA) — Jewish women from post-Communist Central Europe met in Slovakia this month to engage in what one of them called the “holy duty” of fighting racism and intolerance.

The three-day meeting — which also sought to bolster international Jewish sisterhood and promote knowledge of Jewish tradition — was organized in Kosice by the Ester Association, a recently established affiliate of the International Council of Jewish Women.

“Ester’s aim is both to help Jews keep their traditions and also to introduce Jewish culture to mainstream society as a means of fighting xenophobia and anti-Semitism,” Ester President Marta Gyoriova told JTA.

Issues of tolerance are taking on particular urgency in Slovakia.

The country has recently been the scene of brutal persecution of Gypsies, including the murder of a Gypsy woman by skinheads last month.

“We feel that when people know more about Jews, Judaism and Jewish culture, they will not be so anti-Semitic,” Gyoriova said.

The women’s weekend centered around a gala Holocaust commemorative event Sept. 3 at Kosice’s state theater, held under the auspices of Slovak President Rudolf Schuster, a former mayor of Kosice.

Kosice’s Jewish community, numbering several hundred members, is the second largest in Slovakia after the capital, Bratislava.

The gala event, preceded by a memorial ceremony at the Holocaust monument in Kosice’s Jewish cemetery, included a concert as well as personal testimony by Jews from several countries.

“Terrible things happened in the Holocaust, and people didn’t learn anything,” Mira Poljakovic, from Subotica, Yugoslavia, told the audience.

“Terrible things are happening in our country now, and people still don’t learn.

“Our holy duty is to fight hatred and discrimination so these things don’t happen in the future.”

The timing of the gala reflected Schuster’s proposal to declare Sept. 9 an annual Holocaust memorial day in Slovakia.

It was on Sept. 9, 1941, that Slovakia’s wartime fascist regime imposed Nazi-style anti-Semitic laws.

The event coincided with the Sept. 3 European Day of Jewish Culture, in which hundreds of Jewish heritage sites in 16 countries across the continent were opened to the public to promote knowledge of Jewish culture and tradition.

“The weekend was important on several levels,” International Council of Jewish Women President June Jacobs, who attended the session, told JTA.

“For one thing, it was remarkable to have so many of our representatives from the region here together. And it is very important that Schuster has proposed Sept. 9 as a day of remembrance.”

The International Council has affiliates in more than 40 countries. Its membership includes women of all Jewish religious streams, and its interests include promotion of social service and volunteer activities.

“In Central Europe in particular,” said Jacobs, “our chapters do volunteer social work helping older women — and others — cope in a situation of great economic difficulty.”

Delegates to the Kosice meeting included women from Israel, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Yugoslavia, as well as from Slovakia.

Public commemoration was only part of the agenda, however.

For the delegates, the weekend represented an opportunity to network and exchange experiences on common issues facing Jewish women in former Communist states, many of whom only recently acknowledged or learned about their Jewish identity.

A number of participants were hidden children Holocaust survivors who seized the event as an opportunity to strengthen their own often conflicted feelings as Jews and Jewish women.

“When I organized the first meeting of Slovak Jewish women a couple of years ago,” said Gyoriova, “it was very emotional. Many people were crying. It was the first time they had come together like that.” □

Internet input could help create dictionary of centuries-old tongue

By Vlasta Kovac

ZAGREB, Croatia (JTA) — The Internet may prove a valuable tool for preserving a language spoken by Jews for 500 years.

Sephardi Jews from around the world could help compile a dictionary of Ladino by providing their input via the Internet, according to Winfried Busse, a professor of philology at the Berlin Free University.

Making the suggestion at a recent conference in the southern Croatian city of Dubrovnik, Busse said the Internet could serve as a global workshop for people to create the dictionary.

Ladino, also known as Judeo-Spanish, dates back to the Spanish Expulsion of 1492, when it became a specifically Jewish language.

Several dialects are still spoken in the Balkans. In recent years, there has been a boom of interest in the language among young people, especially within Israel.

During the conference, Busse suggested that speakers of Ladino could use the Internet to provide words, sentences, phrases, proverbs, even whole stories, using Ladino.

The software for such a dictionary was created by the Philological Institute of the University of Cologne in Germany, he said, adding that it has already been used to make a dictionary of the language used on the Mediterranean island of Sardinia.

A dictionary of Ladino could take one of two forms, he said. It could include all the varieties of the language known in various regions.

Or it could create out of all the varieties a common, standard Ladino.

He added that the choice of how to proceed would have to be made by the Alta Autoridad de Ladino — the High Authority for the Ladino Language — a body created by Israel’s Knesset. □