



Daily News Bulletin

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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israel won't shut Jordan embassy

Israel's ambassador to Jordan said there are no plans to evacuate the embassy there.

"We are far from giving up," David Dadon said Wednesday, a day after an embassy employee was lightly wounded in a shooting attack in Amman.

Jordan condemned the attack, the second attempted assassination of an Israeli diplomat in less than a month.

Barak says he prefers unity gov't

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said he prefers setting up a national unity government, but would still back holding early elections.

Barak spoke after he briefed opposition leader Ariel Sharon on Tuesday night about Israel's security situation.

The two later said they did not discuss a unity government.

In another development, members of Israel's governing coalition and the opposition failed to agree on a date for early elections.

The nation's three biggest parties had been discussing May 22 as a possible date before Wednesday's talks ended.

Rabbis: Share Temple Mount

A group of 100 U.S. rabbis said there is nothing in Judaism stating that Jews should have exclusive sovereignty over Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

"As Jewish leaders, we do not want the site of our Holy Temple to be an obstacle to peace," the Jewish Peace Lobby said in a statement.

The rabbis come from the Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative movements.

Rally held for kidnap victims

Families and supporters of three Israeli soldiers and a businessman being held by Hezbollah in Lebanon took part in a rally on their behalf Tuesday night in Ramat Gan.

As part of efforts to raise awareness of the plight of the four hostages, the Jewish federation in Chicago launched a campaign calling on people to wear blue ribbons.

In another development, Hezbollah officials on Tuesday rejected a request by the Red Cross to see the four.

Respected Reform leader resigns amid sexual misconduct charges

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — Reform rabbis across the country are reeling from the news that one of Reform Judaism's highest-ranking professionals has resigned amid charges of sexual misconduct.

Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, 58, quit his post as president of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion on Monday, shortly after being suspended from the Reform movement's rabbinic association.

Zimmerman is the highest-ranking rabbi ever to be suspended from the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The suspension, resulting from an inquiry by a seven-member CCAR ethics committee, prohibits Zimmerman from serving as a rabbi in any Reform temple or institution for at least two years.

According to an HUC statement, the suspension results from Zimmerman's "personal relationships" before he became president in 1996.

Zimmerman did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Reform officials said Zimmerman had violated guidelines concerning "sexual ethics and sexual boundaries," but the ethics committee — citing a policy of not commenting on individual cases — will not disclose the precise nature of his misconduct.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said the committee's inquiry came in response to a complaint filed earlier this year. Zimmerman could have contested the decision but chose not to, said Yoffie.

"He recognized that he made a mistake and accepted responsibility for that," said Yoffie, who does not sit on the committee and said he does not know the details of Zimmerman's misconduct. "Obviously, a suspension of two years indicates this is a serious matter."

Zimmerman, known to his colleagues as "Shelly," was the past president of the CCAR, the body from which he has been suspended.

He was admired not only for his administrative work in the college, but as a spokesman for the Reform movement. Zimmerman is widely known by "the force of his personality and his ability to present the principles and commitments of Reform Judaism in a popular and compelling way," Yoffie said.

The news hit students and colleagues in the Reform movement hard.

"Shelly is one of the great American rabbis," said Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin of the Community Synagogue of Port Washington in Long Island, N.Y.

"He has been a leader in this movement for three decades," said Salkin. "His teaching and creativity has touched numerous lives. I profoundly respect him and call him a friend. My heart aches for him and for his family and for our movement."

One former student, who considered Zimmerman her mentor, said "it feels like a death.

"He was a brilliant teacher, and was the single most helpful person in teaching us to find meaning in a text and to communicate it to people," said this rabbi, who asked not to be identified.

In the past five years, the CCAR's ethics committee and guidelines on sexual misconduct have been strengthened, and enforcement has become more aggressive, say people familiar with the process.

Rabbi Paul Menitoff, the executive vice president of the CCAR, said there have

MIDEAST FOCUS

Katsav cancels visit to U.S.

Israel's president canceled a planned trip to the United States, citing the ongoing violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israel Radio said Moshe Katsav had been supposed to talk with President Clinton and attend the dedication of a Jewish community center in Los Angeles.

Rights group blames both sides

A report on the ongoing violence in the Middle East issued by the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem criticized both Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The group criticized Israel for using excessive force and cited Palestinian officials' failure to prevent children from participating in demonstrations.

World Bank aids Palestinians

The World Bank said it would give \$12 million to the Palestinian Authority to alleviate hardships caused by the ongoing conflict with Israel.

Wednesday's move by the bank was considered unusual because it usually approves loans, not grants.

Deri interviewed from jail

In his first television interview since he began serving a three-year jail sentence for bribe-taking, the former leader of Israel's fervently Orthodox Shas Party expressed frustration over what he termed the elite establishment's rejection of his claims of innocence.

During the interview, Aryeh Deri refused to discuss the nature of his current relationship to Shas.

Israeli pupils get bill of rights

Israeli legislators from across the spectrum approved a "bill of rights" for the nation's students.

The legislation forbids corporal punishment, ensures the right of every student to take matriculation exams and bars the exclusion of children from school activities because of their parents' failure to pay school-related fees.

been about 35 cases — not all concerning sexual misconduct — brought before the ethics committee in the past five years. The inquiry involves interviews with both the accuser and the accused, and with other sources when relevant.

After evaluating each case, the committee votes either to dismiss the charge or take one of the following disciplinary actions: reprimand, censure, censure with publication in the CCAR newsletter, suspension, or expulsion, said Menitoff, who is an ex-officio, non-voting member of the committee.

Three rabbis have been suspended in the last five years, Menitoff said.

Zimmerman has been credited with rebuilding HUC's faculty, and under his tenure the college began ordaining rabbis on the West Coast, as well as in New York and Cincinnati.

Recently, Zimmerman had been vocal about the need to address the national shortage of rabbis and other Jewish professionals.

Before assuming the HUC presidency, Zimmerman served as senior rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in Dallas and assistant rabbi of Central Synagogue in New York. Ordained in 1970, he was president of the CCAR from 1993 to 1995.

HUC has appointed its provost, Norman Cohen, to serve as acting president. The college is in the process of forming a search committee for a new president.

HUC, which has campuses in Cincinnati, New York, Los Angeles and Jerusalem, has 1,400 students in its rabbinical, cantorial and other graduate programs. □

Russia ends pact not to arm Iran; Jewish groups warn of threat to Israel

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Russia's decision to terminate its agreement with the United States on stopping Russian arms sales to Iran poses new threats to Israel's security, Jewish groups warn.

Last Friday, Moscow pulled out of a pact sealed in 1995 by then-Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and Vice President Al Gore under which Russia agreed to end conventional arms exports to Iran.

A U.S. delegation will travel to Moscow on Wednesday, trying to preserve the embargo on weapons sales to Tehran.

"We remain committed to constraining arms sales that pose a threat to regional stability and to the national security interests of the United States, our friends, our allies in the region," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Monday.

Boucher said the United States is not aware of any new Russian arms contracts with Iran, but wants the delegation to have a "frank and comprehensive discussion" with Russian officials about Moscow's future intentions.

Russian involvement in the Iranian weapons program remains a major concern, said Barry Jacobs, the American Jewish Committee's director of strategic studies.

Jacobs voiced disappointment that the formal agreement was allowed to lapse, but said the Gore-Chernomyrdin pact was not very effective anyway.

"Russian assistance never stopped," Jacobs said, and therefore Iran remains a primary threat to Israel.

In testimony at an Oct. 5 Senate hearing on the transfer of Russian technology and strategic weapons capabilities to Iran, the AJCommittee called for U.S. restrictions on Iranian technology proliferation, and accused Iran of continuing to smuggle and develop weapons of mass destruction that could reach Israel.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby, agreed that Russian supply of weapons technology to rogue states like Iran remains an extremely serious problem.

Despite the passage this year of the Iran Nonproliferation Act, a measure designed to stop the flow of weapons technology from Russia to Iran, many have viewed the Clinton administration's approach to the problem as too soft.

The issue will remain a top priority for AIPAC regardless of who assumes the presidency in January, AIPAC spokesman Kenneth Bricker said.

"The next administration may take this matter more seriously," he added. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Birthright moves forward with only limited dropouts

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — Despite fears of a “mass exodus,” only two campus Hillels and a handful of individuals have dropped out of Birthright Israel trips since the Thanksgiving holiday, say officials with the organization.

Birthright — which was launched amid much fanfare last winter — plans to send 10,000 Jewish young adults on free 10-day trips to Israel this winter, starting Dec. 23.

Most of the participants are North American college students.

The trips, funded by the Israeli government, Jewish federations and individual philanthropists, have been widely credited with sparking Jewish interest among young people with weak or no Jewish identities.

But after violence escalated in the Middle East this fall and threatened what remains of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, trip organizers worried that potential participants — like many tourists — would decide to avoid Israel this year.

Indeed, in the weeks before Thanksgiving, several hundred participants either turned down the trip offer or canceled their acceptances.

They were replaced from a wait list of 17,000 people. Participants are selected by lottery.

More recently, two Jewish student campus organizations — one serving Amherst and Smith Colleges in Massachusetts and the other serving Duke University in North Carolina — canceled their Birthright trips.

And California's Stanford University decided to reduce its delegation for the winter and send more students on a spring Birthright trip, according to Richard Joel, president of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

As a result of the cancellations, Hillel, which had planned to bring 4,000 of the 8,000 participants from the North America, is now expecting to bring between 3,300 and 3,500.

The slots for the Amherst, Smith and Duke students — fewer than 100 in total — will be given to other campuses, said Marlene Post, Birthright's North American chairwoman.

Nathan Margalit, the religious adviser for the Smith-Amherst Hillel, said the risk-management professional for the colleges told him that because of a U.S. State Department advisory against travel to Israel, “we couldn't go ahead with it because of the liability.”

Unlike most Hillels, the Smith-Amherst one is not independent, but is part of the colleges and accountable to their administrations, said Margalit.

“Everyone was very disappointed,” said Margalit, noting that 17 students were scheduled for the trip. “The students who have chosen to go are top-notch students who would have come back and generated all that energy into Jewish life.”

Hillel staff at Duke could not be reached for comment.

Beyond the college cancellations, few individuals have opted out since Thanksgiving, even though Dec. 2 was the last day for many to do so and still have their \$250 deposit returned. The deposit, which ensures a spot on the trip, is returned at the end of the trip or if a participant cancels three weeks in advance.

With many college students home over the Thanksgiving holiday, Birthright organizers had feared that nervous parents would try to persuade their children not to go to Israel.

However, said Post, the only post-Thanksgiving cancellations have been “five here, two there, one here,” compared to the hundreds that occurred before the holiday.

It is not clear why the pre-Thanksgiving predictions did not come true.

Families may have felt reassured by Birthright's promise to intensify security, say some. Or, with the battle over the U.S. presidential elections dominating media coverage, they may not have followed the situation in Israel as closely as before.

“We as a country have been so tied up with elections and what's going on, that Israel has not appeared on page 1, 2 or 3 of the newspapers,” said one Birthright official. “We're seeing basically a lack of negative PR.” □

U.S. officials press Austria

An American committee monitoring Holocaust compensation efforts called on Austria to provide restitution “as soon as possible” to Jews whose property was confiscated by the Nazis.

The committee, headed by New York City Comptroller Alan Hevesi, sent a letter to Austrian President Thomas Klestil expressing concerns that privatization efforts in Austria might result in the sell-off of national assets that should go to Nazi victims.

War crimes sentence upheld

Croatia's highest court upheld a 20-year sentence imposed last year on the commander of a World War II concentration camp found guilty of crimes against humanity.

The court's decision on Monday ends a legal procedure that began more than two years ago. In October 1999, Dinko Sakic was found responsible for the killings of about 2,000 people when he ran Croatia's Jasenovac concentration camp in 1944.

Romanian victims remembered

Holocaust survivors and victims' relatives gathered in a Romanian city to commemorate the 13,000 Jews who died there in a 1941 pogrom.

Wednesday's gathering in Iasi took place at the city's Holocaust memorial, which is near the local offices of the far-right Greater Romania Party. The party's leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, is running in a presidential runoff election Sunday.

The atmosphere at the commemoration became tense when a party member began disputing the number of Jews who died in Iasi during the war.

S. Africa cemetery desecrated

A Jewish cemetery in South Africa was desecrated and nearly all of its graves damaged.

About 60 graves in the cemetery in the town of Lichtenburg were targeted.

More than half of the tombstones were broken, and the remainder were pushed over.

Swiss Jewish leader honored

The University of Bern gave an honorary doctorate to a former leader of Switzerland's Jewish community. Rolf Bloch was cited for his efforts to enhance dialogue between Jews and Christians.

Hikers rescued from Everest

Five Israeli hikers were rescued from Mt. Everest after they began to suffer from altitude sickness. All were taken back to Israel, where one remains in a hospital for further treatment.

An Israeli high-tech company, Comverse Technology, had treated the five employees to the trip.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israel grapples with voting system as early elections loom on horizon*By David Landau*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As America wrestles with the question of who won its election, Israeli politicians this week were arguing over how, when and even if to hold their election two years ahead of schedule.

At issue is a call to change the present "direct elections" system — in force only since 1996 — under which voters cast separate ballots for the prime minister and party of their choice.

Israelis complained for years that the old, British-style proportional representation system concentrated too much power in the Knesset at the expense of the prime minister.

Yet now that former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was forced to go to early elections and current Prime Minister Ehud Barak is threatened with the same, many Israelis are clamoring for the relative stability of the old system.

Academics and reform-minded politicians designed the direct elections system in the early 1990s to nudge Israel toward the American presidential system.

The widespread feeling was that the old system gave the little parties, especially the Orthodox, disproportionate power, allowing them to play the big Labor and Likud parties against each other.

Contrary to most expectations, however, the new system has encouraged the growth of small splinter parties, further undercutting the clout of the traditional blocs and making Israel almost impossible to govern.

Labor and Likud have seen their Knesset delegations shrink radically under the new system to a combined total of just over 40 out of 120 seats, and many in both parties to support a return to the old system.

Such legislation, however, requires an absolute majority of 61 Knesset members. Advocates of the old system, including ideological opposites Moshe Arens of Likud and Yossi Beilin of Labor, have been working overtime to drum up the votes needed.

That puts them at odds with the two likely contenders for prime minister if early elections are held, Barak and Netanyahu, both of whom believe they can fare better in direct elections rather than under a system that leaves them more beholden to the party.

Netanyahu in particular is said to be trying to persuade members of his Likud Party to stay with the new system.

By midweek, arguments over the system were threatening efforts by the two large parties to agree on a date for new elections, following the Nov. 28 vote giving initial approval to a bill to dissolve the Knesset. The bill must pass two more votes before becoming law.

Labor and Likud leaders were intent on setting a date for elections in late spring or early summer.

But political pundits said enthusiasm for early elections seemed to be perceptibly waning in the Likud, perhaps because of warnings from smaller parties that they would withdraw their support for early elections if legislation moves ahead to restore the old voting system.

Yosef Lapid, leader of the secular Shinui Party, said Monday that "if the election law is changed, there will be no" early election.

In an unlikely alliance between two archenemies, Knesset

members of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party took much the same position as Shinui, saying their party also would reject early elections if Likud backs a return to the old system.

Under the old system, voters had only one ballot, which they cast for the party of their choice.

After the election, the president would consult with each party and then ask the leader of one — almost always the largest party — to form a government.

That leader would then forge a coalition with other parties, as it is rare for a single party to win an outright majority in Israel.

If the government lost its majority during the course of the Knesset's term, the president could ask the leader of another party to form a government.

Under the present system, by contrast, if the prime minister falls by a vote of at least 61 of the 120 Knesset members, there is no way for another legislator to be named prime minister, and new elections must be held.

The framers of the law thought this would deter the Knesset from voting out the prime minister, as Knesset members themselves would be forced to fight to retain their own seats in new party primaries and general elections.

This, they thought, would increase the stability of the system and strengthen the prime minister relative to the Parliament.

But the experiences of Netanyahu and Barak seem to disprove that logic.

In both cases, Knesset members voted to oust each prime minister long before the end of his term, despite putting their own seats at risk in new general elections.

This week, however, there were some signs that the logic behind the new system is working after all, albeit belatedly.

Political insiders suggested that there are increasing signs that Knesset members are reluctant to be tossed into an election campaign barely 18 months into Barak's term, and are having second thoughts about last week's vote for early elections.

Barak himself said Wednesday that despite his call from the Knesset podium for new elections, he still favors the option of a national unity government.

In fact, senior Labor and Likud figures are still negotiating over a unity government, hardly the way for rival parties to behave on the eve of an election campaign.

Labor's Elie Goldschmidt, chairman of the powerful Knesset Finance Committee, said Monday that these unity efforts had been "blessed by the men who matter" — a broad hint that Barak and Likud leader Ariel Sharon are behind the move.

This immediately gave rise to speculation that, despite last week's vote, Barak and Sharon are still seeking to overcome their policy differences and set up a unity cabinet in order to keep Netanyahu from making a comeback.

Returning Monday from a lecture tour and business trip to the United States, Netanyahu said he would make up his mind "soon — not in days, but not in weeks either" — about whether to re-enter politics.

With polls showing Netanyahu as the most popular potential candidate, it is widely expected that he will decide to run.

Not everyone in his own Likud Party is happy about that prospect.

Making the early elections a little less early, after all, would be one means of stopping the Netanyahu bandwagon before it even gets rolling. □