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83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S.-led panel begins work

A U.S.-led panel probing the causes of the current Israeli-Palestinian violence began its work Monday, meeting with Prime Minister Ehud Barak in Jerusalem.

The panel's head, former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, was quoted as saying the commission wants to help bring an end to the violence and restart peace negotiations.

From Jerusalem, the panel members headed to the Gaza Strip for talks with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

Israel seeks hostages' release

An Israeli official confirmed that contacts are under way to try to secure the release of three soldiers and a businessman held by Hezbollah, but he said there have been no breakthroughs.

Israel is "attempting through a number of channels to bring the captives home," Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh said Monday on Army Radio.

Sneh downplayed reports, mostly from Lebanon, of progress in negotiations with Hezbollah that could lead to the release of the four Israelis in exchange for 19 Arabs held by Israel.

Court rejects voucher plan

A school voucher program in Cleveland was again declared unconstitutional.

A U.S. appeals court agreed Monday with an earlier ruling that the program violated the constitutional separation of church and state by providing money for low-income students to attend either private or parochial schools.

The case may end up before the U.S. Supreme Court, though the high court has passed up opportunities to hear voucher cases before.

Extremist defeated in Romania

Former Communist Ion Iliescu defeated extreme nationalist Corneliu Vadim Tudor in runoff elections for president in Romania.

Prior to Sunday's vote, the Romanian Jewish Federation had issued a statement saying Tudor had been "a staunch enemy of the Jews" in Romania for many years.

Tudor's publications have repeatedly published anti-Semitic and xenophobic articles.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Disgusted with politics, Israelis ask which candidate represents the lesser evil

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Dror Ben-Roohi watched with disgust as Israel's political arena sank deeper into turmoil over the past week.

Snap elections sparked by Prime Minister Ehud Barak's resignation on Sunday, and the subsequent announcement by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he, too, would run for the premiership, have done nothing at all to revive Ben-Roohi's confidence in Israeli politics.

He has voted for both men before, and now is considering doing something once considered sacrilegious in Israel's politically driven society.

"I will not vote for Bibi" — a nickname for Netanyahu — "or for Barak," Ben-Roohi said with a sneer, sitting in his electronics store in downtown Jerusalem.

"I have no trust in either one of them," he said. "They are completely detached from reality."

Just one day after Barak formally submitted his resignation and Netanyahu announced his return from political exile, sentiments like Ben-Roohi's were voiced by Israelis across the political spectrum.

On a gloomy gray day that accurately captured the prevailing mood here, Jerusalemites chosen at random used the same words over and over: Disappointment. Despair. Disgust.

The confusion that has settled over many Israelis following 10 weeks of violent conflict with the Palestinians has been compounded by increasing mayhem in Israeli politics.

Israelis' confidence in their political system has never been terribly high, but recent events appear to have sent it to a new low.

Barak's decision to resign and call elections within two months will spare the country a prolonged election campaign that neither politicians nor the public really wanted.

Still, his move was widely seen as a political scheme to improve his sagging chances of re-election by heading off a challenge from Netanyahu, whom he defeated in May 1999.

Under Israeli law, candidates for prime minister following Barak's resignation must be current Knesset members, which excludes Netanyahu.

Netanyahu is attempting to have the law changed so he can run.

Since Barak's resignation, pundits and politicians have endlessly analyzed possible scenarios, alienating a public desperate for anyone who can offer hope of an exit from the conflict with the Palestinians.

Nobody has illusions that new elections are the answer.

"I think children in kindergarten can do a better job running the country," said Mazal Cohen, a 65-year-old pensioner. "I voted for Bibi. He failed. I voted for Barak. He failed. Perhaps if President Clinton has nothing better to do, he can come and help us."

The despondency is not limited to Israelis in the political center, many of whom put their faith in Netanyahu in the 1996 elections, then in Barak last year.

Yoram Faran, a 45-year-old camera importer, has been a staunch supporter of Barak and his peace policies.

Because of the regional unrest, however, his sales have plummeted 25 percent in

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel kills alleged terrorist

Israel killed a member of Islamic Jihad it believes was involved in a 1997 terrorist attack in Jerusalem.

Israeli army sources said Anwar Mahmoud Hamran was killed Monday after he and other Palestinians opened fire on an army position.

Palestinians said the killing, which took place in Nablus, was unprovoked.

Bill may help Netanyahu

Israel's Shas Party introduced a bill that would allow someone who is not a Knesset member to run in the upcoming Israeli election. The bill is designed to allow former Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to run again.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu said he would run for the head of the Likud Party in primaries scheduled for next Monday.

Rights group criticizes Israel

An international human rights organization said the Israel Defense Force was responsible for "excessive, and often indiscriminate, use of lethal force" against unarmed Palestinians during the ongoing violence, which has lasted more than 10 weeks.

Human Rights Watch said in its annual report that the tactics overshadow improvements Israel has made in its human rights record, including its decreasing use of torture.

El Al ruled guilty of ageism

Israel's national airline was guilty of age discrimination when it forced male flight stewards to retire at age 60, Israel's Supreme Court has ruled.

An expanded panel of justices rejected El Al's assertion that the demands of the job justify a retirement at 60, five years before the age determined in a collective agreement with other airline staff.

Chief Justice Aharon Barak wrote in the ruling that a plane flight "is not a beauty contest."



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recent weeks. "Elections are not going to change anything, since nobody knows what to do," he says.

"The time has come for both failures to step aside and allow new people to try to get elected."

Polls indicate that Netanyahu would trounce Barak in a rematch, but it is still difficult to find right-wingers convinced that the former prime minister is capable of solving Israel's predicament with the Palestinians.

"Maybe Bibi's return gives me a little more hope," said Haim Pony, who is employed as a chef at the Jerusalem Tower Hotel and describes himself as a staunch Netanyahu supporter.

"But if Clinton doesn't have a solution, do you think Bibi has one?"

Further to the right, hard-liners do not expect Netanyahu to heed their calls for tougher blows against the Palestinians.

Avni Baruch, a 55-year-old author, said he will support Netanyahu only if he publicly apologizes for negotiating with the Palestinians and ceding most of the West Bank city of Hebron to the Palestinian Authority in January 1997.

"Even then, I won't be voting for him, but against his opponent," said Baruch, who also supports the far-right National Union Party.

"They are all the same. They are all liars," he said.

"Anybody who says that peace is possible with the Arabs is simply lying," Baruch said.

Perhaps the only voters who are somewhat content are supporters of Shas, the fervently Orthodox party that attracts predominantly Sephardi voters.

Some Shas supporters worry that if the Knesset calls new parliamentary elections, Shas would decline after winning 17 seats in the 120-seat Knesset in 1999 to become Israel's third biggest party.

However, Shas voters can rise above the political melee somewhat, as they leave their decisions to spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

Yosef — who this week denounced Barak as a "blind fox" after formerly labeling Netanyahu a "blind goat" — is expected to instruct his constituents to vote for Netanyahu if the Knesset paves the way for him to run.

"We are waiting for the rabbi's official instructions," said David, a kashrut supervisor who refused to give his last name. "Maybe if Netanyahu is elected, it will be a bit better for religion."

Aside from Shas supporters, however, few want to discuss religious-secular relations or social issues, the centerpieces of the May 1999 election that brought Barak to power.

Electoral reform is another story.

It seems increasingly unlikely that the Knesset will push through quick legislation to revert to the electoral system used until 1996.

As frustrations with politics run high, however, some people feel that the only solution is to fix the system.

Under the previous electoral system, Israelis voted with one ballot for a party list, and the leader of the party with the best chance of forming a government was declared prime minister.

Now, Israelis vote separately for a prime minister and a party list of Knesset candidates.

This allows voters to split their tickets, often choosing a party that in effect prevents the prime minister from wielding power effectively.

"All this does is strengthen the fragmentation of Israeli society," said Yoram Preminger, a 42-year-old tour guide.

"Maybe elections are the only choice now. But politicians are politicians, and we can't expect them to change. So having elections without changing the system will not help at all."

All of which leads Pazit Madar, a 23-year-old business student, to what may be the most extreme conclusion.

"I don't think Bibi can make things better, and Barak may not be brilliant. But in this country you elect the lesser of two evils — which is Barak," she said.

"But the situation is very depressing. I just can't understand what I'm doing in this country anymore." □

JEWISH WORLD

Commission blasts State Dept.

A U.S. commission criticized the State Department for not integrating religious freedom into its foreign policy or taking action against countries that violate their people's religious freedom.

In addition, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said U.S. sanctions against Sudan and China are ineffective.

It also said there should be more pressure on Iran to improve its religious freedom and human rights record.

'Mein Kampf' publisher convicted

A Czech court sentenced the publisher of a Czech version of Hitler's "Mein Kampf" to a three year-suspended sentence and a fine of \$50,000.

Michal Zitko was convicted of racial incitement and supporting movements that want to suppress human rights.

Marchers to protest Haider visit

Jewish and other groups in Rome plan to stage a torchlight march on Thursday to protest a planned visit by Austrian right-wing leader Jorg Haider.

Haider, the former leader of Austria's Freedom Party, will meet the pope Saturday when he presents this year's Christmas tree to the Vatican.

IBM helping Claims Conference

IBM plans to donate more than \$150,000 in computer hardware and support services to help the Claims Conference distribute part of a \$5.2 billion German fund for Nazi-era slave and forced laborers.

The Claims Conference hopes the donation from the computer giant will help it distribute the funds to Holocaust survivors within the next two years.

Group vows to combat racism

The American Jewish Committee is praising the decision of a United Nations regional committee to commit itself to fight "the increase in anti-Semitism and hostile acts against Jews around the world."

Last week's decision by the committee, which met in Chile, may pave the way for anti-Semitism to be included on the agenda of a worldwide conference against racism, slated to take place next September in South Africa.

'Hogan's Heroes' star dies

Werner Klemperer, who escaped from Nazi Germany with his family and later played a Nazi colonel on the U.S. television show "Hogan's Heroes," died Dec. 6 at the age of 80.

Klemperer earned two Emmy Awards for his portrayal of the bumbling Col. Wilhelm Klink on the show, which ran from 1965 to 1971.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Key Jewish Democratic player in the eye of the Florida hurricane

By Gary Greenberg

PALM BEACH, Fla. (JTA) — Monte Friedkin keeps interesting company.

On the walls of his expansive Boca Raton office hang dozens of framed photos of Friedkin with an assortment of familiar political faces, including Bill and Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, Michael Dukakis, Ted Kennedy, Mario Cuomo, Dick Gephardt, George Mitchell, Tom Daschle and other leading Democratic Party politicians.

"I could care less about pictures," says Friedkin, chairman of the Palm Beach County Democratic Party. "They were lying in the corners collecting dust until my staff decided to hang them up one day when I was out of town."

But you know they must mean something, especially the half-dozen or so with President Clinton, all signed with notes expressing thanks and gratitude to "my good friend, Monte."

Long a key Democratic and Jewish player, Friedkin, with his Palm Beach County position, is now in the spotlight once again, this time at the center of the fight over the Florida vote, which will determine the next U.S. president.

In a two-hour interview, Friedkin speaks of being raised in Youngstown, Ohio, how he made a fortune with his father in the aluminum business and other ventures, got involved in politics, and moved to Boca Raton for the weather.

Like most Democrats, Friedkin believes that Gore should easily have taken the state of Florida and, with it, the presidency.

"The butterfly ballot in Palm Beach County cost us more than 20,000 votes," he says, referring to the ballot that apparently led many people in Palm Beach County to mistakenly vote for Pat Buchanan instead of Gore.

But with a booming economy and what he thinks was a less-than-stellar opponent in Texas Gov. George W. Bush, Gore never should have been stuck in such a close election, Friedkin believes. Gore ran a lackluster campaign as compared with Clinton's drive for the White House in 1992, he says.

Friedkin first got interested in politics after fund raising for the Jewish federation in Youngstown. In the early 1970s, he was approached by the chairman of the pro-Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which was looking to step up its fund raising in an effort to increase the organization's power.

"At the first meeting, I pledged \$5,000, and the room went dead silent because that was more than the president and chairman had planned to bid," he says. "They upped their bids and we were on our way. If you're going to raise money, you have to put your own money where your mouth is."

That seems to be Friedkin's mantra. He decided to get more involved with the Democratic Party after former Massachusetts Gov. Dukakis lost the 1988 presidential election. He analyzed what he thought went wrong with that campaign, walked into the office of then-Democratic National Committee Chairman Ron Brown and laid a check for \$100,000 on his desk.

Having gotten Brown's attention, he recalls, he told Brown he believed that had the Democrats targeted the swing states, Dukakis might have won. Then he helped Brown compile a team dedicated to winning the White House in 1992.

With Bill Clinton in the White House, Friedkin eventually turned his attention closer to home and became chairman of the Palm Beach County Democratic Party in late 1998. "I couldn't understand how we had 7 to 8 percent more registered Democrats in the county and nothing but Republicans in office," he says. "The reason turned out to be that the Democrats had no money and no organization here."

No matter how the battle for the presidency turns out, the war rages on for Friedkin. "I first got involved in politics because I wanted to protect the interests of Israel. Then, the more I watched those guys in Washington, the more concerned I became about America," Friedkin says.

"But I really didn't have much impact in Washington, so I decided to concentrate on where I live. In Palm Beach County, I think I can make a difference." □

NEWS ANALYSIS

Disappointed by both right and left, Israeli Arabs weigh voting choices

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — In an annual custom during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the king of Jordan invited a delegation of Israeli Arab leaders to take part in a late-night meal this week to break the daily fast.

As in 1996 and 1999, the talk this year revolved around the Israeli elections.

Details were not revealed, but it seemed unlikely that King Abdullah would follow in the footsteps of his late father, King Hussein, and urge Israeli Arabs to support the Labor Party's candidate.

Judging by the present mood in the Arab world, Prime Minister Ehud Barak will have to work overtime to win the endorsement of any Arab leader, including the relatively friendly Abdullah.

Three of Jordan's leading dailies carried a front-page headline this week that read: "The Intifada Defeated General Barak," a reference to the more than 10-week-old Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"It is not that we prefer" former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who announced this week that he would seek to run against Barak, a senior Egyptian political scientist and journalist told JTA in a telephone interview from Cairo.

"But you Israelis must understand: There is a lot of frustration here regarding the behavior of Barak."

The journalist, who preferred to remain anonymous, said that in the eyes of the Arab world, Barak, like Netanyahu before him, has demonstrated "that he is unfit to rule."

When asked why, he said the Israeli premier "does not really understand the Middle East and does not know how to treat the Arabs."

It is one thing for Barak to lose popularity in Amman and Cairo.

It is another thing to create a sense of alienation among Israel's Arab voters.

Late last month, when the Knesset gave initial approval to a bill for new elections, Barak rushed to the Israeli Arab town of Tira for a campaign-style dinner, much to the surprise of the local leaders.

Although 95 percent of Israel's Arab voters chose Barak in the May 1999 elections, Barak has not visited an Israeli Arab village or city since.

Polls last week showed that only 11 percent of Israeli Arabs say they would vote to re-elect Barak.

This is the same rate of support the community would give Netanyahu.

Last week, an Israeli Arab legislator, Ahmed Tibi, announced that he, too, would run for prime minister.

Tibi, a former adviser to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, was among the delegation that visited Amman this week.

If Israeli Arabs vote for Tibi, who is not considered to have a realistic chance of winning, they ultimately will be helping the right-wing candidate — be it Netanyahu or Likud Party chairman

Ariel Sharon — by taking votes away from the Labor Party candidate, who ordinarily would receive Arab votes.

This consequence did not bother Tibi.

"For once, don't burden us with the responsibility of who will become the next prime minister of Israel," he said.

"We want to create another option for all those who are not willing and cannot vote for Netanyahu, Sharon and Barak," Tibi told a news conference in Amman.

He and other Israeli Arab politicians have a certain logic behind their strategies.

A vote for an Israeli Arab candidate conceivably could prevent either of the two main candidates from gaining an absolute majority in the election, forcing a second-round runoff.

In such a case, the Israeli Arab community could demand specific commitments from one of the candidates in exchange for its support.

In the 1999 elections, Israeli Arab legislator Azmi Beshara withdrew his candidacy for the premiership at the 11th hour.

His supporters in the Israeli Arab community subsequently voted for Barak.

Many Arab citizens feel that Barak did not deliver enough in return.

How can Barak get more of the Arab vote?

"Only a settlement with the Palestinians," said Riad Ali, an Israeli Arab journalist.

"Only if the Arabs are absolutely convinced that this time Barak will deliver the goods."

Not that it's all up to Barak, of course — much will depend on Arafat.

Arafat, who convened his Cabinet this week for an emergency meeting in Gaza, said that the early elections in Israel may delay the peace process.

"Barak is known for his way of not implementing agreements and wasting precious time," Arafat told reporters.

"The truth is that we do not believe in his ability to make acceptable compromises."

If Arafat strikes a deal with Barak before the elections, he will signal to the Israeli Arab community to vote for the Labor Party leader.

Officially, Arafat has declared that the elections are an internal Israeli matter.

But just as previous elections were affected by Palestinian terrorist attacks, Arafat is aware that the ongoing Palestinian uprising will have a direct effect on the elections.

"If the intifada calms down, this will be an indication that Arafat understands that he has gone too far," journalist Ali said.

"If the intifada continues at the same pace, that means that Arafat has given up on Barak and would rather have the Likud in power."

But what interest does the Palestinian leader have in supporting the right?

"It seems that the old cliché that the left is best at waging war and only the right can make peace still holds water," Ali said.

Despite the strategies the Israeli Arab community is considering in advance of the elections, predicting the outcome of the voting is a tricky business, since one terror attack could change the entire electoral scene.

Palestinian militants are not Israeli citizens, but they may yet have the final word on Israel's next election. □