



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 78, No. 233

Wednesday, December 13, 2000

83rd Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak launches re-election bid

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak kicked off his re-election campaign Tuesday, insisting that a vote for him was a vote for "peace and security." As the resignation he submitted Sunday took effect, Barak began making campaign stops that included a meeting with Russian immigrants, a crucial voting bloc.

Palestinians fire on children

Palestinian gunmen fired on a group of Israeli children at a community center in the Gaza Strip settlement of Neveh Dekalim. In another attack Tuesday, Palestinians fired on Israeli soldiers in Hebron. No one was injured in either attack.

In other violence, four Israelis were wounded in shooting attacks in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and Palestinians claimed Israeli forces assassinated a Fatah member near Bethlehem.

Groups to seek Israelis' return

Jewish groups are launching a campaign to secure the release of missing Israelis, including three soldiers and a businessman kidnaped by Hezbollah in October and several soldiers captured or injured in Lebanon and classified for years as missing in action.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the United Jewish Communities and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs are dedicating the Shabbat of Chanukah, on Dec. 23, to solidarity with the Israelis. [Page 3]

Argentine leader dies at 57

Rogelio Cichowolsky, president of the political umbrella organization of Argentine Jewry, died Monday at 57 after a long battle with lung cancer.

"He was a friend, a man of peace, an indefatigable defender of justice and equality," Argentine President Fernando de la Rúa said. [Page 2]

Israeli bus skids off highway

At least one person was killed and 30 injured, several seriously, when an Israeli bus skidded off a rain-slicked highway that leads from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea. The Egged bus, traveling from Jerusalem to Tiberias Tuesday night, crashed through a security barrier and plunged into a ravine, trapping some of the passengers inside and flipping over repeatedly as it fell nearly 500 feet.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Netanyahu gives few initial clues to how he would govern differently

By Michael S. Arnold

NEW YORK (JTA) — It's still unclear whether former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will be able to run in the upcoming election, but analysts already are wondering how a second Netanyahu administration might differ from the first.

Three years after defeating incumbent Shimon Peres by a hair's breadth, Netanyahu was trounced by Ehud Barak in May 1999 by a margin of 56 percent to 44 percent, a landslide in Israeli electoral terms.

As returns filed in, Bibi, as he is known to friend and foe alike, announced his resignation from the Likud Party and from Israeli politics, but few believed his exile would be permanent.

Soon after Barak stunned the nation with his announcement Saturday that he was resigning, Netanyahu stepped in to announce that he intended to run for the premiership.

He denounced Barak's resignation as a "cynical trick" intended to prevent Netanyahu from running. According to Israeli law, he is not eligible because he is not a sitting member of the Knesset.

The Knesset is now considering legislation that would amend current law, thereby enabling him to run.

There are Israeli precedents for political rehabilitation.

Yitzhak Rabin's first term as premier was marked by frequent mistakes born of political immaturity, but he returned to power 15 years later, in 1992, for a second term that set in motion Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and changed the course of Israeli history.

Netanyahu, too, pledged in announcing his candidacy on Sunday to learn the lessons of his failed term, which was marked by frequent scandals, policy shifts and abominable relations with his party and Cabinet.

But has he learned enough in such a short time to chart a more successful course the second time around?

So far, he has offered few clues to the policies he would pursue if re-elected.

During the past 18 months, Netanyahu rarely criticized the Barak government publicly, concentrating instead on his business interests as a high-tech consultant and public speaker, and toughing out a police investigation on bribery and fraud charges from which he emerged without indictment this fall.

Since announcing his candidacy, Netanyahu has criticized Barak for "broadcasting weakness" in his handling of the 10-week-old Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but was vague about what he would do differently.

Israel needs to be tougher with the Palestinians, Netanyahu said.

"I think it's using force more wisely, and not necessarily only military force," he said. He also said that he would "restore Israel's deterrent strength" and strike at the Palestinian Authority's organs of government.

Absent was any larger vision for the peace process, which lost much of its momentum under Netanyahu, who insisted on Palestinian "reciprocity" when Israel fulfilled its commitments under the Oslo process.

The best Israel can aspire to is a "cold peace," Netanyahu said on Sunday, not what he called the pipe dream of Scandinavia-style relations in the Middle East.

After three years in which Labor Prime Ministers Rabin and Peres did not halt Israeli concessions despite Palestinian violations of the accords, Netanyahu's insistence

MIDEAST FOCUS

'Netanyahu law' vote expected

Supporters of Benjamin Netanyahu are lobbying legislators to pave the way for the former prime minister to run in the upcoming elections by dissolving the Knesset and going to general elections, not by passing a special law allowing any citizen to run.

The position angered the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, which supports what has been dubbed the "Netanyahu law," because it fears it will lose Knesset seats if general elections are held.

The Knesset plans to hold a preliminary vote on the Netanyahu law Wednesday.

Bearing a message of "security now, peace later," Netanyahu returned to the Likud Party on Tuesday night, 18 months after leaving politics following his electoral loss to Ehud Barak.

Netanyahu appealed to current Likud leader Ariel Sharon to work together to "lead Israel to a new future."

Barak, Clinton confer by phone

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak discussed the nation's political turmoil during a telephone call with President Clinton.

White House spokesman P.J. Crowley said Barak and Clinton also used Monday night's call to discuss ways to end the Israeli-Palestinian violence and bring the two sides back to the negotiating table.

Brother of IDF chief targeted

Israeli security forces apprehended two Palestinians planning to assassinate the brother of Israel's army chief of staff, according to Israeli news reports.

Israeli police stopped a car near Jericho carrying the Palestinians, who admitted to planning to kill Col. Shlomo Mofaz, brother of Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz.

Plans for the attack reportedly were found in their car.

They also admitted to having ties to Palestinian security forces in the West Bank.

on reciprocity was seen by much of the world — and much of the Israeli public — as an excuse to hinder a peace process he had inherited but never really accepted.

Netanyahu, however, said Sunday that his policy of caution and reciprocity has been vindicated, and contrasted it to what he called Barak's determination to reach an agreement with the Palestinians "at any price."

Knowing that they would pay a price for their transgressions, the Palestinians sharply reduced the level of terror when he was in office, Netanyahu said.

Comparing casualty figures during his term to those both before — which included the wave of bus bombings in 1995-96 — and after, including the current Palestinian uprising, Netanyahu claimed that Israelis regained a sense of personal security during his term. The Arab world, however, was deeply suspicious of Netanyahu, and his honeymoon was brief.

In September 1996, after Netanyahu opened a new exit to a tourist tunnel in Jerusalem's Old City, Palestinians rioted throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, leaving some 15 Israeli soldiers dead.

It was the first time Palestinian policemen turned Israeli-supplied weapons on Israeli forces, a grave escalation that foreshadowed the current violence.

Despite his mistrust of Palestinian intentions, Netanyahu, the son of a right-wing ideologue, became the first Likud leader to make territorial concessions in the West Bank, the cradle of Jewish history.

International pressure after the "tunnel riots" forced Netanyahu to hand most of the biblical West Bank city of Hebron to Palestinian Authority control.

Likewise, under fierce pressure from President Clinton at the Wye Plantation summit in October 1998, Netanyahu agreed to cede more West Bank territory to the Palestinian Authority, though little of the accord ultimately was carried out.

Israel's relations with the United States and the world also suffered during Netanyahu's term. Clinton, in particular, reportedly was angered by Netanyahu's purported arrogance and his willingness to appeal directly to the U.S. Congress when he found the president's positions unpalatable.

On the economic front, Netanyahu accelerated the privatization of state-owned industries and took several major steps to liberalize the Israeli economy.

As the peace process slowed, however, the giddy economic boom of the early 1990s gave way to recession, and unemployment and social issues had replaced peace as the most prominent campaign issue when Barak challenged Netanyahu in 1999. □

Rogelio Cichowolsky, 57, head of Argentine Jewish community

By Nicolas Penchaszedeh

BUENOS AIRES (JTA) — Rogelio Cichowolsky, president of the political umbrella organization of Argentine Jewry, died Monday at 57 after a long battle with lung cancer.

"He was a friend, a man of peace, an indefatigable defender of justice and equality," Argentine President Fernando de la Rúa said.

Since assuming the presidency of DAIA in January 1999, Cichowolsky led efforts to pass an anti-discrimination law and to create the National Anti-Discrimination Institute, over which he later presided.

While maintaining close ties with the government, Cichowolsky criticized the lack of progress in the investigations into the terror bombings of the Israeli Embassy in 1992 and the AMIA Jewish community center in 1994.

More than 100 people died in the attacks combined.

He also criticized the government for not taking measures against Iran, which he considered responsible for the bombings.

During his tenure, Cichowolsky made efforts to distance himself from his predecessor and mentor, banker Ruben Beraja. Beraja left the DAIA after a financial scandal that forced the shutdown of his Banco Mayo bank, one of the primary funders of Jewish communal activities in Argentina.

Cichowolsky is survived by his wife, Silvia, and three children. □



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

Russian media magnate arrested

Spanish police arrested a Russian media magnate who also heads the Russian Jewish Congress.

Vladimir Goussinsky, wanted in Russia for alleged fraud, claims the charges against him are politically motivated. Arrested early Tuesday morning at a beach resort in southern Spain, Goussinsky is slated to face an extradition hearing soon.

Reno blocks Palestinian's release

U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno blocked the release of a Palestinian man jailed for three years without charges.

Just moments before Mazen Al-Najjar was to be released Tuesday from a Florida jail, attorneys received a call telling them of Reno's action, according to Rep. David Bonior (D-Mich.), who has been seeking the man's release. The government maintains that Al-Najjar has links to Mideast terrorists and is a threat to national security.

Arab Americans backed Bush

Arab Americans preferred Texas Gov. George W. Bush to Vice President Al Gore, a recent Zogby exit poll shows.

Over 45 percent of Arab American respondents voted for Bush, versus 38 percent for Gore.

Voters who disapproved of the Clinton administration's handling of the Middle East voted overwhelmingly for Bush or Green Party candidate Ralph Nader.

L.A. federation building reopens

The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles rededicated its community building, following a \$24 million renovation to repair severe damage sustained during a 1994 earthquake.

Groups reject shared sovereignty

Two Orthodox Jewish organizations lashed out at a group of U.S. rabbis who are calling on Israel to share sovereignty over Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

"Any calls to 'share' the Temple Mount not only fly in the face of Jewish tradition, they also endanger freedom of access to holy places for all," the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America said.

Hungarian payments rejected

A law the Hungarian Parliament passed last year to pay \$100 to the heirs of Holocaust victims is unconstitutional, Hungary's highest court ruled. In its ruling Tuesday, the court called on legislators to budget a higher amount for victims' relatives. The president of Hungary's Jewish community, Peter Tordai, welcomed the court action, but said it would take at least two more years before legislators act.

Israel, Hezbollah discussing a possible prisoner exchange

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli official has confirmed that contacts are under way to secure the release of three Israeli soldiers and an Israeli businessman held by Hezbollah in Lebanon, but said no breakthrough had been made.

Israel is "attempting through a number of channels to bring the captives home," Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh told Israel Army Radio on Monday. "I am sorry to say there has yet to be a breakthrough."

Sneh was commenting on various reports, mostly from Lebanon, of progress in negotiations with the Shi'ite guerrilla group Hezbollah that could lead to an exchange of the Israelis for 19 Arabs held by Israel.

Both a Hezbollah official and Israeli President Moshe Katsav were quoted over the weekend as saying Germany has been mediating the efforts.

Reports Monday said the exchange could take place by the end of the month. According to the reports, initial progress was made during talks that German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder held in Lebanon in October.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami left Monday for France, where he reportedly was to discuss the prisoner exchange issue with his German counterpart.

Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, the Israeli army's chief of staff, would not comment on the matter. Mofaz met Monday with families of the three kidnapped soldiers: Benny Avraham, Adi Avitan and Omar Souad.

Hezbollah abducted the three in a cross-border attack in the disputed Shabaa Farms area in early October. Shortly after, Hezbollah kidnapped an Israeli businessman, Elhanan Tannenbaum, who also serves as a reserve colonel.

Efforts to obtain information on the well being of the soldiers have been fruitless.

Foreign press reports previously suggested that at least one of the kidnapped soldiers would have died of wounds sustained in the attack unless treated immediately afterward.

Prior to their meeting with Mofaz, the soldiers' families met with the representative in Israel of the International Red Cross.

The families urged the official to press for information on their sons' fates. They also presented the official with a Torah, a Koran for Souad, who is a Bedouin, and a menorah, which they asked be conveyed to the soldiers.

An uncle of Souad said the families had not received any new information regarding the soldiers.

Germany previously helped mediate an exchange of the remains of Israeli navy commandos killed in Lebanon for those of Hezbollah fighters.

Among the Lebanese prisoners held by Israel are Sheik Abdel Karim Obeid and Mustafa Dirani, top operatives of Hezbollah and a rival Shi'ite militia, Amal.

The two were kidnapped by Israeli commando units from their homes in 1989 and 1994, respectively.

Israel released most other Lebanese prisoners earlier this year.

But the Jewish state has continued to hold Obeid and Dirani as bargaining chips for information on Ron Arad, the Israeli air force navigator taken captive after his plane was shot down over Lebanon in 1986.

American Jewish groups also are joining the effort to free the kidnapped soldiers, as well as other Israeli soldiers who have gone missing in action in Lebanon over the years.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the United Jewish Communities and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs are dedicating the Shabbat of Chanukah on Dec. 23 to the captured and missing Israelis.

The organizations are mobilizing schools, synagogues and groups to wear blue ribbons as a sign of solidarity, and send letters to Capitol Hill asking U.S. lawmakers to write to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the Red Cross to help secure the release of the soldiers. □

(JTA correspondent Sharon Samber in Washington contributed to this story.)

Anti-Semitic candidate trounced in Romania, but his party remains

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — One of Europe's most notorious right-wing extremists lost the runoff vote in Romania's presidential elections, but he vowed to continue making himself heard.

In Sunday's second round vote, Corneliu Vadim Tudor lost by a 2-1 margin to Ion Iliescu, who served as Romania's president from 1990 to 1996. Still, Tudor's Greater Romania Party will become Romania's main opposition force in Parliament as a result of its showing in an earlier round of balloting in late November.

Vowing not to go quietly into obscurity, Tudor warned in a post-election statement, "This anti-national government will find it difficult to overlook us in Parliament."

A flamboyant publisher infamous for printing anti-Semitic and other xenophobic diatribes, Tudor, 51, claimed fraud and vowed to contest the vote.

Iliescu, the 70-year-old former Communist who scored the crushing victory over Tudor, told cheering supporters Sunday night that the vote was "a categorical rejection of extremism, xenophobia and totalitarian temptations at a crucial moment for the nation."

"We promise we are going to accelerate the process of the dignified integration of Romania into the European Union and NATO," he said. "As the head of state, I will assure that this promise becomes reality."

Iliescu joined Jewish and other observers in warning that Tudor could gain ground if the nation's catastrophic economic and social problems are not resolved.

"The situation in the country is dramatic," Iliescu told Reuters, warning that Tudor could "gain politically" if the new Romanian government fails "to give satisfaction to the people that there are possibilities to improve the economic situation."

With more than 98 percent of the vote counted, Iliescu had nearly 67 percent, compared with Tudor's 33 percent.

In first round elections Nov. 26, Iliescu came in first out of a dozen candidates, with Tudor a surprise second. A spokesman for the European Council of Jewish Communities said Tudor's strength among one-third of the Romanian populace is part of a worrying trend in Europe of growing support for far-right parties.

"Of course, we are happy that Tudor did not come through with his presidential bid," the spokesman said. "But it is clear that nationalist movements are strong now in many countries — in Switzerland, France, Austria as well as Romania."

"Building democracy is a process that takes years," he said. "We need vigilance and education in order to face the situation in Romania and also to fight it."

Tudor appealed to angry young people desperate for a change in their poverty-stricken country, where cronyism, corruption and economic failure mark the political mainstream.

Iliescu was deeply unpopular during his previous term as president and was voted out of office by liberals in 1996.

But Romania's media and liberal parties threw their weight behind him in the latest voting, warning bluntly that Romania would suffer political and economic isolation if Tudor won. International Jewish organizations also had warned of repercussions if Tudor became president.

Many voters in fact chose Iliescu as the lesser of two evils.

"He was the 'better bad,'" said one Jewish source.

A newspaper commentator compared the vote to a choice "between AIDS and cancer." And, as one of Romania's newspapers said in a headline Monday, "Better a retiree than a dictator."

Tudor's crushing defeat in Sunday's runoff was a relief for Romanian Jews, who had feared for the future of both their country and their community had he won.

About 12,000 Jews, mainly elderly, live in Romania. About half live in Bucharest, the capital.

The Romanian Jewish Federation issued a statement before Sunday's vote saying that Tudor had been "a staunch enemy of the Jews" in Romania for many years and had repeatedly displayed anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

This included backing the rehabilitation of Romania's pro-Nazi World War II leader Ion Antonescu, and lavishing insults on figures such as Romania's late Chief Rabbi Moses Rosen.

"It is the duty of the federation, which has always fought the dangerous revival of extremism, to condemn the anti-Semitic deeds and words of Corneliu Vadim Tudor," the statement said. "Mr. Tudor displays a xenophobia which endangers normal cohabitation between the majority and national minorities."

"We issue a warning both in Romania and abroad against Tudor's xenophobic activities, which aim to fool naive people and to poison relations" among different ethnic groups, the statement said.

During his previous tenure as president, Iliescu took concrete steps to commemorate the Holocaust and support Jewish causes.

He met with Jewish leaders at home and abroad, and he made repeated statements committing his government to fight anti-Semitism.

During the 1996 presidential campaign, which Iliescu lost, right-wing extremists, including Tudor's party, accused Iliescu and his allies of favoritism toward Jews. They also alleged that the then-U.S. ambassador, Alfred Moses, who is Jewish, was trying to make secret deals with Iliescu to foster Jewish interests.

Just the same — reflecting the murkiness and cynicism of Romanian politics — Jews at the time expressed skepticism at some of Iliescu's actions, claiming they were aimed at winning political support from abroad. □

Dutch Jews receive stolen papers

PRAGUE (JTA) — Czech officials have presented the Dutch state archives with Jewish documents the Nazis stole from Amsterdam during World War II.

The seven boxes document Jewish life in the Netherlands from 1796 to 1942 and may have been destined for the museum of European Jewry that Hitler planned to build in Prague after he exterminated Europe's Jews.

The documents were transported to Prague during the war. They only recently resurfaced. The Dutch Jewish community, which is expected to take control of the documents next year, regards them as vital for interpreting Jewish religious laws.

The circumstances of the documents' disappearance remain unclear, but they are believed to have been appropriated by Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler's chief SS official in wartime Prague.

The archives, written in Dutch and Hebrew, include population lists, communal inventories and correspondence among the Netherlands' Jewish communities. □