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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

NEWS ANALYSIS

Foreign affairs could play key role as Bush seeks national consensus

By Matthew E. Berger and Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — When George W. Bush moves into the White House next month, his most difficult task will be to rally a fractured electorate and Congress around his presidency and his agenda.

Even though domestic issues dominated his campaign, the 43rd president may find more consensus on foreign policy issues, including the Middle East, an area he may have no choice but to confront.

“When presidents need to look presidential, they turn to foreign policy, because it is where they can act unilaterally,” said Lester Munson, spokesman for the House International Relations Committee.

Bush may want to leave foreign policy to others, but “he may not have the option in light of the tumultuous events in the Middle East,” said Howard Kohr, executive director of the pro-Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Kohr recalled the elections of former President George Bush and of President Clinton, when people speculated that neither one would become very involved in foreign affairs.

But reacting to events in the Middle East, both ultimately became key foreign policy players. Bush led the country in the Gulf War in 1991, and Clinton became a major figure in the Middle East peace process.

George W. Bush, too, may be forced to take a proactive role, given the current situation in the region — an all-but failed peace process and a mounting death toll from the Palestinian uprising. For Jewish groups focused on Israel and the Middle East, such as AIPAC, that focus would be welcome.

Others more involved with domestic concerns are strategizing how to get their issues on the agenda as Bush and a new, deeply divided Congress figure out a way to work together.

A new administration “doesn’t change our agenda; it might change our strategy,” said Reva Price, Washington representative for the Jewish Council of Public Affairs.

Officials of the umbrella organization huddled Tuesday to debate which parts of their agenda could make it to the floor of the U.S. Congress, given the anticipated congressional gridlock.

In light of the anticipated gridlock on domestic issues, JCPA officials discussed focusing on foreign policy issues — including aid for Israel, traditionally a bipartisan issue, and anti-terrorism measures, Price said. Still, JCPA and other Jewish groups here do not intend to abandon their issues, only perhaps reprioritize them.

On the domestic front, Price said JCPA may focus on education issues, an area Bush has set as a priority. JCPA will seek more federal money for education programs and more help for failing schools.

United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization of local federations and the central fund-raising and social services agency for the Jewish community, is also carefully studying its own agenda and attempting to match up what is most workable with a Bush administration. There are issues that Jewish groups and Bush agree on, said Diana Aviv, UJC’s vice president of public policy.

Bush is sympathetic toward immigration reform, for example, and UJC would “be able to do business with him,” she said.

UJC has been a strong advocate of restoring immigrant benefits that were lost

Report: Clinton may make last try

The United States is considering sending an envoy to the Middle East in an attempt to renew Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Israel Radio reported, quoting senior sources in Jerusalem.

The U.S. official may be Secretary of State Madeleine Albright or President Clinton, making an effort before his term ends Jan. 20. [Page 2]

Latvia seeks Kalejs’ extradition

Responding to an extradition request from Latvia, Australian officials have detained a war crimes suspect. [Page 3]

Gaza gun battle erupts

A nine-hour battle erupted near a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip when Palestinians reportedly confronted a group of Israeli soldiers. [Page 2]

Army group won’t go to Israel

The Jewish Community Centers Association canceled plans to send 37 U.S. military personnel on a trip to Israel this winter because of a State Department warning against traveling there. The warning, which prohibits U.S. government employees from traveling to parts of the region, convinced the group to cancel the Jewish personnel’s participation in the trip, which is part of the Birthright Israel program.

Population survey delayed

A population study of American Jewry is expected to take longer and cost more than originally anticipated. The National Jewish Population Survey, which is sponsored by the United Jewish Communities, is having difficulty finding enough Jewish households willing to be interviewed.

UJC officials now expect the 5,000 interviews to be completed by late spring of next year. They also say they do not know how much the study, originally budgeted at \$5 million, will cost.

D.C. federation exec resigns

The executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington announced that he is resigning the post he has held since 1984.

Ted Farber plans to remain as the federation’s top professional for six months, and make himself available afterward to ensure a smooth transition.

MIDEAST FOCUS

'Netanyahu bill' gets first OK

Israel's Knesset gave preliminary approval to a bill that would allow former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to run for the premiership in elections slated for early next year.

The bill, which amends the current law to allow any citizen to run for the premiership in a special election, must still pass several more votes in Parliament before becoming law.

Lebanese to remain in custody

Israel's Supreme Court granted the state permission to extend the detention of two Lebanese militia leaders abducted by Israeli commandos.

The court said the release of Sheik Abdel Karim Obeid, a Hezbollah leader, and Mustafa Dirani, a leader of the Amal movement, could endanger national security.

The decision came as Israeli officials indicated that the two may be freed in exchange for four Israelis kidnapped by Hezbollah in October.

Lawmaker charges 'harassment'

Israeli police summoned an Arab legislator for questioning over remarks he made in June praising Hezbollah for resisting Israel's presence in southern Lebanon, his office said Wednesday. Azmi Beshara, a candidate for prime minister in Israel's May 1999 election, described the police move as "political harassment" against leaders of the Israeli Arab community.

Meanwhile, another Israeli Arab legislator called on Druse and Bedouin soldiers to stop serving in the Israeli army.

Barak may close Bethlehem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak may impose a closure on the Palestinian-ruled city of Bethlehem during Christmas if Palestinian gunmen do not stop firing on the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo, the Israeli daily Ma'ariv reported.

under welfare reform legislation in 1996 and of easing the process of attaining legal status for undocumented residents, including Jews from the former Soviet Union.

Aviv also said her group would focus on legislation providing prescription drug coverage for seniors because that is an area Bush has indicated as a priority.

The issue is not as important to UJC as other issues, such as home health care for seniors, Aviv said, but "we want to be practical and realistic."

There are still a lot of factors that need to play out before a formal strategy becomes clear for Jewish groups, including Bush's appointment of Cabinet members and the remaining actions of the lame-duck Congress.

The Cabinet appointments of former members of Congress who have good working relationships with Jewish organizations may help tailor the strategy for dealing with the new administration.

Price said, for example, if Rep. Rick Lazio (R-N.Y.) is named to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development, JCPA may put more focus on issues such as housing for the elderly. □

As crisis rages, Clinton considers a final push for Middle East peace

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As Israeli-Palestinian violence continues unabated, reports emerged that U.S. officials are making a last-ditch effort to revive peace talks before President Clinton leaves office next month.

Senior sources in Jerusalem say the United States is considering sending an envoy to the region in an attempt to renew the talks, Israel Radio reported.

According to Wednesday's report, the U.S. official may be Secretary of State Madeleine Albright or Clinton himself.

The report appeared after U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross met Tuesday in Morocco with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to assess the possibility of renewed talks. Sources, however, described the meeting as difficult and disappointing.

Earlier reports had said the United States would not consider launching any new mediation effort and would instead focus on getting the two sides to reduce the violence. The Israeli daily Ma'ariv, however, reported that Clinton told Prime Minister Ehud Barak in a phone conversation this week that he is prepared to undertake one last peace mission before leaving office.

After Barak resigned this week, setting in motion early elections next year, his electoral hopes lie in reaching a deal he can present to the public, turning the election into a referendum on his peace policies. Israeli sources downplay the likelihood of any agreement, putting it at less than 50 percent, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported.

Barak would face sharp opposition in the Knesset, which has already given preliminary approval to a bill barring a prime minister who lacks a parliamentary majority — such as Barak — from signing, or even initialing, international agreements.

In addition, some analysts have noted, Arafat probably would be reluctant to sign an agreement or make any concessions to an Israeli prime minister who could shortly be voted out of office.

Meanwhile, Ma'ariv reported that Jordan and Egypt are trying to come up with a bridging proposal to revive the Israeli-Palestinian talks.

According to the paper, Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami discussed the proposal in Paris this week with Egyptian presidential adviser Osama el-Baz.

Efforts at mediation have been hampered by the ongoing violence, however. On Wednesday, a mob of Palestinians reportedly confronted a group of Israeli soldiers near the Khan Yunis refugee camp in the Gaza Strip in what became a nine-hour battle.

Four Palestinian policemen died in the fighting, described as one of the fiercest clashes since violence erupted in late September.

In another incident Wednesday, Hamas officials said an unarmed member of the militant group was shot and killed by Israeli troops in Hebron.

Israeli army officials, who reported exchanges of fire between armed Palestinians and Israeli troops in Hebron, said they were still investigating the claim. □



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JEWISH WORLD

College flip-flops on Israel credit

A U.S. university reversed an earlier decision to deny academic credit to students planning to study next semester at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Officials with the Israeli Consulate in New York said George Washington University's policy came in response to the U.S. State Department warning against travel to Israel, but after the president of the Washington school met with an Israeli ambassador Wednesday, he decided to approve the credit as long as students agree not to hold the university liable should they be harmed in Jerusalem.

Commandments display barred

Displaying the Ten Commandments in front of a government building is unconstitutional, a U.S. appeals court ruled.

In its ruling, which overturned a lower court decision, the appeals court said Wednesday it sought to prevent government from sponsoring or endorsing a particular perspective on religious matters.

The case originated in Elkhart, Ind.

U.S. to watch Goussinsky case

The U.S. State Department said it would monitor the case of a Russian Jewish media magnate arrested Tuesday in Spain. Meanwhile, several Jewish groups asked Spain's Ministry of Justice to release Vladimir Goussinsky, head of the Russian Jewish Congress, who is wanted in Russia on fraud charges.

The World Jewish Congress said Wednesday that the speaker of Israel's Knesset, Avraham Burg, plans to go to Spain next week to seek Goussinsky's release.

Goussinsky claims Russian President Vladimir Putin is attacking him in an attempt to prevent his media outlets from criticizing Kremlin policies.

Albright honors Hungary victims

During a one-day trip to Hungary, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright paid tribute to the 600,000 Hungarian Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

Albright placed a wreath at Budapest's Holocaust Memorial, located in the courtyard of the Dohany Street Synagogue.

Faith-based groups attack racism

A coalition of faith-based organizations declared racism "an evil that must be eradicated" and released guidelines for holding interfaith forums on racial injustice and reconciliation.

The groups, led by the National Conference for Community and Justice, said they are following up on President Clinton's 1998 race initiative, which sought to eliminate bias and bigotry on both the local and national levels.

British store shrugs off boycott threat from Muslims

By Richard Allen Greene

LONDON (JTA) — A British department store chain is vowing not to be swayed by Muslim calls to boycott the company because it does business with Israel.

"We are a global player and we support many countries, including Israel," a Marks & Spencer spokeswoman told JTA.

"We have a history and a background with Israel that we are very proud of," Cheryl Kuczynski said.

Two groups, the Islamic Human Rights Commission and Action Alert, staged small protests outside two of the chain's stores recently.

The groups plan to continue picketing every Saturday, a commission spokesman said. Nafeez Ahmed described the protests as "an example to other companies that are doing business with Israel."

The commission has over 2,000 members in the United Kingdom.

Action Alert is a new group of activists who work mostly via the Internet.

The protests to date have been very small, Kuczynski said.

"We were anticipating protests at six stores last weekend and only had two," including at the chain's flagship store at London's Marble Arch, Kuczynski said.

But Ahmed said the protests had "only just started."

The clothier bought about \$325 million worth of merchandise from Israel last year. That figure includes products produced in Jordan and exported via Israel, Kuczynski said.

Marks & Spencer, probably the U.K.'s most venerable mid-range department store, was founded in 1884 by Russian Jewish refugee Michael Marks. □

Latvia requests extradition of World War II crimes suspect

By Jeremy Jones

SYDNEY (JTA) — Responding to an extradition request from Latvia, Australian officials have detained a war crimes suspect allegedly involved in the deaths of up to 30,000 Jews during World War II.

Officials on Wednesday arrested Konrad Kalejs and later released him, but they took his passport to prevent him from fleeing the country.

Justice Minister Amanda Vanstone said Wednesday "the normal extradition process would be followed" now that Australia has received the extradition request from Latvia, where Kalejs would face "one charge of genocide and one charge of war crimes."

For years, Kalejs has faced charges of being involved in the wartime slaughter of civilians when he served as an officer in Latvia's pro-Nazi Arajs Kommando unit.

The militia is held directly responsible for the deaths of some 100,000 civilians, including 30,000 Jews, between 1941 and 1943.

About 75,000 Jews, more than 90 percent of Latvia's prewar Jewish community, were murdered by the Nazis, with help from local residents.

Kalejs has said he was ordered by German officers to head an Arajs Kommando unit, but he denied being present when civilians were shot.

U.S. and Jewish groups pressured Latvia to extradite Kalejs for trial after he was found by Nazi hunters in a retirement home in Britain late last year.

Kalejs, 87, signaled through his lawyer that he intends to fight the extradition because of his age and health.

Prosecutors in Latvia say that between 1942 and 1943 Kalejs led a guard unit at a slave labor camp outside Riga that starved, tortured and murdered Jews, Gypsies and others.

If the extradition request is successful, he will be the first suspected Nazi collaborator tried in post-Communist Latvia. □

Jewish reaction to voucher case shows changing view of education

By Marilyn H. Karfeld
Cleveland Jewish News

CLEVELAND (JTA) — Most major Jewish organizations are hailing this week's federal appeals court decision that struck down a Cleveland school voucher program as unconstitutional.

But some groups are not cheering as loudly as they once might have, showing how the Jewish approach to issues of church and state has evolved over the years alongside socioeconomic and religious changes in the community.

A three-judge panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled 2-1 on Dec. 11 that Cleveland's school vouchers principally went to religious institutions, violating the U.S. Constitution's separation of church and state.

As other states debate and establish controversial voucher programs, the Ohio ruling very likely may become a test case ultimately reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Orthodox Jews, who typically send their children to Jewish day schools, long have supported publicly financed tuition vouchers.

Opposition to such programs traditionally has been strong among Conservative and Reform Jews, historic opponents of state aid to parochial schools.

Now, as growing numbers of Conservative and Reform Jews also send their kids to Jewish day schools, members of these two streams are re-examining their earlier anti-voucher stance.

"The Jewish community doesn't look at the church-state issue the same way it used to," said Joel Ratner, Cleveland-based regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, which filed a friend-of-the-court brief opposing the voucher program.

"Vouchers is the issue where that change is most felt. Clearly the consensus that existed in previous decades has broken down."

Proponents say the educational choice provided by the five-year-old Cleveland voucher program is a way for low-income children to escape failing inner-city public schools, but the judges ruled that the program actually offered parents few options.

No suburban schools, and few nonreligious ones, accept the Ohio vouchers.

About 96 percent of the 3,700 participating students use the state aid of up to \$2,500 to attend parochial schools, primarily Catholic ones.

The "voucher program has the primary effect of advancing religion, and it constitutes an endorsement of religion and sectarian education," wrote Judge Eric Clay.

While there may be a greater diversity of opinion within the Jewish community, Jewish organizations reacted to the decision along traditional lines, with Orthodox institutions deploring the ruling and the remainder applauding it.

Monday's ruling "is a decisive rebuttal to those who believe that vouchers are compatible with religious liberty," said Phil Baum, executive director of the American Jewish Congress.

"The court's decision bolsters those who oppose efforts to erode the cherished constitutional principle of church-state separation with respect to public funding of religious schools," said Bruce Ramer, president of the American Jewish Committee.

In the opposing camp is David Zwiebel, executive vice

president for governmental and public affairs of Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox organization. Agudath Israel filed a brief seeking to uphold the voucher program.

"Those who are committed to do all in their power to preserve the public school monopoly and to prevent parents from having meaningful educational options will surely have reason to be pleased with the outcome of this case," Zwiebel said.

The diversity of opinion about the voucher dispute and, in a larger sense, the entire issue of church-state separation displays deep changes in Jews' views of education, said Joyce Garver Keller, a lobbyist for Ohio Jewish Communities, a consortium of Ohio Jewish agencies.

No longer new immigrants seeing public school education as a way to break down barriers and grab a piece of the American dream, Jews today are more concerned that their children may be abandoning their heritage, Garver Keller said.

"Under a different set of circumstances, Jews" saw "public tax money going to pay for religious education that was Christian," she said.

"There was a feeling it wasn't appropriate for public tax dollars to be spent to promote religion, and someone else's religion. The question today is different. Tax money for religious schools today," some Jews now feel, "is not to promote religion but to allow Jews to go to Jewish schools."

Jews also are concerned with the deteriorating quality of urban schools and the unfair plight of poor children, whose parents can't afford private school, Garver Keller said. These Jews see vouchers as a way to deliver quality education.

"There's a definite change in how the Jewish community views vouchers," said Cleveland attorney Harry Brown, president of Agudath Israel of Cleveland and vice president of the national organization. The Jewish view of vouchers has changed as Jews have become more aware of the problem of Jewish assimilation, he said, and as Jewish day schools that address that concern have flourished.

Supreme Court decisions have held that public dollars can pay for therapy and remedial services and, most recently, computers for religious schools.

"There's ample room within the constitutional separation of church and state to permit vouchers," Brown said.

Cleveland civil rights attorney Kenneth Myers, who has written about the Cleveland voucher program for *Time* magazine, said the "drift in Jewish opinion on vouchers is related to the viability of public schools, rather than to the church-state issue. The only reason that anybody perceives a need for vouchers is because of failures of public schools. The question of who pays is somewhat secondary."

But who pays is precisely the constitutional issue.

No Jewish children or Jewish day schools participate in the Cleveland voucher program. But Yossi Prager, executive director of the Avi Chai Foundation, which funds scholarships to Jewish day schools of all denominations, said voucher programs can allow more families to send their children to Jewish day schools.

In Milwaukee, school vouchers last year paid the tuition of 77 of the 168 students at Yeshiva Elementary School, which received \$375,000 from the state of Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld the program, which pays for needy children to attend private and parochial schools, and the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear appeals. □