



Daily News Bulletin

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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Egypt summit uncertain

Israeli and Palestinian officials said that a meeting between Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat may not take place Thursday as planned. The two leaders were slated to hold a joint meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheik, but Barak said Wednesday he may not go.

He added that he will base his decision on how Arafat responds to President Clinton's proposal for a final peace accord.

In Washington, Clinton said he had received the Palestinian response, adding only that he would study it.

Palestinian officials informed Washington that they have some reservations about Clinton's peace proposals, The Associated Press reported.

In a letter they sent Clinton on Wednesday, the Palestinians sought details about planned land transfers, opposed a proposed Israeli-controlled corridor from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and asked for control of archaeological sites underneath Jerusalem's Temple Mount, which are believed to contain the remains of the ancient Jewish temples.

Bush team gets Mideast briefings

Clinton administration officials briefed members of the incoming Bush administration on the status of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

National Security Adviser Sandy Berger briefed his designated successor, Condoleezza Rice, and Middle East envoy Dennis Ross met with Secretary of State-designate Colin Powell.

Russia gives Iran mixed message

Russia's defense minister said his country will abide by international agreements precluding arms sales to Iran.

But just the same, Igor Sergeyev said during a visit to Iran on Wednesday, such agreements will not prevent Russia from making some arms deals with Tehran.

Because of the New Year's holiday, the JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Tuesday, Jan. 2.

NEWS ANALYSIS

To approve or not to approve?

Only time will reveal that answer

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Will the Israeli people approve the peace agreement evolving between their prime minister, Ehud Barak, and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat?

That is the question exercising Israel, the Middle East and much of the world this last week of the year 2000.

The impact of the envisioned changes, not only on the lives of Jerusalemites but on all Israelis, are so vast and unprecedented that the tools of political prediction may be entirely inadequate.

In any case, Barak and Arafat were scheduled to meet Thursday in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, their first meeting since a failed summit there in October.

The agreement under discussion, encapsulated in a package of compromise ideas laid out over the weekend by President Clinton, aims to resolve some of the most difficult issues in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, including Jerusalem, borders, refugees and settlements.

The agreement would divide control of Jerusalem based on Jewish and Arab populations, with Israel ceding sovereignty over the Temple Mount to the Palestinians.

In addition, a Palestinian state would be created on some 95 percent of the territory of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with Israel giving the Palestinians additional land alongside Gaza in the Negev Desert.

In exchange, Israel would annex land adjoining its 1967 border with the West Bank. Most of the post-1967 Jewish settlements have been built in these areas.

The Palestinian refugees, in turn, would be absorbed into other Arab countries, resettled in the Palestinian-ruled areas, or given financial compensation. In addition, Israel would consider limited return within the pre-1967 borders.

The question of whether Israelis eventually will back the deal is predicated on the assumption that both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority will give their assent. While the Israeli government appeared inclined to accept the ideas in principle, the Palestinians seemed more hesitant.

Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, who led the Israeli team in the talks with Clinton and the Palestinians in Washington over the weekend, said Tuesday that Israel "can live with" Clinton's proposals on the Palestinian refugees' demand to realize their "right of return."

The Palestinian leadership was deliberating night and day this week, facing powerful resistance to the proposals from the refugee community, especially in the camps in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

Palestinian leaders said Wednesday that they had reservations about the proposals. Reports conflicted, with some saying that the Palestinian Authority would reject the plan, and others saying only that they would request further clarification of its main points. The international community, working at less than full throttle during the holiday period, was bringing its influence to bear on the P.A. leadership.

Israel also was seeking to mobilize Egypt and Jordan to pressure Arafat.

Clinton had asked for the two sides' answers by Wednesday, but he will likely have to wait at least until the weekend. Clinton can hardly wait much longer, however, as he gives up the keys to the Oval Office on Jan. 20.

If the two sides respond positively, the next step will probably be for Clinton to

MIDEAST FOCUS

Possible accord sparks protests

Right-wing demonstrators protested in Jerusalem, driving trucks and buses around government buildings as the Cabinet met Wednesday to discuss President Clinton's proposals for an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

Supporters of the far-right Temple Mount Faithful demonstrated in Jerusalem's Old City. Earlier in the day, Jordan Valley residents briefly took over an Israel Defense Force outpost in a "symbolic" protest against reported plans to yield Israeli sovereignty in the region.

Court refuses to free 2 Shi'ites

Israel's Supreme Court said two Shi'ite leaders held by Israel will not be freed as long as Hezbollah continues to hold Israelis captive.

The five justices said Wednesday that Hezbollah's abduction of three Israeli soldiers and an Israeli businessman in October provides more than sufficient proof that the militants are continuing their anti-Israel activities.

The court added that there is ample reason for concern that Sheik Abdel Karim Obeid and Mustafa Dirani would join such activities if freed. The two have been held without trial since their seizure by Israel in 1988 and 1994, respectively.

Newborn gets free tuition

An Israeli couple found a novel way to pay for their son's college education: giving birth on the university steps. Livnat Levy and her husband, Zion, were heading to Soroka Hospital in Beersheba when she was overcome with labor pains near the campus of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Three students who had served as medics in the army delivered the baby. University President Avishai Braverman promised the newborn a scholarship for his bachelor's degree studies, the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot reported.

meet with each of the leaders in Washington to work on last-minute demands that both are likely to make in an effort to improve the package.

If there is progress among the leaders, lower-level negotiators will work out wording, finalize maps, formulate security arrangements and agree on time lines, all so that there can be a grand ceremony at the White House before Clinton departs.

President-elect George W. Bush would also presumably be there to signal his backing for what inevitably would be a long and problematic implementation process. What is being debated now is only a framework agreement; details would have to be negotiated, a process that could take up to a year.

In any case, even a White House signing ceremony would only mark an initialing of the deal. The agreement has no validity unless approved by the two peoples.

On the Palestinian side, that approval process could take the form of a plebiscite.

More likely, however, the leadership organs of the Palestine Liberation Organization would be convened to consider the historic accord that Arafat has brought.

On the Israeli side, the process is clear-cut: On Feb. 6, Barak faces Likud Party Chairman Ariel Sharon in elections for prime minister.

For Barak, victory would mean that the nation has endorsed the agreement.

For Sharon, victory would mean that the electorate spurns Barak's peace deal.

The opinion polls show Barak trailing badly now, but closing the gap significantly if he can clinch the peace deal before Feb. 6.

Barak dismisses those projections. He claims he can win even if the deal slips away, and he will win in a landslide if the White House ceremony takes place.

That, he says, is not because the voters will be impressed by the pomp and circumstance of the event, but because the Israeli nation yearns, above all else, for peace.

Barak may be right.

The Likud's vehement protests against the ongoing negotiations suggest that — beyond their ideological opposition to the proposed concessions — strategists on the right also believe a peace deal would sway large sections of the public.

Ultimately, however, this is virgin territory, and even the most sophisticated polling and most acute political instincts may be way off base.

Israeli observers who favor the government's policy point to similarly unanticipated cataclysms in the past that swept along the public:

- Despite a decade of solemn declarations that it would not cede all of the Sinai Peninsula, Israel under Menachem Begin did precisely that in a peace deal with Egypt. Between 1979 and 1982, the government dismantled a string of settlements in the north and south of the peninsula.

- In 1993, despite three decades of solemn declarations that it would not recognize or negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Organization, Israel under Yitzhak Rabin did precisely that, signing the Oslo Accords that entailed mutual recognition and set in motion the present peace process.

In both cases, politicians were astounded at the relative ease with which the public came to terms with the new situation, so different from the years of official rhetoric.

But Jerusalem, and especially the Temple Mount, may prove different.

"Have you no red lines at all, no values that are beyond any deal?" an emotional TV interviewer asked Justice Minister Yossi Beilin on Tuesday.

Beilin, a key architect of the peace process, responded angrily.

"Israel at peace, its capital, Jerusalem, recognized by the whole world, that is a fundamental Zionist value for me," Beilin replied.

Beilin argued that Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount, imposed unilaterally in 1967, is "virtual rather than real." In practice, Israel does not allow Jews to pray on the Mount, and the area is run by the Muslim Wakf, or religious authority.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert this week accused Barak of "duping and swindling" the nation by promising in the 1999 election to preserve the integrity of Jerusalem, and now negotiating its division.

He compared the premier to the Roman general Titus, who destroyed the Jewish Temple and burned the city in the year 70.

With that kind of chasm between leading politicians of the two camps, and with the electorate fragmented into such disparate sectors — Orthodox, Russian immigrants, Israeli Arabs and others — no one can confidently predict how this fateful decision will go. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Chicago cantor denies charges that he and his wife ran brothel

By Ruth Gesmer Silverman

CHICAGO (JTA) — A Chicago-area cantor accused of running a brothel has pleaded not guilty to the charges.

In a brief appearance Dec. 26 in Cook County Circuit Court, Cantor Joel Gordon, 52, and his wife Alison Ginsberg, 23, pleaded not guilty to charges of keeping a house of prostitution and, in her case, also to committing acts of prostitution. In the small, crowded courtroom of Judge Lawrence Terrell, Gordon and Ginsberg requested additional time to review extensive discovery evidence, gathered during a 10-week investigation by an undercover policewoman. The next court date was set for Feb. 27.

The investigation focused on three Cook County apartments used by employees of Golden Touch Massage, said by the Cook County Sheriff's Police to be a cover for a prostitution operation. The officer applied for a job with Golden Touch and was told she could make between \$600 to \$1,100 a day, but the activities would be "illegal," the sheriff's department said.

Gordon and Ginsberg were arrested Nov. 21 along with several others. Gordon resigned from the Cantors' Assembly a few days later. Neither the couple nor their attorney answered questions as they left the courtroom. Gordon was a cantor at other local Reform congregations before serving Congregation Shirat Emet, in the Chicago suburb of Buffalo Grove, Ill. Shirat Emet disbanded earlier this year.

Two former congregation members attended the Dec. 26 court proceedings.

Sam Bell, an attorney, said, "all who put their trust in him and who knew him feel incredibly betrayed."

Howard Peritz, another lawyer and one of the original members of Shirat Emet, said of Gordon: "He changed from the person we had all known. He was quick to fly off the handle, and rumors about inappropriate behavior were around for years. We now realize that in starting a congregation around a man, we were canonizing him." □

Swiss extradite suspect linked to Argentine bombing

By Fredy Rom

BERN (JTA) — Switzerland has extradited to Argentina a man accused of giving false evidence in connection with the 1994 car bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

Two Argentine police officers accompanied the accused, Wilson Roberto Dos Santos, on a flight out of Zurich late last Friday, Swiss authorities said. Argentine authorities accuse Dos Santos of falsely claiming to police that he tipped off a local diplomat about the planned attack on the AMIA center four months before it happened. The attack killed 86 people and wounded some 300.

According to police, Dos Santos claimed his information came from a former Iranian girlfriend who allegedly had links to terrorist groups.

The woman was arrested in 1998 in connection with the AMIA attack and the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, which killed 29 people. She was later released for lack of evidence.

In another development, a Swiss police source told JTA that a botched wiretapping by Israel's Mossad intelligence agency in 1998 was linked to the 1992 embassy attack.

Five Mossad agents were caught in 1998 as they tried to wiretap the phone conversations of a businessman living in an apartment near the Swiss capital of Bern.

On that same day, Swiss officials had gotten a request from Argentina about the businessman, the police source said.

Meanwhile, Swiss investigators are saying that an arms dealer named Monzer al-Kasser was responsible for buying the explosives and the car used in the embassy bombing. Argentine police say Kasser was in Argentina at the time of the embassy attack as a guest of then-President Carlos Menem. □

Hungary, Jewish leaders ink pact

Hungary signed an accord with local Jewish leaders "to promote the political, social and economic stability of Hungarian Jewry."

The signing ceremony took place last Friday, the first day of Chanukah, in the nation's Parliament.

Among its measures, the accord states that the Hungarian government will back efforts to have Holocaust studies taught in the schools and to have victims of the Holocaust "regularly and in due manner remembered."

Hillel creates shaliach post

Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life plans to create a new staff position for a shaliach, or Israeli emissary, to assist North American college campuses with Israel-related programming.

N.Y. campaign to help Israel

New Yorkers contributed more than \$80,000 to provide Israeli medical response teams and teachers in the West Bank with bulletproof vests and helmets.

Assemblyman Dov Hikind (D-N.Y.), who launched the fund-raising campaign, said "New Yorkers who came forward to participate did it with big hearts, not big bank accounts."

Quisling HQ to be Shoah center

The former headquarters of Norway's Nazi-era puppet leader are slated to become a center for Holocaust and minority studies. Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg said the project, at the former headquarters of Vidkun Quisling, would underscore the nation's commitment to "tolerance, human dignity and respect for minorities."

Jews may sue town over eruv

Orthodox Jews are considering filing a federal civil rights suit against a New Jersey town after it decided to dismantle an eruv, or wire permitting observant Jews to carry things on Shabbat, according to the Bergen Record. The decision of the Tenafly council followed several months of debate in which local officials and some other Jews accused the Orthodox community of attempting to construct the eruv without proper permission.

British offer Shoah day guidelines

British officials issued guidelines on how to mark the country's first national Holocaust Memorial Day on Jan. 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

The Board of Deputies, British Jewry's central body, welcomed the guidelines, but emphasized that Holocaust Memorial Day is not a Jewish-led event and does not replace Yom Hashoah as the primary Jewish commemoration of Holocaust victims.

Austria pledges \$150 million, but restitution talks continue

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Austria has agreed to pay an additional installment of \$150 million to compensate Jews whose property was looted by the Nazis, but stopped far short of a comprehensive and conclusive agreement covering all restitution issues.

After a day of talks with Austrian officials in Washington, U.S. Deputy Treasury Secretary Stuart Eizenstat called the Austrian offer a “good-faith effort,” but said more needs to be done in order for Austria to achieve “legal peace.”

The agreement hammered out Dec. 21 called for the additional \$150 million, plus a claims-based component in an amount yet to be determined. Additional health and subsistence benefits for overseas survivors, totaling \$65 million over ten years, were added as well. The new money is in addition to nearly \$150 million Austria promised in October for interim restitution payments. At that time, the government agreed to pay \$7,000 to each of an estimated 21,000 Jews who lost apartments and other property.

The United States has stepped up pressure on Austria to settle a broad range of Holocaust-era issues.

In May, months after a similar settlement by Germany, Austria agreed to pay \$395 million to roughly 150,000 former slave and forced laborers.

Austria has resisted paying for Jewish property looted through the Nazis’ so-called Aryanization program, and has not been forthcoming about either the return of seized lands that are now public or insurance companies that never paid the claims of Holocaust victims. Austrian Ambassador Ernst Sucharipa said at a State Department briefing that there is a realization in Austria that past restitution efforts were “not sufficient and must be improved upon.”

The Claims Conference, an umbrella group that deals with restitution issues and has been spearheading efforts to get Austria to address the property restitution issue, offered stern words about the status of the negotiations.

“We don’t believe that the offer is adequate, and we believe the negotiations have to continue until we can achieve a settlement that will give survivors at least a measure of rough justice,” said Gideon Taylor, the group’s executive vice president.

Declaring that both sides are flexible and getting closer to an agreement, Eizenstat said further negotiations are planned Jan. 10-11 in Vienna and Jan. 15-16 in Washington.

What’s most important, according to Taylor, is to resolve the issues as quickly as possible because of the advanced age of Holocaust survivors.

The Claims Conference fought for, and won, a streamlined process to dispense the first \$150 million payment finalized in October, which covered household property and apartment and small business leases. The conference insisted that Austria speed up the process so the money can start going out to survivors by March.

Hillary Kessler-Godin, a spokesperson for the conference, said that in an early-morning meeting last week, Eizenstat indicated that Austria had said the process might take up to two years.

In addition to the age issue, some feel it imperative to speed up

the process because of Eizenstat’s imminent departure from government when the Clinton administration ends.

It is unclear whether the Bush administration will choose a new point person on Holocaust restitution, but many find it unlikely that the person would work as diligently as Eizenstat. □

Jewish groups concerned by AG-designate Ashcroft’s record

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Before last week’s nomination of former Missouri Sen. John Ashcroft as U.S. Attorney General, it seemed that President-elect George W. Bush’s Cabinet nominees would be moderate, non-controversial figures.

Now, Jewish groups are weighing their positions and deciding whether they might want to join organizations voicing concern and displeasure at the conservative appointee’s record on civil and abortion rights and religious liberties.

Ashcroft, who lost his re-election bid last month but got the nod to head the Justice Department last Friday, is perhaps best known to Jewish organizations for his leadership on charitable choice and his successful fight for its inclusion in 1996 welfare reform laws. Charitable choice — block grants specifically allowing states to use charities or faith-based organizations to provide social services — has become something of a flashpoint for many groups who feel it can violate the separation of church and state and civil rights protections.

What matters is how the role of religious institutions will be expanded in providing social welfare programming, says Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Reform movement’s Religious Action Center.

Pelavin called Ashcroft’s nomination “troubling.” The RAC is collecting information on Ashcroft’s voting record, he said, but formally opposes presidential appointments only in rare instances.

Groups will need to consider not only Ashcroft’s congressional record, but his performance as Missouri’s attorney general from 1976 to 1984 and governor from 1985 to 1993.

The Jewish Federation of St. Louis said it has disagreed with Ashcroft over the years on such issues as church-state separation, gun control and abortion rights issues.

The National Council of Jewish Women views Ashcroft’s position on abortion rights as “extreme.” Sammie Moshenberg, director of the group’s Washington operations, cited Ashcroft’s vote last year against a resolution to reaffirm Roe v. Wade, the landmark Supreme Court decision that upheld a woman’s right to choose to have an abortion.

Also in 1999, Ashcroft voted to ban partial birth abortions. Moshenberg said she is concerned about Ashcroft’s priorities and the resources he will allocate to such programs as the Justice Department’s task force on abortion clinic violence.

Jewish organizations also are concerned about Ashcroft’s record on affirmative action and education. A few years ago, Ashcroft voted to end special funding for businesses owned by women and minorities, and voted against prohibiting job discrimination by sexual orientation.

In 1998, he voted for education savings accounts, a program similar to vouchers. A year earlier, he supported a voucher program in Washington schools. □