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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Rally held to keep Jerusalem one

Tens of thousands of Israelis rallied against proposals promoted by the Clinton administration for Israel to cede parts of Jerusalem to the Palestinians in a peace deal.

Jerusalem is "the heart of our people, and we cannot give away our heart," said legislator Natan Sharansky, one of the organizers of Monday night's rally under the walls of Jerusalem's Old City. [Page 4]

Lauder speaks at Jerusalem rally

The chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations came under attack for speaking at a mass rally in Jerusalem.

Ronald Lauder's comments do not reflect the views of American Jewish organizations, said Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Reform movement's ARZA World Union.

Meanwhile, Israel's new consul general in New York denied having criticized Lauder.

Addressing the issue with Israeli reporters last week, Alon Pinkas reportedly said, "The first thing the consul general of Israel must refrain from is intervening in the internal affairs of the Jewish community. He should try to influence how these issues are dealt with, but not intervene." [Page 4]

Clinton discloses Mideast plan

In his first public disclosure of his proposals for a Middle East peace deal, President Clinton said at a Sunday night dinner hosted by the Israel Policy Forum in New York that Jerusalem should be divided based on the ethnic composition of its neighborhoods, and should be the capital of two states.

He also urged Palestinian leaders to compromise and "not hold out for the impossible more." [Page 1]

U.N. told to stay out of Mideast

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations called on the world body not to get embroiled in Middle East peacemaking efforts.

"When the Middle East comes into the U.N. General Assembly or the Security Council, it works to the detriment of both the issue and the institution," Richard Holbrooke said in an interview before his 17-month tenure as U.N. envoy ends on Jan. 20.

"The United Nations should not be used as a propaganda forum, as it has been."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Clinton suggests his Mideast plan could guide future administrations

By Michael S. Arnold

NEW YORK (JTA) — With only days left before he leaves office, President Clinton went public with an outline for a Middle East peace agreement that he believes will continue to guide future administrations.

His remarks Sunday night to the Israel Policy Forum contradicted earlier hints that Clinton's peace proposals would leave office with him on Jan. 20.

Sensitive to Israeli concerns that any concessions now would only serve as a jumping-off point for future negotiations, Clinton reportedly had told Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, in a fateful session at the White House on Dec. 23, that his offer would expire with his term.

According to a pre-released version of his speech, Clinton was to reiterate this point at the forum's annual gala at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. However, in a deviation from his prepared remarks, Clinton made no mention of a deadline.

In fact, he implied just the opposite, noting that "the fundamental, painful but necessary choices" needed to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "will almost certainly remain the same."

If Israelis and Palestinians "can come up with a different agreement, that would suit me just fine," Clinton told the liberal Jewish group that was founded at the same time that the Oslo peace process got off the ground. "But I doubt it."

Even as he was sending envoy Dennis Ross to the Middle East this week on one last peace effort, Clinton sought to lower expectations of what could be accomplished in his last two weeks in office.

He did not speak of reaching a final peace accord, but pledged only to use "my remaining time to narrow the differences between the parties to the greatest degree possible."

The parameters of his peace proposal "don't answer every question, they just narrow the questions that have to be answered," Clinton said.

Clinton's remarks — in which he criticized the Palestinian Authority for fostering a "culture of violence" and Israel for expanding West Bank settlements — were warmly received by the audience.

Afterward, he spent nearly an hour shaking hands with admirers, including some who called him the best friend the Jewish people ever had, and others who pinched his cheek and kissed him like a grandson.

Foremost among Clinton's proposals was a clear public call for a Palestinian state and the division of Jerusalem along ethnic lines, making the city the capital of both Israel and Palestine.

Excising Arab areas of the city from Israeli control would "give rise to a Jewish Jerusalem larger and more vibrant than any in history," internationally recognized as Israel's capital, Clinton said. With the Jews' ancestral homeland claimed also by another people, "there is no choice but to create two states and make the best of it," Clinton said.

Then, he said, "the motives of those who continue the violence will be clearer to all than they are today."

Beyond a call for "mutual respect" for all religions, Clinton's speech on Sunday was noticeably vague on arrangements for Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Under his plan, the Palestinian state would be established in all of the Gaza Strip

MIDEAST FOCUS

Palestinians reject U.S. plan

Senior Palestinian officials rejected President Clinton's proposals for a final Israeli-Palestinian peace accord.

Reversing the qualified acceptance they had given days earlier, the officials said the proposals ignored the objections raised by Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

Reacting to the news, the White House said Monday that the U.S. Middle East envoy, Dennis Ross, will try to "narrow the gaps" when he arrives in the region this week.

Refugees protest in Lebanon

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon staged large demonstrations demanding the right to return to their former homes in Israel. A statement issued Monday by PLO officials in Lebanon said, "There will be no regional stability unless the Palestinian diaspora regains the right to return."

The Lebanese government refuses to grant citizenship to the estimated 360,000 Palestinian refugees on its soil.

Security meeting yields no result

A meeting in Cairo of Israeli and Palestinian security officials with CIA Director George Tenet broke up without result, according to Palestinian officials.

Sunday's meeting broke up after Israel rejected a Palestinian demand to lift its blockade of Palestinian towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip before the Palestinians resume security cooperation.

Islamic cleric claims Mount

The chief Islamic cleric in Jerusalem issued a religious ruling declaring the entire Temple Mount area holy land for Islam.

Ikrima Sabri also said Monday that the Temple Mount is holy to Muslims from "seven levels above and seven levels below" the mount's surface.

and nearly all of the West Bank, with an exchange of territory to compensate for settlement blocs annexed by Israel. Clinton also said Palestinian refugees should have an unlimited right of return to the new Palestinian state, but not to Israel.

Like other countries that might choose to accept refugees, Israel should be able to decide which and how many refugees to accept, he said.

"You cannot expect Israel to make a decision that would threaten the very foundations of Israel and undermine the whole logic of peace," Clinton said.

America, however, would "take the lead" in raising money to resettle and compensate Palestinian refugees, he pledged.

While Israeli security concerns were important in any peace deal, Clinton said, they should not come at the expense of Palestinian sovereignty or territorial contiguity.

Security clauses could include a phased Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, an international presence in the Jordan Valley to monitor any threat to Israel from the East and Palestinian agreement to suffice with a "nonmilitarized" state, Clinton said.

In addition, Clinton accepted the Israeli demand that any deal declare an end to the historic conflict, something the Palestinian side has resisted. He also called on other Arab states to display a more generous attitude to Israel once its conflict with the Palestinians, the ostensible source of Arab grievance against the Jewish state, is over.

With Prime Minister Ehud Barak facing an uphill battle for re-election Feb. 6 — his coalition collapsed over his proposed concessions at the Camp David summit last summer — Clinton went out of his way to praise Barak, saying he "has demonstrated as much bravery in the office of prime minister as he ever did on the field of battle."

Pointedly absent was any similar praise of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. In fact, Clinton said official Palestinian incitement was "inconsistent with the Palestinian leadership's commitment to nonviolence at Oslo" and "sends the wrong message to the Israeli people."

Despite the leading role taken by Arafat's Fatah movement in the last three months of violence against Israel — and increasing evidence that Palestinian security officials are involved in terror attacks against Israel — Clinton still sought to differentiate between the Palestinian establishment and "independent actors" that are "enemies of peace." Palestinians, Clinton said, are "in the grip of forces," which he did not specify, "that have not permitted them to reconcile with Israel."

After the speech, Sandy Berger, the U.S. national security adviser, told JTA that Arafat's future actions will show whether he is for or against peace.

He refused to say what conclusions could be drawn from Arafat's behavior during the last three months of violent conflict with Israel.

Israel initially responded to the public announcement of Clinton's plan by reiterating its acceptance of the proposals.

However, in a satellite address to the Council of Foreign Relations in Washington on Monday, Barak disputed some of the specifics outlined by Clinton.

Asked about Clinton's comments about a Palestinian state, Barak said Clinton's call "reflected the American position, and not the Israeli one," but did not elaborate.

He reiterated that he would not give away sovereignty over the Temple Mount, Judaism's holiest site. Barak also focused on the possibility of unilateral disengagement from the Palestinians, an option if a peace agreement is not reached. He said over a two-year period, Israel would determine which settlements to annex, would declare a security zone along the Jordan River and reduce its dependence on Palestinian workers.

The Palestinians, who last week said they accepted the proposals — albeit with serious reservations — roundly denounced them Monday, calling them an Israeli plan in American dressing.

Most galling to the Palestinian leadership is the idea that they scale back their demand that some 4 million to 5 million descendants of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war be allowed to return to their former homes inside Israel.

"The Palestinians are eager to make peace yesterday, if not today," Hassan Abdel Rahman, the chief Palestinian representative in the United States, told JTA at the New York event. "But we have our requirements."

Meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told JTA she remained optimistic about the future of the peace process and would work to "achieve as much as we can" in the little time remaining to the administration. □



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JEWISH WORLD

High Court backs religious rights

Opponents of a large new Mormon temple near Boston lost a U.S. Supreme Court challenge against a Massachusetts zoning law.

The high court on Monday turned down the opponents' argument that the 1950 zoning law gives unconstitutional advantages to religious groups.

'Green' group praises Clinton

A Jewish environmental group is praising President Clinton's decision to protect more than 58 million acres of U.S. national forests from future development.

"When Jews around the U.S. gather soon to celebrate Tu B'Shevat, the Jewish New Year of the Trees, we will rejoice" as a result of Clinton's move, which will prevent commercial logging and oil and gas development on the land, Mark Jacobs, president of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, said in a statement.

French deportees' names sought

A French Jewish group asked Holocaust survivors and their families to confirm the names of Jews deported to Nazi concentration camps.

In an ad appearing Monday in several French newspapers, the Center of Contemporary Jewish Documentation said it otherwise would have to depend on lists drawn up by the Gestapo, which the group said "contained errors." The center hopes to engrave the names of 76,000 Jewish deportees on the wall, slated to be inaugurated in 2002 in Paris.

German cemetery hit by arson

Arsonists damaged a building at a Jewish cemetery near Berlin. The door of a hall for mourning was damaged in Monday's attack at the cemetery and there was smoke damage inside, German officials said.

British Muslim calls for inquiry

A Muslim member of Britain's House of Lords called for an investigation into persistent rumors that British Muslims are being recruited to fight in "holy wars" in the Middle East and South Asia.

Lord Ahmed of Rotherham, a supporter of Jewish-Muslim dialogue in Britain, was responding to claims that a British Muslim was responsible for a suicide bombing in Kashmir in December.

Czech Communists charged

Czech state prosecutors charged two former Communist Party officials with abuse of power for allegedly protecting a former Nazi SS officer from prosecution for war crimes in the 1960s, according to Czech press reports. Werner Tutter, who died in 1983, was implicated in the murder of dozens of civilians in Slovakia in 1944.

'Chained women' may be freed by religious divorce standards

By Julie Wiener

NEW YORK (JTA) — In what some say is a historic breakthrough for Orthodox women unable to divorce, several prominent Orthodox rabbis have endorsed divorce standards for rabbinic courts.

The standards would require that a get, or Jewish divorce, be the first step in divorce proceedings. The recommendations are expected to make it easier for Orthodox women to navigate what many say is a labyrinthine system that favors men.

The standards are endorsed by the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America, organizations that represent centrist Orthodox congregants and rabbis. They also have the endorsement of more than 10 prominent rabbis who serve on or represent rabbinic courts in the United States.

Jews who live according to halachah, or Jewish law, require a get to dissolve their marriages. Only a man can give a get, and some withhold them to extort financial or custody settlements from their wives.

Women denied gets are forbidden from remarrying or even dating, and are called agunot, which means "chained women."

The new standards, particularly the assurance that a get be provided before other divorce arrangements are made, will "clear up a very large percentage of the agunah problem," said Mattie Klein, director of L'Maan B'nos Yisrael International, a Brooklyn organization for agunot.

Klein's organization worked closely with the rabbis who drafted the standards. It is not clear how many women in the United States are agunot, or how many settle for unfavorable divorce agreements in order to extract a get, but some estimate the number to be in the thousands.

While there are a number of established rabbinic courts in the United States, Jewish law says that any three Orthodox rabbis can convene such a court. Because these courts are not subject to oversight, many people have complained they are corrupt or favor husbands.

Before the standards, each court could "charge whatever they want, do whatever they want and there was no formal procedure of any kind, no recourse," Klein said.

"Now we're saying if you belong to the RCA or O.U. movement, we expect you to send your congregants to a Beis Din that abides by these standards," Klein said, using the Ashkenazi pronunciation of the Hebrew term for a rabbinical court.

"If they're not willing, we advise her to call us and we will give her information as to how to proceed," she continued.

Rabbi Steven Dworken, executive vice president of the RCA, said the standards should help make the rabbinic courts "user-friendly and appropriate."

The standards will "eliminate some of the alleged abuses," Dworken said.

Other advocates for agunot are applauding the standards, although they say more must be done. Susan Aranoff, a director at the Brooklyn-based Agunah Inc., said, "A Beit Din that adhered to those guidelines would be significant progress."

However, Aranoff said, it is still unclear whether anyone will enforce the standards and whether the courts will require that all divorce proceedings occur in rabbinical court rather than civil court.

Women generally receive more favorable settlements in civil courts, Aranoff said.

The standards also will not solve the "most hard-core agunah cases," Aranoff said, noting that some recalcitrant husbands may refuse to go to a Beit Din that abides by the standards. "I think ultimately the rabbis are going to have to recognize that when men are scoundrels and abusers, they're going to have to have the courage to free women without a get," she said.

Rivka Haut, of the Brooklyn-based Get Organization, called the standards a "wonderful step forward."

"This is the first attempt at some sort of monitoring from the system itself. It's not community monitoring, which I think would be better, but at least it's rabbinic standard setting, and that's been sorely lacking," Haut said. □

Israeli rally tells the world: Get your hands off our capital

By Naomi Segal and Julie Wiener

JERUSALEM (JTA) — When Zelda Brown planned her vacation to Israel this winter, she probably didn't expect to be spending it like this.

Brown, of Queens, N.Y., was among tens of thousands of Israelis and other Jews — as many as 100,000 people, according to an Israel TV estimate — who gathered outside Jerusalem's Old City walls Monday night for a rally to preserve the unity of the city under Israeli rule.

"I'm delighted to be here at the time of the demonstration," said Brown, who was there with her husband and a friend. "It's very inspiring. It's just a shame there's a need for this."

As President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak race to advance an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal under intense time pressure — Clinton leaves office Jan. 20 and Barak faces elections Feb. 6 — many Jews are balking at the concessions Israel is being asked to make in its capital and on its holy sites.

Monday's rally, under the slogan, "Jerusalem, I Pledge Allegiance," drew demonstrators not only from the fervently Orthodox and religious Zionist sectors, but from Israel's secular mainstream as well. Organizers said that some 1,000 buses brought participants from across Israel and from settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"I believe Jerusalem must not be divided," said Avram Lahiani, who brought his wife and child from the coastal city of Acre, north of Haifa. "All Israel belongs to the people of Israel."

Tzipi Hershko, 17, of Petach Tikva, agreed.

"I want Jerusalem to remain in one piece," Hershko said. "It belongs to us, and it's not going to the Arabs."

Organizers initially had intended for rally participants to encircle the Old City's stone walls in a human chain. But the plan was scrapped when police barred access to primarily Muslim areas out of fear of violence. In a stark reminder of the ongoing conflict, the southern Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo once again came under Palestinian fire Monday night. No one was hurt.

In the French Hill neighborhood, Palestinians tossed a firebomb at Israeli cars on a major Jerusalem thoroughfare. North of the city, an Israeli boy was wounded in a shooting attack on the Jerusalem-Modi'in road, which passes near the Green Line and has become a focal point for Palestinian attacks.

Organizers of Monday night's rally described the event as nonpartisan and sought to prevent political statements and posters. But the gathering carried a distinctly political context, given the U.S.-led peace efforts that contemplate splitting Jerusalem between Israel and the Palestinians, and putting the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, under Palestinian sovereignty.

Addressing the rally, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert issued a direct appeal to Clinton, who is sending envoy Dennis Ross to the region on a peace mission before he leaves office on Jan. 20.

"How regretful it would be after eight years of your term, brimming with friendship" for Israel, "that what will be left is the fact that you, Bill Clinton, are the first president in the history of the United States to propose dividing Jerusalem," Olmert declared. The crowd booed at the mention of Clinton's name.

Natan Sharansky, the Yisrael B'Aliyah Party leader who quit

Barak's government last summer over expected concessions at the Camp David summit, was one of the organizers of Monday's rally. The gathering aimed to send a message to the world, and to the Palestinians, that the Jewish people will not abandon Jerusalem, Sharansky said.

"Jerusalem is not a question of borders or security, but a question of the identity of the Jewish people," he said.

In a move aimed at underscoring American Jewish support for Jerusalem, Ronald Lauder, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, ignored criticism of his decision to participate in the gathering.

Lauder told the gathering that millions of Jews in the world stand beside those Israelis who oppose dividing Jerusalem.

Lauder said he came as an individual and not in his official capacity, but his participation drew criticism from some American Jewish leaders. Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Reform movement's ARZA World Union, said Lauder's attendance does not reflect the views of all U.S. Jewish organizations.

"The chairman of the Conference of Presidents represents 54 major organizations, not himself," Hirsch told JTA in New York.

"The conference itself did not give its authorization for Mr. Lauder to participate in the rally, let alone to speak. In fact, it specifically feared that his speaking would be perceived as interfering directly in Israeli politics, which all agreed the conference has never done before."

Those gathered at the rally to sing, dance, hear the speeches and watch images from Jerusalem's history — beamed by laser onto the stone walls — said the message was the Jewish people's commitment to Jerusalem.

Former Supreme Court Judge Moshe Landau told the rally that Clinton should keep to himself his "creative and confidence-building proposals" to transfer sovereignty over the Temple Mount. "We received a precious deposit from our predecessors, and it is our duty to pass it on to those who come after us unharmed," Landau said.

Clinton has suggested that the Palestinians be given sovereignty over the surface of the Temple Mount, which today houses the Al-Aksa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Israel would have some measure of control over underground areas, where the ruins of the biblical Jewish temples are believed to lie.

Under the Clinton plan, the Palestinians also would assume control over Arab parts of Jerusalem, which would become the capital of a Palestinian state. Barak has said he won't transfer sovereignty over the Temple Mount to the Palestinians, but hasn't ruled out letting a third party run the site.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians hardened their stance toward Clinton's proposals, saying they did not address Palestinian "rights." In a related move, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, the Palestinians' highest Islamic authority, issued a religious ruling Monday declaring all of the Temple Mount, above and below the ground, holy Islamic land.

The demonstration passed quietly with the exception of some isolated incidents. Near the Damascus Gate, police forcibly dispersed Palestinians who threw rocks at them. The police also prevented a group of rally participants from entering the area.

Also, police detained a female Jewish extremist who tried to enter the Temple Mount disguised as an Arab woman. □

(JTA Staff Writer Michael J. Jordan in New York contributed to this report.)