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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Report: New turn in peace talks

Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami abruptly cut short a visit to Paris on Thursday to return home.

Israel Radio said "dramatic developments in the peace process" had forced Ben-Ami to cancel his meetings, which included talks with French President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.

Meanwhile, Israel and Palestinian officials said Thursday that high-level Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will resume soon.

The two sides will work on outlining a final peace agreement, after which U.S. envoy Dennis Ross will return to the region, the officials said.

Confidence-building steps taken

On Thursday, Israel eased its closure of Palestinian areas, and officers from both sides toured trouble spots together as part of a renewed effort to establish security cooperation.

In another measure, Israel reopened border crossings, permitting Palestinians to travel from the West Bank to Jordan and from the Gaza Strip to Egypt.

The confidence-building measures are part of a U.S. plan submitted earlier this week to both sides by CIA Director George Tenet.

The steps were taken after security talks were held late Wednesday, when the two sides agreed to reduce the violence that has wracked the region for more than three months.

Nominee: Vouchers not a priority

The U.S. Senate appears ready to give easy approval to Rod Paige as President-elect George W. Bush's education secretary.

The former Houston schools chief sought to reassure top Democrats during his confirmation hearing Wednesday that school vouchers would not be a priority in the Bush administration.

Jewish groups are split on the issue of vouchers, which make use of government funds to enable parents to transfer their children from public schools to private institutions.

REMINDER: The JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN will not be published Monday, Jan. 15.

Conference in uproar after Lauder's Jerusalem speech

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — A furor has erupted in the umbrella organization widely considered the voice of American Jewry, with some members accusing the chairman of dragging the group into Israel's domestic politics.

Twelve members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations have signed a letter calling for a special Conference meeting to criticize the actions of Chairman Ronald Lauder, and take steps to prevent a recurrence.

Lauder was one of several speakers at a massive rally in Israel on Monday against Israeli concessions to the Palestinians in Jerusalem, generally seen as a rebuke to the peacemaking efforts of Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

While Lauder said he was appearing at the event as an individual, he was identified by Israeli and U.S. media as the chairman of the Conference of Presidents.

Some Conference members worry that Lauder's participation may damage the organization's efforts to portray itself as nonpartisan, and set a dangerous precedent of interference in Israel's internal affairs.

That was precisely what several members feared earlier this month when they sought to discourage Lauder from attending the rally.

On Thursday, Lauder appeared at another rally for the unity of Jerusalem, speaking in New York alongside Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Israeli politicians Natan Sharansky, Ehud Olmert and Roni Milo.

Former Interior Minister Sharansky left Barak's government last summer over the premier's willingness to make concessions to the Palestinians, and Health Minister Milo has pledged to resign Sunday. Jerusalem Mayor Olmert is a leading member of the opposition Likud Party.

Those now demanding a special Conference meeting are primarily the left-leaning components of the group, which encompasses the full political and religious spectrum of American Jewry.

The opposition to Lauder includes the major representatives of the Reform movement.

"If the Conference leadership is so committed to a particular point of view that they're prepared to immerse itself in partisan politics, then the Conference cannot exist," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Rising to Lauder's defense, 17 organizations have signed a letter of support also circulating within the Conference.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents, responded that the opponents' letter "will be addressed."

"If any member organization raises concerns, we will provide a forum in which to address them," Hoenlein said.

Hoenlein would not comment further, but noted that "countless" faxes, e-mails and letters of support have poured into Lauder's office and the Conference office in New York.

Lauder himself could not be reached for comment, despite repeated attempts by JTA.

However, a source close to Lauder said Thursday, "His answer is that the future of Jerusalem is not a partisan political issue."

The source conceded that he had tried to dissuade Lauder from speaking at the

MIDEAST FOCUS

Jerusalem bombing averted

A terrorist bombing in Jerusalem's Mea She'arim neighborhood was averted when an alert passer-by spotted a Palestinian youth tossing a suspicious bag into a dumpster.

The woman summoned police Thursday while her son opened the bag and disconnected a cellular phone from what turned out to be a bomb.

Palestinians reject Canada offer

The Palestinian Authority rejected a Canadian offer to take in Palestinian refugees under a future Middle East peace deal.

"The home of the Palestinian refugees is Palestine, and there is not one single refugee willing to accept an alternative to his homeland," Ahmed Abdel Rahman, an aide to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat told Reuters. "The Palestinian people will accept neither resettlement nor compensation."

Israel hailed the proposal by Canada's foreign minister, who was quoted on Wednesday as saying his country would be ready to accept Palestinian refugees.

Official: Kidnappings preventable

The October kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah gunmen across the border into Lebanon could have been prevented, according to Israel's army chief of staff.

Presenting the findings of a commission that investigated the incident, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz said Thursday the army had advance information that Hezbollah planned to attempt an abduction.

Israeli divorce rate rises

The divorce rate among Jewish couples in Israel is rising. At 30 percent, though, the rate is still lower than the rate in Western countries. According to figures released by the director general of the rabbinical courts, 9,153 couples divorced last year, with the greatest number, 733, in Tel Aviv.



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rally. "But he was right and I was wrong," the source said. "He acted as a Jewish leader and spoke out on a critical issue. He expressed his concern about Jerusalem, and he was right."

Yoffie and other opponents say there was hardly a consensus within the 54-member Conference for Lauder to speak at the rally.

A vote earlier this month, attended by only two dozen groups, was 14-9 in Lauder's favor.

There is now much disagreement about what exactly the vote determined — whether Lauder was allowed to appear at the rally without speaking or whether he was allowed to speak as an individual but not on behalf of the Conference.

His opponents say the vote fell well short of "consensus," though the group can not even reach a consensus on the meaning of the term.

Among the questions Lauder's opponents would like the Conference of Presidents to address are what exactly constitutes "consensus," and what to do if a chairman acts without it.

"Consensus is a slippery term that has been discussed ad nauseam over the past five years. But if you have nine groups that are vociferous in their opposition, then you know you don't have consensus," said Mark Rosenblum, founder and policy director of Americans for Peace Now.

"The Presidents Conference as an umbrella institution is moving forward with great peril if it can't demonstrate a significant majority and overwhelming support for an issue that they intend to act on."

Lauder opened his brief remarks at the rally by stating, "I stand here tonight not on behalf of any Jewish organization, but as an individual Jew, representing millions of Jews around the world from Manhattan to Moscow, from London to Budapest. All the world should know that you are not alone."

Lauder's spokeswoman, Jeanine Kemm, told JTA earlier this week that "Mr. Lauder was there as a concerned Jew, as an individual and with no other hats. He is truly concerned about the peace and security of Israel."

"Surely no one would seriously suggest he would be muzzled on a vital issue he has cared about his entire life. In fact, remaining silent would be a greater cause for criticism."

However, even some supporters of Lauder said privately that the cosmetics magnate, a seasoned political player who once served as U.S. ambassador to Austria and ran for mayor of New York City, must have known how the news media would identify him.

The controversy over Lauder's speech has revived concerns that his political leanings may influence his performance as chairman.

Before Lauder began as Conference chair in June 1999, concerns were raised about his longtime support for the Likud Party and his close relationship with former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu was at Monday's rally but did not speak.

However, the rally was organized in part by Sharansky and Olmert, leading to accusations of a partisan agenda.

Prime ministerial elections will be held Feb. 6, and polls indicate that Labor's Barak trails far behind Likud leader Ariel Sharon.

Given the polls and Lauder's political track record, "one would think that Ron Lauder would have been particularly sensitive to perceptions" of bias, said one Conference member who otherwise was supportive of Lauder.

Yoffie, of the Reform movement, said Lauder had been a "good and fair chairman" so far in his two-year tenure. But he warned that steps must be taken to prevent a repeat of this week's controversy.

"In the eyes of Jewish leadership, Israeli leadership, American leadership and even in other governments around the world, the Conference is still seen as the voice of American Jews," Yoffie said.

"If someone's going in the name of American Jewish leadership, we all need to have confidence that the message being delivered actually emerged from conference consensus," he said. "If there is no consensus, then no message should be passed along."

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JEWISH WORLD

Polish bill called 'outrage'

Poland's lower house of Parliament passed a bill that would give former owners for property seized between 1944 and 1962 half of the value of their lost assets.

But because the bill restricts payments to those who held Polish citizenship at the end of 1999, it will exclude most Jewish Holocaust survivors, who joined a class-action lawsuit in the United States for the return of their property. "This is an outrage," said Mel Urbach, who is co-lead counsel in the lawsuit.

Barak vows to bring mogul 'home'

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak vowed to do everything "possible to have Vladimir Goussinsky come back home, to Israel." Barak, who called the Russian media tycoon and Jewish leader his personal friend in an interview Wednesday on a German radio station, said he is seeking Goussinsky's release.

Goussinsky is currently under house arrest in Spain, pending a high court decision on his extradition to Russia, where he is wanted on fraud charges.

In another development, Boris Berezovsky, another controversial Jewish media mogul who was recently ostracized by the Kremlin, has almost completed the sale of his 49 percent stake in Russian national TV channel ORT to an oil and aluminum magnate.

Roman Abramovich, also Jewish, is widely seen as Berezovsky's heir as a Kremlin insider.

Abramovich, who was recently elected governor of the Chukotka region on Russia's border with Alaska, is likely to entrust the stake to the government, according to sources in Moscow.

The state already controls 51 percent of ORT, but the channel is widely viewed as controlled by Berezovsky.

Florida temple to sever Scout ties

A Florida synagogue voted to sever its 49-year-old ties to a Boy Scout troop unless it rejects the national organization's stance against gay membership.

The unanimous decision Wednesday by members at Temple Judea in Coral Gables came after Reform Jewish leaders called on member synagogues to boycott Boy Scout chapters until they change their policy of excluding gays.

Shoah Day gains recognition

The anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp has been established as an official day of Holocaust memory in several European countries.

In Italy, for example, Jan. 27 will be the occasion for numerous ceremonies and cultural and memorial events nationwide.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israel's Sharon presents kinder, gentler image — but few specifics

By JTA staff

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Once reviled as a dangerous warmonger, Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon has amassed a huge lead in public opinion polls before Israel's Feb. 6 elections on the strength of a remarkable image makeover.

Two decades ago, Sharon led Israel into the Lebanon war and soon was forced to resign as defense minister for not preventing Israel's Lebanese Christian allies from massacring Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Now, the 73-year-old is running as a kindly, avuncular figure, tough but sensitive, who will be more effective as a peacemaker than incumbent Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

The apparent transformation is galling to many Israeli leftists. Right-wing and centrist Israelis, however, appear less troubled by Sharon's past, propelling him to leads of 20 to 30 percentage points over Barak in opinion polls.

Perhaps most remarkable — and most telling about the depth of popular dissatisfaction with Barak — is the fact that Sharon has amassed such support while revealing so little of what he would do in office.

"Only Sharon Will Bring Peace" is his campaign slogan. His campaign jingle, released on Monday, sings of the peace he will bring.

The key to his success, according to friend and foe alike, is the vagueness of his platform.

According to a report last week in the Jerusalem Post, Sharon's blueprint for peace remains the outline he presented to the Palestinians in 1999, when he was foreign minister under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

That plan — under which Israel refused to share Jerusalem, uproot Jewish settlements or withdraw from the Jordan Valley — includes far fewer Israeli concessions than those the Palestinians now reject as insufficient from Barak.

Sharon has ridiculed Barak's efforts to sign a final peace deal with the Palestinians, believing the most that can be achieved at this stage is a long-term nonbelligerency agreement.

Justice Minister Yossi Beilin described the Sharon plan to the Jerusalem Post as "a good plan that I would back — if Israel was negotiating with itself."

Barak has challenged Sharon to a series of television debates similar to those in the U.S. presidential elections, but Sharon so far has dodged the invitation.

Increasingly desperate, Barak has been urging audiences to look beyond the outward trappings of the slick Likud campaign to see what he claims is an unrepentant hard-liner beneath.

Sharon's behavior in government often contradicted his hard-line reputation, however. As defense minister under Prime Minister Menachem Begin, he was responsible for evacuating Jewish settlements in the northern Sinai as part of the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt.

As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's foreign minister, he refused to shake Arafat's hand, but helped negotiate the Wye River agreement in October 1998.

In addition, since taking the Likud helm in May 1999, Sharon has proven himself an adept political strategist, rebuilding the morale, organization and finances of a party that Netanyahu left in disarray. Despite their prickly relations, Sharon is mimicking the delicate dance that Netanyahu performed in building and preserving a center-right coalition that had to accept the realities of the Oslo peace process.

Sharon's overall strategy, like that of Netanyahu during his term from 1996 to 1999, will be to keep a fine balance among a coalition of the center-right, far-right, Orthodox and Russians. Losing any component of this grouping could threaten his Knesset majority.

Unless, that is, Labor agrees to enter a unity government under Sharon. If Sharon wins, his strategists say at every opportunity, he will offer Barak the powerful post of defense minister. □

Excerpts from disputed speech given by head of Holocaust council

NEW YORK (JTA) — JTA recently reported on charges leveled against Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg concerning a speech he made at the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities in November.

Journalist Ira Stoll, in a Wall Street Journal opinion piece, charged that Greenberg, the head of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, was unduly critical of the Israeli response to Palestinian and Israeli Arab violence that broke out in late September.

Greenberg termed Stoll's attacks "outright lies" that distorted his words to imply the opposite of what he intended. The following are excerpts from the text of the speech in question:

Now the majority of the state of Israel, as expressed in the election of its government, made a decision that they are prepared to give back lands and therefore to withdraw from ruling over Pales — to make room for Palestinian national existence. . .

It seems to me [it] is central to how we judge the moral situation. Israel is the strongest. It is perceived by the Palestinians as occupying because they want to be independent, and one could make a case that from their perspective, it is occupation. I think one can make a reasonable case that it's occupation. The Jewish answer to that is I'm occupying you because you are trying to kill me and I have a right to protect myself. And I think one can make an equally reasonable strong moral case [that] therefore the occupation is moral.

But it is occupation. So the majority of the Jewish people in Israel and Jews worldwide support the government [that] made a decision, one, to give back 92 percent-plus of the West Bank, to share sovereignty over Jerusalem (although they tried to say that as softly as they could), to share the Old City and to share sovereignty over the Temple Mount, if that would make peace possible. I think it's a remarkable offer. . .

Given that peace offer, I believe, overwhelmingly, there is the moral strength of feeling that we have met the first criterion of the ethic of power, which is to minimize the evil side effects of your own dignity and your own need for security as against the Arab need or Palestinian needs for their own dignity, their own standard.

. . . Central to this thing is of course — with the rejection of that offer, came, of course, the outburst of violence which we are now living through. Demonstrations, continuing demonstrations, in which Israel or Israeli soldiers have protected themselves. . .

Now here again I think as Jews trying to do the moral thing we have to weigh these things carefully. The principle of power ethically exercises you [to] try to do the minimum damage for the maximum security and dignity of life. Israel and its army, at least — as it announced — is trying to minimize casualties. And you know the policy is you try not to fire; and then if you fire, you fire rubber bullets and you fire low, that is to say below, the lower half of the body in the hope of not causing death.

The obvious question then is why there are 180 deaths of which many have been young or younger children. The answer in part is because in fact if you ever lived through it — and I have talked to Israeli soldiers who have lived through it — when you are being assaulted by people who are throwing rocks and in the present situation, if you've seen those rocks, it's not pebbles,

there's a serious danger to life and personal safety. Secondly, equally important and devastating, is that in this round they have been frequently backed by people who have guns and there is shooting.

And many times the shooting starts (from we now know) Palestinian policemen in violation of the peace agreement. So again the soldier has to make judgments as people get closer: Are they coming just to throw rocks? Will the rocks kill me? Are they coming with people in there who when they get close enough will shoot? Are they coming actually with the gun to shoot? Under these circumstances, for people to stay cool and never to shoot and kill, is I think not only unreasonable, but it's impossible.

Having said that one has to continually monitor what's happened. For example again, and to me the criterion is what Israeli — what ethical power we practice here. The outburst of Israeli Arab demonstrations during this period led to very severe clashes with police in the course of which some 13-14 Arabs were killed.

My own personal judgment is [it is] very questionable. It surprised me, I must say, and it's easy to say because obviously here I'm defending a much larger death toll. I was very surprised; I think there have been internal demonstrations as far as I could tell and I wasn't there, severe ones in the past which have not led to such a loss of life. . . It is entirely possible in my judgment that they overreacted, and in that overreaction killed people unnecessarily, and as a serious violation of the Jewish ethic of power.

But my answer to that is the judgment of a moral country is what? If you've done that you investigate and decide. The government has appointed a serious commission. . .

I believe we will find out if in fact the police either overreacted because they didn't take Arab life as seriously as Jewish life, or because they were not trained properly and didn't expect this, or because all of the above was true; or it's not at all, that they tried their best and under circumstances of difficulty, in fact to defend themselves, shot back and killed people.

Now the same holds true on the question of the 180 Palestinian Arabs. It will be established, and there is a constant review whether the army was trained enough, whether there were methods, not rubber bullets, not regular bullets, that might have had lesser loss of life, and I would not be shocked if 5 percent or 10 percent of those casualties are either — or 20 percent — are scared soldiers or people overreacting. That's the measure of our morality, that we are able to evaluate and assess and carry it on. But the heart of it is, as far as I am concerned, is what is the evidence so far. The evidence so far is that the army is in fact instructed and is trying (and I've talked to people), it's trying to seriously minimize casualties and death and under much more difficult circumstances than the previous intifada because there are now serious weapons on the other side.

. . . I can predict in advance that there will be some errors or some soldiers who will be gun-happy, but the bottom line is the continuing attempt to keep that controlled, and to keep it under moral guidance. So the capacity both to review the use of force and to correct it, is I think essential to this continuing ethic of power.

Third, facts speak for themselves and Jewish tradition has never said one romanticizes peace and makes it an absolute ideal, ignoring the human reality. The human reality is that the key partner on the other side has acted so badly as to destroy the trust and the confidence in them as a full peace partner. . . □