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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Sharon faces coalition deadline

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon must present his new government by the end of March. Israeli law grants a new prime minister 45 days from publication of the official election tally — due on Feb. 14 — to present a new government.

Meanwhile, a succession battle is under way in the Labor Party in the wake of Ehud Barak's resignation as party leader following his crushing defeat.

With 99 percent of the ballots counted, Sharon defeated Labor Party incumbent Ehud Barak 62.5 percent to 37.4 percent in Tuesday's vote for prime minister. [Page 1]

'Iran 10' appeal rejected

Iran's highest court rejected the appeal of 10 Jews imprisoned on charges of espionage, according to the nation's official news agency.

Earlier Wednesday, a judiciary spokesman denied that the 10 had formally requested clemency from the country's highest leader.

News reports earlier this week said the 10 had sent a letter to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in which they asked to be pardoned from sentences ranging from two to nine years.

Satloff may advise NSC

Robert Satloff, the director of a Washington-based Middle East think tank, is being considered for the post of Middle East adviser to the U.S. National Security Council, according to sources. Muslim and Arab organizations are expected to announce their opposition Thursday to Satloff, the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, claiming he holds anti-Muslim and Arab viewpoints.

Sharon to send delegation to U.S.

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon is sending a delegation to the United States to explain his future policies.

The delegation includes two former Israeli ambassadors to the United States, Moshe Arens and Zalman Shoval, and a former ambassador to the United Nations, Dore Gold.

Meanwhile, Sharon himself is likely to meet with President Bush in Washington next month. Sharon is expected to take part in the annual meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. [Page 1]

Ariel Sharon takes stock, weighs his coalition options

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Following his landslide election as prime minister, Ariel Sharon is seeking to cobble together a governing coalition and strengthen ties with the new U.S. administration.

On Tuesday, Sharon defeated incumbent Prime Minister Ehud Barak by 62.5 percent to 37.4 percent, one of the largest margins in Israeli history. Despite the resounding decision, pundits noted that the voter turnout of less than 59 percent was the lowest in Israeli history, indicating a large degree of uneasiness with both candidates.

On Wednesday, as congratulations — and some notes of caution — poured in from around the world, Sharon named a team of negotiators to handle his coalition-building effort. The team includes Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert and former Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman.

Several Labor Party politicians announced that they would run for party head to replace Barak, who resigned Tuesday night. The party also named negotiators to discuss the possibility of a national unity government with Sharon's Likud.

On his first day as prime minister-elect, Sharon took a moment to reflect, visiting the grave site of his deceased wife, Lily, and making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem's Western Wall.

But he quickly got down to business, meeting with his coalition negotiators and fielding phone calls from world leaders. He also named a team of advisers who will travel to Washington for a round of high-level meetings to explain Sharon's agenda.

"I think it's important to tell the administration in Washington, Congress and the public at large about Sharon, about the very large mandate that he received in the election, about his intention to form a national unity government if it's possible, about his intention to move ahead toward negotiations toward peace, if that's possible," Moshe Arens, a former defense minister and ambassador to the United States, told Israel Radio.

Along with another former ambassador to the United States, Zalman Shoval, and former U.N. ambassador Dore Gold, Arens will be on the Washington trip.

President Bush said Wednesday that his administration would do what it could to promote stability in the Middle East and give Sharon a chance to carry out his promises, including forming a national unity government and pursuing peace efforts. But many world leaders are taking a "wait-and-see" attitude toward the burly ex-general.

Arens disagreed that the election of a right-wing government would necessarily hinder peace efforts.

"I think it's important to look upon it as a process," Arens said. "It's a painfully slow process."

Arens added that a right-wing government might even be more able to conclude a deal with the Palestinians than a Labor-led administration, because it could count on the support of the left for any concessions.

Sharon also is expected to dispatch envoys to European capitals and neighboring Arab states.

In the meantime, Sharon faces two domestic deadlines. He must assemble and present his new government for Knesset approval by the end of March. Failure to meet the deadline will result in new elections, although Sharon said he hopes to have a government ready within two weeks.

Further complicating matters is a March 31 deadline to pass the state budget. If Sharon fails to raise a Knesset majority for his budget, the parliament will dissolve and new elections must be held for both Knesset and prime minister. Since Tuesday's

MIDEAST FOCUS

Bush vows to promote peace

President Bush urged calm in the Middle East following Ariel Sharon's election victory in Israel and said the U.S. administration will continue to promote peace in the region.

"We're going to play the hand we've been dealt, and we're going to play it well, with one thing in mind, that we promote peace in the Middle East," Bush said Wednesday.

The president said that he had phoned Middle East leaders with his message and added that the Likud leader should be given a chance to form a unity government.

Sharon claims all of Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon laid claim to all of Jerusalem as Israel's "eternal capital."

Sharon, who prayed Wednesday at the Western Wall, also called on the Palestinians to end their violence and negotiate a "realistic peace."

Fatah vows new violence

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement vowed to prevent Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon from keeping his election-night promise to make Israel secure.

"We say loudly that Israel will never have security at all," said a statement issued Wednesday by the Fatah leadership in the West Bank.

"The intifada and resistance are our strategic options to get rid of the occupation and to achieve freedom."

Meanwhile, Israeli military sources are warning that the level of Palestinian violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip may rise in the wake of Sharon's victory.

There were several shooting incidents in the territories, including shots fired near the West Bank settlement of Pesagot shortly after election exit polls were released.

elections were for prime minister alone, Sharon faces the same fractious Parliament that brought down Barak.

Sharon has several options — a national unity government with Labor, a narrow coalition with right-wing and religious parties or a coalition of secular parties.

He has made clear that he prefers the national unity government with Labor that was a key element of his campaign.

Labor Party secretary Ra'anana Cohen agreed to assemble a team that would handle contacts regarding a unity government. Labor's Knesset faction was due to discuss the issue Thursday. The party is divided about joining a unity government, however, and an upcoming battle for party leadership — following Barak's decision to resign as chairman — could make unity more difficult.

Knesset speaker Avraham Burg already has stated his intention to seek the party leadership. Other possible contenders are Cabinet ministers Haim Ramon, Shlomo Ben-Ami, Yossi Beilin and Shimon Peres.

Meanwhile, Israel Radio reported Tuesday that, in contradiction to his concession speech, Barak may not give up his Knesset seat. Vacating the seat for the next person on the One Israel roster would mean it would go to a member of the Geshet Party, which is likely to join Sharon's government.

In the meantime, Sharon was due to begin discussions Thursday with Likud Knesset members who may hold Cabinet positions. □

Jews seeking to be U.S. refugees now must contend with a new rule

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Jews in the former Soviet Union have a new hurdle to overcome before they can be accepted as refugees in the United States.

Because of a rule passed at the end of last year, a refugee's American relatives will have to take an extra step in the refugee's application process. The change could result in confusion and delays in resettlement for thousands of people from the former Soviet Union seeking refugee status, social service agencies warn.

A refugee's close relative, who has to sign an affidavit establishing his relationship to the refugee, must now prepare the affidavit at a resettlement agency for processing before it can be sent to the State Department.

The new rule takes effect March 1, but many Jews — especially in smaller communities — are unaware of the change, according to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. The agency is trying to spread the word, and already has contacted Jewish family service organizations and other agencies that can help notify people. HIAS will check applications for accuracy and act as a clearinghouse.

Before the procedural change, relatives of potential refugees from the former Soviet Union would submit the affidavit themselves by sending it straight to the State Department's processing center in Washington.

Refugees from other parts of the world already must file through a resettlement agency. The Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration at the State Department told HIAS the change was necessary for refugees from the former Soviet Union to standardize the refugee application process and prevent fraud.

HIAS, the oldest international migration and refugee resettlement agency in the United States, expects to receive several thousand applications this year that will have to go through the new screening process.

During the heavy waves of Russian refugee resettlement in the 1970s and 1980s, HIAS was involved in thousands of cases, but lately it has been handling only a few hundred applications per year.

HIAS is working on a procedure to handle the new flow of work, according to Marina Belotserkovsky, the agency's director of Russian communication and outreach.

The change is a burden, Belotserkovsky said.

In 1990, the Lautenberg Amendment established that former Soviet Jews could be considered likely targets of persecution, making it easier for them to apply for refugee status.

Under U.S. law, no more than 80,000 refugees can be admitted to the United States each year, including 17,000 from the former Soviet Union. □



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JEWISH WORLD

Calendars' listings wrong

Many Jewish calendars list the wrong day of observance for three Israeli holidays this year.

Because of Shabbat, Israel has shifted its observance of Holocaust Memorial Day to begin on the evening of April 18, Memorial Day to the evening of April 24 and Israeli Independence Day to the evening of April 25.

Help sought for kidnap victim

A Greek representative in the European Parliament called on the body to seek the release of an Israeli businessman kidnapped by Hezbollah last October.

Parliament member Anna Karamanou told the world body that the family of Elhanan Tannenbaum has no information about his condition and that the Red Cross has not been allowed to visit him. Tannenbaum's family recently visited several European capitals, including Athens, to drum up support for his release.

Academic blasts Shoah 'racket'

A U.S. academic defended the publication in German of his controversial book "The Holocaust Industry," and urged Germany not to submit to blackmail over its past.

"It is Germany's right to reject the use of the Nazi Holocaust as a weapon for political and economic gain," Norman Finkelstein, the son of concentration camp survivors, said Wednesday in Berlin. "The Nazi Holocaust has long ceased to be a source of moral and historical enlightenment. It has become a straight-out extortion racket."

In a related development, a German television station delayed airing a documentary on Finkelstein because of concerns that the show might be seen as anti-Semitic. The regional station asked for changes in the program before allowing it to air.

Makor merges with culture center

A Manhattan cultural center designed to be a national model for outreach to Jews in their 20s and 30s is merging with a Jewish cultural center.

Makor, which offers arts programs and classes targeting unaffiliated young Jews, will become part of the 92nd Street Y.

Spanish sites to get rid of hate

Two of Latin America's biggest Internet auction sites pledged to remove potentially offensive material after their pages were used to sell Nazi memorabilia.

The decision by the Web sites, www.MercadoLibre.com and <http://DeRemate.com>, follows a recent move by U.S. Internet portal Yahoo to stop the sale of potentially offensive items.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Arab world greets Sharon win with indifference, defiance, scorn

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Wisam Jamal stood defiantly at the entrance to his family's bakery in Wadi Nisnas, the Arab neighborhood of downtown Haifa.

"I do not intend to waste any gasoline driving to the polling station," he said.

Jamal was not alone in deciding to boycott Tuesday's election for prime minister.

Only some 13 percent of Israeli Arabs went to the polls, and many of them cast blank ballots to underscore their dissatisfaction with both candidates.

A few Arab Knesset members urged voters to go to the polls to cast white protest ballots. More effective, however, were the multiple calls to boycott the elections — backed up with threats against those who voted.

On election day, a convoy of cars bearing black flags and Palestinian flags, calling for a boycott and protesting the killing of 13 Israeli Arabs by police during pro-Palestinian riots last October, made its way through a predominantly Arab area in the lower Galilee. At some polling stations, members of the Israeli Arab community — looking intimidating — formed patrols to enforce the boycott.

Israeli Arabs make up about 12 percent of the voting public, and they overwhelmingly supported Prime Minister Ehud Barak in the last election.

Their boycott this time was a major factor in Barak's crushing loss to Likud leader Ariel Sharon.

In the waning days of the campaign, as one poll after another predicted his defeat, Barak knew the Arab vote was crucial.

On Sunday, he apologized for the deaths of the 13 Israeli Arabs.

"In my name and in the name of the government, I express sorrow over the death of Arab citizens," Barak said Sunday, in what was widely viewed as an appeal for Israeli Arab votes. "As prime minister, I hold general responsibility for everything that happens in the country during my term, and also for these incidents."

This was the same man who ignored Arab Knesset members when forming his governing coalition in the summer of 1999, not even giving them a courtesy call.

On Tuesday, Barak again issued an apology, this time during an interview on al-Jazeera, a satellite station popular with the Arab community.

In an indication of how desperately he needed the Arab vote, Barak gave the interview despite an Israeli law that bans campaigning on election day.

The Israeli Arabs' boycott reflected dissatisfaction on a number of issues, including the long-standing feeling that they suffer discrimination in receiving government services and civil service jobs. But the boycott also carried a message of indifference, even defiance, toward both candidates.

"They don't care much for the Arab anyway, so let the Jews fight it out among themselves," said Nilli Barmaki of the Arab village of Mazra'a.

Israeli Arabs claimed not to see much difference between Sharon and Barak. A similar message came in recent days from Arab capitals.

Shaqib abu-Jabal, a former member of Syria's Parliament, was quoted on Israel's Army Radio as saying that Syria considered the two candidates equally unacceptable.

But, abu-Jabal added, there is a silver lining to Sharon's victory, because it will push the Arab world toward greater unity.

For his part, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat sounded a conciliatory note after the election results became clear.

"We respect the decision of the Israeli people," Arafat told Reuters. "We hope the peace process will continue."

But Palestinian official Yasser Abed Rabbo called the election of Sharon the most "foolish event" in Israeli history.

Despite Sharon's efforts during the election campaign to present himself as a moderate, the Arab world remembers the role he has played in the Israeli-Arab conflict, particularly as defense minister in the 1982 Lebanon war.

An Israeli government commission found Sharon indirectly responsible for the September 1982 massacre of Palestinians by Lebanese Christians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

After Sharon win, Israel backers prepare for public relations battle

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — With much of the world's media painting Ariel Sharon as a dangerous extremist, American Jewish advocates — whether or not they like the prime minister-elect — will find themselves working overtime to protect Israel's image.

"It will make everybody's job infinitely more difficult," said Henry Siegman, a former executive director of the American Jewish Congress and now director of the U.S./Middle East Project at the Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank.

Israel's image already has taken a grave hit since the outbreak of Palestinian violence in late September. To fend off further attacks, particularly at the United Nations, advocates say Israel must have the help of its influential defender, the United States.

Israel backers therefore are frustrated that the Bush administration has yet to appoint a new ambassador to the United Nations to replace Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, who was considered an effective defender of Israel.

Observers are bracing for an onslaught of anti-Israel condemnation in the wake of Sharon's election. Some predict the Arab world may call for Sharon to be indicted for war crimes connected with the 1982 massacre by Israel's Lebanese Christian allies of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

An Israeli inquiry commission found Sharon who was then defense minister, indirectly responsible for the massacre because he failed to prevent it.

In March, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights will convene in Geneva to discuss the recent Palestinian-Israeli violence. At a special session in October, several of the commission's Arab members accused Israel of "war crimes" and "crimes against humanity." Washington also has not named a new ambassador to the rights commission.

"Without a U.S. ambassador, we can guarantee that these high jinks — or low jinks — will have an open door. There will be nobody there to do much about it," said Felice Gaer, director of international organizations for the American Jewish Committee.

"The position, degree of interest and active diplomacy of the U.S. over the past 30 years has been the most decisive factor in how Israel is treated at the United Nations."

Yet even if Bush names a new ambassador to the United Nations right away, there is concern that U.S.-Israel relations will go through a period of cooling, or "disengagement."

First, Israel supporters say, it's unlikely that Bush will match former President Clinton's intense involvement with Israel.

Second, Sharon may react to Palestinian violence more harshly than did Prime Minister Ehud Barak. If so, Washington may find that this jeopardizes U.S. interests in the Middle East, such as warm relations with moderate Arab states, the isolation of Iraq and a dependable supply of Middle East oil.

To counter Sharon's negative image, and to demonstrate its support for peace efforts, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations is considering the unusual move of issuing a statement of solidarity with the new Israeli leadership — co-signed by all past chairmen, regardless of their politics.

"The media has unfairly demonized Sharon, and we have an obligation to put things back in their proper context," said Malcolm

Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Presidents Conference.

"It's like when Menachem Begin was elected prime minister" in 1977, Hoenlein said.

"He was characterized as an extremist, a leader of a terrorist gang. But he's the man who signed Camp David," Hoenlein said, referring to Israel's peace treaty with Egypt. "Similarly, with Sharon, what we have to do is give the full picture of his background, his contributions to the state of Israel, and let people judge him by what he will do."

Hoenlein was pleased that Bush called to congratulate Sharon on his victory and that U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell urged the Arab world to take a wait-and-see approach to the new Israeli premier. Yet any Bush-Sharon honeymoon will not last long, Siegman predicted. In recent years, American relations with Israel have followed a pattern, he said.

If the Israeli government demonstrates a genuine interest in making peace, Washington is willing to overlook perceived missteps as aberrations.

Mindful of Barak's commitment to the peace process, for example, President Clinton criticized the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank as "not helpful" to the peace process, and left it at that.

However, Siegman said, if the Bush administration thinks Israel is not committed to peace — and even inflames the situation with provocative actions — it may be compelled to criticize Israel.

Siegman predicted that Sharon would incur American wrath.

Already, Sharon's pledge not to negotiate with the Palestinians while violence continues smacks of Israeli intransigence, Siegman said. It also shows Palestinians that they can "veto" peace talks with a bombing or drive-by shooting.

On the international stage, the scenario is even less optimistic.

For half a century, many in the Jewish world believe the United Nations — swayed by the large voting bloc of Arab and Muslim states — has displayed a pronounced anti-Israel bias.

In 2000, Israel enjoyed a brief thaw in relations following its withdrawal from southern Lebanon; its acceptance into the Western European and Others Group, one of five regional groupings that presents candidates for U.N. bodies; and international praise for Barak's peace efforts. But the improvement was short-lived, as the outbreak of violence in late September prompted another barrage of anti-Israel resolutions.

The AJCommittee is mounting the first challenge to the United Nations during the Sharon era, demanding that Israel finally be allowed to sit on the 15-member U.N. Security Council.

Such international pariahs as Iraq, Iran and Cuba are eligible to serve as rotating members of the Security Council; only Israel, among all U.N. member states, is not.

The AJCommittee will remind member states of such historic injustices, acting Executive Director Shula Bahat said.

With the election of Sharon, some argue that Israeli society has thumbed its nose at international opinion. In fact, some American Jewish observers suggest that Israel should put international opinion, if not the peace process itself, on the back burner.

Israel's primary concern is in enhancing its citizens' security and averting war, and Sharon's tough-guy image may be the ideal remedy, said Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, a Philadelphia-based think tank.

The Palestinians and the Arab world anticipate that Sharon will not react gently to attacks on Israel, Pipes said — which may prove to be the most effective deterrent. □