



Daily News Bulletin

Vol. 79, No. 34

Tuesday, February 20, 2001

84th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Clinton blasted for Jews-Rich link

U.S. Jewish leaders criticized President Clinton for trying to shift the blame for pardoning fugitive financier Marc Rich onto Israelis and Diaspora Jewish leaders.

Clinton "should not use the Jews as scapegoats," said Ronald Lauder, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

In an Op-Ed in Sunday's New York Times, Clinton cited eight reasons for pardoning Rich in the final hours of his presidency.

The last read, "Finally, and importantly, many present and former high-ranking Israeli officials of both major political parties, and leaders of Jewish communities in America and Europe, urged the pardon of Mr. Rich."

Unity gov't may be in jeopardy

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon's efforts to form a national unity government hit a snag.

Likud officials blamed the delay on strife within the Labor Party over the possibility that outgoing premier Ehud Barak, who earlier had promised to resign, would take the defense portfolio. Labor officials accused the Likud of presenting new demands at a late stage in negotiations. [Page 3]

Russian aliyah decreases

Immigration to Israel from the former Soviet Union decreased during the first six weeks of 2001, according to the Jewish Agency for Israel. Some 3,542 immigrants made aliyah during that time, a 30 percent drop from the same period last year.

The decrease is due more to an improved economic situation in Russia than fear of Middle East violence, according to Carol Unger, director of the Jewish Agency's Moscow office.

Some Israelis want gas masks

Israeli security officials are monitoring Iraq following last Friday's U.S. and British air strikes outside Baghdad, in which two civilians were reportedly killed. Israeli officials said they were unshaken by an Iraqi pledge for revenge, but some Israelis lined up Monday for new gas masks.

When Iraq fired missiles on Israel during the 1991 Gulf War, Israelis donned gas masks, fearing chemical and biological attacks.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

U.S. Jews consider urging Israel toward national unity government

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — American Jewish leaders are considering issuing an appeal to all Israeli political parties to come together in a national unity government.

The idea, floated quietly behind the scenes this week as the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations began its annual mission to Israel, reflects a growing perception among American Jews that Israel sorely needs a unity government as the violent crisis with the Palestinians rages on.

Such an appeal could mark a significant shift from the umbrella organization's traditional policy of avoiding involvement in internal Israeli politics, and some delegates already are opposing the idea.

The suggestion comes just a month after the group's chairman, Ronald Lauder, spoke at a Jerusalem rally opposed to the division of the city, as contemplated by Prime Minister Ehud Barak in peace talks with the Palestinians.

Although he claimed to be speaking as an individual, Lauder was criticized for allegedly injecting the Conference of Presidents into Israeli political debate — especially on an issue on which the group lacks consensus.

This week's mission began as Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon's Likud Party remained in talks with Barak over a national unity government.

Barak, who initially agreed to take the defense ministry post in a unity government, is under increasing pressure from within his party to refuse the appointment, quit the Labor chairmanship and clear the way for new leadership.

Some Labor leaders, however, reject entirely the idea of entering into a unity government with Sharon.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents, confirmed that the idea to issue an appeal for Israeli unity had been floated.

"There are people who have raised the idea for an open declaration in support of a national unity government," Hoenlein told JTA.

But there are concerns, he added, that even if a broad consensus on the issue emerges among the Conference of Presidents' member organizations, it might create a precedent for more overt political involvement in the future on more controversial issues.

Lauder, for his part, would not comment on the possibility that the Conference of Presidents might openly support a unity government.

At a media briefing launching this year's mission, Lauder said he was "encouraged" that Sharon was determined to keep Jerusalem united. He also said he would continue to speak out on Jerusalem, even if it meant resigning as chairman of the Conference of Presidents, which is made up of 54 groups from across the political spectrum.

Hoenlein said that Diaspora Jews have a right to take a stand on the future of Jerusalem — unlike other, internal Israeli political issues — because "this is our common inheritance."

Conference members who support the call for a national unity government say the organization can afford to take a stand because the issue is no longer politically divisive.

"This is a critical time and this is not a partisan effort," said Kenneth Bialkin, chairman of the American-Israel Friendship League and a former chairman of the Conference of Presidents.

"Given the critical nature and the uncertainty of the future direction of relations with the Palestinian Authority, the Jewish people should put aside their immediate

MIDEAST FOCUS

Panel looks into Arab killings

An Israeli state commission began hearing testimony in the killing of 13 Israeli Arabs by police during riots in October.

During Monday's hearings, a border police officer said he and his comrades fired rubber bullets because they lacked other crowd-dispersal tools, such as tear gas or a public address system. The hearings were suspended for more than an hour when relatives of one of the victims lunged at a border police guard who took the stand as a witness.

Hamas activist killed

A leading Hamas activist was killed Monday in a West Bank refugee camp. The Israeli army had no comment on accusations that it fired on Mahmoud Madani as he was walking from a mosque in the Balata refugee camp to his nearby grocery.

Meanwhile, Israeli security forces on Monday neutralized five bombs discovered near the entrance to the West Bank settlement of Homesh. In other violence, Palestinian gunmen fired at the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo on Sunday night, prompting return fire on the Palestinian town of Beit Jalla.

U.S.: Border killing a 'provocation'

Israel conveyed messages to Lebanon and Syria that it holds them responsible for maintaining quiet on the Israel-Lebanon border. The message followed an attack last Friday in which Hezbollah gunmen in Lebanon killed an Israeli soldier and wounded three others in a missile strike along the border. U.S. officials called the attack a "clear provocation."

Settler released from prison

A Jewish settler convicted of killing a bound Palestinian terrorist was released from jail Sunday after serving eight years in prison.

The High Court of Justice upheld Yoram Skolnik's release in a 4-3 ruling.

political differences and recognize that everybody's interests are best served by coming together," he added.

Other members who have pushed for a declaration say such an appeal could be a unifying force both in Israel and among Diaspora communities, whose fracture lines parallel the partisan debate in Israeli politics.

"There is a broad consensus in American Jewry to come out for a national unity government," said David Clayman, director of the Israel office for the American Jewish Congress. "This can unite the American Jewish community."

Clayman also said the formation of a national unity government would help the American Jewish community push Israel's case in the United States. "If you have a very narrow extremist-oriented government, that becomes a very difficult task," he said.

But some delegates — from both right and left — objected to the idea. Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, said bringing Labor into a national unity government would amount to rejecting the will of the voters, after Barak and his policies received a "clear trouncing" in Israel's Feb. 6 election for prime minister. "I don't think the Conference should be involved in a political issue like this," Klein said. "We should stay out of politics."

On the left, Mark Rosenblum, founder of Americans for Peace Now, said he did not object in principle to a call for a unity government, but said it was still unclear what such a government would stand for. "Some of us would first like to see what the national unity government is and what its guidelines are," Rosenblum said.

"A unity government must be united around something," he added. "My instinct would be that unity without content sets the stage for a divorce that could be even more divisive for the American Jewish community."

The alternative to a unity government — a narrow government contingent on the support of far-right and fervently Orthodox parties — also presents potential drawbacks for American Jewry. The fervently Orthodox parties in such a coalition might try to push through a variety of religious legislation, driving a wedge between Israel and Diaspora Jewry at a particularly sensitive time.

"The last thing Israel needs now is to get embroiled in these religious issues," said one delegate to the Conference, speaking on condition of anonymity. □

Web site touts touchy attraction: shooting range next to Nazi camp

By Magnus Bennett

PRAGUE (JTA) — Czech officials and Jewish leaders are trying to shut down a German entrepreneur's Web site that offers cheap trips to a shooting range next to a Nazi-era transit camp.

Czech-born hotel owner Rudolf Potucek has been using the Internet to advertise trips from his hotel in the Czech town of Litomerice to the range, located on the outskirts of the Terezin transit camp — also known by the German name Theresienstadt — where thousands of victims were held before being transported to Nazi death camps.

The advertisement, complete with images of the former Jewish ghetto near the camp, has incensed groups in the Czech Republic and Germany.

"This is a tasteless Web site, particularly because it gives the impression that they are inviting Germans to come and shoot within Terezin itself," said Dagmar Lieblova, chairwoman of the Terezin Initiative, an international association of former ghetto and concentration camp prisoners. "The shooting range is not in Terezin, but next to it."

Potucek was not available for comment, despite repeated calls to his hotel in Litomerice.

The German-based Internet site originally featured a picture of the ramparts of the Small Fortress at Terezin, where prisoners were held during World War II.

It was removed after protests from local Jewish representatives and Terezin's City Hall, but it was replaced by a picture of a Terezin-based memorial to children who died during the war in the adjacent Jewish ghetto.

"The new photograph is no better than the first," said Lieblova, who first heard of the Web site from a Terezin support group based in Germany that asked German authorities to find out whether neo-Nazis were behind the advertisement.

They were told there was no connection. □



Daily News Bulletin

Shoshana S. Cardin, *President*

Mark J. Joffe, *Executive Editor and Publisher*

Lisa Hostein, *Editor*

Michael S. Arnold, *Managing Editor*

Lenore A. Silverstein, *Business Manager*

JTA DAILY NEWS BULLETIN is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.

© JTA Reproduction only by previous arrangement.

JEWISH WORLD

U.S., Israel test Patriots

The United States and Israel are holding military exercises for five days this week in southern Israel, where they will test Patriot anti-missile missiles.

Such missiles were used against Iraqi Scuds fired at Israel during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Sources in the Israeli Defense Ministry said the exercise was scheduled months ago, and had nothing to do with last Friday's air strikes on Iraq.

Iran bans Jews from U.N. forum

An international Jewish human rights group said it was told by an Iranian official that Jewish groups "would not be welcome" at a U.N. conference on racism and discrimination.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center said the forum should not be held this week in Iran because the country's policies are discriminatory and oppressive.

Groups slam YMCA report

The World Alliance of YMCAs in Geneva released a report saying the group is taking "the side of the oppressed Palestinian people" in the Middle East conflict.

The YMCAs of the United States and Canada distanced themselves from the report, earning applause from Jewish groups including the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Congress.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center asked YMCA offices in other countries to stop funding the international office.

U.S. court upholds deportation

A U.S. appeals court upheld an earlier decision to deport a Chicago-area man for his role in helping to execute more than 11,000 people in Lithuania and Belarus during World War II.

Juozas Naujalis served in a Lithuanian-based battalion that aided the Nazis in a series of killing missions in October 1941.

Khalil Muhammed dies at 53

Khalil Abdul Muhammed, who was ejected from the Nation of Islam after calling Jews "bloodsuckers" and the pope a "cracker," died Saturday at 53 of a brain aneurysm.

Last survivor of Triangle fire dies

Rose Freedman, the last survivor of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire in New York that killed 146 people, many of them immigrant Jewish women, died in Beverly Hills, Calif., on Feb. 15 at the age of 107.

The fire, in which many girls and women jumped to their deaths from eighth- and ninth-story windows, focused attention on poor working conditions and spurred the U.S. labor movement.

So close but yet so far: Israeli unity proving elusive

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon is finding that achieving unity in Israel, even in the midst of a national crisis, is far from easy.

Sharon's talks with the Labor Party toward forming a national unity government seemed all but completed late last week, but the efforts hit a snag over the weekend.

Likud officials blame the delay on strife within Labor over the possibility that outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who had promised to resign after losing to Sharon in Feb. 6 elections, would instead become Sharon's defense minister.

A meeting of the Labor Party Central Committee — originally slated for Tuesday to endorse the unity government — was postponed until next week, with Labor officials citing ongoing negotiations with Likud on the coalition agreement.

But political observers said Barak, who still holds the party leadership, delayed the meeting because he feared he would not win the committee's support to become defense minister.

Citing Barak's election-night resignation notice, senior Labor officials have sharply criticized his decision in principle last week to accept the defense portfolio.

Labor must formally accept the coalition plan before Sharon can assign Cabinet posts and present the coalition for Knesset approval.

Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, a vehement opponent of a unity government, said Monday that the opposition of key Labor officials, including Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, would foil Sharon's attempts for a unity government.

A bitter power struggle has erupted within Labor since Barak's supposed resignation, with Ben-Ami, Cabinet minister Haim Ramon and Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg among those considering a run for party leader.

Officials from the pro-settler National Religious Party, meanwhile, have threatened not to join the government if Barak becomes defense minister, claiming that Barak's response to Palestinian violence has been restrained and ineffective.

Barak also took a drubbing in the media, where commentators noted the irony in the fact that the Israeli public, which rejected Barak as prime minister by an overwhelming vote, could now get him as defense minister.

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz said that while Barak continues to fight for the appointment to save his political skin, he also is laying the groundwork to undermine the unity effort.

The paper reported that officials close to Barak turned to the leader of the "Awakening" movement, which advocates drafting yeshiva students, and asked them to prepare a public campaign. Sharon favors deferring the issue, and an impasse over the yeshiva draft could provide an out for Barak if needed.

For his part, Barak said Monday that he would not join a unity government that includes far-right legislators Rehavam Ze'evi and Avigdor Lieberman.

Sensing a rising tide of opposition to the unity idea, Sharon called on the political parties to "rise above petty politics and their own individual interests" and help create a unity government.

"Unity among the people in light of the difficult security situation is more important than narrow political interests," he said in a statement Monday.

Likud officials were angered by Labor's decision to delay its Central Committee meeting, a move they said thwarted Sharon's hope to present a government this week.

Labor officials accused Likud of presenting new demands at a late stage in the coalition negotiations, including a clause giving the Prime Minister's Office — not the Foreign Ministry — oversight over diplomatic policy.

Leading Labor dove Shimon Peres is expected to be named foreign minister if a unity government is formed.

Labor officials also claim that Likud has refused to grant Labor the portfolios it seeks beyond defense and foreign affairs.

Likud negotiators said that if the unity effort proves fruitless, Sharon still can form a narrow government with right-wing and religious parties.

Providing a possible way around the Labor infighting, sources close to Sharon said he did not condition a unity government on Barak's participation. □

U.S. Jews tell European Jews: You're responsible for your future

By Ruth E. Gruber

BERLIN (JTA) — European Jews bear the burden for shaping their own future.

This is the sentiment that emerged at a weekend meeting in Berlin among representatives of American Jewry's central umbrella organization and Jewish leaders from 18 European countries.

European Jews must revamp their institutions, forge stronger links, coordinate policy and set common political agendas in order to become a significant force in world Jewish affairs, participants said.

"It's time for European Jewry to get its act together and start really rising up to the task of becoming the third pillar of world Jewry, alongside American Jews and Israel, that everyone is talking about," said Gideon Bolotowsky, president of the tiny Jewish community in Finland.

"They realize now that the onus is on them," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

More than 2 million Jews live in Europe, including 1 million in the former Soviet Union.

The communities range in size, from 1,500 people in Finland to 30,000 in Italy to 600,000 each in France and Russia.

The fall of communism more than a decade ago led to a revival of Jewish life in Eastern Europe and created new opportunities, conditions and challenges for European Jewry.

The Berlin conference was the latest in a series of meetings aimed at examining Jewish potential in Europe and exploring the role international Jewry can play.

It took place against the backdrop of looming challenges for European Jews.

These include rising xenophobia, a fast-growing immigrant Muslim population and a sharp erosion of support for Israel in Europe and in international organizations since the outbreak of Palestinian violence last September.

Holocaust denial and hate on the Internet are major concerns, as is the electoral success of far-right political parties and a growing tolerance for anti-Semitism.

"You don't just hear anti-Semitism and right-wing extremism on the street, but also at cocktail parties," said Michel Friedman, who serves as deputy chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany.

Media in some countries have displayed what many feel is a pronounced anti-Israel bias, and there has been a wave of vandalism against synagogues, cemeteries and other Jewish sites.

In Germany, for example, more than 290 anti-Semitic crimes were reported in the third quarter of 2000, about twice as many as in the same period in 1999.

"We are woefully unprepared to deal with these challenges," David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, told the conference.

Nonetheless, European speakers said the most pressing problems for Jewish survival in Europe do not come from outside the Jewish world.

"The most important challenges are the internal ones," said Cobi Benatoff, president of the European Council of Jewish

Communities. "Our institutions are such that unless we change them, the projections for Jewish life in Europe are pessimistic.

"Our institutions today are a failure. If we look at demographic projections, that is a failure, too," said Benatoff, from Milan, a city whose 10,000 Jews are split into sometimes hostile factions.

"Our current institutions and ways have not won the battle of assimilation," he said.

"They must give a positive motivation for Jews to continue Jewish life."

Such comments, echoed by others, represent a new frankness — and frustration — on the part of some European Jewish leaders.

They also represent a new recognition of European responsibility.

According to many observers, the ECJC failed to capitalize on the momentum produced by its 1999 General Assembly in Nice.

That meeting drew some 600 Jews from across Europe and was celebrated as a landmark in the emergence of a strengthened, self-confident European Jewry that could take its place as a creative force in Europe and a "third pillar" in global Jewish affairs.

But follow-up to the assembly was limited.

Some observers see the upcoming ECJC General Assembly, to be held in May in Madrid, as a potential turning point, for better or worse.

Benatoff and other organizers want the Madrid General Assembly to serve as a springboard for new Jewish institutions and new directions. They also hope it will give a boost to organizations, groups and movements that are active outside, or at the fringe of, official communal structures.

"Our vision is to move on, not to be a defender of the old structures," said Alberto Senderrey of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

The Berlin meeting marked the second time the Conference of Presidents has met with European Jewish leaders.

In addition to recognizing the potential for strengthening European Jewry's voice, the meetings reflect the growing importance of the European Union as a geopolitical and economic power. The previous meeting took place two years ago in Brussels, the E.U. headquarters.

Hoenlein said the purpose of this month's forum was to air problems, establish communication with European Jews, introduce European issues to the American leaders and begin to assess how American Jewish organizational experience can be used to bolster European Jewry.

"We're not looking to establish an institutional presence here, we're looking for results and how we can use our experience to help get them," he said. "The collective voice of European Jewry can be organized."

For example, Hoenlein said, the development of the European Union and its integration of former Communist states gave European Jews a key reference point for lobbying and other collective political activities.

Such skills, however — and others like fund-raising and public relations — are still largely undeveloped in Europe.

Bolotowsky, the Finnish Jewish leader, said learning to become more proactive is a priority.

"We react to anti-Semitism, to xenophobia, to threats against Israel, etcetera, and that is important," he said. "But if collective Jewry is only preoccupied with reacting, how do we find the energy to formulate common strategies and the like?" □