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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Russia-Iran deal worries Israel

Israel is "very concerned" about a Russian plan to sell ballistic missiles to Iran, which poses a "very real threat to the State of Israel," an Israeli spokesman said.

Russia agreed to resume conventional weapons sales to Iran after a five-year hiatus. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said America is awaiting more details about the deal, but is concerned that it could threaten Persian Gulf countries as well.

Powell: Jerusalem's status open

Secretary of State Colin Powell told Arab American leaders that his reference to Jerusalem as Israel's capital in congressional testimony last week did not indicate a change in U.S. policy. In his first meeting with Arab Americans on Tuesday, Powell clarified that Jerusalem's status is a matter to be determined by Israel and the Palestinians.

Powell also discussed U.S. sanctions on Iraq, treatment of Arab Americans in Israel and Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In poll, Americans back Israel

Americans resoundingly side with Israel in its ongoing struggle with the Palestinians, according to a new poll, contradicting the perception of many American Jewish leaders that the Palestinians are winning the "P.R. war."

The poll found that one-third of American Jews believe Jerusalem should be divided as part of a peace deal with the Palestinians, a view shared by half of non-Jews. Four leading Jewish groups commissioned the poll.

Money pledged to slave fund

A group of top German businesses agreed to cover a \$670 million shortfall from what German industry had pledged to a fund to compensate Holocaust-era slave and forced laborers, according to a spokesman for the group.

The announcement came Tuesday, a day before Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was to host a meeting in Berlin aimed at getting corporate leaders to cover the shortfall.

Under a deal reached last year, German industry had pledged \$2.5 billion to the fund, but many firms have not provided their share.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Backers hope new P.R. effort will help Israel spread 'the truth'

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Palestinians may not be winning the war for American public opinion, but Israeli diplomats and American Jews are still forging ahead with efforts to augment Israeli hasbarah — a uniquely Hebrew term that falls somewhere between explanation and propaganda.

The Israeli government recently took the unusual step of contracting two prominent American public relations firms — Rubenstein Associates and Morris, Carrick & Guma — on a three-month trial basis.

More controversially, a handful of Jewish mega-donors has created a think tank that they hope will generate long-term strategies for presenting Israel in a favorable light.

Some Israelis have asked whether such a group is necessary; after all, isn't that why Israel supports two embassies and 11 consulates in North America?

And, they ask, if American Jews must get involved, shouldn't it be the responsibility of the official Jewish community, rather than private interests?

But American Jewish leaders say international condemnation of Israel during the past half-year of Israeli-Palestinian bloodshed has made a stronger P.R. effort necessary.

"There's always a need to do more, to educate about the hate toward Israel that exists, the unwillingness to accept Israel, that Israel is under threat," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

"As long as Israel makes news, and has perhaps the largest foreign press corps in any non-war zone, then Israel needs to be concerned about how it is presented," Foxman said.

For much of the past decade, Israel appeared to be guided by a notion advanced by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres: If Israel's policy is right, there's no need for hasbarah, and if its policy is wrong, hasbarah won't help.

That notion was put to the test over the last half year — and, many believe, disproved.

When former Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered far-reaching concessions in peace talks, the Palestinians responded with street clashes and terror attacks — and much of the world blamed Israel.

The vitriol appeared to catch Israel's Foreign Ministry by surprise. Before Israel could organize its hasbarah effort, the Palestinians had scored major victories on the battlefield of public opinion.

"We need to be proactive, not reactive," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish organizations. "Israel is always served by the truth, because its case is fundamentally sound."

Enter the new think tank — "Emet," the Hebrew word for truth.

Spearheading the project is Leonard Abramson, the Philadelphia-based founder of U.S. Healthcare, along with philanthropist Michael Steinhardt and World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman.

The group consulted with Hoenlein, Foxman and other Jewish activists — and only then notified Israel's Foreign Ministry, Foxman said.

American donors are expected to provide \$7 million for the think tank, with another \$1 million requested from the Foreign Ministry, according to reports.

When Emet's formation became public knowledge earlier this month, it touched

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel eases Ramallah blockade

Israel eased a blockade of Ramallah, allowing some vehicles in and out of the West Bank city, but Palestinian officials called the change insignificant.

Israeli President Moshe Katsav defended the blockades Tuesday, telling a delegation from the European Union that they are necessary to prevent terrorist attacks.

Israeli Arabs said hit by live fire

Two of the four Israeli Arabs killed by police in the first few days of rioting in October were hit by live fire, according to senior Israeli pathologists.

The opinion, submitted to a commission investigating the deaths of 13 Israeli Arabs during the riots, contradicts police testimony that only rubber bullets were fired. Arab leaders have described the October demonstrations as peaceful, but two Israeli reporters testifying Tuesday said they had never seen such violent events and vandalism.

Katsav blasts Red Cross, U.N.

Israeli President Moshe Katsav blasted the International Red Cross for not visiting three Israeli soldiers kidnapped by Hezbollah last October.

He also criticized the United Nations and the international community for their silence. "If we were talking about citizens of another country, I'm convinced that the international community would demand that visits be allowed," Katsav said Tuesday.

Nuke book author questioned

The author of a book that focuses on Israel's nuclear program was questioned Tuesday by Israeli police for alleged violation of the nation's censorship laws.

Avner Cohen, who lives in the United States, arrived in Israel on Monday for the first time since "Israel and the Bomb" was published in the United States three years ago.



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off consternation in Israel. Some Foreign Ministry officials grumbled that American Jews were poaching on their turf.

Not surprisingly, they would prefer that any extra money be funneled to the ministry's efforts.

Both right and left also have concerns about Emet.

Israel's left appears concerned that hawkish American Jews will use Emet to push a hard-line approach to the peace process.

On the other hand, some right-wingers were rankled by the hiring of Itamar Rabinovich — a former Israeli ambassador to the United States who is closely associated with the peace process — to head up Emet's Tel Aviv office.

Rabinovich is still searching for a director for Emet's U.S. office, and a governing board is now being assembled.

Some right-wingers fear Emet will promote the idea that peace talks should resume under new Prime Minister Ariel Sharon where they left off under Barak — with President Clinton's proposals, which included the division of Jerusalem.

The Palestinians, in fact, are demanding just that. But both Clinton and Barak pronounced those offers dead after the Palestinians rejected the proposals in talks last summer and afterward, and the Israeli and American leaders then left office.

Steinhardt and Bronfman referred all queries about Emet to Abramson, who refused to comment.

A spokesman for the Abramson Foundation, Joe Yohlin, said "any speculation" about the think tank would be "premature."

It is unclear exactly what the Emet will do, and the principals' reluctance to talk has raised eyebrows.

Now that the dust has settled a bit, some Israeli diplomats have taken a more sober approach.

"Whoever is willing to put their efforts into" hasbarah, "to improve the general understanding of what the situation is all about, is welcome," said one diplomatic source in Jerusalem, who did not want to be identified.

"Sometimes when there are more doing it, there's competition," the source said. "But the principle of cooperation and sharing the burden is much more important than who is doing what to the other."

If there's one thing American Jewish leaders agree on, it's that Israel needs help with its P.R.

The Palestinians gained the high ground early in the conflict, painting themselves as oppressed, rock-throwing victims of brutal and heavily armed Israeli troops. It took a little while for the Palestinians' self-portrayal as "peaceful protesters" to be exposed as mendacious.

But although the media now reports more accurately on Palestinian tactics, Jewish observers lament that Israel has not capitalized further on Arafat's diplomatic intransigence and his resort to violence and terror.

Opinions differ as to why the Foreign Ministry has had difficulty getting Israel's view across. Some say it's arrogance or incompetence, some that Israel places a low priority on hasbarah or that it's hampered by endemic anti-Israel bias in the media.

Others say Israel simply doesn't understand what messages will move an American audience — and no one knows the American media market better than American Jews.

"Even if your product or service is good, you still need advertising to let the world know it," said Morton Klein, president of the hawkish Zionist Organization of America.

Klein said there is a need for an outfit like Emet, but objects to the choice of Rabinovich.

On the other side of the political spectrum, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, also indicated his support for an organization like Emet.

But he wondered whether Emet would discredit itself by defending Israel in every circumstance.

What if Israeli soldiers commit atrocities, for example, or if Sharon decides to expand Jewish settlements, which much of the world considers provocative?

"An effective P.R. will say 'This is a mistake, we accept it, we don't try to excuse it, but we have to look at the broader message,'" Yoffie said. "Will this group be able to say this, or will it offer a public relations that will be rigid and propagandistic?" □

JEWISH WORLD

Goussinsky ordered back to jail

A Spanish judge ordered Russian media tycoon and Jewish leader Vladimir Goussinsky to return to jail pending the outcome of his extradition hearing, which starts later this week.

Goussinsky, who has been under house arrest, may be extradited to Russia to face fraud charges.

U.N.-funded maps draw fire

B'nai B'rith International blasted a U.N. program for funding publication of a map that does not show the State of Israel. Another map, published by the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism with the support of the U.N.'s Program of Assistance to the Palestinian People, details the Old City of Jerusalem, showing churches and mosques, but making no mention of synagogues or the Western Wall.

"It is unconscionable that the U.N. should fund a map — or any other publication — that ignores Israel or any other member state," said the president of B'nai B'rith International, Richard Heideman.

New Anne Frank pages published

A new edition of Anne Frank's diary was released Monday, three years after a close friend of the teenage diarist's father disclosed the existence of five secret pages that Otto Frank had entrusted to him years earlier.

In those pages, Anne portrays her mother, Edith, as having "cold eyes," and agonizes that she cannot talk to her, which perhaps explains why Anne began writing a diary. Anne also laments that her parents' marriage is a union of convenience.

German club owner investigated

The German government welcomed a decision by prosecutors in Munich to investigate a nightclub owner accused of making anti-Semitic remarks about the granddaughter of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Rudolf Fischer, who denied the accusations of anti-Semitism, canceled an event at his club after being told that Noa Ben-Artzi was to make a speech to 400 guests there. According to members of the Jewish charity Keren Hayesod, the event's sponsor, Fischer said he wanted nothing to do with Jews and would rather host a far-right rally.

O.U. offers Haggadah supplement

The Orthodox Union is mailing a sign-language supplement to the Passover Haggadah to thousands of deaf and hearing-impaired Jews worldwide.

The supplement, published by the O.U.'s Our Way program, features descriptions of basic Passover laws and customs. It is the third in the group's series of sign-language guides for Jewish holidays.

Find alternatives to funding religious groups, Jews say

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Looking for a new way to say "thanks, but no thanks," some Jewish leaders are trying to convince the White House to seek alternatives to its faith-based initiative.

President Bush should not focus on direct federal assistance to religious groups that provide social services, Jewish leaders say.

They argue that would risk violating the constitutional separation between church and state.

Instead, they say, he should offer tax credits to individuals who give to charities and indirect aid to religious groups with their programs for the homeless or drug treatment.

Some Jewish groups say they hope that the Bush administration is cautious before it implements its plan to provide federal funds to religious organizations.

The administration is not delaying any part of its initiative, White House officials said Tuesday, contrary to what was reported in Monday's Washington Post.

The newspaper quoted the deputy director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives as saying the proposal "may need to be corrected in some areas."

But John DiIulio Jr., the office's director, told a conference of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism on Tuesday that "we are following our plan."

When Bush was asked on Monday whether he was backing down on his faith-based initiative, he replied, "Not at all."

At the same time, the White House, apparently aware of the criticism, appears to be moving ahead slowly.

DiIulio told the National Association of Evangelicals last week that proselytizing organizations which provide social services would not be eligible for direct federal funding, but individual recipients could choose to use public vouchers for those programs.

Just the suggestion of using public vouchers shows the administration is realizing the dangers of direct funding and it is beginning to look for other ways for the program to work, said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

Saperstein and other leaders are pushing other ideas, such as tax credits for charitable giving, as the proper approach to involve more religious groups in the care of the needy. Bush's plan includes a proposal to allow individuals who do not itemize their tax returns to deduct contributions to charities.

"I would not be surprised to see critics from the right and left join together to support these kinds of initiatives," Saperstein said.

Rallying around tax credits and other forms of government assistance to religious groups that could stimulate private giving is preferable to the risk of direct federal funding, which poses constitutional problems, Saperstein and others explain.

Most Jewish groups are opposed to expanding financial partnerships between government and religious organizations in the manner suggested by the Bush administration. They say that in addition to chipping away at the constitutional separation between church and state, the partnerships allow for employment discrimination based on religion and infringes on religious liberties.

The Anti-Defamation League has raised concerns about discriminatory employment practices by would-be recipients of funding and the need for safeguards against money going to hate groups. DiIulio is aware of the "very serious stumbling blocks" in his program, said Abraham Foxman, ADL's national director.

The idea of public vouchers may be "interesting," but in the end the government is still potentially helping to fund hate groups, according to Foxman. Specifically, the ADL has voiced concern over the possibility that the Nation of Islam, led by Louis Farrakhan, could receive federal funding.

Religious conservatives such as the Rev. Pat Robertson and the Rev. Jerry Falwell also have problems with the Bush plan. They are concerned that churches would be corrupted by government regulations and that groups they find objectionable would be rewarded. □

AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

Jewish judge is latest casualty of assault on law in Zimbabwe

By Suzanne Belling

JOHANNESBURG (JTA) — The Jewish chief justice of Zimbabwe has agreed to step down, giving in to the government of President Robert Mugabe in a standoff over enforcing the nation's laws.

Anthony Gubbay, 68, agreed to go on immediate vacation until his retirement at the end of June, and will not preside over any more cases.

The conflict between the judiciary and Mugabe's government erupted last year after white farmers challenged the invasion of their land by black "veterans" of the 1970s Zimbabwean war of independence.

The "veterans" — only some of whom actually fought in the independence war — claimed that land reform instituted after Zimbabwe became independent in 1980 had not proceeded fast enough.

Many regarded the land reform campaign as nothing more than an exercise by Mugabe to avoid defeat in last year's elections, the first time since Mugabe took power in 1980 that he had faced a serious challenge.

The country's highest court then heard two major cases that got Gubbay into trouble with the government.

The first, brought by dispossessed white farmers, asked the court to order the eviction of the squatters, despite government measures to protect them.

The second was an application by the narrowly defeated opposition party to order a recount in many key constituencies, following allegations of irregularities.

Before the second application was heard, the government passed a law prohibiting any investigation of the irregularities and any vote recount.

Gubbay — born in Manchester, England — presided in both cases.

In both cases, the court ruled against the government.

Shortly after the judgments, the government verbally attacked "white and Asian judges" over the land issue.

Analysts pointed out that the judges' independence had proved inconvenient to Mugabe, who ignored the court orders.

Johannesburg Rabbi Ben Isaacson, who served as a rabbi in Zimbabwe for 12 years, until 1999, and knows Gubbay, described him as a "gentleman."

"He is a legal authority of international renown, a human being of great integrity and a man who does not sacrifice his principles on the altar of expediency," Isaacson said.

Isaacson described Mugabe's actions as "thuggery," but pointed out that Mugabe does not target people because of their religion.

"Judge Gubbay's religion, and that of his colleagues, has nothing to do with it," Isaacson stressed. "The removal of judges who rule against the lawlessly rampant regime resembles what the Nazis did in the 1930s."

At the end of November, militants with the ruling Zanu Party "invaded" the Supreme Court in the Zimbabwean capital, Harare, while police stood by.

Though they did little damage, the militants disrupted court proceedings and sent a message of intimidation to the judiciary.

In February, Gubbay asked Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa to ensure the safety of the judges, indicating that otherwise they could not continue to serve.

Chinamasa, a Mugabe ally, said he could not do so.

An arrangement was made soon afterward for Gubbay to take early retirement, but later in February Gubbay's office said Chinamasa had not honored the arrangement and Gubbay would not resign.

He defied a ministerial order to vacate his office until another deal was reached on March 2.

Gubbay is expected to be replaced with a judge who is loyal to the Zimbabwean government.

Zimbabwe's Jewish community is small.

Only some 750 Jews remain of the 6,000 who lived there two decades ago.

Tony Leon, a Jew who heads South Africa's opposition Democratic Party, criticized the Zimbabwe government's conduct after a recent visit to South Africa's northern neighbor.

"If the culture of impunity continues during the next 18 months to the general election, there will be very little to save in that country, and the effect on us will be great," Leon said. Instability in Zimbabwe can scare investors away from its southern neighbor, South Africa.

To date, South Africa has preferred to use quiet diplomacy to influence the situation in Zimbabwe.

But a more forceful diplomatic approach appears to be in the cards.

While recognizing the need for land redistribution in both countries, few South Africans, whether black or white, appear to support Mugabe's methods.

Unusually, leaders of the South African judiciary have broken their silence on political issues to talk about developments in Zimbabwe.

In a joint statement, the country's two top judges — Constitutional Court President Arthur Chaskalson, who is Jewish, and Acting Chief Justice Joos Hefer — said that "unless judges are allowed to fulfill their constitutional function independently" and "without interference from the government, their judgments will lose credibility and the rule of law will be irreversibly compromised."

In a lecture last week, Chaskalson quoted American jurist Louis Brandeis.

"If the government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for the law, it invites every man to become a law unto himself, it invites anarchy," he warned.

Isaacson, the rabbi, added: "The issue at stake is the thuggery of Mugabe, who, like Saddam Hussein and the other thugs of the world, will target anybody they feel like." □

Seven convicted in Azerbaijan

MOSCOW (JTA) — Two leaders of the Azerbaijani branch of Hezbollah have been sentenced to life in prison for their involvement in the recent assassination of a leading Azerbaijani intellectual, according to the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews.

Five other members of Hezbollah accused of being involved in the death of Ziya Bunyatov, who the group believed had connections with "Zionist circles and Israeli intelligence," were given lesser sentences.

Last week's sentences came amid reports that Iran is training Azerbaijanis for "Islamic battalions." □