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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Another settler killed in ambush

An Israeli settler was killed by Palestinian gunmen while driving near the West Bank city of Tulkarm. Zvi Shelef, 63, died of massive head wounds Thursday.

He was the fourth settler killed this week in Palestinian roadside ambushes.

The attack took place hours after Israeli and Palestinian security officials met for the second time in two days but failed to find a way to end the violence.

Israeli settlers retaliated following the latest murder.

Near the West Bank town of Nablus, a settler opened fire Thursday on a Palestinian car, slightly injuring two people, Israeli police said.

Nearby, settlers stoned and beat a group of Palestinians whose car overturned after settlers threw rocks at it.

Three Israelis were arrested in the incidents.

Palestinian official dies at 61

The top Palestinian official in charge of Jerusalem affairs died Thursday of a heart attack while on a visit to Kuwait.

Many Israelis considered Faisal Hussein, 61, a relative moderate in Palestinian politics.

Yossi Beilin, a former negotiator with the Palestinians and a leading Israeli dove, said Israel had lost a negotiating partner.

Reports said Hussein died Thursday in his hotel room before attending an Arab conference against normalization of ties with Israel.

Katsav visits White House

Israeli President Moshe Katsav asked President Bush to set a deadline for Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to end Palestinian violence against Israel.

Speaking to Israeli reporters after meeting with Bush at the White House, Katsav said Thursday that Bush had called the deadline "an interesting idea."

The night before, Katsav urged the United States and other nations to suspend relations with the Palestinian Authority if Arafat fails to end terrorist attacks against Israel.

"If he continues to use terror it can be very bad for Israel, but it can be a disaster for the Palestinians" if world powers cut off ties with the Palestinian Authority, Katsav said.

With Burns and Kurtzer appointments, Bush's Mideast team begins to take shape

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — After four months of planning Mideast policy with a team made up mostly of Clinton-appointed officials, President Bush is moving decisively to assemble his own team.

The most prominent steps were the recent confirmation of William Burns as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs and the nomination of Daniel Kurtzer to be ambassador to Israel.

Secretary of State Colin Powell last week designated Burns — along with Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk and the consul general in Jerusalem, Ron Schlicher — to revive security talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The trio is urging both sides to accept proposals outlined in May by an international commission led by former Sen. George Mitchell.

The Bush administration views the three men as its Middle East team, with the same power and leeway that the Clinton administration gave to former Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross and his group.

While Ross became famous for his strenuous work in "shuttle diplomacy," however, a State Department official said the new team will be less ubiquitous.

"We're proving that you can be deeply engaged with the parties without a special Middle East coordinator," the official said.

The SMEC office was closed by Powell in his first days at State, and Powell has said repeatedly that he is reluctant to reopen it.

Analysts have criticized the lack of personal involvement in Middle East issues at the top level of the Bush administration, particularly by Bush himself and Powell.

Samuel Lewis, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel, has said that Israel and the Palestinians were spoiled by the extensive personal attention from Clinton and previous presidents, and may interpret the lack of senior-level involvement as a lack of interest in the region.

The State Department brushes aside such concerns, saying Clinton's personal involvement was so intensive as to blunt its effectiveness, and was a level of engagement too high to replicate.

"We're cognizant in the administration that you do need to maintain the power of the presidency to impact the process at a suitable time," a State Department official said. However, the official added, now is not the time.

For the time being, the brunt of the task is left to Burns.

The former ambassador to Jordan was confirmed only last Friday as assistant secretary, but already had been working as an envoy for Powell.

In his confirmation hearing, Burns called active American engagement in the Middle East "a necessity, not an option," but said the United States needs to be humble in its approach.

"We have no monopoly on wisdom in the Middle East," Burns said in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 17.

"It is in our self-interest to listen carefully to our friends and consult widely, both inside and outside the region, while remaining committed to our principles and expecting that our friends will address our concerns too."

As assistant secretary, Burns' portfolio extends far beyond Jerusalem.

He frequently will have to attend to other U.S. concerns in the region — such as Iraq, Iran and Lebanon — leaving a gap in the U.S. presence in the peace process.

"I'm not so convinced that Bill Burns will be able to devote the amount of time to

MIDEAST FOCUS

Sharon seeks pressure on Arafat

Israel has reached an "intolerable" situation because of Palestinian terrorism and will not be able to maintain its unilateral cease-fire much longer, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell during a phone call Wednesday night.

Sharon urged the United States to pressure Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to end the violence. Israeli sources were quoted as saying Sharon plans to continue the cease-fire until after his trip to Europe next week.

Settlers lash out at Sharon

Israeli settlers lashed out at Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to maintain a unilateral cease-fire, despite repeated Palestinian attacks.

Several hundred settlers demonstrated outside Sharon's office Thursday, charging that the premier is not doing enough to protect them.

Palestinian gets 8 life sentences

An Israeli court sentenced a Palestinian man to eight consecutive life sentences plus 21 years for ramming a bus into a crowded bus stop near Tel Aviv in February.

The court agreed Thursday to the prosecution's request to give Khalil Abu Alba a life sentence for every person killed in the attack, plus a year for every person who was injured.

Hall's collapse blamed on victims

The building collapse at a Jerusalem wedding hall last week, in which 23 people were killed and over 300 others were injured, occurred because men and women were dancing together, according to the rabbi who officiated at the ceremony.

Israeli media quoted Rabbi Reuven Levy as saying dancing between an unmarried man and woman is a sexual indiscretion punishable by death.



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Arab-Israeli matters that Dennis Ross did," an official with a Jewish organization said.

Powell has been seeking advice and counsel from a wide variety of sources, including Ross and Edward Djerejian, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel and Syria. Djerejian has been mentioned as a possible special envoy if Powell chooses to go that route.

Schlicher, in Jerusalem, serves as Washington's main liaison with the Palestinians, after serving in Egypt and Lebanon.

Burns is being aided by Indyk, a former assistant secretary whose second tour of duty in Tel Aviv ends this summer.

Indyk is expected to be replaced by Kurtzer, who is currently serving as the U.S. ambassador to Egypt.

Kurtzer's nomination has been anticipated for months and has become a point of contention in the American Jewish community.

Though he is an Orthodox Jew, right-wing groups are concerned that Kurtzer will take a pro-Arab viewpoint, and they disagree with his position on Israeli settlement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Kurtzer is an opponent of "natural growth," a policy Israel uses to justify its expansion of settlements.

While the State Department has said repeatedly that it opposes the construction of new settlements, it has been evasive in addressing "natural growth."

Groups like the Zionist Organization of America have taken out advertisements opposing Kurtzer's nomination.

But the diplomat has found unlikely allies in the Reform and Conservative movements, which sent a letter to President Bush last month refuting criticism of Kurtzer.

In foreign service circles, Kurtzer is considered a brilliant analyst.

"The way he handled adversaries in Egypt should be taught to all foreign service officers," said a former Israeli diplomat who has worked with Kurtzer for almost 20 years.

An official with a Jewish organization, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that when times were toughest, he questioned Kurtzer as to why he kept working toward peace. Kurtzer's reply was succinct.

"This is my life," Kurtzer reportedly said.

"He goes to sleep every night and wakes up every morning wondering how he can move the ball forward," the official said.

Both Burns and Kurtzer have strong relations with Arab leaders from their previous postings.

They are described as Arabists because of their sympathy for Arab positions, but generally are considered friends of Israel as well.

Both also are widely praised as professional, and many analysts believe they will be able to adapt to the changes brought about by the presence of new leaders in the United States and Middle East.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said the identity of the envoys matters less than the message they carry from the United States.

"The major factor is that the administration and events on the ground are going to shape the policy," Hoenlein said. "The ongoing violence leaves little room for maneuverability." □

Jedwabne inscription avoids mention of Poles

ROME (JTA) — The inscription for a new monument to Jews massacred in the Polish town of Jedwabne in 1941 will stop short of saying outright that Poles, not Nazi troops, did the killing.

The inscription, released Monday, alludes to the horrors of neighbors killing neighbors and warns that hatred should never again "set the residents of this land against each other."

A Polish official acknowledged that the text is a compromise that won't satisfy everyone, especially some Jewish groups. But he said he believes it "reflects current knowledge and emotions surrounding the issue." □

JEWISH WORLD

U.S.: Extend application deadline

The United States is joining a call to extend the Aug. 11 application deadline for those seeking payments from a nearly \$5 billion German fund for Holocaust-era slave and forced laborers.

"The United States would support such a change, which would improve the opportunity for victims to apply for payments," James Bindenagel, the U.S. State Department's envoy on Holocaust issues, said in a letter released Thursday.

Payments to the aging survivors are expected to start in mid-June, but fund officials say it may take 18 months before the last victims see money from the fund.

Thousands expected at N.Y. rally

Organizers are expecting thousands to attend a pro-Israel solidarity rally Sunday morning in New York in front of the Israeli Mission to the United Nations. More than 100 rabbis and congregations are among those planning to participate in the rally.

IBM faces Shoah-related suit

Gypsy groups plan to file a lawsuit against computer giant IBM alleging that its machines helped Hitler identify and send 600,000 Gypsies to their deaths in the Holocaust.

A lawyer for the groups said Thursday he would file a civil suit in Geneva against IBM for "complicity in crimes against humanity."

Reports focus on FSU

Russian professors "propagate Jewish conspiracy theories and other Jewish stereotypes in their lectures," according to the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews. The accusation was part of a report the group issued Wednesday on anti-Semitism in Russian academia.

A second group representing Jews in the former Soviet Union also issued a report this week. The report focuses on such issues as the revival of Jewish life throughout the region and increased interference by the Russian government in Jewish communal affairs. Available at www.ncsj.org, the report was released Wednesday by NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia.

D.C. shul building marks birthday

The Jewish Historical society of Greater Washington is planning to mark the 125th anniversary of the oldest synagogue building in the nation's capital.

The Adas Israel Synagogue opened its doors in 1876 but moved out in 1908. Over the years, the building has served as a church, barber shop and sandwich shop.

The structure now houses the Small Jewish Museum and the historical society.

Sponsor terror, lose business: Iran, Libya sanctions up for renewal

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Lawmakers are set to debate whether to continue restricting foreign access to Iranian and Libyan oil resources as punishment for those countries' support of terrorism.

The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act — commonly known as ILSA — was passed unanimously in 1996 and calls for sanctions against foreign companies investing in Iran's and Libya's energy sectors. American oil and gas companies are barred from trading with Iran and Libya by executive order.

Intended as a deterrent to trade with the two rogue nations, ILSA appears to be generally effective: In the five years since the measure became law, only seven of more than 50 international deals pursued by Iran have gone through.

A five-year extension of ILSA was proposed May 23 and already has the support of almost 200 lawmakers in the U.S. House of Representatives.

"Iran has been continuing to threaten the national security of our nation," said Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), chair of the Middle East subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee. "Without ILSA, these countries would be even more dangerous."

The State Department said in May that Iran is "the most active state sponsor of terrorism." Iran also is targeted because it actively opposes peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and because it seeks to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

"Billions of dollars that would have been invested in making the money machine for Iran, which is their oil and gas production, have not been invested as a result of ILSA," former Sen. Alphonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), the original sponsor of the legislation, said in testimony before Gilman's subcommittee.

By the Iranian government's own account, the law has "led to the disruption of the country's economic system, caused a decline in its gross national product, weakened the country's ability to deal with international leaders and impeded credit transactions," according to a 1998 report submitted to the United Nations.

Libya is included in the act because it refuses to acknowledge state responsibility for the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988.

Howard Kohr, executive director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, called in May for ILSA's extension, charging that Iran continues to encourage Hezbollah and Palestinian groups to attack Israel and spends almost \$100 million annually to support terrorist groups.

Proponents of the bill say ILSA also has hurt Iran's ability to acquire weapons by cutting off its access to hard currency. In addition, because ILSA has prevented Iran from modernizing its oil development and maintenance equipment, it is believed that Iran soon will be forced to designate most of its oil supply for domestic use, possibly even becoming an importer in the next 10 years.

ILSA is set to expire in August. Lawmakers are concerned that letting it expire would signal weakness to Iran and give foreign corporations an advantage over the American oil and gas industries.

The major opponents of the legislation are the business and foreign trade communities, which argue both that the sanctions impede free trade and that — because a waiver provision creates loopholes in the sanctions — they hurt American corporations' ability to compete with U.S. allies.

William Reinsch, a former Commerce Department official in the Clinton administration and now president of the National Foreign Trade Council, said the program is counterproductive to American interests and has no chance of achieving its goals. "The reality is that it is the world price of oil and the ability to produce it that determines Iran's and Libya's income from oil and gas production, not U.S. sanctions," Reinsch said. "And it is that sustained and rising price level that is encouraging exactly the investment that ILSA sought to block."

His group says the sanctions policy alienates key trading partners, such as Canada and the European Union.

The Bush administration has not taken a formal position on ILSA, but is in the midst of a review of policy toward the two countries. □

Focus back on Ashcroft over office prayer sessions

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Congress may start its day with a prayer, but there is still a clear separation of church and state when it comes to organized prayer and the federal government.

Or is there?

Prayer sessions or Bible studies have been held for years in congressional buildings. But is there a difference if a senator, congressman or cabinet secretary holds the prayer session in his office? The question has put Attorney General John Ashcroft back under scrutiny. As a senator, Ashcroft held devotionals in his office. Now, as attorney general, he is holding them at the Justice Department, welcoming any and all staff.

Ashcroft's religious views and conservative ideology concern some Jewish organizations, a number of which opposed Ashcroft's nomination as attorney general.

Held about three times a week, the devotionals take place at 8 a.m., before the government workday officially begins. Participants — from as few as four or five to as many as 20 — lead the group in reading verses from the Old and New Testaments, memorizing psalms and offering prayer.

"I don't see a problem as long as there is no coercion and there is nothing to make people uncomfortable," said Rabbi Levi Shemtov, director of the Washington office of American Friends of Lubavitch.

However, Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said Ashcroft must be "very cautious" not to step over the line.

There is no real prohibition against Ashcroft conducting a religious event in a personal capacity, Saperstein said. But, he added, for a supervisor in a government setting — let alone the attorney general — to conduct such an event sends out certain signals. "There is a real risk that employees may feel coerced or pressured that they participate," Saperstein said.

When Ashcroft held devotionals in his Senate office, Shimon Stein, an Orthodox Jew, attended because he was interested in learning about other faiths. Ashcroft asked Stein, a legislative correspondent, if there was anything he could do to make him more comfortable.

Now working in an anti-domestic terrorism office in the Justice Department, Stein said he never has felt pressure to attend the devotionals — but he continues to attend. It would be a "poor assumption" to think that attendance at the devotionals is tied to greater access to Ashcroft, Stein said.

He added that he enjoys learning about Christianity and sharing insights with other participants. "Occasionally I can kick in a good Rashi," he said, referring to the revered medieval commentator on the Bible and Talmud.

In a speech to the Detroit Economic Club in 1998, Ashcroft, who belongs to the Assembly of God faith, distanced himself from the favorite themes of the religious right.

"We must embrace the power of faith, but we must never confuse politics and piety," he said. "For me, may I say that it is against my religion to impose my religion."

Pressure, however, could be in the eye of the beholder. Some people might even perceive public awareness of the devotionals as government endorsement of religion, Saperstein warned.

There are a number of Congress-wide Bible study sessions.

The Center for Christian Statesmanship has been ministering to the House and Senate for six years and sponsors weekly sessions that are open to all.

The Capitol Jewish Forum sponsors study sessions and an occasional minyan.

The Senate chaplain leads a senator's Bible study and a Senate staff prayer group each week. On the House side, members meet for a weekly prayer breakfast.

Meanwhile, the debate continues as to how fine a line Ashcroft can walk.

"Maybe those who have sought to tone down religion in public have gone a little too far," Shemtov said. "It's time for a fresh look at what level of religion in public might just be appropriate." □

Jews say praise of proselytizing shows dangers of faith-based plan

By Sharon Samber

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Recent comments by the director of a Christian social services program praising the proselytization of Jews are fueling Jewish opposition to President Bush's faith-based initiative.

John Castellani, executive director of Teen Challenge, a substance-abuse treatment program, said in testimony before Congress last week that Jews at his center were "completed" — that is, had accepted Jesus — as part of their treatment.

Officials of the Anti-Defamation League and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism said Castellani's testimony shows the dangers involved in funneling federal funds to social service organizations that might proselytize.

Both groups sent letters to Bush expressing concern.

Many Jewish leaders fear an expanded partnership between the government and faith-based institutions could break down the constitutional wall separating church and state, infringe on religious liberties and imply toleration of employment discrimination.

Groups have cautioned that the administration's proposal does not have proper safeguards against religious coercion.

The latest incident only highlights Jewish groups' fears that the federal government ultimately will fund proselytizing activity.

Under the Bush proposal, even if the government does not directly fund such activity, charitable choice laws will fund and strengthen organizations that make proselytizing a core component of their work, according to Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

"When speaking of the need for government to help faith-based organizations transform lives, is proselytizing of Jews and other non-Christians what you had in mind?" Saperstein asked in his letter to the president.

"Are you prepared to lend government endorsement and support to programs or organizations with such an overt mission?"

In their letter, ADL's National Chairman Glen A. Tobias and National Director Abraham Foxman said the testimony at the House Government Reform subcommittee hearing showed faith-based organizations would be either "unable or unwilling to separate their power to transform lives from their theologically grounded mission to proselytize and convert."

Members of other Jewish groups — such as Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America and the American Jewish Congress — and religious-liberties groups also spoke out against the potential for government-financed proselytizing. □