

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Bush makes Iraq case

President Bush told the U.N. General Assembly on Thursday that it would be a "reckless gamble" for the international community not to deal with Iraq.

Bush enumerated numerous U.N. resolutions that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had violated within the last decade. Saddam "had made the case against himself," he said. [Page 1]

Israel sees political opportunity

Israeli officials are viewing the resignation of the Palestinian Cabinet as an opportunity to bypass Yasser Arafat.

Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said the time is now right for an Israeli political initiative to encourage a moderate Palestinian leadership.

The Israeli military intelligence chief, Maj. Gen. Aharon Ze'evi, said Wednesday's Cabinet resignation signifies a new low in Arafat's status among his own people.

Netanyahu calls for help on Iraq

Benjamin Netanyahu said the United States should help Israel prepare for a possible Iraqi retaliation if the United States attacks Iraq.

Speaking before the U.S. House of Representatives' Government Reform Committee on Thursday, the former Israeli prime minister said the United States should help provide "all means of civil defense," such as smallpox vaccinations.

"Israel is the most likely target. It must be protected," he said.

Netanyahu also praised President Bush's speech Thursday at the U.N. General Assembly, saying Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein must be removed from power. [Page 3]

P.A. links elections to withdrawal

Palestinian officials are calling for an Israeli troop withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip before Palestinian elections are held in January.

Israel, however, says it will only withdraw troops if there is an end to violence.

Let the Palestinians "stop terrorist activity, let them stop condoning terror, and then they can have elections," said Ra'anana Gissin, a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. "The terror is preventing free elections."

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jewish groups laud Bush's words in clearest statement yet on Iraq

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A majority of American Jewish groups are supporting President Bush's call for action against Iraq, agreeing that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein poses a grave risk to world stability.

"I believe, at present, it's the most clear and present danger to democracy and freedom," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

The Jewish reaction to Bush's speech at the U.N. General Assembly on Thursday represents the clearest statement to date about support for Bush's stance on Iraq.

It comes as the community has been struggling to formulate a policy on an issue fraught with sensitivities.

In his highly anticipated speech at the United Nations, Bush said it would be a "reckless gamble" for the international community to ignore Iraq.

"The history, the logic and the facts lead to one conclusion: Saddam Hussein's regime is a grave and gathering danger," Bush said in New York. "To suggest otherwise is to hope against the evidence."

Bush enumerated numerous U.N. resolutions that Saddam had violated within the last decade, and said the Iraqi president "had made the case against himself."

Without setting a firm deadline for Iraqi compliance, Bush laid out a detailed list of things Saddam must do to avoid conflict.

He said he preferred to get international support for any move against Iraq, but he made it clear that the United States would act unilaterally if necessary.

The "purpose of the United States should not be debated," he said.

In its effort to formulate a policy on Iraq, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations has been soliciting the views of its members to reach consensus not only on whether to support Bush but also how outspoken the community should be. Members of the umbrella group met via conference call shortly after the speech, but did not reach a conclusion as to how the American Jewish community will respond to Bush's doctrine.

"We have to be careful how the Jewish community handles this," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents. "Events are going to dictate the timing."

Jewish groups have been unusually cautious about taking a stand on the issue for several reasons. Most Jewish groups believe a regime change in Iraq would reduce the security threat to Israel and remove a key Palestinian ally.

But there is also considerable concern that Iraq will hit Israel with biological or chemical weapons in retaliation for any attack by the United States.

There is also a predominant view that even if Jews generally support Bush's stance, the community should not be vocal in the debate because it would give critics ammunition to portray U.S. action as a fight on Israel's behalf, as some did in the 1991 Gulf War.

Despite their caution and without specifying a formal policy, Jewish leaders predominantly expressed support for Bush's words at the United Nations.

They said he detailed a strong case that Saddam has consistently ignored U.N. resolutions, that Saddam was seeking to obtain weapons of mass destruction and that he has shown a propensity towards using them.

"Iraq is the single most important threat right now to world peace and to our

MIDEAST FOCUS

Annan calls for peace conference

The U.N. secretary-general described the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a threat to world peace. Kofi Annan told the U.N. General Assembly on Thursday that the Security Council must have the political will to act because "true leadership and effective action are badly needed" to end the conflict.

Annan said a comprehensive, two-state solution must be sought on the basis of land for peace. Annan also called for an international peace conference "without delay."

Palestinians fire rocket at Israel

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip fired a rocket Thursday that landed in a kibbutz in Israel, but caused no injuries.

The rocket landed on a house in Kibbutz Sa'ad, but no one was at home at the time. An Israeli team defused the rocket, which failed to detonate.

Kafit terrorist gets 22 years

A would-be suicide bomber who tried to carry out a terrorist attack at a Jerusalem café six months ago was sentenced Thursday to 22 years in prison. Mishal Niddal entered Café Kafit in Jerusalem's German Colony carrying more than 30 pounds of explosives in a backpack.

Israeli mayor won't wait for Scuds

The mayor of an Israeli city hit by Iraqi Scud missiles in 1991 said he will evacuate the city if Baghdad threatens to strike Israel again.

Zvi Bar said he was making arrangements for the orderly evacuation of Ramat Gan's 125,000 population to a "tent city" in the south of the country, the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot reported.

During the 1991 Gulf War, some 9,000 apartments in Ramat Gan, near Tel Aviv, were damaged, of which 100 were totally destroyed, the paper said.

safety," said Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, executive vice president of the Orthodox Religious Zionists of America.

He described Saddam as a "maniac" who "has proven that he will gas his own people."

"The fanaticism that exists throughout the Middle East is best addressed by first dealing with Iraq," agreed Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Many American Jewish leaders expressed the fear that Saddam has not been quiet for the past decade because of a loss of will, but because he has been using the time to garner weapons for an eventual attack on U.S. interests and allies.

"Do we have to wait until a target is hit, and the world says, 'Ah, yes, he did have weapons of mass destruction,'" asked David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

Support, however, is not unconditional for some. Some argue that the United States should not act alone, but only through an international coalition of the kind that the senior President Bush assembled during the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, said that acting alone would be a mistake.

"I have little doubt that if the United States were to defy world opinion by attacking Saddam Hussein, the Arab street would spawn a tidal wave of terrorism," Schorsch said in a speech to JTS on Sept. 11.

Schorsch told JTA that he would encourage new diplomatic initiatives, because "a military victory will only leave the soil saturated with resentment, the poisoned seedbed for the next round of violence."

Indeed, Bush clearly faces an uphill battle in gathering world support for his position that demands against Iraq must be met or "action will be unavoidable."

Several Jewish leaders expressed concern about remarks by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who warned against quick military action and directly linked the Iraq issue with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Speaking to the General Assembly directly before Bush, Annan said both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iraq's defiance of U.N. resolutions were "threats to world peace." He said Iraq has defied Security Council resolutions but that efforts to obtain Iraq's compliance with the resolutions must continue.

Annan pressed the need for weapons inspections so that the world could know that weapons of mass destruction have been eliminated and lead to suspension of sanctions against the Iraqi people.

But, warned Annan, "If Iraq's defiance continues, the Security Council must face its responsibilities."

The speech also intensified the debate as to whether the Iraqi regime is the largest threat to the world, and thus worthy of intense U.S. efforts.

In the past couple of weeks, questions on Capitol Hill and elsewhere have been raised as to whether Iran, Syria or other regimes are also a threat, and require additional attention from the United States.

"I think we need to see more evidence from the administration" that Iraq poses the greatest danger, Schorsch said.

But others said the Bush administration's focus on Iraq is well placed, and that it does not preclude further action against other supporters of terrorism.

"The president is saying, 'This is No. 1, but there are more to come,'" said one senior official with a U.S. Jewish organization. "Saddam is the beginning, not the end."

Morton Klein, national president of the Zionist Organization of America, said, "This should make it clear that if other regimes continue promoting terror, the United States will go after them as well."

As the Jewish community continues to wrestle with policy, some said they would be best poised to speak out when Bush takes his message to Congress.

"If the president asks Congress to support action in Iraq, AIPAC would lobby members of Congress to support him," said Rebecca Needler, spokeswoman for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. □

(JTA staff writer Rachel Pomerance in New York and correspondent Sharon Samber in Washington contributed to this report.)



Daily News Bulletin

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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.
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JEWISH WORLD

Radicals: U.S. deserved Sept. 11

A group of radical Muslims meeting in London praised Osama bin Laden for the Sept. 11 attacks. Participants at Wednesday's meeting issued a statement accusing the United States of acting as if it is "above any law" in its foreign policy.

About a dozen men, their faces covered, prevented journalists from attending the meeting at the Finsbury Park Mosque in north London. The mosque is widely regarded as a center of radical Islam in Britain.

Jews, Muslims at ceremony

Representatives of Jewish and Muslim police officers in Britain jointly laid a wreath at London ceremonies for the victims of the Sept. 11 attack. During Wednesday's ceremony outside the U.S. Embassy in London, Jewish Police Association chaplain Rabbi Alan Plancey and Mohammed Mahroof of the Association of Muslim Police said prayers in memory of those who died.

The police said in a statement that the wreath-laying ceremony "reflected the coexistence of beliefs of both associations who continue to support each other within the police service."

Forward sells radio station

The Forward Association reached an agreement to sell its radio station to ABC Inc. for \$78 million.

The planned sale of WEVD-AM by the publisher of a family of Jewish newspapers bearing the Forward name follows an agreement announced in September 2001, under which ABC's ESPN subsidiary was granted the right to provide programming on WEVD and ABC acquired an option to initiate negotiations for the purchase of the station.

Lubavitch school opens in Mass.

A one-year Jewish girls school for high school graduates is opening this fall in western Massachusetts. About 10 women will be attending the inaugural year of the Lubavitch-run Beis Chaya Mushka Seminary in Amherst.

In addition to participating in traditional Jewish studies, students will have the opportunity to work at a nearby kosher organic farm.

Romanian station accused

Romanian officials accused a local television station of promoting anti-Semitism and racism. Presidential adviser Corina Cretu called for action to be taken against the station OTV, which is known for sensationalist reporting. The Associated Press reported Thursday. The government issued its criticism after an appearance Tuesday by extremist Corneliu Vadim Tudor, who accused the government of corruption.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Would action against Iraq help or harm the Jewish state?

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Despite a widespread consensus that U.S. action against Iraq would affect Israel, the question remains: Would such action help or harm the Jewish state?

President Bush's speech Thursday at the United Nations General Assembly made no reference to Israel, but any action the United States takes is expected to fuel a counter-attack by Iraq on Israel.

Some have argued that the debate itself might prompt Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to launch a pre-emptive attack, and Israel would be the probable target.

Just hours after Bush delivered his speech, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was on Capitol Hill, telling lawmakers that the world needed to act before additional attacks are carried out against Israel and other U.S. interests.

A strong supporter of U.S. actions against Iraq, Netanyahu said he believes that despite the short-term consequences for his country, a mission against Saddam could prevent mass casualties.

"We support this pre-emptive American action even though we stand on the front lines, while others criticize it as they sit comfortably on the sidelines," he said.

"But we know that their sense of comfort is an illusion, for if action is not taken now, we will all be threatened by a much greater peril."

He also said the United States should help Israel prepare for a possible Iraqi retaliation.

He said the United States should help provide "all means of civil defense," such as smallpox vaccinations.

"Israel is the most likely target," he said, testifying before the House Government Reform Committee. "It must be protected."

Netanyahu said that while Israel may be attacked by Iraq if the United States does not act first, U.S. action is still necessary.

"You have to connect the dots," he said, pointing to Saddam's work to compile weapons of mass destruction and the propensity he has shown to use them.

Netanyahu's public comments appear to mirror the official Israeli position, but Israeli government officials have tried to take a less public stance.

"Iraq, although it's a clear and present threat toward peace, stability and security, is not an Israeli problem," Danny Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to the United States, told JTA.

"We are not a part of this conflict, nor do we want to be."

However, the ambassador reiterated the Israeli position that Israel would support U.S. actions, even if it went forward without U.N. or international backing.

Critics of the U.S. actions against Iraq argue that, in addition to casualties that Israel would likely face from reprisal attacks, Israel's entrance into the conflict could have damaging consequences.

While Israel, at the United States' command, did not retaliate for Iraqi attacks on the country in the 1991 Gulf War, numerous Israeli officials have said Israel would not hold its fire this time around.

In particular, any use of nuclear weapons by the Jewish state in a retaliatory attack could have dire consequences.

"There are consequences for Israel and the world that follows such a war, even if Saddam is removed," said Henry Siegman, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. "There will be lasting consequences that make, as far as the eye can see, establishing normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab and Islamic world more difficult."

Others worry that the United States has not made clear its endgame, and has not specified what it expects to implement in Iraq once Saddam's regime is defeated.

A regime that follows Saddam could even have a closer link to terrorism, some have argued. □

(JTA correspondent Sharon Samber in Washington contributed to this report.)

FOCUS ON ISSUES

As more non-Jews come to Israel, Israelis re-examine Russian aliyah

By Jessica Steinberg

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A renewed call to change the Law of Return, which guarantees Israeli citizenship to anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent, is turning the spotlight on immigration from the former Soviet Union.

Nearly 1 million immigrants have moved to Israel from the former Soviet Union since the floodgates opened in the late 1980s — and as many as a quarter of them are not Jews according to religious law, experts say.

Though immigration has tailed off sharply in the last few years, the percentage of non-Jews among the most recent immigrants has risen as high as 70 percent, according to Israel's chief rabbis. The Interior Ministry puts the figure slightly lower, at 58 percent for the first half of 2002, but still far above what it was in previous years.

The controversy over Russian immigration is not academic. With Israel defining itself as the Jewish state — and with the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate in charge of issues such as marriage, divorce and burial — an influx of large numbers of non-Jews raises difficult societal questions.

Should non-Jewish immigrants be allowed to undergo Reform or Conservative conversions, for example, or must they go the more demanding Orthodox route?

Indeed, some ask, should they have to convert at all? Or are the responsibilities of Israeli citizenship, such as military service, the price of entry to the Jewish people?

The significant number of non-Jewish immigrants has pushed such issues to the front of the political battlefield.

At the same time, Russian immigration has “forced Israeli society to find practical solutions for problems that didn't exist 10 years ago,” remarks Eli Kazhdan, executive director of Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, Israel's largest Russian political party.

It also has infused the country with a fresh dose of Zionism at a time when patriotism has fallen prey to cynicism in much of Israeli society.

While most Israelis generally welcome the idea of immigration, opinions differ widely on the implications of the huge Russian immigration for the Jewish state. Recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union now make up nearly one-sixth of the Israeli population.

For the most part, it all can be traced back to the Law of Return, which begs the question of who is a Jew.

Initially adopted in 1950, the Law of Return gave every Jew the right to immigrate to Israel. An amendment in 1970 extended that right to non-Jews who had a Jewish parent or grandparent, their spouses and the spouses of Jews.

Of the 250,000 or so non-Jewish Russian immigrants, about 30,000 fall under the “grandfather clause.” The rest are spouses or children of Jews. Assuming that half of those 250,000 are women of childbearing age, the figures mean that in coming generations the Jewish state will be producing non-Jews, since halachah does not accept the children of non-Jewish mothers as Jews.

With only religious marriages recognized in Israel, the halachic issue raises certain dilemmas. How, for example, would

a young man whose immigrant mother wasn't Jewish, but who served in the army and lives like any other secular Israeli marry a girlfriend who is accepted as Jewish?

In Israel, such questions — which threaten to create a kind of “A-list” and “B-list” of halachic status — are a ticking time bomb in a country not lacking in explosive issues.

Certain Israeli leaders, such as Interior Minister Eli Yishai of the fervently Orthodox Shas Party, and Chief Rabbis Yisrael Meir Lau and Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, want to strike the grandfather clause and limit the Law of Return to halachic Jews.

In July, the Cabinet rejected a proposal to drop the grandfather clause — but the issue might be raised again. Israel cannot continue to bring entire Christian families to Israel, the chief rabbis said, according to Israeli media. Without immediate changes to the Law of Return, Yishai warned, “By the end of the year 2010, the State of Israel will lose its Jewish identity.”

Others, such as the chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, Sallai Meridor, are equally adamant that the Russian immigration should continue, but say the current conversion process should be changed to make conversions more available and less degrading.

Yisrael Ba'Aliyah takes a third stance: Since “only” about 30,000 of the non-Jewish immigrants are eligible for citizenship through the grandfather clause, the party argues that it's not worth tampering with the Law of Return. Still, the party does think the time has come for the Jewish Agency to stop actively seeking potential immigrants who fall under the grandfather clause.

Instead, Kazhdan said, the Jewish Agency should work on infusing potential immigrants with Jewish identity and streamline the conversion bureaucracy. That, he said, would solve more problems than tinkering with the Law of Return.

Yet the search for potential immigrants is a crucial one for Israel, as demographic projections show that — absent significant immigration — Arabs will outnumber Jews between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River within several generations.

Israel needs immigrants, and that's the Jewish Agency's job, said Mike Rosenberg, head of the Jewish Agency's aliyah department.

“We bring them to Israel, give them a home, a passport, a job. Their absorption is very successful,” Rosenberg said. “They didn't come to Israel to join the Christian or Arab population. The only thing they're missing is the stamp of the rabbinate, and the rabbinate isn't open-minded and willing to let them convert.”

Once conversions become part of the absorption process, he said, there won't be any question of whether Russian immigrants identify or are identified as Israeli Jews.

Consider Natalia Nabitovsky, 21, a student of sociology and anthropology at Tel Aviv University who immigrated from Russia four years ago. She thinks of herself as an Israeli first and a Russian second.

The daughter of a Jewish father and Russian mother, Nabitovsky is converting at the Joint Conversion Institute, the government- and rabbinate-sponsored agency guided by a joint board of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis. The actual conversions are performed according to Orthodox standards.

Several thousand immigrants from the former Soviet Union have passed through the conversion institute, and some 1,200 are waiting to be converted. “I always knew I was Jewish, but I didn't know what that meant for me,” Nabitovsky said. “Being Israeli and being Jewish goes together; it's part of being Israeli.” □