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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Groups praise act's passage

The Senate passed a bill that would provide funding for social service providers and tax incentives for charitable giving.

Jewish leaders hailed the Charity Aid, Recovery and Empowerment Act as proof that social service funding can be embraced by the federal government without blurring the constitutional separation between church and state. [Page 3]

Palestinians killed in Gaza raid

At least two armed Palestinians were killed during an Israeli army raid into the northern Gaza Strip.

The troops were searching Wednesday for Kassam rockets and launchers after Palestinians earlier fired two rockets at Israeli targets.

One of the rockets was fired at the Negev town of Sderot, where an Israeli woman was later treated for shock.

The other rocket was fired toward an Israeli settlement in the southern Gaza Strip, but did not explode, Israel Radio reported.

In the West Bank, Israeli troops arrested several Palestinians, including two wanted for involvement in a stabbing attack Monday night against two security guards near a kibbutz in northern Israel.

Education secretary criticized

Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.) criticized Secretary of Education Rod Paige for saying he preferred to have children attend Christian schools.

"I would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community, where a child is taught to have a strong faith," Paige said in an interview in the Baptist Press. "The reason that Christian schools and Christian universities are growing is a result of a strong value system. In a religious environment the value system is set. That's not the case in a public school, where there are so many different kids with different kinds of values."

In a letter to Paige, Lowey said the comments are "inappropriate for the chief official in charge of the nation's public school system."

The Anti-Defamation League said it is troubled by Paige's comments, and called on him to clarify them.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

As community splits on 'road map,' Congress gets an earful of advice

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Congress got a glimpse of the internal Jewish battle over the "road map" for Israeli-Palestinian peace, as organizations last week swamped lawmakers with literature and lobbyists pushing particular interpretations of the plan.

At issue is whether lawmakers should support a road map that places initial obligations solely on the Palestinians, or the current version that envisions simultaneous concessions by both sides.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee sent nearly 3,000 people to Capitol Hill on Tuesday, each asking congressional representatives to sign letters to President Bush. The letters ask him to reject calls for a road map that demands Israeli concessions up front.

At the same time, two dovish Jewish groups — the Israel Policy Forum and Americans for Peace Now — were faxing legislators' offices and holding background briefings, calling the current road map the best available policy and urging lawmakers not to place conditions on progress toward peace.

"We're saying this isn't a document we would have written, it certainly has its problems, but it's the only game in town," said Lewis Roth, APN's assistant executive director.

"The president shouldn't have his hands tied in pursuing it."

AIPAC and others argue that the current incarnation of the road map, drafted by the diplomatic "Quartet" of the United States, European Union, Russia and United Nations, places too much emphasis on a rigid timeline and doesn't demand Palestinian reforms and an end to violence as preconditions to Israeli concessions.

Many in the Jewish community also have been wary of the international presence in the road map, concerned that America's three partners in the plan are biased toward the Palestinians.

While AIPAC spent much of its recent policy conference praising the Bush administration, concerns linger that the White House will utilize the road map to mend fences with the European Union and the Arab world, which have not been supportive of the war against Iraq and see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the key problem in the Middle East.

Those concerns were heightened last month when Bush praised the appointment of Mahmoud Abbas as the new Palestinian Authority prime minister and announced he would unveil the road map once Abbas is confirmed.

AIPAC is asking legislators to write the president, asking him to stick to his policy speech of June 24, 2002.

Fulfillment of the four principles Bush laid out in the speech — an end to terror and violence against Israel, a new Palestinian leadership not tainted by terrorism, transparency in Palestinian government and an overhaul of the Palestinian security apparatus — will show when it's time to move toward peace, the letters say.

As of Monday, 28 senators and 124 representatives had added their signatures.

The dovish groups suggest the letters are merely a way to sandbag progress toward peace.

"Nothing in the letter is bad," said M.J. Rosenberg, IPF's policy director. "What's bad in that letter is what's left out."

Rosenberg argues that AIPAC is ignoring steps Israel could take for peace. He

MIDEAST FOCUS

Abu Mazen gets more time

The Palestinian legislative council gave the new Palestinian Authority prime minister two more weeks to present his new cabinet.

Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, was reportedly still at odds with members of the Fatah central committee over whom to appoint to the position of interior minister.

Israeli labor strike called off

A planned general strike in Israel was called off. The Histadrut, Israel's labor federation, called off a strike slated for Thursday after reaching an agreement with Israeli Treasury officials.

But Histadrut officials indicated Wednesday that disagreements remain over Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's austerity plan.

Group claims school blast

An extremist Jewish group claimed responsibility for a West Bank blast that wounded 15 Palestinian students.

The cause of Wednesday's explosion was not immediately clear, but some reports said it could have occurred when a student picked up a makeshift device in the schoolyard.

An unknown group, Revenge of the Infants, said it carried out the blast to avenge the murder of Jewish children at the hands of Palestinian terrorists. But police said past claims by the group were not verified, Israel Radio reported.

Sentencing for Ze'evi assassin

An eastern Jerusalem resident was sentenced to 12 years in prison for helping the Palestinian terrorists who assassinated Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi.

Salakh Alawi was found guilty Wednesday of letting the gunmen stay in his home in October 2001 after the murder.

wonders how many lawmakers will sign the letter because they support the principles it outlines, while wishing it listed what Israel should do as well.

"Maybe there are members inclined to join the letter who, when armed with information from other groups, would realize that it's not a good letter to join," one congressional staffer said.

In statements, press releases and a list of questions and answers sent to congressional offices last week, IPF and APN said the White House has shown a sincere desire to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, and that the effort should be embraced.

"Placing unrealistic preconditions on U.S. engagement will mean that any Palestinian leader, however chosen, will lack the capacity to effectively fight terror," said a letter to lawmakers from Debra DeLee, APN's president.

"Moreover, unrealistic preconditions will endanger the nascent reform initiative in the Palestinian Authority which led to the appointment of Prime Minister Abu Mazen," as Abbas is also known.

The dovish groups insist that the timing of their campaigns is coincidental, and that they were not trying to undercut AIPAC's message.

The groups argue that the agendas of both AIPAC and the dovish groups were set by President Bush's actions.

Both dovish groups say their aim is to show lawmakers that supporting AIPAC is not the only way to prove your pro-Israel credentials.

"AIPAC bills itself as the voice of the pro-Israel community on Capitol Hill, when in fact they are one voice," Rosenberg said.

"They may not even be the majority voice."

Congressional staffers say last week's maneuvering will change few entrenched viewpoints, but that the current international environment might change the views of some members who are wavering.

"I think there's a feeling in Congress that the Iraq war kind of changes things," one staffer said. "I think a lot of members will think of putting pressure on Israel to take pressure off America, vis-a-vis the Arabs and Muslims that hate us."

For its part, AIPAC says it is accustomed to being attacked by Jewish groups from both the left and right, and that the dovish groups have a personal stake in continuing the peace process.

"They've come out with an interpretation that supports their own narrative," AIPAC spokeswoman Rebecca Dinar said. "For them, accepting this vision that the United States and Israel have endorsed would mean abandoning a lifelong crusade and coming to terms with their own irrelevance."

While the Bush administration no doubt is hearing the dichotomy of views, it does not seem to be embracing the more dovish groups.

Five senior administration officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, spoke at the AIPAC conference.

In contrast, IPF has not consistently been on the administration's invitation list for consultations with the Jewish community. "I think it will be interesting when they unveil the road map and the people they have been courting" — meaning AIPAC — "bash them, and the people they haven't let in the door embrace them," said one Jewish leader not affiliated with any of the groups. □

Australian extremist loses job

SYDNEY, Australia (JTA) — A former head of the Jewish Defense League in Australia was fired from his job as a teacher recently after his criminal record became public.

Michael O'Hara, who says he is Jewish and who used the name Ze'ev Korwan when in the JDL, was found guilty in a Melbourne court last year of perpetrating a fraud involving the sale of two German pistols, one of which he claimed Hitler used to commit suicide.

The JDL in Australia rescinded O'Hara's membership last year and the group's U.S. headquarters refuted O'Hara's claims that he headed its Australian branch.

He has been banned from entering synagogues in Australia following attempts to raise funds. □



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JEWISH WORLD

French condemn anti-Semitism

French Jewish politicians and cultural leaders condemned anti-Semitism.

The leaders launched a petition drive by gathering earlier this week in Paris as part of a campaign to fight anti-Semitism.

The signatories pledged to take action to counter anti-Semitic incidents in France, "including those taking place at demonstrations against the war in Iraq."

The campaign, which has the backing of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, is slated to culminate in a mass demonstration in Paris on April 13.

Think tank unveils Mideast plan

A U.S.-based think tank unveiled a plan for achieving Middle East peace after the war on Iraq.

Winning the Peace in the Middle East, produced by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, outlines a plan with three options for Israeli-Palestinian peace — one that includes a return to bilateral negotiations, a second that creates a provisional Palestinian state and a third, less desirable, option of coordinated unilateral separation.

The plan says the Palestinians should confirm Israel's legitimacy as a Jewish state and their commitment to law and order. The plan calls on Israel to make private assurances to the United States of its willingness to make peace, as well as to take public steps, such as ending settlement expansion.

The plan is endorsed by a bipartisan group of former U.S. diplomatic leaders.

Campus Israel news launched

A weekly e-mail service was launched with Israel news for North American college students.

Israel Campus Beat, a joint effort of the Israel on Campus Coalition and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, will be dispatched on Sundays through the 26 member groups of the ICC and the 52 organizations of the Presidents Conference.

Prepared by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, the Israel Campus Beat will feature news about Israel and how it pertains to events on North American campuses.

Critics assail 'Auschwitz dilemma'

An Australian Jew lodged a complaint with the country's broadcasting authority after a radio station used an "Auschwitz dilemma" as part of a game show.

The radio station asked participants whether they would save their daughter or mother if given the choice in Auschwitz.

The station later apologized for the show.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Jews cheer charitable choice bill's advance — minus provocative parts

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Many Jewish groups are savoring a small but sweet victory after the Senate removed provocative language in a charitable aid bill.

Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) announced late last month that Republicans were eliminating from the Charity Aid, Recovery and Empowerment Act — known as the CARE Act — guidelines for government contracts to charities. Those guidelines said the government couldn't take into account a charity's religious identity when awarding contracts.

That move ended a deadlock on the legislation, which passed the Senate on Wednesday by a vote of 95-5.

"By removing controversial charitable choice language, the Senate paved the way for passage of this bill," which would have "provided direct funding for houses of worship, authorized government-funded employment discrimination on the basis of religion, and threatened the religious liberty of social service beneficiaries, who are often the most vulnerable members of society," said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

A similar bill has yet to be introduced in the House of Representatives, but Santorum has said any House version would not include the controversial provisions he removed.

Most Jewish groups support the amended bill, which would create tax breaks for charitable giving by individuals and corporations. Jewish groups believed the original CARE Act proposal was a subtle attempt to remove barriers for religious groups seeking federal money for their social services programming.

The original proposal said government should ignore charities' religious symbols, missions or religious-affiliated boards of directors. That would have allowed religious charities to take government money while still discriminating in hiring or while evoking religious doctrine in their charitable work, Jewish groups warned.

Many liberal groups are concerned about the Bush administration's emphasis on charitable choice policy, fearing it blurs the line between church and state.

Several charitable choice bills were signed but not implemented during the Clinton administration. The current White House has moved to change regulations to reflect the Clinton-era laws, aiding religious social service groups.

Many Jewish groups have spoken out against the regulations.

"Given the fact that you had the administration going further to implement charitable choice, there was a concern that this bill would be seen as Congress ratifying what the administration was doing," said Richard Foltin, legislative director of the American Jewish Committee.

The Orthodox Union was a strong supporter of the original CARE Act. Nathan Diament, director of the O.U.'s Institute for Public Affairs, said liberal groups — including some Jewish organizations — were "extorting from charitable organizations" by holding up the legislation.

Foltin concurred that larger battles on the issue of charitable choice are still to come. "It was the opening battle for this Congress," he said. "We will see in every social services bill in this Congress a battle like this." □

Poll: Anti-Semitism low in France

PARIS (JTA) — Anti-Semitic attitudes in France have reached their lowest level in a decade, according to a new poll.

The results of this poll contradict those found earlier by an American-based research team. The results of the latest poll, published in the Le Figaro newspaper on Tuesday, found that approximately 9 percent of the French population holds negative attitudes toward Jews. That percentage jumped to 14 percent among France's 18- to 24-year-olds. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Barghouti and cohorts leave trial twisting in an Israeli court's wind*By Matthew Gutman*

TEL AVIV (JTA) — For many observers, the Marwan Barghouti trial is a pageant of the absurd.

The prosecutions' four star witnesses refuse to speak, the court stenographer can barely type and the public defender, at her client's request, is not permitted to defend him.

As the trial resumed this week after a three-month recess, three of Barghouti's former lieutenants were called to testify against the boss of the Palestinians' Tanzim militia.

Each reverently hailed Barghouti when they entered the courtroom, then covered their ears as Judge Sarah Sirota addressed them. Two gave Barghouti military salutes as they left.

Facing the defendant's bench, the witnesses charged the court system with hypocrisy. One man, Nasser Aweis, issued a throaty condemnation: "I would only testify if it was Israel that was on trial at the International Criminal Court."

The judges were unmoved.

In a trial that sought to slow the intifada by demoting one of its initiators to the status of "just another criminal," some say the court has managed to bounce a renegade Barghouti back into legitimacy.

Barghouti is accused of masterminding terror attacks that killed dozens of Israelis. He has been charged with membership in a terrorist organization, activity in a terrorist organization, murder, complicity to murder, solicitation to murder, attempted murder and conspiracy to commit a felony.

Moreover, Israeli officials say Barghouti is the link between Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat and the actual terrorists. A subtle hint is enough to indicate what Arafat wants, and Barghouti then passes instructions — and funding — to terrorists in the field, Israeli officials say.

Barghouti was captured a year ago during Operation Defensive Shield, Israel's first massive invasion of the West Bank after a year and a half of escalating Palestinian terror attacks.

For his part, Barghouti maintains that he is solely a political leader, with no military role in the intifada.

At the very least, in the transcript of his confession to Shin Bet investigators — who included the agency's director, Avi Dichter — Barghouti unabashedly divulged the intricacies of Palestinian backroom politics.

He revealed a Palestinian political world where maintaining legitimacy vis-a-vis the fundamentalist Islamic Jihad and Hamas is paramount. Barghouti, the West Bank secretary of Arafat's Fatah movement, said he was obliged to take a leading role in the violent campaign against Israel in order to fend off the increasingly powerful fundamentalist groups and maintain his status in the Palestinian street.

The Foreign Ministry had hoped that the revelations relayed by Brig. Gen. Yossi Kupperwasser, head of research for Israel's military intelligence, would at last cement the connection of Barghouti and Arafat and their responsibility for terrorism. Yet many here say the revelations fell flat.

The public had heard it all before: People knew that Arafat either directly or indirectly had ordered terror attacks; they knew that Barghouti was the man who translated Arafat's signals into action; they knew that Barghouti might well be responsible for

dozens of attacks. What the Shin Bet interrogations revealed is the extent to which Barghouti seems to be enjoying his elevated status. He expressed optimism that time in prison would serve him well politically, allowing him to remain above the political fray while his rivals stumble.

During his cross-examination, Barghouti put away his mantra that the trial is a sham and optimistically hailed the intifada as "the last struggle between Israelis and Palestinians before peace."

"Barghouti is a Palestinian leader and has no connection to military operations," said one witness, Khalum Abu Hmeid.

A senior Fatah source told JTA that the Israelis are — perhaps intentionally — "making Marwan into a Mandela, who may transform from prisoner to president," a reference to South Africa's Nelson Mandela.

Recent polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Polling and Research found that Barghouti is the most popular Palestinian after Arafat, garnering the support of 21 percent of respondents.

According to the center, Barghouti is likely to gain on his mentor cum rival in next week's polls.

Israeli officials, on the other hand, say the trial shows that no Palestinian leader involved in terrorism is beyond Israel's reach — and that he will be treated severely but fairly if apprehended.

Meanwhile, images of a ruffled man sitting droopy-eyed and handcuffed in the courtroom beside towering prison guards have softened Barghouti's image as a dangerous firebrand.

Inside the courtroom, Barghouti has engaged in shouting matches with the families of Israeli terror victims and the judges.

In almost every hearing so far, Zion Sweri, who lost two children in an attack Barghouti allegedly ordered, has shouted, "You are a terrorist, a murderer!"

As if by rote, Barghouti has responded, "No! I am a freedom fighter! I am a man of politics."

The duet has exposed a microcosm of Israeli and Palestinian societies that often attends the trial. Beside Sweri, in a courtroom with space for about 80, sit the dedicated families of the victims, interspersed with members of the Government Press Office and Foreign Ministry officials.

Behind them often sit members of the Israeli left and Palestinian Americans loyal to Barghouti, "international observers" and other Barghouti loyalists.

Snickers, gasps and even clucking rise from the gallery, depending on the testimony.

The courtroom is always under heavy guard, with as many as 20 security guards and police in attendance. All of this has taken place in a criminal case that, at least on official court books, is no different from any other murder case.

The judges' panel, led by Sirota, is comprised not of Supreme Court judges but those who interpret the law day in and day out in the Tel Aviv Magistrates Court.

Even the court stenographer, the sole recorder of this bit of Israeli-Palestinian history — no recording devices are allowed in court — has appeared overwhelmed. Sirota often has had to slow the trial's already plodding pace to permit the stenographer to catch up.

During each session Barghouti has said that the "Israeli occupation must be put on trial, not me."

With his first anniversary in captivity coming next week, Barghouti has remained remarkably close to his script. He continues to espouse a two-state vision and maintain that he is a freedom fighter. □