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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Mitzna quits as Labor Party chief

Amram Mitzna quit as the chief of Israel's Labor Party.

At a news conference Sunday where he announced his resignation, Mitzna blamed senior members of the party for his decision to resign. [Page 3]

Sharon, Abbas to meet soon

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will reportedly meet with his Palestinian counterpart next week.

Sources said the meeting between Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas would take place after U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell holds talks in Israel and the Palestinian Authority over the coming weekend, Israel Radio reported.

Sharon is also expected to meet with President Bush during a scheduled visit to Washington later this month, the report said.

Hillel to go interim

Avraham Infeld is expected to be appointed interim director of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

Sources told JTA that Infeld, an Israeli who headed the Melitz educational organization and who has been a consultant to Hillel, could be approved as interim director as early as later this week.

The search for a successor to Richard Joel has run into difficulties.

The group's top choice, an Ivy League-educated, 30-something Bostonian who did not come from the Jewish professional world, turned down the post, and two other candidates dropped out of the running.

Joel will assume the presidency of Yeshiva University in June.

Burns meets Israeli leaders

Both Israel and the Palestinians must take steps to help advance a new plan for peace, a visiting senior U.S. official said.

Israel should improve the humanitarian situation and ease travel restrictions on Palestinians in the territories, and the Palestinians should fight terrorism unconditionally, said William Burns, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs.

Burns is visiting Israel before U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell does so next weekend as part of his tour of the Middle East.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

'Road map' shows communal splits as activists gear up for and against

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK (JTA) — The "road map" toward Israeli-Palestinian peace has just gotten off the ground — but it's taking Jewish groups on divergent courses.

In the latest sign of the ferment the plan is causing in the Jewish community, several leaders of the national Jewish federation system endorsed it in a letter to congressional leaders on April 29.

The action apparently came in response to letters expressing concern with aspects of the plan that were sent by many members of Congress to President Bush last week in an effort backed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the main pro-Israel lobby.

The April 29 letter from 14 philanthropists illustrates the extent to which the road map has pressed Jewish buttons. Many of the signatories are philanthropists who do not commonly enter the political fray and are current or former activists in the federation system, an institution that is deliberately nonpartisan.

The formal presentation of the road map last week intensified the split in the Jewish community about the plan's merits and flaws, and the extent to which Jews should present a unified front on the issue.

The road map calls for a "final and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by 2005," which will include "an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel."

The plan calls for the Palestinian Authority to dismantle terrorist groups, clearly accept Israel's right to exist and enact a clean, functioning democracy, among other steps.

Israel, in turn, must end its settlement enterprises in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, withdraw from most of the territories and commit itself to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Left-leaning groups like Americans for Peace Now have sent letters to Congress supporting the road map, while mainstream ones have expressed concerns.

Meanwhile, the hawkish Zionist Organization of America has launched a grass-roots campaign urging activists to write letters to President Bush opposing the road map. "Bush's 'road map' plan will lead to the creation of a Palestinian Arab terrorist state," the group's action alert reads.

The tension surrounding the road map was highlighted at a general meeting of the Conference of Presidents of American Jewish Organizations on April 30.

Chairman Mortimer Zuckerman — who recently penned a broadside against the road map in U.S. News and World Report, which he publishes — cited the plan's perceived pitfalls, such as its failure to demand tangible results from the Palestinian Authority, according to participants at the closed-door session.

And Ronald Lauder, a past Presidents Conference chairman, encouraged a unified Jewish stance on the issue, but did not specify the position.

In response, Seymour Reich, another past chairman of the Presidents Conference, praised the road map's positive potential and urged respect for the diversity of Jewish opinion on the issue.

For his part, James Tisch, chairman of the board of the United Jewish Communities federation umbrella and the man elected last week as the Presidents Conference's next chairman, distanced himself from the federation leaders' recent letter to Congress

MIDEAST FOCUS

British journalist killed in Gaza

A British journalist killed in the Gaza Strip may have been killed by Palestinian and not Israeli fire, Israel said. But an Israeli analyst told Israel Radio that there was no exchange of gunfire at the time.

James Miller was fatally shot in the neck late last Friday night while Israeli army troops were searching for suspected arms-smuggling tunnels in the southern Gaza Strip. Britain is demanding a full investigation into the incident.

Powell: Syria acting against terror

Syria is closing down the offices of three anti-Israel groups in Damascus, says U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell. Powell made his comments over the weekend after meeting with Syrian President Bashar Assad in Syria as part of a tour of the Middle East. But a spokesman for Islamic Jihad, one of the groups it is believed Powell was referring to, said his group's Damascus offices are still open.

Arafat circumvents 'road map'

Yasser Arafat has established a national security council, contravening a key part of the "road map" toward Israeli-Palestinian peace. The new body to oversee security in the West Bank and Gaza Strip will report to Arafat, even though the road map calls for Palestinian security to be in the hands of the Palestinian Authority interior minister, who is accountable to the prime minister.

Tel Aviv bomb hidden in Koran

The bomb used in last week's suicide bombing in Tel Aviv was placed inside a copy of the Koran, Israel's defense minister said Sunday. Israeli officials described the bomb as being assembled abroad. Three people were killed and 40 others wounded in the attack.

The two terrorists entered Israel from the Gaza Strip.



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supporting the plan. "That letter does not reflect in any way UJC policy," said Tisch, who faced off against one of its signatories, Alan Solomont, chairman of Boston's Jewish federation, in a CNN interview April 30 about Jewish debate over the road map.

Tisch, who will be the first person to chair both the Conference of Presidents and the federation system at the same time, told JTA the boundaries between his roles will stay intact.

"When I speak for the Conference of Presidents, I speak reflecting the consensus view of the conference, and UJC has a voice within the Conference of Presidents," said Tisch, whose UJC position will end in November.

Meanwhile, signatories of the letter backing the road map say the letter represents their personal positions, not the positions of their organizations.

"We are still all individuals, and we have our own thoughts and feelings," said Marvin Lender, former president of the United Jewish Appeal, who helped put together the letter.

"The people I know who really are passionately involved are people who tend to have positions in organizations," said signatory Karen Shapira, vice chairwoman of UJC.

The federation leaders' letter begins as follows: "We are writing to express our concern over recent efforts to sidetrack implementation of the 'road map,' which the Bush administration has developed as a tool for helping to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We believe that the road map provides Israel with a distinct opportunity to escape the bloody status quo of the past two and a half years," it continues. "It offers a broad outline to detailed security arrangements that will ensure efforts to end Palestinian terrorism, while providing the necessary political context that will lead to an effective and safe implementation of the two-state solution."

Lender said the letter was prompted by the signatories' recognition that the road map was about to be presented.

"This is an opportunity, a moment in time," he said.

"It's not going to happen because of the Quartet," Lender said, referring to the collaboration among the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia to produce the plan.

"It will happen because President Bush takes a personal interest in this, and I want" Bush "to know that there are those of us in the community that would encourage him to do this," Lender said.

But AIPAC appeared to figure into the decision as well. The letter it supports, signed by 88 senators and 313 representatives, affirms the principles of Bush's June 2002 speech, which won broad Jewish approval.

In that speech, Bush called for new Palestinian leadership not compromised by terrorism and a Palestinian state under a transparent, democratic government that will live in peace next to Israel.

Israeli officials say the road map diverges from the Bush speech by dropping the president's apparent belief that the Palestinians must first show they are serious about ending terrorism and making peace before Israel makes concessions.

In addition, Israeli officials fear the plan's timetable undermines the idea that progress from one stage to the next should depend on each side's performance, not a schedule.

"Many are urging you to short-circuit this process and to focus on timelines, rather than benchmarks of real performance," the Senate version of the AIPAC-backed letter reads.

The "AIPAC letter appears to be the culmination of a variety of Jewish organizations and leaders who have been vocal in opposing aspects of the road map," Lender said.

Still, he added, his letter is not incompatible with the position of groups that have questioned the road map. It simply asks the nation's leadership to use the road map to revive the dormant Israeli-Palestinian peace process, he said.

"It's not a treaty," said Joel Tauber, a signatory to the philanthropists' letter and former chair of the UJC's executive committee. "It's a road map, and there will be detours along the way." □

JEWISH WORLD

British police arrest 6

British police arrested six people in connection with last week's suicide attack in Tel Aviv.

British citizen Asif Muhammad Hanif blew himself up outside a beachfront bar known as Mike's Place on April 30, killing three and injuring 40.

His accomplice, Omar Khan Sharif, also British, is still on the run after his explosive device failed to detonate.

Hate crimes bill reintroduced

Jewish groups are supporting a Senate bill that would increase coordination between federal and state law enforcement against hate crimes.

The Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act is sponsored in the Senate by Sens. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Gordon Smith (R-Ore.) and has the support of the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs and the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism. A Senate filibuster kept the bill from being voted on during the last Congress.

Synagogue dumps Arafat pal

A leading New York synagogue dropped an event it was to host honoring a U.S. Jewish supporter of Yasser Arafat. Congregation B'nai Jeshurun on Manhattan's Upper West Side said it reached an agreement with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, the organizer of the event, to move the ceremony feting Adam Shapiro.

Shapiro holed up with the Palestinian Authority president during the Israeli siege of Arafat's West Bank headquarters last year.

Plan urges recall of settlers

A peace group is calling on the U.S. government to help lure Israeli settlers out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip with financial incentives.

The Chicago-based Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace, known in Hebrew as Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, launched a campaign last Friday to convince the United States to lend foreign aid and solicit support from Europe to help relocate Jewish settlers from the West Bank and Gaza to within Israel proper.

Denier labeled security risk

Canada declared a Holocaust denier a national security risk. The move taken last Friday against Ernst Zundel paves the way for Canada to deport Zundel.

The United States deported Zundel, a German citizen who long lived in Canada, in February for missing an immigration hearing.

In January 2001, a Canadian human rights tribunal ruled that Zundel broke the law through his operation of a California-based Web site that vilified and promoted hatred against Jews.

Mitzna's resignation as chief leaves Labor Party in more disarray

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA)—Israel's Labor Party, already in shambles since its stinging defeat in the general elections earlier this year, became even more unsettled this week with the announcement by Amram Mitzna that he was stepping down as party leader.

At a news conference Sunday, the dovish Mitzna, the former mayor of Haifa, blamed infighting and backstabbing by senior party officials for his decision.

Mitzna, 58, said these officials, whom he did not name, pursued their personal interests instead of party interests.

"There were people in the party who said everything they could to hurt me. They put their personal interests before those of the party, even during the general elections."

In those elections, held in late January, the Mitzna-led Labor Party made its worst showing in Israel's 55 years, winning only 19 seats in the country's 120-seat Knesset.

Most commentators said Mitzna lost the election so badly because his policies were too dovish for an Israeli electorate hardened by more than two years of almost-daily clashes with the Palestinians.

During the campaign, Mitzna said he would be willing to negotiate with the Palestinians without a cease-fire and would talk with any Palestinian leader, including Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

If negotiations failed to produce an agreement, he said, Israel would withdraw unilaterally from most of the West Bank within a year. Mitzna also pledged to uproot Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip immediately upon taking office.

It is unclear who would take over for Mitzna.

Mitzna and party secretary Ophir Pines agreed to convene party organizations within 10 days to discuss whether new primaries would be held or a temporary leader appointed.

Mitzna's move was not altogether unexpected. Since Labor's electoral defeat, political analysts had predicted that Mitzna might step down.

At the news conference, Mitzna accused party officials of constantly trying to undermine him. He said he was prepared to fight for his dovish views, but not to fight daily to prove his legitimacy as party leader.

Mitzna entered national politics six months ago, after ousting former Labor Chairman Benjamin Ben-Eliezer in a November primary. But their rivalry did not end there. Ben-Eliezer, more of a centrist than Mitzna, still used his influence in various party bodies to block or encumber decisions Mitzna tried to put through.

Mitzna is a former general who clashed with then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon during the 1982 Lebanon War and commanded Israeli troops in the West Bank during the first intifada in the late 1980s.

Mitzna also continued an Israeli tradition of white knights with little political experience who had only a short tenure on the national stage — Ehud Barak and Amnon Lipkin-Shahak were two other ex-generals seen briefly as political saviors, but whose stars quickly burned out.

Mitzna's departure appeared to indicate a shift to the right for the Labor Party.

Immediately following Mitzna's resignation, a number of names were mentioned as possible successors.

Among those names are Ben-Eliezer, who served as defense minister in Sharon's previous unity government, Avraham Shochat, Matan Vilnai and Dalia Itzik. □

Israel to bar activists

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel will bar pro-Palestinian activists from entering the country, in an attempt to prevent more injuries to "human shields."

Members of the International Solidarity Movement try to block Israeli soldiers from bulldozing terrorists' houses, and American Rachel Corrie was killed earlier this year in one such incident. Two other activists from the group were injured in ensuing weeks. Israel is trying to expel members of the group already in the country. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

What's behind Blair's pressure on Israel? It's tough love, some say

By Richard Allen Greene

LONDON (JTA) — As the long-delayed “road map” toward Israeli-Palestinian peace finally sees daylight, British Prime Minister Tony Blair may be inclined to take some credit for pushing the process forward.

Israeli officials don't think he deserves much.

Blair's frequent and vocal interventions in the past year have been “not at all helpful,” one Israeli source, who asked not to be named, told JTA.

“The closer the war with Iraq got, the more vigorous the United Kingdom's courting of the Islamic world got,” the source said.

“Some of it was pathetic,” the source said, citing Blair's promise last summer to get Israel and the Palestinians talking to each other “by the end of the year.”

“The Americans said: ‘What year?’ ” the source said.

“They would like to show that they are doing something. But people in Israel are saying, ‘This is a game for them. For us, it's our lives,’ ” the Israeli added.

Israel has publicly and sharply rebuked Blair, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and the British ambassador to Israel more than once since the beginning of the year.

Dov Weisglass, a top adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, said remarks about the road map Blair made at the beginning of April were “inappropriate and unbalanced,” calling Britain's position “extreme.”

Israel was even angrier when, in March, Straw appeared to compare Israel's record at the United Nations to Iraq's.

Israel called the remarks “worrisome and outrageous,” and summoned Ambassador Sherard Cowper-Coles and criticized him.

“They do not contribute to the peace process, and might even hinder progress toward achieving a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict,” the director general of Israel's Foreign Ministry told Cowper-Coles.

Aware of Israel's irritation, Blair gave a long interview to the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot on the eve of Passover.

“I have great respect for what Israel has achieved and that is why I am so anxious that we create a situation in which Israel can feel real confidence and security and stability,” he told the newspaper, describing himself as “a real friend of Israel.”

The Israeli source concedes that point: “Blair, and Straw too, are friends of Israel. I understand their predicament.”

The predicament, another observer says, is that Blair heads a Labor party with a strong pro-Palestinian wing.

“In the 1980s, Israel was an issue of totemic significance for the Labor left,” said Matthew Harris, a spokesman for the Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel, a lobbying group.

“They saw it as being central to all the problems of the Middle East — which it is not.

“And they still have in the back of their minds an obsession with Israel,” Harris said of the Labor rank and file, many of whom opposed Blair on the Iraq war.

“He has to toss them a bone because they didn't drag him down” over Iraq, Harris said.

Stuart Polak, director of Conservative Friends of Israel, agreed.

Blair urged President Bush to make statements in praise of the road map to “save his own skin,” Polak said, “which is astounding when you look at” Labor's huge majority in the British Parliament.

A record proportion of Blair's own party voted against him on the Iraq war, but the government motion to go to war still passed easily, with support from much of the governing Labor and the opposition Conservative parties.

Only the small, centrist Liberal Democrat grouping took a party-line position against the war.

Amid the criticism, Blair has found unexpected defenders.

Malcolm Rifkind, a Conservative former foreign secretary and defense secretary — and a Jew with family in Israel — is among them.

“The British audience is puzzled that there is so much difficulty in recognizing that” the Israel-Palestinian conflict “has been the defining issue for most of the people in the region in the last 50 years,” Rifkind told JTA.

If some criticize the United States for lacking Blair's enthusiasm for the road map, it's because they recognize “that it is the only country outside the region that has any influence,” Rifkind said.

David Mencer, who as director of Labor Friends of Israel is close to the government, said Blair sees Israeli-Arab peace as an important goal.

“He believes in processes and getting people talking,” Mencer said, pointing to Blair's progress in the Northern Ireland conflict.

After 30 years of stalemate and bloodshed in Northern Ireland, Blair achieved a breakthrough because he kept negotiations going “no matter how odious the partners were,” Mencer said.

Blair compares himself to President Clinton, believing that his pro-Israel credentials are so strong he can push Israel toward uncomfortable compromises, Mencer said.

“He considers himself the most pro-Israel politician in Europe, which he is,” Mencer said. “He has never criticized Israel for taking action against terrorism. His only question is, ‘Where is this going?’ ”

Blair also thinks the time is right for a paradigm shift in the Middle East, Mencer said.

“As in the last Gulf conflict, there is some momentum created and a hope we can get everything sorted out at once,” he said.

Blair thinks he already has made a positive contribution by pushing for the appointment of a prime minister in the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Parliament's confirmation of Mahmoud Abbas last week overcame the final obstacle to releasing the road map.

But the Israeli source refuses to give Blair credit for that.

“The U.K. was not at all helpful in getting a prime minister appointed,” the source said. “Not even the last compromise. That was the Egyptians.” □

Far-right party rises in Britain

LONDON (JTA) — The far-right British National Party is celebrating after doubling its number of seats in local elections in England.

The party, whose policies include the voluntary repatriation of non-whites to their native countries, now has 11 council seats.

The BNP was particularly successful in the northern town of Burnley, where it is now the second biggest party. Ethnic tensions in the town are believed to have helped the party win seven seats on the council. □