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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli army to pull back

Israel's prime minister said he would order the army to pull back from West Bank cities after his meeting with the Palestinian Authority prime minister.

Ariel Sharon met with Mahmoud Abbas at Sharon's Jerusalem office Thursday evening, for the second time in as many weeks, to discuss the implementation of the "road map" peace plan.

Sharon's office said late Thursday that he proposed that the Palestinians gradually resume security control in the areas from which the army exits, expected to begin in the northern Gaza Strip and a number of cities in the West Bank. [Page 3]

U.S. troops raid P.A. offices

U.S. troops raided Palestinian Authority offices in Baghdad.

Several Palestinians were arrested and weapons were seized during Thursday's raid, and soldiers reportedly ransacked the building. The raid occurred in a part of Baghdad where a U.S. soldier was recently killed.

Knesset approves budget cuts

Israel's Knesset approved an economic austerity plan.

Thursday's vote, which followed marathon deliberations, was 52-1.

Opposition legislators walked out of the plenum during the voting to protest a move to speed up the voting process.

The legislation cuts \$2.3 billion from the government budget and includes slashes in public sector wages, pension reforms and layoffs.

First lady to attend exhibit

First lady Laura Bush is to attend the opening of a new Anne Frank exhibit at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum next month.

Sources tell JTA the first lady will attend the June 11 opening at the Washington museum, and that President Bush will host a dinner for his "friends in the Jewish community" at the White House that evening.

The new exhibit includes new diaries, photo albums and other writings of the famous teen-aged Holocaust victim that have never before been seen outside the Netherlands.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jerusalem mayoral vote presents challenges for all three candidates

By Leslie Susser

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Next week's vote for mayor of Jerusalem will be unprecedented: For the first time since the reunification of the city in 1967, no major national figure is running.

The front-runners are three candidates who until now were little known: a high-tech multimillionaire, a fervently Orthodox provider of auxiliary medical equipment and a loyal Likud Party functionary.

Likud leaders wanted former Finance Minister Dan Meridor, the man Menachem Begin predicted one day would be prime minister, to take the job. He declined.

Labor heavyweights Avraham Burg, Matan Vilnai, Dahlia Itzik and Ophir Pines-Paz all briefly toyed with the idea of running, but chose not to.

That left the field open to Nir Barkat, 43, director of BRM, a venture capital firm worth an estimated \$250 million; acting Mayor Uri Lupoliansky, 51, founder of Yad Sarah, the biggest volunteer organization in the country; and Deputy Mayor Yigal Amedi, 47, a Likud activist who has been involved in local party politics since his teens.

The June 3 election comes just four days after Jerusalem Day, which celebrates the reunification of the capital under Jewish rule in the 1967 Six-Day War.

But it also comes as the city's future is more uncertain than ever: As momentum builds for new peace talks under the "road map" plan, Jerusalem's fate is sure to be reopened as the Palestinians demand the eastern part of the city for the capital of their expected state. The reason for this year's election partly explains why major national players aren't lining up for the race.

Former Mayor Ehud Olmert was forced to resign after being elected to the Knesset in January because of a new law prohibiting Knesset members or Cabinet ministers from serving as mayors at the same time.

Had Meridor, Burg or any of the other national politicians run, they would have had to leave behind the Knesset — and their national leadership aspirations — at least for the foreseeable future.

Olmert's critics argue that he used the mayoral office to resurrect his national political career so blatantly that no one else would feel comfortable doing the same. All three front-runners feel obligated to stress that they would be "full-time" mayors in a way politicians with national aspirations never could.

Each is convinced he has a special contribution to make to the development of the capital in the 21st century.

Amedi, a self-made man from the poor Nahlaot neighborhood, claims to have an innate understanding of the city's residents and their needs.

"There is not a stone in the city I don't know," he boasts, adding that he wants to be "the people's mayor."

If elected, he would be the first Jerusalem-born incumbent.

Barkat is convinced he can revolutionize the way the city operates by applying the same standards of excellence that made him rich.

He sees running the city in terms of a customer-driven service market: The people — the customers — must be empowered to let the service provider, the city, know what they want, and the city must then provide those services with maximum efficiency.

In Barkat's view, the mayor's job is to monitor all municipal services, from garbage collection to education, in terms of customer satisfaction and to demand constant

MIDEAST FOCUS

Wanted Palestinian killed

Israeli troops killed a wanted Palestinian during an operation in the Gaza Strip.

Troops detained some 29 Palestinians during Wednesday night's raid. In the southern Gaza Strip, Israeli forces destroyed four buildings said to have been used to make weapons. In the West Bank, a Palestinian was killed and an Israeli soldier lightly wounded during exchanges of fire in Jenin.

Soldiers entered the city amid warnings of planned terrorist attacks.

Jerusalem synagogue vandalized

A Conservative synagogue in Jerusalem was vandalized. Hebrew words, which translate as "A mixed synagogue for the rabble," were found scrawled on a bulletin board at Kehilat Ya'ar Ramot on Thursday. Another liberal Jerusalem synagogue was vandalized recently, and Kehilat Ya'ar Ramot has been vandalized several times in the past, including an arson attack three years ago.

Army compromises with resister

The Israeli army will allow a draft resister to serve without wearing a uniform, swearing allegiance to the army or carrying a gun.

The army agreed that Rotem Ronen would be assigned to the army's home front command and would be permitted to wear civilian clothes while handing out gas masks, the daily Ha'aretz reported.

Israel to get shtetl museum

A "living history" museum that recreates the world of the shtetl is slated to have its groundbreaking in Israel next month. The Shtetl Museum, expected to open June 1 in Rishon le-Zion, will focus on Jewish life in Eastern European communities. It will recreate the world of the shtetl, complete with a market, homes and schools.



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improvement. "We will put a mirror up to each and every department in the municipality, and I will demand that they keep raising their standards," he says.

For example, schools that aren't up to snuff will be closed, and their buildings handed over to successful schools that will be encouraged to expand and open new branches.

If he wins, Barkat would be the first mayor elected on a non-party ticket.

Lupoliansky's flagship is Yad Sarah, which loans medical equipment to the sick and infirm, religious or secular, Jew or Arab, virtually free of charge. He claims its success is evidence of his ability to run large organizations, and that he will run the city in the same non-discriminatory way.

Lupoliansky — who became the city's first fervently Orthodox mayor when he took over from Olmert in February — says he hopes to create a more caring community in which people from all sectors live in harmony.

"What burns in my bones is to build a city that will be a joy to live in, where everyone can dance to his own tune in his own place without stepping on anyone else's toes," he declares.

But running a city holy to three religions, at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with more than 3,000 years of history — and a population of 670,000 that is the largest, poorest and most ethnically diverse in the country — will take more than sloganeering. For years young, mainly secular Israelis have been leaving the city in droves because of a perception of growing Orthodox influence on its lifestyle and because of a dearth of housing and job opportunities.

For example, 220,000 people work in Jerusalem every day; in Tel Aviv, with a population half as large, the figure is 340,000. Clearly, anyone who wants to keep young people in Jerusalem will have to bring in more businesses that provide jobs.

There are other pressing problems, too: the rundown state of the city center; the ongoing threat of Palestinian terrorism that keeps tourists away; light-rail infrastructure clogging up the roads; keeping the peace between fervently Orthodox and secular Jews, while allowing secular entertainment and travel on the Sabbath; dealing with social problems in poor neighborhoods; equalizing educational opportunities; restoring Jerusalem's status as a great international city; and providing an acceptable level of services to Palestinians in the eastern part of the city.

With less than a week to go, polls show Barkat and Lupoliansky running neck and neck at around 40 percent, with Amedi winning 10 percent to 15 percent.

If no candidate wins 40 percent on the first ballot, there will be a runoff between the top two finishers. If that happens, Barkat, who would be expected to pick up most of the rest of the secular vote, would be the favorite.

Still, many secular Jerusalemites complain they have no one to vote for: Barkat's critics fear he may try too much too soon and end up being a mayor for the rich, while Amedi's critics say he is a good No. 2 but doesn't have what it takes to be No. 1.

As for Lupoliansky, critics say that as talented and personable as he is, the fervently Orthodox establishment will force him to divert huge budgets to yeshivas and Orthodox schools.

The big question is whether the new mayor will be able to grow in stature and restore the city to its former glory.

That could depend on events outside his control — particularly on whether the road map ends terrorism, brings back tourists and investors and re-establishes Jerusalem, the holy pilgrim city, as a symbol of peace and spirituality. □

(Leslie Susser is the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report.)

Israeli Arab gets U.N. prize

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An Israeli Arab priest who is currently leading a group of Jews and Muslims on a visit to Auschwitz was awarded a U.N. prize. Emile Shoufani, a Greek Orthodox priest in Nazareth, was awarded the UNESCO Education for Peace Prize on Wednesday in Paris.

The UNESCO statement praised Shoufani for his "personal attitude and action, which have always been directed toward dialogue, peace and tolerance, as well as his constant desire to bring together Arabs and Jews." □

JEWISH WORLD

French grocery burned down

A Jewish grocery store near Paris was gutted in an arson attack Wednesday night.

Trash cans and mattresses were set alight and thrown in to the Hyperzol supermarket in Creteil, the largest Jewish community in the Paris suburbs. Police said two youths were arrested later that night and are helping the investigation.

Scholarships to Israel offered

Israel is offering scholarships for North American Jewish students to study in the Jewish state.

The Jewish Agency for Israel and the Israeli Education Ministry will provide free flights, full scholarships, housing and pocket money for the students, who will study at an Israeli high school.

Jewish students in North America, including children of Israelis who have moved to North America, are eligible for the program.

Jews try to help Palestinian

Jews in Birmingham, Alabama, are trying to find a bone marrow match for a Palestinian woman living in California.

Maha Khalaf, 27, is suffering from non-Hodgkins lymphoma. Her uncle, Dr. Omar Khalaf, lives in Birmingham. Because studies have found that Jews and Palestinians have similar genetic makeups, Khalaf says, "Maha has the greatest potential of finding a match among Palestinians and Jews."

Belgian actions to be checked

Belgium historians will investigate the complicity of their country's authorities in the deportation of Belgian Jews during World War II, according to media reports. The Guardian newspaper reported this week that the historians will be given access to archives on government actions during the war.

She's a mystical — and rich — girl

Madonna reportedly is funding a new building for the London Kabbalah Centre.

The singer, who in recent years has become a student of Jewish mysticism, and her husband, film director Guy Ritchie, donated nearly \$6 million to help the center move into a 10,000-square-foot building. Madonna also is writing a series of children's books based on kabbalistic parables.

Italian composer dies

Italian composer Luciano Berio, who increasingly used Jewish themes in his music in his later years, died Tuesday in Rome at age 77. Berio was a conductor of the Israel Chamber Orchestra in the 1970s. He is survived by his third wife, the Israeli musicologist Talia Pecker Berio, an influence on his later work.

In second meeting with Abbas, Sharon offers a troop pullback

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Diplomatic momentum is building ahead of a planned Israeli-Palestinian summit with President Bush next week.

Late Thursday, following talks between the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers, Israel announced a number of confidence-building measures it would take.

Ariel Sharon and his Palestinian Authority counterpart, Mahmoud Abbas, met for three hours Thursday night at Sharon's office in Jerusalem. It was their second meeting in as many weeks. Both sides were interested in a positive outcome that would help lay the groundwork for the June 4 summit in Jordan with President Bush to discuss the "road map" peace plan.

A statement issued after the talks by Sharon's office said the discussions were held in a "positive atmosphere."

The statement said Sharon would order the Israeli army to redeploy from the centers of Palestinian cities and reduce its troop presence, but didn't mention a timetable.

At the meeting, Sharon reportedly reiterated his proposal for a transfer of security control to the Palestinians wherever the army withdraws. However, if the Palestinians don't take action to stop threats to Israeli lives, the army will act, the statement said.

Abbas reportedly said he preferred a security handover in Gaza first, as he believed that there would be a better chance of a successful Palestinian resumption of security control in the Gaza Strip, where its security forces are largely intact.

"If there is a readiness by Israel to stop its military actions against us and start freeing political prisoners, I think we are ready to guarantee a total cessation of violence," P.A. Foreign Minister Nabil Sha'ath told Israel's Channel One television station Thursday night, the Jerusalem Post reported.

Sharon also repeated Israel's demand that the Palestinians take concrete measures to halt terrorist attacks, arrest terrorists, confiscate illegal weapons and cease anti-Israel incitement. "Only with determined action" and "a halt to terrorism will it be possible to reach peace," Sharon was quoted as saying.

The statement went on to list measures Sharon was prepared to take to ease restrictions on the Palestinian population, including lifting closures in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, allowing more Palestinians to work in Israel and increasing the amount of Palestinian tax revenues that Israel transfers to the Palestinian Authority each month.

In response to a demand for the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, Sharon promised to review prisoner lists.

The Palestinians also reportedly were seeking an Israeli declaration of the Palestinians' right to a state, as called for in the road map. Sharon referred to President Bush's speech of June 24, 2002, which spoke of the creation of a provisional Palestinian state as part of the negotiating process, Israel Radio reported.

Thursday's meeting took place against the backdrop of a disagreement over Abbas' efforts to negotiate a deal with Palestinian terrorist groups to cease, at least temporarily, their attacks against Israel.

In an interview in the daily Yediot Achronot on Thursday, Abbas voiced optimism that he would be able to reach a cease-fire agreement with Hamas by next week that would apply to attacks both inside Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Israeli officials say a cease-fire is not enough, fearing it will give the groups time to rearm, and demand a full dismantling of the terrorist groups and their infrastructure.

Thursday's meeting got under way at 9 p.m. following conflicting reports earlier in the day over whether it would take place at all. Palestinian sources said Israel was interested in a postponement, but Sharon's office issued a statement clarifying that the talks were to be held as scheduled.

In addition to Abbas, Sha'ath and the P.A. security affairs minister, Mohammed Dahlan, took part in the meeting.

A senior U.S. envoy, William Burns, arrived in Cairo on Thursday to prepare for next week's summit meetings, starting with a U.S.-Arab summit meeting slated for June 3 in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheik.

Bush will meet with Sharon and Abbas the following day in Aqaba. □

ACROSS THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Jews are poor in breakaway land, but it's 'better to be Jewish here'

By Lev Krichevsky

TIRASPOL, Moldova (JTA) — A visit to the self-proclaimed republic of Trans-Dniester is like a trip through a time machine. Soviet-era hammer-and-sickle emblems and red stars are chiseled into many walls, and Soviet-era collective farms produce the bulk of local crops.

Tiraspol's central square has a huge statue of Lenin standing atop a marble obelisk, and a local government newspaper sings praise to Soviet strongman Josef Stalin for building a great power that is now gone.

In more than a decade of self-proclaimed independence from the nation of Moldova — itself a former Soviet republic — Trans-Dniester has cobbled together a society that is a curious blend of Soviet political theory and shady business practices.

The republic has a reputation as a safe haven for arms- and drug-traffickers and other semi-legal business operations, an accusation challenged by most here as Moldovan propaganda.

For most people living in Trans-Dniester today — including an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 Jews, perhaps one-tenth of the area's Jewish population of a decade ago — “uncertainty” is the key word to describe the situation.

“Not everything is so bad here,” says Yefim Teitel, the balding 67-year-old chairman of the Trans-Dniestrian Jewish community.

Like many local Jews, he rose to some level of prominence during Soviet times; he was a high-ranking manager in the agriculture sector. And like most local Jews of his age, he survived the Holocaust as a young ghetto resident in the Trans-Dniestrian town of Rybnitsa.

Most Jews fled Trans-Dniester after the revolt against Moldova broke out in June of 1991.

Among those who left for Israel was the family of Semyon Weisman, a pioneer of the area's Jewish revival who headed the Jewish Culture Society in Tiraspol.

Weisman, a 50-something former agriculture engineer, stayed for two more years to oversee the evacuation of thousands of Jews who desperately wanted to leave the war-torn region.

The civil war unleashed rampant nationalism that fortunately, Weisman says, did not result in any large-scale violence against the Jews like the kind of outbreaks that historically have afflicted this part of Eastern Europe.

Even after the large-scale emigration, there is still a Jewish presence in Tiraspol and half a dozen other communities. The towns of Bendery and Rybnitsa each have relatively large communities of a few hundred Jews.

As for Teitel, he now divides his time between a construction business and his small clothing factory.

“You can make a living here,” he says.

His two children, both college graduates, also live in Trans-Dniester. They don't have immediate plans to leave, he says.

But others argue that the younger generation of Jews has no future in Trans-Dniester.

“What awaits our children and grandchildren here?” pensioner Valery Kazakov, 63, asks rhetorically.

“If you go to college here, who will need this degree issued by an unrecognized state.”

Ira Abramova, 14, goes to the Jewish Sunday school in Tiraspol and makes plans for the future, which she hopes will be elsewhere.

“I want to be a stylist in Moscow, maybe in the United States,” she says.

“It's terrible here, my mom can't find a job.”

Most locals hold a passport from some other country so they can travel outside of Trans-Dniester. Local passports are valid only inside the republic.

Abramova says she will apply for a Ukrainian passport when she turns 16 — her father is an ethnic Ukrainian.

Despite the apparent difficulties of living in an unrecognized state and despite economic hardships stemming from the republic's political isolation, many Jewish Trans-Dniestrians say Jews here probably live better than other ethnic groups.

“Out of all ethnic communities, Jews perhaps live best of all,” Teitel says.

Part of the paradox is easy to explain. The small Jewish community receives generous support from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which runs various welfare and cultural programs similar to those in other communities in the former Soviet Union.

“To us, these are two separate states, though the work we are doing in Trans-Dniester is similar to what we are doing elsewhere in Moldova,” says Vera Krizhak, Kishinev-based director of the JDC Moldova office.

The five-year-old Chesed Chana welfare center sponsored by the JDC is located in a tidy two-story building in Tiraspol constructed two years ago with funds donated by a family from Pittsburgh.

Most Jews insist that they have no problems with their non-Jewish neighbors and rarely experience anti-Semitism.

But Alla Lozovskaya, director of the Chesed Chana day care center for elderly and disabled Jews, says some of her clients are careful to make sure their neighbors don't notice the food packages they receive at the Jewish center.

The two Jewish addresses in town take some precautions to avoid public attention.

There is no sign on the Chesed center, and the local synagogue only has a mezuzah in the lobby.

“What's the use of placing it outside?” asks Shloime Gaubman, the 83-year-old synagogue's usher and chairman of the congregation. “Someone will tear it off anyway.”

In recent years, the three-story synagogue in Tiraspol was firebombed twice.

Gaubman says he removed the mezuzah from the street door after the second bombing, in 2001.

The synagogue regularly attracts a dozen elderly Jews, but doesn't have a rabbi.

The nearest rabbi, in the Moldovan capital, Kishinev, is too old to travel regularly.

Gaubman, who for non-Jewish occasions prefers to be called by his Russian name, Lev, says no one in his community can read the original Torah scroll that is housed in a simple wooden closet.

“Still it's better to be Jewish here,” Lozovskaya says. “You can get some help, and we have an interesting cultural life. No other community here has anything like that.”

She pauses and adds: “One of our Jews who now lives in the United States recently wrote in a letter: You are so happy that you don't realize how unhappy you are.” □