

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Abbas meets Jewish leaders

Mahmoud Abbas told U.S. Jewish leaders he wants peace, but that Israel must stop playing into the hands of extremists.

Meeting in Washington with American Jewish leaders, the Palestinian Authority prime minister said he remains fully committed to the "road map" peace plan, but that Israel is giving Palestinian extremists reasons to fight it.

He "is a breath of fresh air," Michael Bohnen, chairman of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, said of Abbas. [Page 1]

Iraqi Jews make aliyah

Six of Iraq's 34 remaining Jews will make aliyah on Friday.

A specially-chartered plane is scheduled to depart Iraq Friday evening, carrying the six elderly Iraqis and Rachel Zelon, a vice president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which is leading the operation with the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Zelon traveled to Baghdad earlier this summer to assess the community's situation in person.

"This is clearly a community at great risk given the increasing tensions within Iraq, and the increase in open anti-Semitism," she said.

Argentine leader seeks 'justice'

Argentina's new president told U.S. Jewish leaders that he is committed to investigating the 1994 bombing of the main Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

"Impunity has ended in Argentina," Nestor Kirchner told representatives of 12 American Jewish groups Thursday in New York.

Argentine officials believe Iranian intelligence agents and Hezbollah were responsible for the bombing of the AMIA center, which killed 85 people and wounded more than 300, but the investigation has been slow and inconclusive.

"If deed will match word, then we may be in for a very encouraging period in Argentine history," said David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, who attended the meeting.

Earlier Thursday, AMIA President Abraham Kaul said that lawyers for Argentine Jewish groups were going through recently opened police files that may shed light on the attack.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Jewish leaders laud Abbas as moderate, a 'breath of fresh air'

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas met many American Jewish leaders for the first time Thursday, aiming to convince them he's no Yasser Arafat.

In a meeting he requested and which the Israel Policy Forum and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs organized, Abbas presented himself as a moderate and a supporter of a peaceful, two-state settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, several participants said.

Abbas "is a breath of fresh air," said Michael Bohnen, chairman of the JCPA, the umbrella group for Jewish community relations councils and national organizations.

"There's a certain amount of trust now" in Abbas, added Marvin Lender, chairman of the executive committee of the Israel Policy Forum, a Washington group that supports Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives.

The Washington meeting was the first for many American Jewish officials with Abbas, who was appointed when the United States and Israel said any progress in negotiations required a change in Palestinian leadership.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat has continued to thwart Abbas at times, but the two recently worked out a power-sharing arrangement.

The 90-minute session at the St. Regis Hotel included between 50 and 70 members of a range of Jewish organizations, ranging from left-of-center groups such as the IPF and Americans for Peace Now to more centrist groups such as the JCPA, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee and Hadassah, as well as several major federation leaders.

Many came away convinced that Abbas is a moderate alternative to Arafat who wholeheartedly supports the "road map" peace plan, even if he lacks Arafat's popular support.

"He expressed a strong desire for peace" in "an exceedingly moderate tone," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Reform movement's synagogue arm, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. "He wasn't patronizing, and he didn't gloss over the differences."

Abbas described Israeli actions as weapons that Palestinian extremists could cite to scuttle the peace process. He mentioned Israel's settlement building, its refusal to release all Palestinian prisoners, its construction of a security fence along the West Bank border and its maintenance of security checkpoints in and near Palestinian areas.

Alan Solomont, chairman of the board of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, said Abbas told the group that he hopes to get U.S. government and American Jewish backing to convince Israel to act on these issues.

Judy Yudof, president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, that movement's congregational arm, said Abbas called the security fence a "modern-age Berlin Wall," but she said she reminded him that Israel erected the fence in response to "homicide bombers" attacking Israelis.

"I think there were certain things he needed to say because he was there representing the Palestinian perspective," she said.

Part of his message also included a call for U.S. Jews to promote further U.S. aid to the Palestinians, as a way to promote their peace efforts.

Abbas told the group he would seek additional U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority

MIDEAST FOCUS

Abbas blasts support for Israel

Mahmoud Abbas warned Congress that its "blind support" for Israel threatens the "road map" peace plan.

The Palestinian Authority prime minister also told legislators on the House of Representatives' International Relations Committee that he remains loyal to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, despite the U.S. decision to shun Arafat because of his alleged ties to terrorism.

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) told the Jerusalem Post that she found Abbas comments "very disturbing."

Shalom defends security fence

Washington effectively has adopted the Palestinian position on Israel's new security fence, Silvan Shalom told Army Radio.

The Israeli foreign minister reacted to news that the United States will press Israel to freeze construction of the fence and to change its planned course.

Shalom rejected claims that the fence harms Palestinian interests.

"The fence will contribute to the peace process," the foreign minister said, "because it is designed to prevent terrorist attacks by radical elements which oppose peace."

Concern for missing soldier

Israeli police intensified the search for a missing soldier, with concern growing that he had been kidnapped.

Oleg Sheichat, 20, of Upper Nazareth was last seen three days ago when a driver who had offered him a ride dropped him at an intersection some 10 miles from his home.

Police fear Sheichat may have been kidnapped shortly thereafter, and said they have no information on his whereabouts.



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.

as a way to rebuild its infrastructure and make further peace moves.

The White House recently earmarked \$20 million in humanitarian funds to the P.A., the first time the United States has designated direct aid to the Palestinian leadership.

Abbas met earlier Thursday with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. He also is due to meet President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell during his visit.

While never mentioning Hamas by name, Abbas said crucial social services are "run by other organizations" and "we would like to be able to provide those services," Solomont said.

Abbas has said repeatedly that he will not forcibly disarm Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In this meeting, "he did not really deal directly with the question of dismantling" the terrorist groups, said Jess Hordes, director of ADL's Washington office.

But Abbas said he believes strongly in fostering ties between Israelis and Palestinians through professional ties or via groups such as Seeds for Peace, which promotes co-existence, several participants said.

"Abbas achieved what he set out to do — to present himself as a moderate person who is committed to a two-state solution," Hordes said.

Not all Jewish groups invited attended. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee was trying to set up a private meeting with Abbas, a spokeswoman said.

And Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said he couldn't attend because he had a full schedule, meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and Argentine President Nestor Kirchner. □

Poll: Americans support road map but question its chance for success

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK (JTA) — Most Americans want to see Palestinian deeds, not just words, when it comes to stopping terrorism and making peace with Israel, a new poll shows. Released on the eve of the first visit to Washington by the new Palestinian prime minister, the poll by the Israel Project in Washington also found that a majority of Americans back President Bush and his "road map" to an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

But they remain largely pessimistic that it will bring that peace.

Only 36 percent surveyed thought the president's efforts would succeed, in contrast to 52 percent who thought they would not.

"This poll shows that Americans overwhelmingly support President Bush's involvement in the peace process, even though they have their doubts about the ability to succeed," said Jennifer Laszlo-Mizrahi, president of the Israel Project.

The poll, conducted for the Israel Project by Neil Newhouse of Public Opinion Strategies, surveyed 800 registered voters nationally July 21-22.

It came just days before the new Palestinian Authority prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, was scheduled to meet with Bush and others, including American Jewish leaders.

Americans say the Palestinians must take concrete steps to fight terrorism, the poll said.

According to the poll, 95 percent of Americans agreed to varying degrees with the statement: "Palestinian leaders need to do more than just say they are against terrorists, they need to arrest and disarm terrorists and jail those who are known to be responsible for killing innocent civilians."

Meanwhile, 88 percent agreed with the statement: "Before the Palestinians are allowed to establish their own nation, they need to stop teaching their children to become terrorists. This includes ending the incitement of violence on their public television station and in their textbooks."

Among other key findings:

- 59 percent called the U.S. promise of aid to the Palestinians a "step toward peace," while 29 percent said it would have no effect;

- 78 percent said a hudna, the Arabic word for a temporary cease-fire, was not sufficient, and that terrorists should be disarmed and jailed, while only 15 percent called a hudna sufficient. □

JEWISH WORLD

Alumni slam Rutgers summit

Alumni of Rutgers University in New Jersey protested an upcoming pro-Palestinian conference.

The graduates launched an online petition urging the president of the school, which is state-funded, to stop the International Solidarity Movement from holding an October conference at the campus, saying the group backs terrorism.

Holocaust plaques defaced

Two plaques at a Holocaust memorial in France were discovered defaced and broken on Tuesday. The plaques mark the site of a transit camp at Venissieux where hundreds of Jews from the Lyon region were rounded up before being sent to Nazi death camps in August 1942.

Jewish organizations and the Venissieux municipality have filed a formal complaint with police.

Romania to mark Shoah?

Romanian schools will begin marking the Holocaust, according to an official of Israel's Foreign Ministry who was part of a delegation to Romania.

The announcement comes shortly after an uproar over comments by Romanian authorities that there had been no Holocaust in Romania. The comments were later retracted.

Center for cultural Jews opens

The Center for Cultural Judaism is opening in New York. The center will continue to host the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, but will expand its focus, according to Myrna Baron, the center's executive director.

The center is reissuing the 2001 American Jewish Identity Survey — which counted 1.7 million American Jews who said they practice no religion — and says that half of American Jewry does not affiliate with any Jewish institution.

Baron said the center will introduce a new seminar series, train secular Jewish leaders and launch a Web site at www.culturaljudaism.org.

Group backs decision on religion

The American Jewish Congress is supporting the decision of Washington state to deny scholarships to theology students.

In a brief filed with the U.S. Supreme Court last week, the organization argued that the state decision did not suppress religious ideas, but only state sponsorship of religious training.

An appeals court previously ruled in *Locke v. Davey* that the state must provide Joshua Davey with public funding for his study at Northwest College, a school affiliated with the Assembly of God. The American Jewish Committee also is supporting the state.

Poll shows Italian teens harbor racist and anti-Semitic attitudes

By Ruth E. Gruber

ROME (JTA) — Racist attitudes are increasingly prevalent in Italy, where more than one-third of teenagers may harbor racist views toward Jews, Muslims and immigrants.

So says a new poll sponsored by the umbrella organization of Italian Jewry under the auspices of Italy's president, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi.

"What we are seeing are new forms of creeping racism that do not present themselves as such," said Enzo Campelli, a sociologist at Rome's Sapienza University, who conducted the survey on behalf of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities. "We are also seeing that some forms of racism have become socially accepted.

"Things that would have caused a scandal 20 years ago no longer do so. We are getting used to them, the barriers that existed before are down," he said. "A certain form of racism is becoming part of the daily language of a large part of society."

This means that racism and anti-Semitism may be less virulent, but in fact are more widespread in society, Campelli said.

"If we look at it as a triangle," he said, "the peak of the triangle is lower but the base of it is much broader."

Campelli spoke at a public presentation of the survey at Rome's City Hall late last month. The results also were to be presented formally to the Italian Senate.

"We must carry out a rapid examination of our conscience," said Amos Luzzatto, president of the union. "What impact will these attitudes have on Italy as a part of Europe?"

The poll, believed to be the most rigorous and detailed survey of its type in Italy, was carried out last year among more than 2,000 young Italians between the ages of 14 and 18 in 110 locations across the country.

"We wanted this survey at a time that politically is not all that positive for Jews, for Muslims and for other minorities," Luzzatto said. "The media daily emphasize the Middle East conflict and threats of terrorism from immigrant radical Muslim imams in Italy. There is a growing emotional climate that is not favorable to minorities."

Nearly 8 percent of respondents could be classified as harboring a "very high" level of racism, nearly 11 percent had a "high" level and nearly 21 percent had a "medium high" level, according to the poll. More than 9 percent showed a "very low" level of racism, 15.5 percent showed a "low" level and nearly 18 percent a "medium low" level.

The highest levels of racism were seen among teenagers who lived in northern Italy, who were deeply religious or who were politically right wing.

Northern Italy is the base of operations of the anti-immigrant Northern League Party, which forms part of the ruling center-right coalition. The issue of how to deal with the thousands of illegal immigrants from Eastern Europe and the developing world who enter Italy each year has been a heated topic in recent years.

Many respondents held negative views of immigrants in general. These included nearly 48 percent who said immigrants make cities less safe. Nearly 51 percent said they foster prostitution, and more than 46 percent said immigrants eventually might outnumber native Italians.

Negative views of Muslims were even more widespread: Nearly two-thirds of respondents agreed that even if they had lived in Italy for many years, Muslims "are loyal only to the Islamic world."

Anti-Semitic stereotypes also were prevalent: Nearly 35 percent of respondents agreed that "the financial power in the world is mostly in the hands of Jews." More than 17 percent believed that reports of the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust are "exaggerated," and 17.5 percent believed that Italian Jews should "return" to Israel.

"We deliberately used this term, 'return' to Israel," Campelli said. "By agreeing with that, the respondents show their feelings that Jews are outsiders and do not have the right to stay here."

Jews have lived in Italy for more than 2,000 years. The present Jewish community numbers about 35,000, out of a total population of 60 million. □

ACROSS THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

**As Russia investigates oil firm,
Jewish angle in case is unclear**

By Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW (JTA) — As Russian prosecutors continue their pressure on Russia's second largest oil company, Russian Jews disagree over a possible Jewish angle in the politically charged case.

On July 3, a Moscow court approved an arrest warrant for Platon Lebedev, the billionaire chairman of the board of Menatep, the financial arm of the oil giant Yukos. Lebedev was charged with fraud in the 1994 privatization of a fertilizer and chemical company. Lebedev is not Jewish, but Yukos' CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who is believed to be the richest person in Russia, and Leonid Nevzlin, his former deputy at Yukos and former head of the Russian Jewish Congress, both are Jewish. Prosecutors questioned both men on July 4, and recently the case shifted to Yukos itself.

The case is the latest to be prosecuted in Russia against businesses with Jewish ties or against Jewish business tycoons.

In the most celebrated case, media mogul Vladimir Goussinsky — a major funder of Russian Jewish life — eventually left Russia after a Kremlin-orchestrated legal case against him.

Authorities accused Yukos, believed to be Russia's largest taxpayer, of tax evasion. The charges resulted in a 17-hour search of the company's main office in Moscow; the company quickly lost some \$6.5 billion, or about one-fifth of its market value. Its stock fell rapidly after news of the investigation became known — indeed, the Russian stock market has plunged recently as fears mounted that the investigation of Yukos could lead to the reassessment of private property rights.

Yukos owners have dismissed accusations of financial wrongdoing, saying the company is being targeted for political reasons.

A senior adviser to Yukos fingered two top administrators on Russian President Vladimir Putin's staff who, some believe, instigated the Yukos investigation. Viktor Ivanov, deputy head of presidential administration, and Igor Sechin, head of Putin's secretariat, are "hardened anti-Semites," the source told JTA.

"There is clearly an anti-Semitic trace in this situation," said Alexander Osovtsov, project director at the Open Russia foundation, a public organization funded by Yukos. "This is evident in the actions of those who stand behind the campaign and of those who serve as its direct executors."

The government has remained relatively silent on the matter.

Putin distanced himself from the situation around Yukos and tiptoed around several opportunities to comment on the case — while stressing that "we need to punish economic violations."

Osovtsov, former executive vice president of the Russian Jewish Congress, said he saw many parallels between this case and the situation around Goussinsky, who was president of the Russian Jewish Congress when legal proceedings were launched against him. The same team of prosecutors accused Goussinsky of financial wrongdoing and forced him into exile four years ago.

While the reasons behind the current attack are unclear, many analysts say the case has little to do with the rule of law, but rather is an attempt by Russian security services and some members of

Putin's administration to redistribute property — either to another individual or to a member of the government.

"The actions of law enforcers in the economy have often gone beyond the framework of the law recently, and in essence are being based on political expediency," said a carefully worded draft of a letter from the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, a lobbying group for big business, that was handed to Putin recently.

Some observers say Khodorkovsky, who often is credited with creating one of the most transparent business empires in Russia, may have aroused the Kremlin's ire when he indicated that he might leave business for politics in a few years.

Named as the richest person in Russia by Forbes, Khodorkovsky also recently publicized the list of political parties whose candidates he would support in December elections for Parliament. The list did not include the pro-Kremlin United Russia Party. Gazeta.ru, a Web site that focuses on politics, has written that the Kremlin believes Khodorkovsky, 41, violated an unwritten agreement that Putin struck with top business magnates when he came to power in 2000.

Under that agreement, the Kremlin would not look into the legitimacy of capital accumulations if the most powerful business owners, referred to as oligarchs, renounced aspirations to political power. Instead, the Web site argued, Khodorkovsky began financing several political parties, which could give him influence over as many as half the deputies in the new Duma, the Russian Parliament's lower house.

One Jewish leader, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told JTA that "there is definitely a Jewish angle to this story. It's part of election politics."

Those who fear that the case involves anti-Semitism say it might help Putin and his supporters if the public sees it as a Kremlin attempt to get rid of some of the new Jewish rich, who hardly enjoy public sympathy. But not all Jewish leaders agree that the Jewish backgrounds of Khodorkovsky and Nevzlin, who is known as one of the most generous domestic donors to Russian Jewish causes, play any role in the case.

Nikolai Propirniy, editor in chief of the Jewish News, said his weekly publication was not going to write about the case.

"Since Khodorkovsky and Nevzlin were summoned to the prosecutor's office not as Jewish leaders but as business leaders, this situation has nothing to do with the Jewish community," Propirniy said.

However, another prominent Russian Jewish leader, who spoke to JTA on condition of anonymity, said the situation could lead to serious difficulties for some of the leading Russian Jewish groups that have established close ties with big business and government. "This is not directly a Jewish issue," the leader said. "But indirectly it has great ramifications for the Jewish community. It will put those Jewish groups that are close to the government and to any of the oligarchs into a very difficult position."

At least one U.S. Jewish leader responded to speculations about anti-Semitism in the case, JTA has learned.

On July 10, Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, met in New York with Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Sergey Lavrov, to express his apprehension that anti-Semitism may play a role in the Yukos case.

The Russian envoy reportedly promised to report these concerns to Moscow. □