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86th Year

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Bush: Palestinian state 'realistic'

President Bush said he believes the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005 is "realistic."

"I also know when we start sliding goals, it makes progress less realistic," Bush said in a Rose Garden press conference Wednesday.

Bush spoke at length about his trust in Mahmoud Abbas and suggested that faster progress on the "road map" peace plan would strengthen the Palestinian Authority prime minister.

Bush also said that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon backs the establishment of a Palestinian state because "he understands I will in no way compromise the security of the Israeli people, or the Palestinian people for that matter, to terror."

Temple Mount visits halted

Israeli police suspended visits by Jews and Christians to Jerusalem's Temple Mount. Wednesday's decision came because of rising Palestinian anger over the visits, leading to fears of violence.

Police began allowing such visits in recent weeks for the first time since Palestinian authorities closed the site to non-Muslims nearly three years ago, at the start of the intifada.

The start of the Palestinian campaign of violence coincided with a visit to the Temple Mount in September 2000 by Ariel Sharon, then Likud Party leader. The Temple Mount, which is the holiest site in Judaism, also houses the Al-Aksa Mosque.

Paris synagogue vandalized

A synagogue near Paris was vandalized. Torah scrolls were thrown open, prayer books strewn on the floor and money stolen in last Friday's attack at the Ohr Menahem synagogue in the Paris suburb of Saint-Denis. Anti-Semitic graffiti was scrawled on the outside of the building.

Saint-Denis is populated largely by Arab immigrants from North Africa.

Al-Qaida may attack in Africa

An Al-Qaida terrorist is planning an attack on an Israeli or American target in Africa, Israeli officials said.

The man believed to be planning the attacks, Fawzal Abdullah Mohammed, is believed to be behind the November 2002 attacks on Israeli targets in Kenya.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

In contrast to Sharon, Abbas gets cool reception on Capitol Hill

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — While Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas received the red-carpet treatment from the White House last week, he received a much cooler reception on Capitol Hill.

Abbas' first official trip gave the Palestinian leader an opportunity to thank President Bush for \$20 million in direct aid and for the president's support for Abbas' steps toward peace.

But in congressional meetings, Abbas faced sharp questions from lawmakers about his ability to lead, his efforts so far to combat terrorism and his criticism of Israeli actions.

That is in sharp contrast to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, whose meetings with lawmakers were limited this time around but who often receives warm welcomes from congressional leaders.

Sharon "gets a much warmer reception" and a "sympathetic ear," said Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), a member of the House International Relations Committee's Middle East subcommittee.

He said lawmakers are sympathetic to Abbas because they see him as an alternative to Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, but they have yet to see substantive achievements from him.

Many members of Congress support Sharon's anti-terrorism measures and his timetable for moving forward in the peace process.

So, for example, while Bush called on Sharon to keep in mind how Israel's anti-terror measures affect the peace process — presumably referring to the fence Israel is building to keep terrorists from infiltrating from the West Bank — some lawmakers wrote Bush on the eve of Sharon's visit to emphasize that the fence is necessary for Israel's security.

Abbas spent considerable time on Capitol Hill during his first official visit last week.

He met with congressional leaders in both the Senate and the House of Representatives on July 24, presenting them with a wish list to strengthen his government and promote the "road map" peace plan.

Among his requests was pressure on Israel to release Palestinian prisoners, reconsider the security fence and allow Arafat freedom of movement.

"Abbas was businesslike," a Democratic House aide said. "He said, 'This is what I need and this is why I need it.'"

But while Abbas impressed some with what they called his straightforward responses, others said they were concerned about his reluctance to dismantle Palestinian terrorist groups.

Many in Israel believe that unless the groups are dismantled, they will use the three-month cease-fire they declared to rebuild and expand their infrastructure, leading to an eventual escalation in attacks.

"I don't think that he's particularly keen on cracking down on terrorist groups the way we would like, but wants to emphasize the predominance of the Palestinian Authority," said the aide, who asked not to be identified.

Sources say some lawmakers resented Abbas' ability to shift the focus in the conflict away from Palestinian reform toward issues such as Israel's building of a

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel: Romania, be true

Romania should acknowledge its role in the Holocaust, Israel's president said.

In a letter to his Romanian counterpart, Ion Iliescu, President Moshe Katsav urged Romania "to show the courage to face its own past during the Holocaust."

Iliescu's office released the letter Wednesday.

The letter comes after two recent incidents in which Romanian officials made comments that minimized the Holocaust.

Economy's in a slump, stupid

Israel's economy grew more slowly than expected in the first quarter of 2003, the Bank of Israel announced.

Growth for the quarter was 1.1 percent, not 3.6 percent as originally forecast, according to Globes newspaper.

Israel commends E.U.

Europe is showing "growing understanding" of Israel's position regarding the Palestinians, an Israeli diplomat said.

The statement by Arye Mekel, Israel's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations, came after European diplomats spoke out strongly against efforts by Arab countries to define "terrorism" in a way that condones violence against Israel under the rubric of national liberation.

Palestinian sentenced for attacks

An Israeli military court sentenced a Palestinian for organizing attacks against Israelis.

Ahmed Barghouti, whose more famous cousin Marwan Barghouti also is on trial in Israel, was sentenced on Wednesday to 13 life sentences for orchestrating attacks that killed 12 Israelis and wounded dozens.



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security fence. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), chair of the Middle East subcommittee, called the meeting with Abbas "disappointing" because he provided "lackluster" answers to questions about his control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip and his relationship with Arafat.

"He put his best case forward to the committee," she told JTA. "I just don't know whether the answers were tough enough."

Despite the ambivalence many lawmakers expressed, one Democratic Senate aide said, "The view of most people was that Abbas is a smart guy and needs our support."

On the aid front, meanwhile, lawmakers are looking for signs that the aid will be put to good use and will be properly monitored.

Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.), the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has been pushing Abbas to name some specific humanitarian projects that the United States can fund, which would justify additional direct assistance to the Palestinian Authority.

Many believe that replicating the humanitarian projects supported by the terrorist groups would lessen the terrorists' support among the Palestinian public — and in the wider Arab world — and help legitimize Abbas and his new government.

However, Abbas has yet to give Congress a list of projects, sources said.

As discussion of aid continues, Ros-Lehtinen said Congress will work to make sure money sent to the Palestinian Authority has "as much oversight as possible."

In reality, Congress is likely to stay out of Middle East peacemaking for a little while, simply because many lawmakers will spend most of August in their home districts.

For example, Sharon was able to meet only with Senate leaders because the House of Representatives already had begun its summer recess.

Even so, several groups of House members are going to the Middle East this summer, trips that lawmakers often use as opportunities to show their support for the Jewish state.

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas), an outspoken supporter of the Sharon government, led a delegation to the region this week, with stops in Israel, Jordan and Iraq.

DeLay met with Sharon before the prime minister departed for Washington. On Tuesday, the day Bush and Sharon met, DeLay said, "Both Bush and Sharon are committed to ending global terror and finally bringing peace to the Middle East. I commend both leaders for their unwavering determination to end Palestinian terrorism."

Sharon has many allies on Capitol Hill — especially in leadership positions — and his meetings with them, whether in Washington or Jerusalem, are often intended more to inform the lawmakers than to push for action.

One issue on which Congress may weigh in when lawmakers return in the fall is the security fence, but it is not yet clear what positions they will take.

The fence, which Palestinians oppose, has been under construction for more than a year.

It has been making headlines recently, primarily because Abbas appears to have gotten support for his view from Bush and the White House national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice.

Some lawmakers have already told Bush they support the fence, but others remain concerned about its impact. Over the last month, Palestinians have been circulating a multimedia presentation to Washington insiders — including Rice — about the fence's effect on Palestinian living conditions.

Israel says the fence is necessary to keep out suicide bombers, but the Palestinians worry that it is setting a de facto border between Israel and the Palestinians.

Ros-Lehtinen said the fence is an untested issue because it is so new, but speculated that many in Congress would back Israel on this issue. Engel went further, saying Congress will need to support the fence, and that lawmakers backed it in their discussions with Abbas.

He said that when the Palestinian leader compared the fence to the Berlin Wall, lawmakers countered that the Berlin Wall kept people in, while the Israeli fence keeps people out.

If the fence remains a sticking point in September, the Israeli government and its supporters in Washington will likely call on Congress to put that support in writing. □

JEWISH WORLD

DeLay: 'Israel's fight is our fight'

The United States believes "Israel's fight is our fight," the majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives told the Knesset.

Tom DeLay, a Texas Republican who is a staunch supporter of the Jewish state, called for Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to be isolated and said President Bush's leadership makes "peace in the Middle East possible and victory in the war on terror inevitable."

DeLay and his congressional delegation also are traveling to Jordan and Iraq.

Supremacist's trial delayed

A U.S. judge delayed the trial of white supremacist Eric Rudolph.

Rudolph, 36, could face the death penalty for suspected involvement in a deadly bombing of a Birmingham abortion clinic and the 1996 Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta.

The judge said his decision was a result of both sides needing more time to prepare for the case, which involves more than 100,000 court filings.

Rabbi protests camp memorial

An American rabbi disrupted construction of a memorial at a Nazi death camp in Poland.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, president of Amcha-The Coalition for Jewish Concerns, blocked work at the site of the Belzec death camp for about five hours today, saying the construction of a walkway through the camp was disturbing buried remains of Jews.

"There are bone fragments everywhere in the camp," Weiss said.

Weiss is a plaintiff in a lawsuit against the American Jewish Committee, which is spearheading the \$4.5 million memorial along with the Polish government.

The AJCommittee's director of international Jewish affairs, Rabbi Andrew Baker, who is overseeing the project, said the work is following Jewish law "appropriately."

Czech project succeeds

A project encouraging Czech schoolchildren to document the fate of Jews in World War II is proving a success. The "Neighbors Who Disappeared" project, launched by the Jewish Museum in Prague three years ago, is spawning similar projects in other European countries. Teenagers from dozens of Czech schools have uncovered previously undocumented information on the Holocaust.

Their work has inspired a museum in Slovakia to start a similar program, and the Jewish community in Croatia hopes to begin its own version of the program next year.

Improved understanding of Israel is goal of program for young Jews

By Toby Axelrod

BERLIN (JTA) — When Shila Khasani showed up in Israel for a government-run seminar on the Jewish state for young European Jewish leaders, she was on the alert for brainwashing.

A skeptic by nature, Khasani expected she would be told to toe an uncompromising government line.

But she was surprised by the presentation of a wide array of conflicting viewpoints from government representatives and others, and went home with a more nuanced understanding of Israel and its place in the world.

"It was not at all like" I expected, Khasani, a 27-year-old university graduate from Heidelberg, said at a press conference Monday at the Israeli Embassy in Berlin.

"Questions were posed, by both participants and speakers, that made people break out in a sweat sometimes," she said. "That was the best — that we heard different ideas, different opinions."

Khasani is the eighth German to receive a diploma from the Bayit Meshutaf young leaders' program, initiated in 1999 by Israel's Foreign Ministry. So far, 145 young Jews from around the world have completed the two-week program on topics ranging from Israel's economy, security and sociology to worldwide anti-Semitism.

Bayit Meshutaf was created for English-speaking, Jewish college graduates younger than 35. The program aims to build connections between Israel and Diaspora Jews, and to help strengthen a new generation of Jewish leaders outside Israel.

The program is part of an Israeli effort to build support for the Jewish state by strengthening Israel-Diaspora connections. The effort has taken on a special urgency against the backdrop of worldwide criticism of Israel's handling of the Palestinian intifada and as surveys show Zionist sentiment weakening among Diaspora Jews.

Recently, the Jewish Agency for Israel, the main organization promoting immigration to Israel, initiated a task force aimed at supporting Jewish life in Germany. The project seeks to reinforce links between Israel and German Jews.

Bayit Meshutaf's goal of empowering young Jewish leaders may be its greatest challenge. In Germany, Khasani said, it has been hard to convince the country's Jewish establishment to take the younger generation seriously. "The current leaders are missing an opportunity," Khasani said. "We are the future."

Khasani, who completed a degree in Jewish studies and sociology, comes from a family of Jewish leaders. Her father, Asher Khasani, who came to Germany from Iran in 1957, is descended from a long line of rabbis and heads the Jewish community of Hof-on-the-Saale.

"I came to Germany to study medicine, and to research for myself and others why our brethren were killed here, and to show the Germans that we are here and not destroyed," Asher Khasani said.

For Shila Khasani, the Bayit Meshutaf program provided more than a chance to learn about Israel; she also got to know 14 other young Jewish leaders from across Europe. "We share similar problems and experiences," Khasani said. "Before, I didn't know any Jews from Finland or Ireland."

The participants are creating an Internet forum to stay in touch.

Now, several months after her return from Israel, Khasani is looking for work in Germany, preferably in the Jewish community. But she said she is considering making aliyah one day.

"Clearly, we want all the Jews in the world to come to Israel," said the director of public relations for the Israeli Embassy in Berlin, Joel Lion, who presented the diploma to Khasani. "But everyone is free to choose."

For now, it is important that these young leaders understand Israel so they can build ties with Israel at home, he said.

"We want them to have not only slogans, but also an understanding of what Israel is," Lion said. "It is nice to say you will demonstrate for Israel, but the essential thing is, what do you know about Israel?" □

LATIN AMERICA'S JEWS

A precarious democracy threatens Venezuela — Jews and non-Jews

By Larry Luxner

CARACAS, Venezuela (JTA)— The minaret of Venezuela's largest mosque, the Saudi-financed Mezquita Ibrahim Bin Abdul-Aziz al-Ibrahim, towers over the Caracas skyline.

Meanwhile, the country's populist president, Hugo Chavez, rallies against globalization, threatens his critics and praises his heroes — Fidel Castro, Muammar Gadhafi and Saddam Hussein.

Yet what really worries Venezuela's dwindling Jewish community isn't anti-Semitism, at least not yet. It's the rapid dismantling of civil liberties in what was once considered one of Latin America's most vibrant, economically healthy democracies.

**The Jews
of Latin America
Part of a Series**

"It's obvious that everything in Venezuela has been jeopardized," said Rebecca Perli, executive director of the Centro de Asociaciones Israelitas de Venezuela, or CAIV, which represents about 4,000 Jewish families. "It's not the way it used to be. And this isn't the case only for the Jewish community, but for the whole country."

Chavez, a former army paratrooper who attempted to overthrow then-President Carlos Andres Perez in 1992, was elected six years later with the support of millions of poor Venezuelans who had never shared in the country's enormous oil wealth.

In 1999, voters in a national referendum approved the adoption of a new constitution that changed the country's name to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Yet Chavez soon began antagonizing the business sector with his tirades against the "predatory oligarchs and corrupt servants of international capital."

As anti-Chavez protests mounted and the economy began tanking, the president's popularity fell from a high of 80 percent shortly after his election to around 30 percent. Relations with the United States took a further dive after Sept. 11, when Chavez accused Washington of "fighting terror with terror" during the war in Afghanistan. The relations hit bottom last year, when the Bush administration failed to immediately condemn the backers of a short-lived coup d'etat against Chavez.

In 2003 — as a result of continued strikes, work stoppages and often violent protests intended to force Chavez out of office — Venezuela's GDP is expected to shrink by 9 percent, on top of the 10 percent it plummeted in 2002.

That has frightened the country's Jews, most of whom are middle- or upper-class professionals.

"We want the truth to be known to the American people, not just about how the Jews are suffering, but how Venezuelans in general are suffering under this dictatorship we are heading toward," warned Isaac Hochman, secretary-general of both CAIV and a regional human rights group. "This has consequences not only for Venezuela, but also for Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador and other neighboring countries."

In an interview with JTA, Hochman said that only 16,000 to 18,000 Jews remain in Venezuela, down from 25,000 as recently as 10 years ago. Most of those who left have settled in Miami; others have gone to New York, Houston, Madrid or Israel.

"The political situation is affecting democracy because there is no balance of power right now," said Hochman, a petroleum engineer whose company sells equipment to the state oil monopoly. "Strikes are a consequence of the political situation. For the last 90 days, we have had exchange controls in place. The government has not issued one single dollar to industry or commerce."

Noting that Venezuela's Congress is currently debating several measures that would revise the penal code to forbid strikes and anti-government demonstrations, Hochman said that "even if we were extremely rich, it doesn't matter if we don't have freedom and democracy." Yet when asked if Chavez is anti-Semitic, Hochman said "absolutely not."

"There is no official pronouncement against Jews," he said. "In four and a half years as president, Chavez has never publicly mentioned the words Jew or Israel."

In fact, anti-Semitism has never been a major problem in Venezuela, a country liberated from Spanish rule by Simon Bolivar in 1821 and blessed with immense reserves of petroleum and other mineral resources.

Jews began trickling into Venezuela at the beginning of the 19th century, though the biggest waves of immigration occurred after World War II and the 1967 Six-Day War. At its peak in the early 1970s, the community — split evenly between Sephardim and Ashkenazim — numbered about 25,000, and wealthy Venezuelan Jews would often fly to Miami for weekend shopping trips.

Today, around 90 percent of the country's remaining Jews live in Caracas, a sprawling metropolis of 5.5 million. The other 10 percent are scattered in Maracaibo, Valencia and smaller cities.

Unlike the country's 100,000-strong Arab community — which includes many Palestinians — Venezuela's Jews keep an extremely low profile. Most of the 18 functioning synagogues in Caracas, as well as the offices of B'nai B'rith, CAIV, WIZO and other Jewish organizations, are unmarked and protected by security systems, barbed wire and armed security guards.

Part of this, of course, stems from fears of terrorism sparked by the deadly 1994 bombing of Argentina's AMIA Jewish community center. But it's also a consequence of Venezuela's skyrocketing crime rate.

Eliaser Rotkopf, director general of the Instituto Cultural Venezolano-Israeli, said that although the country's Jews were generally well-off before the current crisis, they now suffer economically along with everybody else.

"Many Jewish families have had to make big sacrifices," he said. "They've taken their kids out of Jewish schools because they couldn't afford the cost, even though more than 30 percent of the students are on scholarships."

About 10 percent of all Jewish-owned businesses have gone bankrupt, putting an additional strain on Venezuela's once-prosperous Jewish institutions.

For both Jews and non-Jews, the big issue facing Venezuelans is whether a referendum on Chavez's continued rule will take place as scheduled Aug. 19. But many Venezuelans doubt there will be a referendum at all, given the belief that more than 80 percent of the electorate would vote to oust Chavez.

"I think we're worse off than Argentina," said Scher, who's originally from Buenos Aires. "There the problem is economic; here it's political. Even if Chavez falls and the economy recuperates, the class differences and the hatred he caused won't heal for a very long time." □