

IN THE NEWS

P.A. fraud is probed

European Union investigators are in Jerusalem investigating allegations of misuse of E.U. funds by the Palestinian Authority.

OLAF, the E.U.'s anti-fraud office, is investigating claims by the International Monetary Fund that as much as \$1.1 billion of E.U. funding was laundered into illegal operations by the Palestinian Authority.

According to a statement from French E.U. legislator Francois Zimeray, this is the first time that OLAF has traveled to the Middle East to investigate the Palestinian Authority firsthand.

Europe marks Holocaust day

Several European countries marked Holocaust Memorial Day with speeches that denounced modern-day anti-Semitism.

"Anti-Semitism is not limited to the past," Peter Schieder, an Austrian lawmaker, told the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg, France. "We cannot be silent. We must deplore" incidents of anti-Semitism in Europe. "When we say 'never again,' we should mean it."

Tuesday marked the 59th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

UJC to Tidewater federation: Pay up

A Virginia federation is in jeopardy of losing its membership in the national federation system.

After the United Jewish Communities issued a statement Monday ousting the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater, Va., for "continuing delinquency" on dues payments, it now says it will give the federation three to four weeks to pay up before cutting ties.

"Now we're learning that they still want to consider" paying dues, UJC CEO Stephen Hoffman told JTA.

Harry Graber, executive vice president of the Tidewater federation, called the incident a "miscommunication."

WORLD REPORT

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U.S. folds up 'road map,' blaming the Palestinians

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Now that the "road map" peace plan has failed him, President Bush may be ready to ask for directions.

The Bush administration is quietly folding up the Israeli-Palestinian road map, the U.S.-led peace plan that neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis seem willing to follow.

In recent statements, top Bush officials have made it clear that the plan is moribund and that, for the most part, the Palestinians are to blame.

And after leading with tough talk for two years, the Bush administration is uncharacteristically asking for help and advice from the Israelis, some Arab nations and Europe.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is due to visit Washington in March, and topping the agenda is his contingency plan for unilateral disengagement from the Palestinians — an unimaginable scenario just months ago.

U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney is discussing alternatives with European allies during his tour of Europe this week, and the administration has watched with interest news of a Saudi proposal that addresses Israeli anxieties about the prospect of a mass influx of Palestinian refugees.

The new tone first was adopted by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell at a news conference two weeks ago announcing his outlook for the new year.

Powell repeated his allegiance to the road map, which envisions a Palestinian state and an end to terrorism by next year — but he made it clear he was waiting for

the Palestinians to take action first.

"What we need right now is for the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority to get control of the security forces and to use those forces and use other tools available to him to put down terror and to put down violence," Powell said. "Then I'm confident that we can move forward on the road map."

Since then, U.S. officials have made clear that they have not seen signs of a crack-down. In fact, they say, Powell got his answer the day after his talk, when a suicide bomber killed four Israelis at the Erez crossing at the Gaza-Israel boundary.

"The attack in Erez made people less sympathetic to the Palestinians, more sympathetic to Israeli security," said one U.S. administration official. Especially aggravating, the official said, was the Palestinian Authority's refusal to condemn the attack.

Cheney echoed the disappointment this weekend at an economic summit in Davos, Switzerland.

"Peace will not be achieved by Palestinian rulers who intimidate opposition, tolerate and profit from corruption, and maintain ties to terrorist groups," Cheney said.

The most stunning evolution was in John Wolf, the assistant secretary of state who was appointed Bush's envoy to the region last year. He started out believing more in the optimistic outlook represented by then-P.A. Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas than in Sharon's skepticism.

But that changed on Aug. 19, when a

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suicide bomb attack on a Jerusalem bus killed 21 Israelis, many of them children.

Wolf said he had persuaded Israel to allow the Palestinians a few days to crack down on terrorists after the attack.

"I have to say on the Palestinian side it was all talk and no action," Wolf said at a forum here last week hosted by Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. "There was no real effort by the Palestinian Authority to stop the violence."

The frustration was exacerbated by Abbas' resignation in September — viewed by the Bush administration and by Israel as a triumph for P.A. President Yasser Arafat, whose support for terrorism has made him an unacceptable partner for the United States and Israel.

The final straw was the Palestinians' failure to uncover who was behind an Oct. 15 bombing in Gaza that killed three people traveling in a convoy with Wolf. U.S. officials were appalled that the Palestinians did not even make an effort to find the killers.

Wolf, who is visiting Israel this week, is in the region for the first time since the Oct. 15 attack. He and David Satterfield, the deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, are pointedly avoiding the West Bank and Gaza, meeting instead with Palestinians in Jerusalem.

Before he left, Wolf insisted the meetings would be routine consultations and

said he was not bringing anything new to the sides.

The evolving sympathy for Israel helped make the case for two emissaries who arrived here last week to argue Israel's case for the security barrier it is building in the West Bank — and for the separation plan from the Palestinians that Sharon now favors and that the fence implies.

High-level meetings between administration officials and Dov Weisglass, Sharon's top adviser, and Yoav Biran, the Foreign Ministry's director-general were positive, Israeli officials said. They scored a partial victory: a softening in U.S. rhetoric on the security fence.

The fence's route has been a U.S.-Israel sore point for months because Bush officials believe Sharon wants to use the fence to set parameters for a Palestinian state that would not be viable.

Biran and Weisglass sought a U.S. commitment to file a legal brief on Israel's behalf at the International Court of Justice at the Hague, which is considering the issue of the fence next month.

That apparently won't happen, but they did elicit a broad statement from the administration that the hearing "would undermine rather than encourage direct negotiations between the parties to resolve those differences."

State Department officials also promised them that criticism of the fence in the department's annual human-rights report would be "soft."

Best of all for Sharon, U.S. officials found sympathy for his plan to begin unilateral separation from the Palestinians unless the Palestinian Authority cracks down on terrorism by midyear. That set the stage for Sharon's visit in March, when Bush will at least entertain Israeli plans for disengagement.

In their meetings, Biran and Weisglass emphasized the collapse of the road map. One Israeli official likened it to a new product produced by Kibbutz Hepzibah, a chemically treated goldfish

that can survive in a plastic bag for a year — but not much longer.

There are those in the administration and in Congress who are quick to remind Israel of its responsibilities, and who hanker for the road map's survival.

In a speech Jan. 13 at a State Department symposium on the 1967 Six-Day War, Satterfield said Israel clearly had more to lose if the road map failed, implying that Israel bore greater responsibility for keeping it alive.

He underscored that settlement building in the West Bank was a principle obstacle.

"Settlements continue to grow today, encouraged by specific ongoing government policies and at enormous expense to Israel's economy," he said. "And this persists even as it becomes clearer and clearer that the logic of settlements and the reality of demographics could threaten the future of Israel itself as a Jewish democratic state."

And in Congress, a powerful Republican called on the administration to defy the traditional election-year squeamishness at dealing with foreign-affairs initiatives.

U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf of Virginia, who chairs the subcommittee that funds the State Department, called on Bush to appoint a high-level diplomat to get the road map back on track.

"What is now needed is someone whose only job is to implement the plan, whose sole responsibility is to encourage peace in the region, who can at a moment's notice fly anywhere in the world to talk, listen, assuage, mediate, cajole and console," he said.

That's not likely to happen for a while, said David Makovsky, an analyst with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"There's a growing realization Arafat is pulling the strings again. On the American side, it's an election year, on the Israeli side there's talk of unilateralism," he said. "Any way you look at it, that's not a combination that's going to go."

American officials were appalled that the Palestinians did not even make an effort to find the killers behind an Oct. 15 bombing in Gaza that killed three people traveling in a U.S. convoy

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Jews to fight amendment against gay marriage

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Bush has thrown down the gauntlet on the issue of gay marriage, and many Jewish groups are lining up for the fight.

As part of his State of the Union address last week, Bush suggested support for a constitutional amendment codifying marriage as a union only between a man and a woman. The call came after jurists Bush described as “activist judges” ruled that gays and lesbians have a constitutional right to marry.

“On an issue of such great consequence, the people’s voice must be heard,” Bush said. “If judges insist on forcing their arbitrary will upon the people, the only alternative left to the people would be the constitutional process. Our nation must defend the sanctity of marriage.”

The issue was put on the front burner by a Massachusetts court ruling in November. Under the state constitution, the ruling said, gay couples have the right to wed.

The developments are coupled with election-year politics in which Bush is appealing to his conservative base by proposing a \$1 billion initiative to promote heterosexual marriage.

Among the major U.S. organized religions, Judaism is among the more progressive when it comes to homosexuality.

The Reform movement, which welcomes gay clergy, determined in 2000 that gay unions were “worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual.”

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism’s Committee on Law and Standards is expected to begin debate this

year on issues relating to the status of homosexuals. Though it will not specifically discuss gay marriage or the ordination of gay rabbis, the debate is considered the first step in that process.

The Orthodox and more traditional Jewish denominations see no room for debate on the religious prohibition against homosexuality.

Many Jewish groups have supported the Massachusetts decision. This month, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston urged the state government to pass laws accepting same-sex marriage, in keeping with the court ruling.

Many Jewish groups opposed the Defense of Marriage Act, which President Clinton signed in 1996, and Jewish leaders suggested that they would play a large role in opposing a similar constitutional amendment.

“Our position has been that we support efforts to extend all rights of civil marriage to couples in domestic partnerships,” said Steve Freedman, director of legal affairs for the Anti-Defamation League, using a term often used to describe gay unions.

The National Council of Jewish Women has filed briefs in support of gay marriage in several court cases. The group suggests that civil unions, a legal status that gives domestic partners some legal rights, would not be sufficient.

“Gay and lesbian couples in this country are forming partnerships, having children and creating families and will continue to do so,” the group’s board of directors said in an October 2003 statement. “To deny couples in these committed relationships the same legal benefits accorded spouses

in heterosexual marriages is prejudicial, counterproductive and morally offensive.”

David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said he believed several mainline Christian groups would join civil-rights and civil-liberties organizations in fighting an amendment.

Many groups do not know exactly what position they will take because an amendment has yet to be introduced.

The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America supports an amendment. Nathan Diament, director of the O.U.’s Institute for Public Affairs, said he agrees with President Bush that litigation is thrusting the issue to the fore.

“There is a huge issue of immense social implications,” Diament said. “It requires a great deal of debate.”

Diament said he was unsure how much time or effort the Orthodox Union and other Orthodox groups would expend in support of a constitutional amendment.

The issue is likely to stay in the public eye for a while. A constitutional amendment requires the support of three-fourths of the 50 state legislatures, a lengthy process.

Saperstein said the amendment proposal could benefit for gay rights. He likened it to the push in the 1970s for an Equal Rights Amendment.

While that amendment never passed, the debate changed the mind-set of many people, Saperstein said.

“I hate to see this amendment go forward,” he said. “But if it does, I think it would be a debate that makes America a better country and improves the situation for gays and lesbians.”

It’s a down year for Jewish films at the Oscars

By TOM TUGEND

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — Jewish talent and themes scored only modestly in the Oscar nominations announced this week.

However, there was recognition Tuesday for the critically acclaimed “House of Sand and Fog” by Vadim Perelman, a 39-year-old native of Kiev, Ukraine, in his first feature film.

Although Perelman didn’t make the best director category, the film won three nominations: Ben Kingsley, who said he had a Jewish grandparent on his mother’s side, was nominated for best actor honors for his role as a proud Iranian immigrant.

Shohreh Aghdashloo, playing his wife, was nominated for best supporting actress, and James Horner was nominated for

the musical score.

The documentary feature category, which has been traditionally hospitable to Jewish and Holocaust themes, includes two nominees with Jewish ties: “Capturing the Friedmans,” about a highly dysfunctional Jewish family in New York, and “My Architect,” chronicling the professional triumphs and unorthodox personal lifestyle of American architect Louis Kahn, created by his son Nathaniel Kahn and Susan R. Behr.

“American Splendor,” about Jewish comic-book cult favorite Harvey Pekar, earned an adopted screenplay nomination for writers Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer Behr.

Among foreign-language films, entries from Israel and the Palestinians failed to make the cut.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

New York OKs insurance bill

The New York state Assembly passed a bill banning insurance companies from denying life insurance to travelers to Israel.

The assembly unanimously approved the bill prohibiting insurers from asking life insurance applicants if they have visited Israel or other countries on a State Department travel advisory list.

JTA recently revealed that some insurers were denying such coverage based on past or even future travel plans to Israel because of the U.S. advisory.

The state Senate must pass the bill before it becomes law.

Delay in terror case

The trial in Cleveland of an Islamic cleric accused of hiding his ties to anti-Israel terrorist groups was delayed.

The judge in the case of Fawaz Mohammed Damrah said the trial would be delayed until March 31 while government prosecutors gather classified documents to use in their case.

Damrah is accused of links to several groups, including Islamic Jihad.

Canadian Jews upset at nomination

Canadian Jews responded angrily to the nomination of a Hitler proponent to a federal native commission.

Native leader David Ahenakew, who is facing trial on charges of spreading anti-Semitic hate, was nominated to the Assembly of First Nations Renewal Commission, a federally funded board for Canadian native peoples, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reported. Ahenakew made headlines a year ago for saying that Hitler had some good ideas and for comparing Jews to a disease.

The comments forced Ahenakew to resign from the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and resulted in criminal charges.

Israel holds anti-Semitism day

Israel held its first national day against global anti-Semitism.

The day, chosen to be held Tuesday to coincide with annual European commemorations of the Holocaust, was marked with a special session of the Knesset and a seminar for Israeli and Diaspora youth at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial.

MIDDLE EAST

No Shalom in Jordan

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom postponed a trip to Jordan. No reason was given for the cancellation of the trip, slated to begin Wednesday.

Israeli media speculated that growing tension over Israel's West Bank security barrier or the lack of Jordanian prisoners included in Israel's pending prisoner swap with Hezbollah could account for the postponement.

Israel releases prisoner list

Israel published the names of 436 security prisoners due for release under a deal with Hezbollah.

The list was published to give Israeli terror victims a chance to appeal against any of the releases before the swap takes place later this week.

Israel is slated to receive businessman Elhanan Tannenbaum and the bodies of three Israeli soldiers in return for the prisoners.

The Prisons Service Web site on Tuesday listed the names of 400 Palestinians, 23 Lebanese, 12 prisoners from other Arab countries, and a German jailed for coming to Israel on a Hezbollah mission.

Dirani denies Arad connection

A Lebanese militia leader jailed in Israel said he was raped to extract a confession about missing Israeli airman Ron Arad. Mustafa Dirani, a former chief of the Amal militia, who is due to be released this week under a prisoner swap with Hezbollah, told Tel Aviv District Court on Tuesday that an intelligence major code-named George ordered a soldier to sodomize him.

Israeli commandos abducted Dirani in 1994 in the hope that he could be traded for Arad, who went missing after bailing out from his fighter jet over Lebanon in 1986. Dirani said Arad spent his first night of captivity in his home.

The militiaman had told interrogators he later delivered Arad to Iranian agents, but on Tuesday he said this confession was forced. State prosecutors denied the torture charge, saying Dirani needed to invent a reason for cooperating with his interrogators now that he is about to return home.

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Argentine Jews staying put

The number of Argentine Jews who moved to Israel declined sharply last year.

The Israeli government released a report showing 1,400 Argentines made aliyah during 2003, a 77 percent decrease from 2002, when 6,300 Argentines moved to Israel. The decline is believed to be due to improving economic conditions in Argentina.

Europe pressed to mark Holocaust day

European Commission President Romano Prodi proposed that the European Union adopt a Holocaust remembrance day.

"This day will be for the victims of the Shoah and the fight against crimes against humanity," Prodi said Monday. "The memory of the Shoah, a unique and unprecedented tragedy, is a universal value." Wolfgang Thierse, the president of Germany's Parliament, echoed Prodi's call in an address on Holocaust Memorial Day, which many European countries mark on Jan. 27, the day Auschwitz was liberated.

This year, some 20 European countries marked Jan. 27 with ceremonies.

British clergy blast anti-Semitism

British Jewish and Christian leaders warned against anti-Semitism. In a letter published Tuesday in London Times, clergy said anti-Israel rhetoric should not be used as a mask for anti-Semitism.

"Attacks on Israel should not be used to throw a cloak of respectability over anti-Semitic feelings," the letter said.

The archbishop of Canterbury, a British Catholic cardinal and Britain's Orthodox chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, all signed the letter.

Jewish college celebrates in Berlin

The first U.S. Jewish college to open a branch in Germany celebrated its inauguration. In ceremonies Monday, the eve of Holocaust Memorial Day celebrations across Europe, Touro College Berlin was celebrated as an affirmation of the rebirth of Jewish life in Germany.

The opening of the Berlin branch of the New York-based Jewish college was also a sign of the enduring nature of the German-U.S. relationship, which has been under strain over differences between the current administrations of both countries, participants said.

"We consider this an important date for the re-establishment of Jewish life in this city," said Albert Meyer, newly elected president of the Jewish Community of Berlin, in ceremonies held at Berlin's main public library.