

IN THE NEWS

To please U.S., Israel adjusts fence

In an attempt to satisfy the Bush administration, Israel is adjusting the route of the West Bank security fence to exclude most settlement blocs.

On Sunday, Israel's Ha'aretz newspaper reported that the new route would shorten the fence by some 63 miles.

According to political sources, Israel hopes to get the Bush administration's backing for the new route to bolster its case before hearings on the fence at the International Court of Justice in The Hague on Feb. 23.

Israel kills terrorists in Gaza

Israel killed two terrorists and one bystander in Gaza Strip operations over the weekend.

On Saturday, a helicopter-fired missile killed Aziz Shami, a military commander for Islamic Jihad, and a 12-year-old bystander in Gaza City.

On Sunday, troops raiding the southern town of Rafah killed a fugitive from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and wounded five other gunmen.

Report: Arafat used E.U. money for terror

Yasser Arafat channeled E.U. aid money to terrorist groups and for personal use by high-ranking Palestinian officials, according to a preliminary investigation.

The probe is being conducted by the E.U.'s anti-fraud team.

The Berlin Morgenpost, which obtained documents from the team, said they show that the Palestinian Authority president fed E.U. funds to the Al-Aksa Brigade, a terrorist group linked to Arafat's Fatah movement.

The Al-Aksa Brigade has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks on Israeli civilians during the Palestinian intifada.

The Israeli government provided documents, which the army seized when it entered Arafat's headquarters in March 2002, for the investigation.

WORLD REPORT

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Vienna meeting highlights split within Austrian Jewry

By RUTH ELLEN GRUBER

VIENNA (JTA) — Austrian newspapers recently showcased a remarkable photograph.

It was a dramatic shot of Israel's Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Yona Metzger, with his hands laid in blessing on the bowed head of Austria's president, Thomas Klestil.

Surrounding them, in a mirrored hall of the imperial Hofburg Palace, were dozens of Orthodox rabbis with full beards and black hats.

Their meeting was "a signal that Jewish people from all over the world are welcome in Austria," Klestil told the rabbis.

But last week's encounter had additional overtones in Austria: "God bless the Austrian people," the right-wing daily Kronen Zeitung wrote in a headline, essentially portraying Metzger's blessing as an absolution of Austria's history of anti-Semitism and Holocaust complicity and its troubled record of coming to terms with the past.

The Feb. 2 encounter with Klestil was part of a high-profile series of events in Vienna last week that sharply illustrated the complex, differing and sometime rival visions of Jewish development currently at play in Europe.

The events demonstrated how national and mainstream political forces can make use of Jewish issues to further their own agendas — and also showed that while Chabad is equally savvy in enlisting official support for their own goals, others, like longtime Jewish leader Ariel Muzikant, take a more aggressive approach.

Developments centered on a three-day rabbinical conference organized by the Brussels-based, Chabad-linked Rabbinical Center of Europe.

The conference brought more than 100 Orthodox rabbis to the Austrian capital, most of them Chabad emissaries serving in former Communist nations. Metzger and Israel's tourism minister, Benny Elon, also took part.

The meeting's stated focus was halachic discussion, and nuts-and-bolts issues of rabbinical involvement in Jewish communal and religious revival. A centerpiece was the dedication of the first Jewish teacher training academy to open in Vienna since the Holocaust.

But the meeting packed a political punch that went far beyond the Jewish community — especially since the Vienna events coincided with a conference in Israel where the head of Austria's own Jewish community raised the alarms about anti-Semitism in Austria and Europe.

European Commission President Romano Prodi, who flew in from Brussels for the occasion, took part in the dedication of the teacher training academy. The rabbis then presented him with a humanitarian award from the rabbinical council in a ceremony attended by government ministers and other Austrian dignitaries.

"It's very encouraging to know that the president is taking this special trip to inaugurate this significant Jewish institution and to receive the award," said Vienna-based Rabbi Jacob Biderman, who heads a Chabad educational network in Vienna and hosted the conference events.

"This act is an important message from

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AROUND THE JEWISH WORLD

■ Chabad takes a more diplomatic approach than a longtime Jewish leader

Continued from page 1

the president about the direction Europe is taking toward the future of the Jewish community here," he said.

Accepting the award, Prodi stressed that "there is no place for racism, no place for anti-Semitism, in Europe."

He praised council leaders for showing that "you understand the importance of taking an active part in European integration and engaging in an open dialogue with" European Union institutions.

Coupled with the council's recognition of his achievements, Prodi's remarks were significant given the tension he has experienced lately with several mainstream Jewish groups.

Prodi spoke weeks ahead of a seminar on anti-Semitism to be held Feb. 19 in Brussels — an event Prodi temporarily suspended last month after the presidents of the World Jewish Congress and the European Jewish Congress accused the E.U. Commission of anti-Semitism.

Earlier, the WJC branded as "flawed and dangerously inflammatory" an E.U.-commissioned survey that listed Israel at the top of nations that Europeans saw as a threat to world peace. Another E.U. body also came under sharp Jewish criticism for suppressing a report that showed that anti-Semitic violence in Europe largely was carried out by Muslims.

In fact, on the same day that Prodi received his award in Vienna, Jewish communal leaders from across Europe were in Jerusalem for a meeting of the European Jewish Congress that dwelt in large part

on anti-Semitism.

Speakers including Muzikant, told the Jerusalem meeting of an increase of anti-Semitic attitudes and of occasional violence in their home countries.

Muzikant, who has been involved in a long and bitter conflict with the Austrian government over demands for more state subsidies to cover Jewish communal costs, including increased security, said European Jews had a right "not to live behind barbed wire" and Jewish children had a right to attend school "without being spat on."

The Vienna newspaper Die Presse went to town on the issue, sharply contrasting Muzikant's criticism of Austria in Jerusalem with the positive attitude toward Austria and the European Union expressed at the council's conference.

On its front page Feb. 3, the paper juxtaposed the dramatic photograph of Metzger blessing Klestil with an article quoting Muzikant as saying, "My children have left Austria because they can't bear the daily stress of being Jewish here any more."

On his return to Vienna, Muzikant said he had been misinterpreted and had "never attacked" the European Union or Austria. But the damage was done.

Muzikant and others in Vienna's 7,000-member Jewish community expressed concern that the conference was a step in what one observer called a "political power play" by Chabad to form its own, separate and officially recognized communal operation that — given Muzikant's prickly dealings with the authorities — could end up having much better relations with the Austrian government.

"I think it shows that Biderman has become an operator and a politician to be reckoned with," one close observer of the Austrian Jewish scene said of the Vienna-based Chabad rabbi. "With a public to-do like this, it looks like he's making good progress."

Biderman's group already has filed a request to be recognized as an autonomous community, separate from the mainstream Jewish communal organization. Such a move would give it and its institutions a

formal legal relationship with the state, independent of the mainstream Jewish administration.

If that happens, Muzikant told JTA by telephone, Biderman "is going to weaken an already weak Jewish community."

"Chabad does such a great job teaching, educating, bringing Jews back to Judaism," he said. "We admire them for that. Why do they need to get involved in politics? I just don't understand — we don't know where they want to go."

Biderman denied that he has any intention

to weaken the community or jockey for political power.

"We have no interest in special relations with the government," he told JTA by telephone. "We have our needs and we want to do our work, and we don't need a special community to do so."

He said his group had applied to be recognized as an autonomous community because Muzikant had "threatened to use his position to ask the authorities to withdraw accreditation" for the Chabad school.

But the school issue is an internal communal issue, and Chabad had agreed with the organized Jewish community not to talk about it publicly, Biderman said.

Muzikant noted that the only person from the official Jewish communal leadership who was invited to any of the events last week was Chief Rabbi Paul Chaim Eisenberg.

Eisenberg used his speech at a gala dinner for the rabbis at Vienna's historic Rathaus City Hall to appeal for communal unity.

Edward Serotta, director of the Vienna-based Centropa Jewish oral history project, said the developments demonstrated two clearly divergent methods that Jewish organizations use to seek their goals.

"Rabbi Biderman believes he can attract more bees with honey, while Muzikant is going after the honeycomb with a club," Serotta said.

"Both of these men are highly intelligent and skillful players, and they are pursuing politics as befits their respective natures. It would be nice if they both win what they want."

Austrian Jewish leader Ariel Muzikant is 'going after the honeycomb with a club.'

Edward Serotta
European Jewish chronicler

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THIS WEEK

MONDAY

■ Leaders of five Jewish federations convene in New York to rehash an overseas allocations decision for the North American Jewish federation system. The meeting appears to be an attempt to patch up a fallout over a Dec. 8 allocations decision.

■ Some 300 Conservative rabbis gather in Jerusalem for the 104th Rabbinical Assembly convention. A debate over a plank supporting Israel's fence is expected.

TUESDAY

■ Palestinian and Israeli negotiators of the "Geneva accord" promote their plan at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. They will brief congressional representatives on the plan on Friday.

■ Tennessee and Virginia hold primaries. Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) needs to make a good showing to sustain his chances against Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.).

■ Dennis Ross briefs the House of Representatives Middle East Subcommittee. The briefing will highlight congressional support for Israel's security fence ahead of the Feb. 23 hearing by the International Court of Justice.

THURSDAY

■ Secretary of State Colin Powell testifies before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Committee chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) is likely to grill Powell on the failure to advance the "road map."

■ The American Jewish Committee opens its office in Brussels. The group is attempting to increase its lobbying pressure on the European Union.

■ Israel's High Court of Justice examines the issue of Falash Mura immigration. The government is expected to explain why it has not expedited the aliyah of the 20,000 descendants of Ethiopian Jews.

SATURDAY

■ A gay and lesbian Jewish student group stages a rally at a Washington synagogue to encourage the Conservative movement to ordain gay and lesbian rabbis.

SUNDAY

■ Israel honors evangelical leader the Rev. Pat Robertson for promoting visits to Israel on his Christian Broadcasting Network.

■ Orthodox feminists meet for the fifth annual Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance in New York City.

■ The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations conducts its first mission to Morocco. The mission aims to strengthen Morocco-Israel relations and bolster the Jewish community, which has suffered a terrorism attack.

Conservative rabbis likely to focus on Israeli security fence

By JOE BERKOFSKY

NEW YORK (JTA) — Conservative rabbis are preparing to debate a resolution supporting Israel's West Bank security fence during an upcoming Jerusalem summit.

The debate, set for the Rabbinical Assembly's 104th annual convention, being held Monday through Thursday, will come after some of the rabbis from across North America — 300 are expected to attend — tour the fence Tuesday.

The fence resolution already is generating buzz, say members of the rabbinical group, which claims 1,600 members in 20 counties, including Israel.

"There are feelings that the fence is helpful, and that parts are a wall and are not helpful," said Rabbi Joel Meyers, the R.A.'s executive vice president.

The fence resolution, and others dealing with the Iraq war, the segregation by gender of Western Wall prayer areas and a new plank outlining the movement's stance on Zionism in the 21st century come as many Conservative rabbis are urging the centrist movement to be more politically adventurous.

"Part of our mission as Conservative Jews is to see Judaism and halachah," or Jewish law, "as something which affects life," said Rabbi Richard Hammerman of Congregation B'nai Israel in Toms River, N.J.

"If we take that mission seriously, it means we have a social agenda. And you can't have a real social agenda in this century without" taking an active role lobbying the government, he said.

For four decades, the Reform movement in particular has staked highly visible positions on domestic issues from affirmative action to voter rights — including such hot-button topics as abortion rights and homosexuality — via the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington.

In recent years, the Orthodox Union also has grown more politically vocal with its Institute for Public Affairs in the capital.

The union has spoken out on issues such as school vouchers, President Bush's faith-based initiative and same-sex marriage.

The Conservative movement has been far less vocal, partly because its members run the political gamut.

In addition, the movement does not have a public affairs arm in the nation's capital, at times relying on the Reform movement to help with advocacy, some say.

"There is an ongoing discussion about how active we should be," Meyers said.

Much of that debate revolves around the larger issue of what voice is appropriate for a movement that long has viewed itself as "in the middle" of the more liberal and traditional denominations, Meyers said.

"There is a desire to have a more unified approach, a strong approach, to express the movement's values," Meyers said.

Some suggest that while Conservative rabbis should craft a much more aggressive domestic agenda, they should not weigh in on Israeli issues such as the fence.

"We're not there," said Rabbi Richard Spiegel of Temple Etz Chaim in Thousand Oaks, Calif., which is outside Los Angeles. "My sons are not the ones who are on the borders there in the army, they're in college here. It's very different."

The fence resolution supports Israel's right to build the fence "as a legitimate tool of self-defense" and "in a manner that will aid the renewal of negotiations for peace and maintain the Jewish and democratic nature of the State."

While Spiegel is loathe to criticize Israel, supporting such a plank "is like you're for apple pie and motherhood."

Hammerman is less enthusiastic.

He wishes the fence "wasn't a necessity, but the Palestinians brought it on themselves," he said.

Still, he said, "I don't think we want to be dividing villages and families" with the barrier.

The assembly will be meeting in Israel for the first time since the Palestinian intifada began in September 2000. ■

Some think 'the fence is helpful, and that parts are a wall and are not helpful.'

Rabbi Joel Meyers
Rabbinical Assembly

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Two named to Iraq panel

President Bush appointed a Jewish judge to co-chair a commission assessing the intelligence that preceded the Iraq war.

Judge Laurence Silberman, a Republican, will co-chair the commission with former Sen. Chuck Robb (D-Va.).

Also named to the panel last Friday was Rick Levin, Yale University's first Jewish president. The panel was created in the wake of a declaration from Bush's top weapons inspector that assessments of Iraq's capability to develop weapons of mass destruction were "almost all wrong."

Silberman, 68, decided as an appeals court judge to overturn convictions in the Iran-Contra scandal.

Allegations that he helped plot the impeachment case against President Clinton and then adjudicated related cases will make him a controversial choice for Democrats.

Levin clashed with a group of Orthodox Jews in 1998 when he would not accept their request to forego a requirement that unmarried freshmen live on campus.

Orthodox pleased faith-based language stays

Orthodox Jewish groups were pleased that Congress voted down amendments that would have removed language allowing federally funded charities to use faith as a criterion in hiring.

On Feb. 4, the U.S. House of Representatives voted down the amendments, moved by some Democrats, to the Community Service Block Grants legislation.

JCPA: Resist anti-poverty cuts

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs urged Congress to resist White House budget cuts aimed at anti-poverty programs.

"The federal budget should express a practical commitment to build a nation in which every American, young and old alike, is free from hunger, is adequately housed, and has access to health care," the JCPA said in its analysis of President Bush's latest budget.

The analysis uncovered cuts in programs targeting dropouts, raising literacy and revitalizing housing, among others.

Agudath Israel backs marriage amendment

Agudath Israel said it would work to change the Massachusetts state and the U.S. Constitutions to restrict marriage to heterosexual unions.

The state's Supreme Court ruled last week that the state constitution will be fulfilled only if full marriage rights are granted to same-sex couples.

MIDDLE EAST

Israeli Arab charged with Hezbollah ties

An Israeli Arab political activist is accused of planning attacks for Hezbollah.

Ghassan Atamalla, a member of the Balad Party's central committee, was arrested with his brother, Sirhan, last December. According to the indictment served against them in Nazareth District Court on Sunday, Ghassan Atamalla arranged for Sirhan to undergo arms training in Lebanon with a view to setting up a Hezbollah cell in Israel. A lawyer for the brothers said they denied all the charges.

Indictments served in Gaza attack

The Palestinian Authority indicted four Gaza men suspected in a deadly ambush on a U.S. diplomatic convoy. The military court trial that opened Saturday followed increased U.S. pressure on the Pales-

tinians to catch those responsible for the Oct. 15 attack, which killed three American guards.

The four men are members of the Popular Resistance Committees, a coalition of terrorist groups that claimed responsibility for the ambush. The four proclaimed their innocence ahead of the trial, which was convened on virtually no notice.

Panel to examine yeshiva students

The Israeli government established a new panel to investigate the drafting of yeshiva students into the Israeli army. The committee is the latest attempt to resolve the issue of yeshiva students not serving in the army, a major source of religious-secular tension in Israel.

The committee is expected to report back in nine months.

Top U.S. cops train in Israel

Israeli security agencies trained top U.S. policemen in terrorism prevention.

A delegation of 14 police chiefs from major metropolitan areas — including New York, Washington, Boston and Chicago — spent five days in Israel at the end of January. Israeli police and army units briefed the delegation on how to identify suicide bombers and secure large venues, such as malls and stadiums.

The Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs organized the tour.

WORLD

German politician off the hook

A German politician who gave an anti-Semitic speech last fall will not face charges.

German prosecutors announced Feb. 5 that the remarks of Parliament member Martin Hohmann were protected under Germany's freedom-of-speech laws. In October, Hohmann said that the Jews are a "nation of perpetrators" based on their behavior during the Russian Revolution. The leader of Germany's Jewish community is incensed at the news.

Nigerians hold Iranian

Nigerian authorities are holding an Iranian diplomat who was caught with a digital camera staking out the Israeli Embassy.

Reuters quoted Israeli security sources and Nigerian newspapers as saying last week that the man had photographed the Israeli Embassy and other sensitive buildings in Abuja, including the British Council and the Nigerian Defense Ministry.

Officials at the Iranian Embassy had no comment.

Berlin site defaced

Pro-extremist posters were placed around the construction site of Germany's Holocaust memorial in Berlin.

The signs called the memorial an "atonement park" and encouraged people to join the extremist National Democratic Party, or NPD, police said Saturday night.

Mexican rabbi dies

Rabbi Samuel Lerer, who converted thousands of Jews in Mexico, died Feb. 5 at age 89.

Lerer, who had retired to San Antonio, Texas, lived in Mexico City from 1968 to 1999 while leading the English-language Beth Israel Community Center. During that time, the Conservative rabbi reached out to Mexicans who believed they were descended from Spanish Jews forced to convert to Catholicism during the Inquisition.

By his count, Lerer converted about 3,000 people, mostly in the Mexican cities of Veracruz, Venta Prieta and Puebla.