

IN THE NEWS

White House likes Sharon plan

Ariel Sharon's proposals on withdrawing from Gaza and the West Bank "have the potential to be historic," the White House said.

National Security Council spokesman Shawn McCormack spoke after two top aides to Israel's prime minister briefed top U.S. officials this week on the status of the plan. McCormack said U.S. officials would soon visit Israel to further the plan.

"The talks were very helpful and we will continue them in the coming weeks," he said.

McCormack said he expected the plans to adhere to the U.S.-led "road map" peace plan, which envisions Palestinian statehood, but he would not say whether Bush would press Israel to negotiate with the Palestinians at this stage.

French ban religious signs

The French Senate passed a bill banning all conspicuous religious signs in state schools.

The bill was adopted Wednesday by a vote of 276 to 20. Students in state schools will be barred from wearing Muslim veils, yarmulkes or large crosses from the start of the new academic year.

Closing the debate in the Senate, Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said, "Everyone has a right to express one's faith on condition that inside republican schools one respects the laws of the republic."

Gaza strike

An Israeli air strike killed two Hamas members and a third person in Gaza.

Witnesses said two missiles, apparently fired by an Israeli helicopter gunship, blew up a car carrying the two Hamas members outside Netzarim on Wednesday.

The identity of the third person killed in the airstrike was not immediately clear.

WORLD REPORT

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Both parties look to U.S. Jews as Bush vs. Kerry race takes shape

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Now that it's down to John Kerry versus George W. Bush, American Jews — prominent in swing states in what could be a close election — can expect plenty of attention.

"Anything that moves a few hundred or a few thousand voters one way or another in any state can cause a seismic shift," said John Zogby, a pollster who says the closeness of this election is leading opinion-gatherers to focus more than ever on small groups like Jews.

David Harris, the executive director of the American Jewish Committee, which tracks Jewish voting patterns, said Jews could expect to be courted.

"The Jewish community should feel comfortable that both parties in the coming election will be paying close attention to the Jewish vote and will be paying attention to core Jewish concerns," he said.

"Jews are in swing states, Jews vote rain or shine, Jews are active in mobilizing support for the parties, Jews are also visible and vocal in the competition of ideas, radio, television, newspapers, magazines, all of which makes for impact."

The fight will mirror the larger battle for the election, where Kerry will emphasize domestic issues and President Bush will stress his foreign-policy and security record.

Among Jews, Democratic strategists say they will stress health care, the economy and the proposed constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

Republicans say they will stress Bush's

strong pro-Israel record and his war against terrorism.

Jews still lean strongly Democratic, pollsters say, but even small shifts could change history.

"If instead of 72 percent of the Jewish vote Kerry were to get 69 percent, it's not many votes, but it could have an impact in Pennsylvania, Florida, Arizona," Zogby said — all states that were won by tiny margins in the 2000 election.

Florida's contested electoral votes in that election ultimately threw the national race to Bush, even though Al Gore got the plurality of the national vote.

Kerry, the Democratic senator from Massachusetts, swept nine of 10 states in this week's Super Tuesday primaries, all but clinching the Democratic nomination.

Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.), Kerry's only serious rival, announced his withdrawal from the race on Wednesday and praised Kerry. Edwards did not win any primaries Tuesday.

Jewish activists in both parties already are targeting swing communities.

"There's probably going to be about 10 real battleground states and in a number of those places there's a large Jewish community," said Matt Brooks, the executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, making note of Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and Missouri.

The Republic Jewish Coalition has held a number of events in Florida recently to bolster support.

Marc Racicot, the former Montana governor who chairs the Bush-Cheney re-election

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■ Democrats and Republicans eye Jews as possible November swing factor

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campaign, attended some Republican Jewish events in the state over the weekend. Racicot said he was optimistic that Bush would do better than the 19 percent he earned from Jews in 2000, because of the president's strong pro-Israel record.

"We understand they have been inclined to support Democrats," Racicot said of Jewish voters in an interview with the JTA. "But we feel the president's policies and his values in regards to the Middle East lead to the possibility to be much more successful in the Jewish community — not just in Florida but around the country."

Bring it on, say the Democrats.

"Things have not looked as good for Democrats in the Jewish community for a number of years," said Ira Forman, the executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council.

Kerry's strength among Jews was reflected in exit polls on Tuesday, where he polled better among Jews than among non-Jews in four out of five states with reliable Jewish exit poll data.

Forman said his party would emphasize what all pro-Israel activists agree is Kerry's exemplary voting record in 19 years in the Senate.

Harris, of the AJCommittee, suggested that the Democrats need to publicize Kerry's record on Israel — and quickly. He said his impression in the lead-up to the California primary on Tuesday was that Jews in the Golden State were unaware of Kerry's views on the Middle East.

"In 10 meetings I've had in California, the very same issues have come up — specifically John Kerry and Israel," Harris said. "How does he stack up?"

A senior official in Kerry's campaign named three Kerry associates immediately available to do Jewish outreach for the candidate: Mark Mellman, a top Democratic pollster, Alan Solomont, a leading Jewish philanthropist in Boston, and Cameron Kerry, the candidate's brother who converted to Judaism 20 years ago.

Forman suggested that the Democrats' strategy would be first to say that Bush and Kerry were equals on Israel, "and then we pivot to all the major domestic issues."

"They're on the wrong side of the community on the fiscal mess, with its dire implications for social service programs, on forfeiture of stewardship of the environment, on destroying the wall separating church from state, on choice, in energy, on nuclear proliferation — we can go on and on and on," Forman said.

Hannah Rosenthal, executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an umbrella organization of local Jewish community relations councils and national groups, agreed that Jews are likelier to vote this year on domestic issues.

"On issues specific to Israel, we're talking about a win-win situation," said Rosenthal, one of 40 Jewish organizational leaders who met with Kerry over the weekend in New York. "Jews will be looking at protection of privacy, at civil liberties protections, at health care, women's rights."

Those were all issues Kerry stressed in his victory speech Tuesday night, when he left foreign policy and the Iraq war for brief mentions at the end.

Forman said the party also would emphasize Bush's backing for the amendment banning gay marriage.

"Every time they play to their conservative base — and they'll have to play a lot this year — they totally alienate the Jewish community," Forman said.

Republicans agreed that Kerry was strong on Israel but suggested that Bush was stronger and that Kerry could be

vulnerable on national security, where Bush has aggressively advocated tougher measures in the USA Patriot Act.

Brooks, the Republican Jewish official, suggested that Bush's commitment to Israel's safety and security would trump domestic considerations for many Jews.

By Wednesday, Republicans were already highlighting alleged inconsistencies in Kerry's positions on Israel.

The Republican Jewish Coalition said in a press release that Kerry had opposed Israel's

West Bank security barrier when speaking to Arab Americans in the autumn but supported it when speaking to Jews this week. "Where does John Kerry really stand on Israel's anti-terrorism fence?" the release said.

Forman scoffed at the Republicans' strategy, noting that Bush, too, had modified his position over the same period: opposing the fence's route in the autumn, but supporting the barrier now that Israel is adjusting the route.

Kerry's campaign has said that his comments to Arab Americans last year, when he said, "We don't need another barrier to peace," referred to the fence's planned route inside the West Bank. Israel has since adjusted the route, so Kerry now defends the fence as a legitimate security measure.

Frank Luntz, a Republican pollster who will publish his own survey of American Jews next week, said this election season promises to be an interesting one.

"For the first time in my lifetime, a significant segment of the Jewish vote is up for grabs," he said in an interview. "The Jewish community is the most interested in national security of any voter sub-group, and that plays to Bush's advantage."

"The Jewish community is still liberal on social issues and that plays to Kerry's advantage," he said.

In a survey of American Jews published in January by the AJCommittee, 51 percent identified themselves as Democrats, 31 percent as Independent and 16 percent as Republican.

(JTA correspondent Matthew E. Berger in Washington contributed to this report.)

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Jews proud of choice for Russian prime minister

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — The Jewish man named Russian prime minister this week is little known to the country's Jewish community.

But Jewish leaders welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin's selection this week of Mikhail Fradkov, currently Russia's envoy to the European Union in Brussels.

Jewish leaders said Fradkov, who was expected to be approved by the pro-Putin majority in the Russian Parliament on Friday, has had no interaction with the organized Jewish community.

If approved, Fradkov would be the first identified Jew to serve as Russia's prime minister. His father is known to be Jewish, and while the background of his mother is unclear, he was profiled in a biographical volume of the Russian Jewish Encyclopedia that was published in 1997.

Berel Lazar, one of Russia's two chief rabbis, told JTA he has met with Fradkov in the past. "He is very knowledgeable about economics. He hopefully will direct his Cabinet toward resolving Russia's most serious problems, such as the problem of poverty," Lazar said.

Russian experts, whom the choice of Fradkov, 53, has taken by surprise, describe him as a civil servant who is likely to become a bureaucratic prime minister devoted to Putin.

Whether he will serve in his post for very long is unclear.

Russian voters go the polls March 14 in an election that is believed to be a rubber stamp for Putin, and a new Cabinet has to be approved after the election.

But most experts believe he will remain in office for at least a year.

Fradkov has been a foreign trade official since 1972, when at the age of 21 he got a job as an economic adviser with the Russian Embassy in New Delhi.

He first joined the Russian government in 1992, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when he was deputy foreign trade minister in the reformist government headed by Yegor Gaidar. He served as trade minister for less than a year in 1997, and was named foreign trade minister two years later. He lost his job when Putin was elected president in 2000.

Before this week's appointment, Fradkov's high point came in March 2001, when he was made head of the tax police, charged with ending Russia's massive tax evasion. The agency was disbanded during a government reshuffle in 2003, and Fradkov was sent to Brussels to represent Russia in the European Commission.

For some Russian Jewish leaders, Fradkov's Jewishness is welcome.

"This nomination sends a clear signal to everyone," said Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the Russian Jewish Congress. "It means that Russia's president is an ab-

solute pragmatist, it means that a person's nationality does not mean anything to him, and that he is judging people by their business and personal qualities."

Satanovsky said that while Russia's next Cabinet's policies may remain an open question, Russian Jews already have received an answer to an important question: whether a Jew can serve in one of Russia's highest offices.

But others are expressing mixed feelings about Fradkov's nomination, worrying that it could cause a backlash.

"Of course, this is an overall positive thing to Jews," said Lyudmila Krasnopol'skaya, an English-language instructor at a Moscow college. "Yet given this, I'm not sure this choice will necessarily make all Russians that happy."

A recent conference on xenophobia and racism in Russia held last week in Moscow reported that more than 60 percent of Russians have xenophobic sentiments, and many are anti-Semitic.

"There are people in the society who can try to make this an issue," said Lazar, speaking of Fradkov's Jewish background.

"I know there are people even inside the Kremlin whom this nomination will not make extremely happy," Satanovsky said.

Two major politicians have come against the nomination. Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov and ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy both opposed it.

Zhirinovskiy called Fradkov a "gray and faceless person."

Anti-Semitic incidents up in Britain, survey says

By RICHARD ALLEN GREENE

LONDON (JTA) — Turmoil in the Middle East is behind the high number of anti-Semitic incidents in Britain, a monitoring group said.

There were 375 anti-Semitic incidents in Britain last year, the second highest number in two decades, according to the Community Security Trust, which monitors such incidents on behalf of U.K. Jewry.

The incidents ranged from attacks on rabbis and university students to abusive e-mail directed at pro-Israel lawmakers and graffiti on the home of Israeli-born psychic Uri Geller.

The home of David Triesman, a former general secretary of Britain's Labor Party, was attacked by the neo-Nazi group Combat 18 so regularly that police advised him to build a 10-foot-high fence around his home, London's Daily Telegraph newspaper reported.

But the local council ordered him to take the fence down be-

cause it violated planning guidelines.

Triesman, had his windows broken and swastikas painted on his walls a dozen times in 14 months.

"When a group like Combat 18 sprays swastikas and slogans on your walls, it's evident what it's all about," he told the Telegraph. "It has been a really bad time, horrendous, and no one should have to go through that," he said, noting that his family had been home during some of the attacks.

The monitoring group said there is a clear link between anti-Semitic incidents and Middle East events — even when Israel is not directly involved.

In March 2003, the month the Iraq war began, the trust recorded 48 anti-Semitic incidents.

That was more than twice the average number of incidents in March during the preceding seven years. The vast majority took place after the summit between President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the Azores Islands, when it became clear that war was inevitable.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

New bill to foster U.S.-Israeli cooperation

A new bill would provide \$25 million for joint U.S.-Israeli cooperation on homeland security.

The United States-Israel Homeland Security Foundation Act, introduced Tuesday by Reps. Jim Turner (D-Texas) and Curt Weldon (R-Pa.), would fund research and development of new homeland security products by U.S. and Israeli companies.

Abramoff quits amid lobbying allegations

Jack Abramoff, a top Republican lobbyist and a major Jewish giver, resigned from his firm due to an investigation into alleged malfeasance. U.S. Senators called for a probe after a Washington Post report said Abramoff had taken \$15 million in lobbying fees from Indian tribes in recent years.

One of the tribes is alleging malfeasance, according to a report that was slated to appear in Wednesday's edition of Roll Call, a Capitol Hill newspaper. Abramoff's law firm, the Miami-based Greenberg Traurig, announced its own investigation and was quoted by Roll Call as saying in a statement that Abramoff "disclosed to the firm for the first time personal transactions and related conduct which are unacceptable to the firm."

Abramoff owns Stacks, a kosher restaurant in downtown Washington, and has given to a number of Jewish causes.

Lantos moves on in race

Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) easily fended off two primary challengers to his congressional seat. The five Jewish members of Congress from Los Angeles County, Democrats Brad Sherman, Howard Berman, Adam Schiff, Henry Waxman and Jane Harman, all won their primaries too.

Lantos, a longtime legislator and a Holocaust survivor, won 73 percent of the vote in California's 12th District on Tuesday.

Justice Dept. looks into religious zoning

The U.S. Justice Dept. is investigating whether a Florida city discriminated against Chabad-Lubavitch. The probe comes after the city commission in Hollywood, Fla., ruled that Chabad could not worship in a residential neighborhood. Federal investigators plan to meet with both sides on March 24 in a dispute that began in 2000.

Love for the Jews?

A pastor in Denver apologized for a roadside sign saying Jews killed Jesus.

The Rev. Maurice Gordon's new sign reads, "I am deeply sorry for offending the Jewish people, whom I love." The earlier message was inspired by Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," Gordon said. Gordon also caused controversy when he said Tuesday that Jews need to forgive Germans for the Holocaust.

Purim for IDF

The American Zionist Movement is sending Purim baskets to Israeli soldiers.

The group will send Purim gift baskets to 2,500 IDF soldiers, many of whom serve in front-line combat units. In coordination with the Jewish Agency for Israel, the gifts will also reach Israeli children orphaned in terrorist attacks. The gifts came from donors whose name, city and message will be included in the package.

The packages are being prepared by members of Zionist youth movements and American Jewish students in Israel. The National Council of Young Israel sent hundreds of Purim treats, along with lip balm and hand sanitizer, to U.S. Jewish soldiers in Iraq.

MIDDLE EAST

Settlers arrested

Eleven Jewish settlers were arrested for attacking Palestinian farmers. Israeli police said the arrests took place on Wednesday after they were summoned to Havat Maon, a settlement near Hebron, by Palestinian farmers who said they had been fired upon and physically harassed by the settlers.

West Bank sweep

Israeli troops killed a Palestinian terrorist in a West Bank sweep. Witnesses described the man shot dead in the Tulkarm refugee camp Wednesday as a member of the Al-Aksa Brigade.

Fashion shoot at the fence

Israel's West Bank security barrier was the site of a fashion shoot. The Comme-il-faut company did the shoot Wednesday to shock the 15,000 readers of the feminist fashion house's summer catalog. "We are doing something to show that we have to have peace," said one model with an ornate bouffant, as Palestinian women in ankle-length smocks and Islamic headdresses shuffled by behind.

'Lionesses' raid Knesset bread

Anti-poverty activists raided a cafeteria in Israel's Knesset.

A group of women hailing from low-income neighborhoods and calling themselves the Lionesses came to Israel's parliament to lobby for a boycott of bakeries in response to a recent hike in bread prices.

Descending on the cafeteria, they snatched sandwiches, chanting, "Bibi will pay for it; put it on Bibi's tab" — a reference to Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose austerity measures have outraged Israel's poor. Security guards removed the women from the Knesset, and one of them was taken for questioning by police.

Not child's play

An Israeli military court convicted three would-be terrorists, ages 12, 13 and 15.

The three boys from a Palestinian village near Nablus were found guilty Wednesday of belonging to Islamic Jihad and planning an attack on the nearby Israeli city of Afula. They were arrested last week while preparing homemade guns.

Palestinian security officials dismissed the boys as "pranksters." Military officials said the army was checking options for incarcerating the three; their convictions carry possible prison sentences of 10 years.

WORLD

Lithuania lauded on restitution

The American Jewish Committee is praising Lithuania for what it calls its willingness to address restitution of Jewish communal properties.

The group praised the country's president, Algirdas Brazauskas, for asking for a list of more than 1,600 properties in the Baltic state. The list was compiled by researchers representing a consortium of Jewish groups in the matter.

Germany blocks anti-synagogue protest

A German court banned right-wing extremists from protesting the construction of a new synagogue.

The court in Muenster said the National Democratic Party of Germany could not demonstrate against plans to build a synagogue in Bochum, whose last synagogue was destroyed by Nazi arsonists during the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938.