

IN THE NEWS

Israeli-Palestinian summit is possible

The Israeli and Palestinian Authority prime ministers may hold their first meeting next week.

The location of the meeting between Ariel Sharon and Ahmed Qurei, slated for Tuesday, was not immediately clear.

Israeli officials said Wednesday that Sharon hopes the summit will ease U.S. concerns about the diplomatic deadlock between Israel and the Palestinians ahead of Sharon's upcoming trip to Washington.

Israel's plan to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza also may be discussed. Two senior U.S. envoys are due in Israel on Thursday for high-level briefings.

Five killed in West Bank

Israeli soldiers killed five Palestinian gunmen in the West Bank. Wednesday's deaths came during a military operation in Jenin.

The five men killed were members of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

Powell: Fayyad is 'outstanding'

The Palestinian Authority's finance minister has done an "outstanding" job creating transparency, Colin Powell said.

The U.S. secretary of state described his recent meeting with Salam Fayyad when he appeared Wednesday before the House Appropriations subcommittee that pays for foreign operations.

"He has done an outstanding job in getting greater and greater control over finances that are flowing to the Palestinian Authority, and done it in a solid, honest, reliable way," Powell said.

The United States had problems with Israel's raids on Palestinian banks last month because some of those banks were owned in part by U.S. allies, Powell said. Israel seized money that it said was being used to finance terrorism.

WORLD REPORT

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U.S., Israel find that details of Gaza withdrawal take time

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — It has become "my-place-or-yours" diplomacy.

A group of three top U.S. Middle East advisers was to return to Israel this week to discuss Israel's plans for withdrawing from the Gaza Strip and possibly parts of the West Bank. A week ago, Israeli advisers were in Washington. Two weeks before that, the Americans were in Jerusalem.

On Thursday, Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz is due in Washington, where he is to discuss the withdrawal plan with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell and President Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice.

Underlying all the back-and-forth is U.S. frustration with a lack of clear Israeli ideas on how the withdrawal will take shape without Palestinian cooperation.

"We're not even sure if the Israelis are clear about what they want," one American official said ahead of the visit to Israel by Steven Hadley, Bush's deputy national security adviser; Elliott Abrams, his top Middle East adviser; and William Burns, the top State Department envoy to the region.

U.S. Jewish officials say Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's vagueness about his withdrawal proposal is at the heart of the confusion. Giora Eiland, Sharon's national security adviser, is eager to push ahead with a plan, they say, but Sharon is hanging back for now.

Why Sharon is playing his cards so close to his chest is anyone's guess.

"Everyone gives you different informa-

tion," said Steven Spiegel, a scholar at the Israel Policy Forum, a group that backs U.S. prodding of Middle East parties to get back to the peace table. "A lot of people are scratching their heads."

Representatives of the four bodies behind the "road map" peace plan — the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia — planned to meet in Washington on Wednesday.

Powell has joined his European counterparts in calling on the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers to meet as soon as possible. He also wants Israel to explain its withdrawal plans.

"There are many other questions that we want to pose to our Israeli colleagues to make sure we have a good understanding of their plans for Gaza, and plans for the West

Bank as well," Powell said Tuesday after meeting with Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher.

Powell and Muasher had discussed the Sharon proposal but wanted more details.

"I think that if this is done in the context of the road map, if this is done in coordination with the Palestinians, then this might present an opportunity," Muasher said.

"But it is important before we pass final judgment to talk to the Israelis and understand exactly what their intentions are regarding this issue."

When the Americans initially embraced Sharon's proposal for unilateral withdrawal last month, each side suggested it would take no time to get it into shape.

It simply was a matter of a U.S. mission to Israel, an Israeli visit to Washington and

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then Bush and Sharon would wrap it up at a summit.

However, this week's round is at least the fourth such visit, and the Sharon-Bush summit — originally set for sometime this week — has been bumped at least until next month.

Reports in Israeli newspapers quote unnamed Israeli security officials as saying that the Bush administration is behind the delay, worried that a withdrawal could precipitate violence and adversely affect Bush's re-election chances in November.

"They're doing what they can to keep a lid on, maybe because they feel that doing something now is likely to lead to instability," Spiegel said. "If the administration wanted more, they'd be more active, they'd have someone on the scene day after day working with Eiland."

U.S. and Israeli officials insist the November elections have not played a role in delaying the presentation of a plan. U.S. officials have gone out of their way to praise the proposal as one that could entice the Palestinians to crack down on terrorism and rejoin the broader U.S.-led "road map" peace plan.

In the next few weeks, State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said, "What you can expect is continuing engagement by the United States with both parties to really help facilitate progress."

The White House's National Security Council issued a rare on-the-record endorsement of the Sharon proposal.

"The prime minister's ideas are prom-

ising and the discussions are very useful to examine the details and many ramifications," NSC spokesman Shawn McCormack told JTA. "The prime minister's proposals have the potential to be historic. We are all working within the framework of the road map and the vision outlined by President Bush."

U.S. officials say details of the pullout have been more daunting than U.S. and Israeli negotiators originally realized. They harken back to Israel's last unilateral withdrawal, from southern Lebanon in May 2000.

Israel negotiated that move with the United Nations, getting U.N. approval for the exact contours of the withdrawal. Even so, Hezbollah seized on the unresolved status of the Shebaa Farms, a tiny patch of land in the Golan foothills that Israel captured from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War, as a pretext to keep attacking Israel.

The lesson: If a crucial party has absented itself from the table, make sure everything is wrapped up tightly enough that provocateurs can't reignite a conflict.

"They're making sure a lot of details are sorted out so as not to end up with another Shebaa Farms-type of thing," another administration official said. "They're making progress, but a lot more remains to be done."

Another factor might be Israel's failure to anticipate the degree to which the Palestinian Authority lacks control in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas, the Al-Aksa Brigade and other terrorist groups have asserted control in some of the main refugee camps in the center of the strip.

Avi Dichter, head of Israel's Shin Bet security service, was in Washington this week, where he said that a withdrawal now was not likely to end terrorism, according to reports in Israeli newspapers.

Bush administration officials say another factor has been Sharon's attempt to work a tradeoff into any withdrawal: Gaza for parts of the West Bank. Israel wants U.S. recognition of its permanent control over Ma'aleh Adumim, Ariel and the Gush Etzion settlement bloc — areas the Palestinians effectively ceded in 2000-2001 peace talks.

Sharon might need such a tradeoff to sell the package to hard-liners in his Cabinet — support he is seeking this week. But he's unlikely to get administration backing for such a trade, the Americans say, because the idea is to get the Palestinians back to the table, not give them an excuse to keep away.

Israel also is seeking Egyptian agreement to secure the Gaza-Egypt border once Israel leaves. The border is a main route for Palestinians to smuggle weapons into the Gaza Strip.

Nabil Fahmy, Egypt's ambassador to Washington, told JTA that Egypt would withhold a decision until it was certain Israel's actions were designed to lead to the resumption of peace talks.

"We need to understand the details as far of the package and as far as the proposal," he said. "We're not aware of the full details of the position because much of it has not been resolved in Israel itself."

In any case, he said, "It has to be in the context of resolving the conflict on the basis of a two-state solution and ending the occupation."

'The prime minister's proposals have the potential to be historic.'

Shawn McCormack

U.S. National Security Council

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Senate bill: Trade for peace

NEW YORK (JTA) — A bill under consideration in the U.S. Senate would award free trade provisions to Middle Eastern countries that support Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Introduced by Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Max Baucus (D-Mont.), the bill would award trade preferences to nations

that support the war on terrorism and economic reform. It would also grant the preferences to those supporting peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

A Senate Finance Committee hearing on trade with the Middle East considered the bill Wednesday along with other economic incentives to spur peace in the region.

Palestinians challenge Israel's U.N. credentials

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — An old tradition is being revived at the United Nations: challenging Israel's credentials.

The Palestinians' U.N. representative, Nasser Al-Kidwa, plans to introduce a U.N. General Assembly resolution later this month that would limit Israel's U.N. credentials to its pre-1967 borders and give Palestinians the right to represent the West Bank, Gaza Strip and eastern Jerusalem.

"We uncovered this scheme about a week ago," said Arye Mekel, Israel's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations. "This is another effort by the Palestinians, part of their ongoing campaign against the state of Israel."

Challenging Israel's U.N. credentials was common practice in pre-Oslo days but resurfaced recently only in a failed attempt last year.

Palestinians introduced the resolution in December but decided against bringing it to a vote due to weak support.

The move comes as the International Court of Justice at The Hague ponders the legality of Israel's West Bank security barrier.

It also comes as Israel awaits its next trial: the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which opens a six-week session in Geneva on March 15.

"Once again, the Palestinians will lead in using the commission to flog Israel," said the American Jewish Committee's executive director, David Harris, summarizing his recent meetings with key U.N. ambassadors in Geneva.

The commission typically devotes one agenda item to Israel and another to the rest of the world. It generally passes a host of resolutions accusing Israel of human rights violations, ranging from extrajudicial killings to impairing Palestinians' economic rights and freedom of movement.

But this year's meeting of the commission may be "business as usual, and then some," Harris said — with an additional session possible on Israel's security fence.

Still, Harris noted that the commission chairman, Australia's U.N. ambassador, Mike Smith, is a "refreshing change" from last year's chair. Najat al-Hajaji, Libya's U.N. ambassador, chaired the 2003 forum, where she did not condemn Palestinian rhetoric comparing Zionism to Nazism.

In the meantime, Israel is hoping to stave off renewed attacks on its credentials.

In diplomatic meetings, the Jewish state argues against mixing technical issues with substantive ones, which could open the floodgates for countries with border disputes.

So far, Israel is getting a "fair and good hearing," Mekel said. Most countries view the Palestinian move as crossing a red line, he said.

The Palestinians' Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations did not return JTA's phone calls.

Amy Goldstein, director of U.N. affairs at B'nai B'rith International, said the move underscores a Palestinian strategy to circumvent the peace process and challenge Israel's very existence.

"The Palestinians are trying to get the U.N. to confer legitimacy to them as a state without going through a negotiated process," she said.

For example, she said, the Palestinians at the International Court of Justice argued for sanctions on Israel like those imposed on apartheid-era South Africa, which ultimately led to regime change.

"The Palestinians are doing this in order to achieve a regime change in Israel from a Jewish democratic government to a Palestinian government," she said.

The move must be countered quickly, Harris said.

Al-Kidwa "can't be ignored because he pretty much has the Arab bloc in the palm of his hand," Harris said. "He usually can deliver the 22 Arab League members — and that, of course, triggers the process that leads to the automatic majority too often."

Abu Abbas, hijacker of Achille Lauro, dies in Baghdad

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Even in death, Mohammed Abu Abbas' journey is fraught with uncertainty.

A day after Abbas died in U.S. custody in Baghdad, the Palestinian Authority asked U.S. officials to deliver the terrorist's body from Iraq to Ramallah. The United States is considering the matter.

The 55-year-old leader of the Palestinian Liberation Front was notorious for masterminding an ocean-liner hijacking in 1985 that ended in the murder of an elderly American Jew and brought notoriety to the Palestinian cause.

Israel, which might be asked to help facilitate a body transfer, clearly would be happier if the leader of the Iraqi-backed Palestinian Liberation Front were to remain in Iraqi soil.

"It's poetic justice," Ra'anah Gissin, a top aide to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, told Reuters on Wednesday. "He started as a terrorist in Iraq, he was brought to justice in an Iraqi prison under U.S. control and he'll be buried in Iraq."

Abbas' death buried the opportunity to put him on trial as an

example to those who use terrorism as a political tool. Captured by U.S. forces in Baghdad last April, whatever testimony Abbas gave about Saddam Hussein's role in funneling money to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers remains shrouded in secrecy for now.

U.S. military officials said Abbas died of natural causes.

Various governments had sought to try Abbas over the years for his role in masterminding the 1985 hijacking of the Italian-owned Achille Lauro.

But no one yearned for justice more than Leon Klinghoffer's family. Four terrorists from Abbas' group hijacked the cruise ship off the Egyptian coast and shot the wheelchair-bound Klinghoffer, 69, in the head and chest as his wife Marilyn watched. They then dumped his body overboard.

Klinghoffer's family had pressed U.S. authorities to extradite Abbas to U.S. soil to be tried for their father's murder.

"Now, with his death, justice will be denied," Klinghoffer's daughters, Ilsa and Lisa, said in a statement released through the Anti-Defamation League. "The one consolation for us is that Abu Abbas died in captivity, not as a free man."

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

No Jews? Then, no Saudis

New legislation in the U.S. Congress asks Saudi Arabia to clarify its position on tourist visas for Jews.

Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) introduced legislation Wednesday that would bar Saudi citizens from receiving tourist visas for the United States until the Saudis clarify whether U.S. Jews can seek tourist visas to Saudi Arabia.

The move comes after a Saudi tourism Web site suggested last month that Jews were barred from receiving visas to the kingdom under new policies. The Saudi Embassy claimed the information on the Web site was a mistake.

"We know they recognized the P.R. problem posed by their Web site; the question is whether they recognize the moral problem posed by their policy, and have moved to correct it," Weiner said.

Santorum pushing for vote

Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) is pushing the Senate to hold a vote on the Workplace Religious Freedom Act.

Santorum told reporters Tuesday that he would like to add the bill, which allows employees to wear religious garb and take time off for religious practices, as an amendment to a spending bill being considered later this year.

Such a move would ensure a vote on the bill. Santorum said he believes it's important to send a message that contrasts with France's move to ban religious garb from public schools.

ONAD passes resolution

A United Jewish Communities committee approved a resolution Wednesday aimed at increasing overseas funding.

The Overseas Needs Assessment and Distribution Committee passed the resolution with only one opposing vote on a conference call.

The group decided to maintain the federation system's 75-25 split in allocations between the Jewish Agency for Israel and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, respectively. The resolution also calls for an additional \$14 million to be split evenly between the Jewish Agency and the JDC.

The committee also decided to ask local federations to increase their overseas funding by at least the same percentage as their annual fund-raising campaigns have grown. The resolution, which still must be approved by UJC's board of trustees, comes after a controversial December resolution that would have diminished federations' discretionary spending.

Camping for dollars

High-school students can witness Wall Street up close and personal this summer at Camp Wall Street.

Students entering grades 10-12 in September 2004 will visit a stock exchange and hear from young finance experts who are active in the Jewish community. In two sessions — Aug. 1-13 and Aug. 15-27 — the program aims to give teens an understanding of investing and long-term financial planning, and also of maintaining Jewish values.

MIDDLE EAST

Sharon plan still backed

A plan to evacuate Gaza Strip settlements has lost some support among Israelis, a poll says. The 60 percent support seen in the Tel Aviv University survey released Wednesday followed 80 percent support when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon first announced his

"disengagement plan" in December. Experts said the drop was due to Israeli fears that the move could bolster terrorist groups in Gaza. Twenty-eight percent of respondents opposed the plan and the rest were undecided. According to the poll, most Israelis also support the West Bank security barrier and want some West Bank settlement blocs to remain under Israeli control.

Unsettling model airplane

Israel recently foiled a terrorist plot to slam a radio-controlled model airplane loaded with explosives into Jewish communities in the Gaza Strip. The Shin Bet said Wednesday it had arrested a Palestinian who confessed to planning the attack on instructions from Hezbollah. The Palestinian said he joined the Lebanese militia after seeing a recruitment ad on its satellite television channel Al-Manar.

Israelis help Aborigines

Israeli experts are helping to develop an educational program for Aborigine youth in Australia. Scholars from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem recently visited three Aborigine communities to help develop the program, which will enable Aborigine children to join mainstream Australian society.

WORLD

OSCE taps Hungarian Jew

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe announced that a Hungarian Jewish writer will be its representative for media freedom. After Tuesday's announcement, Miklos Haraszti will observe media developments in OSCE-participating nations and promote full compliance with OSCE principles regarding freedom of expression and free media. A former Communist-era dissident, Haraszti was born in 1945 in Jerusalem and in the 1980s edited the underground Hungarian periodical *Beszelo*. After the fall of communism, he served as a member of the Hungarian Parliament.

Jews for Jesus ad to stay

Britain's Advertising Standards Authority again rejected a complaint by Jewish groups against a Jews for Jesus ad campaign. Posters and newspaper ads showed a group of Orthodox Jews at the Western Wall, one wearing a Jews for Jesus T-shirt over the slogan, "Think for yourself."

The watchdog group agreed that the campaign "had offended many Jews by apparently mocking Orthodox Jews as mindlessly following their faith."

But the group ruled that "the advertisements were not racist and were likely to be regarded by other Jews and by non-Jews as conveying a thought-provoking message in a light-hearted manner."

Riding for Reform

Some 20 cyclists will ride 225 miles in Israel to benefit Reform Jewish education around the world. The riders, some from North America and some from Israel, will bike from Nahariya, on Israel's northern coast, to Jerusalem starting March 21.

Conservatives in Latin America to meet

Latin America's Conservative Jewish leaders will meet in Buenos Aires. Rabbis, lay leaders and other representatives will gather in Buenos Aires on Sunday and Monday for the Latin American Masorti/MERCAZ Conference.

The Jewish leaders, joined by a delegation of Masorti Olami board members from North America, are expected to create a Latin American Council of Masorti, or Conservative, congregations that will set an agenda for the group.