

IN THE NEWS

Rice asks Weisglass about plan for Gaza

Condoleezza Rice met with an Israeli adviser to Ariel Sharon to discuss the political prospects of Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan.

President Bush's national security adviser met Tuesday with Dov Weisglass, who assured her that Sharon still backed the plan even though it was rejected by the Likud Party's membership in a referendum last month.

Bush pushes his faith-based initiative

President Bush expanded his faith-based initiative program and called on Congress to pass new legislation.

Speaking Tuesday at the first White House National Conference on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, Bush announced that \$1.1 billion had been given to faith-based groups for charitable services. He asked conference participants to lobby Congress for money for several programs.

The faith-based initiative, which gives federal funds to community service programs run by religious groups, is opposed by Jewish organizations that view it as a violation of the separation between church and state. The program is backed by many Orthodox Jews, who were represented at the conference.

Religious streams back 'road map' plan

Leaders of several Jewish movements pressed Colin Powell to get the United States more involved in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Leaders of the U.S. Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative movements joined Christian and Muslim leaders in a meeting with the U.S. secretary of state on Tuesday.

They asked the Bush administration to appoint a new envoy to the region and work with Israelis and Palestinians along the lines of the U.S.-backed "road map" peace plan.

WORLD REPORT

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With Labor still seeking a leader, Barak begins to plot a comeback

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With the Likud Party threatening to tear itself apart over Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan and pundits predicting new elections, new coalitions and even new political alignments, this should be a field day for the opposition Labor Party.

But the chaos in Likud is highlighting Labor's biggest problem: The lack of a credible candidate for prime minister.

As buoyant Labor supporters left a huge mid-May demonstration in Tel Aviv in favor of withdrawing from the Gaza Strip, the same refrain could be heard over and over: "We have flexed our political muscle," Labor people said, "but who is there that can lead us back to power?"

Labor's caretaker leader, Shimon Peres, will turn 81 in August and generally is considered too old to be prime minister. None of the luminaries around him seems an obvious choice to lead the party.

That could set the stage for the re-emergence of former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Despite what is seen as Barak's colossal failure as prime minister from 1999 to 2001, and his subsequent retirement from politics, Labor's leadership vacuum has led Barak to consider a political comeback.

But it won't be easy: There is a groundswell of resentment against Barak in the party and in the general public. His chances also depend on political developments over the next few weeks and months.

Still, more and more Labor supporters are saying that Barak at least showed leadership in office — and, they add, there's no one else.

"You'll come back," Knesset member Eitan Cabel reportedly told Barak, "not because you were so great, but because there is a leadership drought."

Barak has been toying with the comeback idea for several months. After losing by a landslide to Sharon in the February 2001 elections, he took what he described as a "time-out" from politics, intimating that he would be back.

Last October, Barak declared that he would "announce his plans after the High Holidays." At the time, conditions for a dramatic return seemed good: The peace process was stymied by the collapse of Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas' government, and Sharon seemed uncertain where to go next.

Barak proposed unilateral disengagement and withdrawal behind a security fence, with a plan for peacemaking with the Palestinians when they were ready.

That might have been an excellent ticket for a comeback — but, at much the same time, Sharon and his deputy, Ehud Olmert, came out with a disengagement plan of their own.

Barak suffered a second setback in early February when Labor voted to extend Peres' temporary chairmanship to December 2005, rather than hold a new leadership race in June 2004.

Nevertheless, in mid-May, as Sharon again seemed to be running into political trouble, Barak met with a group of loyalists and told them his return to politics was "only a matter of timing."

The political correspondent for the Ha'aretz newspaper, Yossi Verter, reported

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that Barak argued that all those who had tried to lead the party after him — Avraham Burg, Binyamin Ben Eliezer, Amram Mitzna and Haim Ramon — had failed, that Peres was too old and that, in the end, Labor would turn to him.

Barak reportedly told his supporters that he would win back disaffected left-wingers through a public relations blitz and would build a support group for his leadership campaign outside the party, similar to the Aleph, Aleph, Aleph group that built support for Barak's successful prime ministerial run against Benjamin Netanyahu in May 1999.

Indeed, Barak predicts that the next election for prime minister will again pit him against Netanyahu, and he is convinced he can win again.

Barak's aspirations could have been cut short by allegations of impropriety in his 1999 election financing and claims that, as prime minister, he bore ultimate responsibility for police excesses that led to the death of 13 Israeli Arabs during pro-Palestinian riots in October 2000. In both cases, however, he was cleared of any wrongdoing.

Still, Barak faces an uphill struggle.

Many blame him for mismanaging negotiations with the Syrians and Palestinians as prime minister, alienating Israeli Arabs and bringing the Labor Party to its lowest ebb.

Separation from his popular wife Nava, the building and selling of an ostentatious home and his highflying

moneymaking ventures since leaving office have further alienated him from his potential electorate.

Unlike Netanyahu — who also took a brief break from politics but later returned as a major player in the Likud, though not yet as party leader — Barak does not have a strong party base.

Many Labor colleagues accuse Barak of arrogance and bear personal grievances against him. Party heavyweights like Burg, Peres and Ramon have vowed to do all they can to block Barak's return.

Ramon has gone on record as saying that if Barak does try to come back Ramon would destroy him politically. Even former supporters like Matan Vilnai and Ephraim Sneh now see themselves as leadership candidates, and have no interest in backing Barak.

Some Labor aspirants suspect Peres of maneuvering to further extend his term as interim party leader. They believe Labor's late May merger with the One Nation Party of Amir Peretz, secretary general of the Histadrut labor union federation, was another Peres ploy to remain at Labor's helm.

They suspect that Peres plans to use

One Nation's votes in the party's Central Committee to hang onto power until the next elections, and then return the favor by helping Peretz succeed him as leader.

Much will depend on political developments, of course. If Peres joins a Sharon-led coalition that withdraws Israeli settlements and troops from Gaza,

there would be little point in Barak making a comeback. The same is true if Sharon, Peres and Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, leader of the centrist Shinui Party, form a coalition to run in early elections.

But if Sharon stumbles on, or if Netanyahu takes over and fails to take the process with the Palestinians forward, conditions would be ideal for Barak to return as a potential national savior.

There seems little doubt that Barak wants to make a political comeback, but he would have to pick his moment very carefully to succeed.

Given the antipathy toward him in Labor and the fast-moving political events, that moment may not come — and Labor may have to find another solution for its leadership vacuum.

(Leslie Susser is the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Report.)

Some suspect Shimon Peres of doing all he can to cling to the Labor Party's mantle.

L.A. Holocaust museum fights for life

By TOM TUGEND

LOS ANGELES (JTA) — A Holocaust museum here is fighting for its survival.

The Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, dubbed "The Wandering Jew" of the Jewish community by one survivor, has lost one rented home and found interim shelter in another, but a permanent home of its own yet remains beyond its reach.

The museum faces tough odds. It is not far from another Holocaust museum of sorts, the high-profile Simon Wiesenthal Center-Museum of Tolerance; it is losing financial backing from the local Jewish federation, and it is experiencing declining involvement by the Holocaust survivors who founded it.

There are some hopeful signs. The museum's executive director, Rachel Jagoda,

recently received a \$100,000 check from the Annenberg Foundation and smaller sums from three other foundations and a German bank. Best of all, a Holocaust survivor who asked to remain anonymous made a \$3 million pledge as the building block for a permanent museum.

It is the dream of Jagoda and the museum's chairman, Gary Schiller, that the structure might rise on city-owned land in Pan Pacific Park, next to the Los Angeles Holocaust Monument. Schiller pins some of his hopes for funding on the Hollywood community, with whom he is planning a major fund-raiser.

For the time being, the museum will take over the street floor of the ORT Building next to the federation headquarters, and will reopen this summer.

"We reach out to parts of Los Angeles nobody else reaches," Schiller said.

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E.U. debates Christian reference in constitution

By PHILIP CARMEL

PARIS (JTA) — Faith may have the ability to move mountains, but it's not clear if it will be able to budge politicians.

With a deadline approaching to set the E.U. Constitution, a number of staunchly Christian European states are making one last attempt to insert a reference to Christianity.

In a May 21 letter to the E.U.'s Irish presidency, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, the Czech Republic and Slovakia wrote that recognition of the Christian roots of Europe "remains a priority for our governments as well as for millions of European citizens. We therefore propose to pay further attention to a reference to the Christian roots of Europe in the existing text of the preamble."

Ireland also favors including a reference to Christianity in the constitution, while Greece and Slovenia have said they would welcome the idea.

The proposal also is backed by European Commission President Romano Prodi — and, not surprisingly, by the Vatican, which is not an E.U. member.

The new moves are a source of concern for Jewish leaders, who note the failure last year of an attempt to insert a reference to the "Judaean-Christian" nature of European history by the center-right Christian Democrat grouping in the European Parliament.

The need for agreement on the constitution is especially pressing given the European summit — set for June 16 and 17 in Brussels — that is supposed to finalize the document.

In the initial draft to the constitution's preamble — prepared by former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing last year after months of discussion — the text included a reference to the "cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe," but omitted Christianity and God.

The draft proved problematic for many Catholic countries in the union, which at the time had only 15 members. Since another 10 countries joined the union May 1 — including traditionally Catholic countries from the former Soviet bloc — opposition has grown to the secular character of Giscard's constitution.

Italy and Poland have been the principal instigators in recent moves to include

a Christian reference.

In its own national constitution, Poland refers to "both those who believe in God as the source of truth, justice, good and beauty, as well as those not sharing such faith but respecting those universal values from other sources."

Such pressure from the new states has worried the largely Protestant states of northern Europe, as well as those with rigidly secularist traditions such as France and Belgium.

One of the first to come out strongly against a Christian reference was Britain.

"If we were to go down the road of making specific references to one religious tradition, we have to bear in mind other specific religions and references to them as well," British Foreign Minister Jack Straw said at a recent meeting of E.U. foreign ministers.

Roger Cukierman, vice president of the European Jewish Congress and head of the CRIF umbrella organization of French Jewry, said Jews would "prefer no reference to religion at all, particularly if what was on offer ignored the Jewish contribution to European civilization."

"Jews have traditionally been strong supporters of the secular state," Cukierman told JTA. But even in Cukierman's France — which has the continent's largest Jewish community, but is perhaps the strongest bastion of European secularism — once-total opposition to a religious reference appears to be breaking down.

Meeting last week in Dublin with his Irish counterpart Bertie Ahern, Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said France was "not hostile" to an inclusion of Chris-

tian references in the preamble — even if, he said, the current text appeared "reasonable and balanced."

"I understand both points of view. Now we have to find a compromise," Ahern reportedly said.

France's wavering probably owes more to political concerns than to a sudden surge of Christian faith.

With elections to the European Parliament set for mid-June, center-right parties such as Raffarin's are aware of the threat from parties that push a strongly traditionalist, and sometimes extremist, perspective on the new Europe.

Spain's recent change of government has pushed it into the secular camp, but other European governments increasingly are worried by far-right parties utilizing Europe's Christian heritage to gain votes in the upcoming elections.

In France, in particular, much of that threat comes from Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front. But the governing UMP Party also faces a challenge from two "sovereignist" lists that call for slowing down European integration.

All those parties also have rigorously opposed plans that envision adding Turkey to a future E.U. A principal plank of their opposition has been Turkey's non-Christian character.

The Vatican also has not given up on providing a Christian reference in the constitution.

Welcoming the entry of the 10 new countries to the union on May 1, Pope John Paul II said that "Europe should conserve and re-discover its Christian roots in order to be prepared for the great challenges of the Third Millennium." ■

Poll: Sharon still enjoys Likud support

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Ariel Sharon still enjoys majority support in Israel's ruling Likud Party, despite infighting, a poll found.

According to a survey published Tuesday in Israel's daily *Ma'ariv*, 61 percent of Likud members would vote for the Israeli prime minister if a party primary were held today, while only 25 percent would back his main rival, Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu has been leading opposition in Likud and the Cabinet to Sharon's plan

for disengagement from the Palestinians.

The Likud membership rejected the plan in a May 2 referendum, but Sharon's supporters believe he still can get government approval for it.

Among the general Israeli population, 55 percent support Sharon's positions over Netanyahu's, which won 32 percent in the *Ma'ariv* poll.

"The findings show that we are talking about a step that the vast majority of the public supports," Cabinet minister Ehud Olmert told Army Radio. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Would-be embassy bomber jailed

An Australian recruited by Al-Qaida was jailed for planning to bomb the country's Israeli Embassy.

An Australian court sentenced Jack Roche, 50, to nine years in jail on Tuesday after he confessed to the plot. Roche, a British-born Muslim convert, joined Osama bin Laden's group during a 2000 trip to Afghanistan.

Jews close Vilnius synagogue

The only synagogue in Vilnius has been closed since last week as a result of an internecine dispute.

The synagogue in the Lithuanian capital, which celebrated its 100th anniversary last September, was closed by Simonas Alperavičius, the community president, because of a dispute over the post of chief rabbi of Lithuania's small Jewish community.

The decision was made last week after fist-fighting broke out in the synagogue between two groups of worshipers who wanted to have the other's rabbi removed from the shul. Community members said it is the first time since the Holocaust that the synagogue has been closed.

Anti-Israel NGO blasted

A German diplomat threatened a non-profit group with sanctions for what he called anti-Semitic activity.

At a May 28 meeting of the United Nations' Economic and Social Council's Committee on Nongovernmental Organizations, the German delegate harshly criticized one organization that had denigrated Zionism as racism in the run-up to the 2001 U.N. World Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa.

If the Organization for the Solidarity of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America continued to engage in "anti-Semitic activities," the German delegate said, he would insist that sanctions be imposed on the group, according to Elan Steinberg, executive vice president of the World Jewish Congress.

UNRWA wants funds for Palestinians

The U.N. Relief and Works Agency is asking for \$16 million for Palestinians.

The agency launched an appeal to the international community today for nearly \$16 million for the people of Rafah after Israeli incursions there. UNRWA is asking for funds to feed those taking shelter in its schools, provide medical equipment to injured refugees and repair damaged infrastructure.

Friends in need

Israel's Magen David Adom emergency relief service signed a cooperation agreement with the French Red Cross.

The Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem said Tuesday that the deal, signed in Paris over the weekend, was aimed at enhancing medical and emergency services on both sides, as well as Franco-Israeli relations. Magen David Adom entered a similar pact with the American Red Cross Society in 2002.

NORTH AMERICA

Groups back overturn of abortion ban

Several Jewish groups welcomed a judge's decision overturning a ban on late-term abortions.

The decision Tuesday by U.S. District Judge Phyllis Hamilton applies to 900 Planned Parenthood clinics, where half of all abortions in the United States are performed.

"It's a victory for women's health and privacy rights," said Sammie Moshenberg, director of the Washington office of the National Council of Jewish Women.

Mark Pelavin, the associate director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center, said he expected the ban, signed into law last year by President Bush, to be ruled unconstitutional. Pelavin's group opposes the ban.

Two similar cases are pending in Nebraska and New York.

Columbia eyes Israel studies

Columbia University is hoping to fund a professorship in Israel studies.

The move to raise an estimated \$2 million to \$4 million endowment could allay criticism that the New York City campus has become a center of anti-Israel activity, the New York Sun said.

NYC water not kosher?

Some Orthodox rabbis in New York City are saying city water isn't kosher.

The water issue filtered down after copepods, tiny crustaceans, were found in the water, The New York Times reported. Crustaceans are not kosher.

MIDDLE EAST

Citizens back Mideast peace

Three-quarters of Israelis and Palestinians backed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a grass-roots voting initiative.

A group of Israelis and Palestinians called OneVoice said nearly 76 percent of more than 20,000 Israelis and 25,000 Palestinians polled backed a proposal for "two viable states" for Israelis and Palestinians as a key to peace.

The results came after the voters chose on a sliding scale of importance from a series of proposals put to both sides.

The issues that sparked the most division were settlements, refugees, borders and Jerusalem.

Route of Israel's barrier protested

Some Jewish and Arab residents of Jerusalem are protesting the route of Israel's West Bank security barrier.

A petition by the residents said the fence's planned route will cut off the village of Jabel Mukaber from the village of Sheik Sa'ad, separating families and preventing residents of the latter village from getting to school or work in Jerusalem.

Arafat to stay put

Israel said it would turn down an Egyptian request to move Yasser Arafat to the Gaza Strip.

Ha'aretz reported Tuesday that Egypt, which has offered to help Prime Minister Ariel Sharon carry out his pledged pullout of Gaza, wants the Palestinian Authority president installed there as a figurehead leader to forestall an Islamist takeover.

Sticks and stones

An Israeli human rights group called for a ban on public proposals to expel the country's Arab citizens.

The Mossawa Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel accused law enforcement authorities Tuesday of failing to crack down on illegal racial incitement.

It also called for a broader ban on political rhetoric that could be construed as harmful to Israeli Arabs, who constitute almost 20 percent of the country's population.