

## IN THE NEWS

## Former Israeli army chief dies

Rafael Eitan, a former Israeli army chief and right-wing politician, drowned Tuesday at age 75.

Eitan, known to most Israelis by his nickname, "Raful," was swept into the sea while inspecting a new pier whose construction he had overseen in Ashdod, authorities said.

Born in Moshav Tel Adashim in 1929, Eitan ended his military career as chief of staff under a cloud following the 1982 massacre by an Israeli-allied Christian militia of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps outside Beirut.

## 'Quartet' backs Palestinian elections

International mediators urged Israel to ease its security clampdown in the West Bank and Gaza Strip ahead of Palestinian elections.

"If people are going to campaign and move around to vote, some of the restrictions will have to be lifted, and we are hopeful that will be done," U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan told reporters at a conference in Egypt on Tuesday.

The call was endorsed by the United Nations' partners in the diplomatic "Quartet" — the United States, European Union and Russia — that crafted the "road map" peace plan.

## Holocaust database draws in many visitors

Yad Vashem's Web site experienced a record increase in visitors after it posted a database of Holocaust victims.

More than 400,000 people visited the Web site of Israel's Holocaust memorial in the first 24 hours after the database of 3 million victims was posted early this week, more than 10 times the number who usually visit in an entire month, Ha'aretz reported.

The database is available at [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org).

# WORLD REPORT

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## Administration suggests \$20 million in aid will help Palestinian reformers

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

**W**ASHINGTON (JTA) — The Bush administration is lobbying Congress to approve a plan to give \$20 million to the Palestinian Authority ahead of Palestinian presidential elections — or at least, not to oppose the aid.

The State Department can give the direct aid to Palestinian leaders without a congressional vote, as it did a year ago, but support from Capitol Hill is seen as politically important.

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) is one of the most vocal critics of the plan, and his support for the president's other legislative initiatives is crucial.

In the week since the administration first proposed the plan to congressional leaders, Bush administration officials have suggested a number of proposals that might appease DeLay and other opponents.

DeLay's camp is confident the administration will not pick a major fight with the majority leader over \$20 million.

"Before we send money to the Palestinian Authority, there needs to be reforms attached to that," said Stuart Roy, a DeLay spokesman.

Traditionally, Jewish groups and other pro-Israel activists have opposed giving aid directly to the Palestinian Authority, concerned about a history of corruption and terrorist financing.

But with the death of P.A. President Yasser Arafat and the prospect of more moderate leaders, many suggest it makes sense for the United States to support potential Palestinian reformers.

Even if the plan is implemented, it remains unclear where the funds would go.

President Bush wants to ensure smooth elections to choose a replacement for Arafat, whom Washington shunned because of his ties to terrorism.

In meetings in the Middle East this week, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell highlighted the Palestinian Authority's financial needs, saying he would work with congressional leaders to try to get the assistance.

The diplomatic "Quartet" behind the "road map" peace plan — the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia — also pledged to provide funding for the Palestinian elections.

"This is the time to assist them in holding a good, solid election on the ninth of January," Powell said Monday in Jericho, where he met with Palestinian leaders.

Still, the money may be for broader budgetary help than for elections — for instance, to help the Palestinian Authority meet its payroll.

William Burns, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, spoke last week to congressional opponents of the funding, including

Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), and suggested aid to the Palestinians could come in forms other than cash.

"The congressman had been first given to understand that large amounts of cash were going to the leaders of the Palestinian Authority," said Lynne Weil, Lantos' spokeswoman. "But there was no specific plan as to how it was going to be channeled, who it was going to."

A program that would allow the Palestin-  
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HEADLINES

## ■ President Bush wants aid to help the Palestinian Authority

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ian Authority to repay debts to Israel, freeing up funds to facilitate elections, likely would enjoy more support from American Jewish officials and congressional supporters of Israel.

One effort on Capitol Hill, a letter orchestrated by Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.) in support of the Bush administration's plan, has stalled. The letter would have sought stringent controls to promote fiscal transparency and prevent misuse of funds.

"Our inclination is to support the administration," Ackerman said. "But the administration doesn't seem to have its act together now and we want to make sure we know what they are doing before we agree with them."

Ackerman said he would prefer that the money be used for P.A. elections or to pay off P.A. debts to Israel, such as an outstanding \$20 million electric bill. He said he is more inclined to back direct aid than in the past, now that Arafat, who led a famously corrupt regime, is dead.

Israel's annual aid appropriation from the United States — close to \$2.2 billion in military aid and \$360 million in economic assistance — passed Congress on Saturday.

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza traditionally receive about \$75 million from the United States. Rather than going directly to the Palestinian Authority, the aid traditionally has been doled out to NGOs through the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.N. Relief and Works Agency.

Numerous laws over the years have

blocked direct U.S. aid to the Palestinians, but a waiver in the Foreign Assistance Act allows for spending of up to \$25 million for "unanticipated contingencies." The \$20 million being proposed is seen as more of a symbolic gesture of support for the emerging leadership than real aid for the economy.

Some Jewish leaders already have come out in support of the Bush plan.

"We believe the administration has the correct policy, as stated by the president," a coalition of some 70 Jewish leaders wrote this week to Condoleezza Rice, congratulating her on her nomination as secretary of state in the next Bush administration. "Although you enter office with a myriad of pressing problems, we also believe that additional time and political capital devoted to this issue will bring positive results."

The letter, signed by leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements as well as several major philanthropists and past chairmen of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, cited U.S. assistance to the Palestinians ahead of elections as a priority.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby that often takes the lead on questions of aid to the Palestinians, has not expressed itself directly on the proposal.

"We are hopeful that with the election of new leadership and fundamental reform of the Palestinian Authority, as called for by the president in his June 24, 2002, Rose Garden speech and outlined in the road map, that there will be an opportunity for Palestinians to rejuvenate the economy and begin to build a civil society," AIPAC spokesman Andrew Schwartz said in response to JTA queries.

Some Jewish leaders suggested the plan was a done deal, and focused attention on ensuring the aid was given with oversight and accountability.

While there has not been vocal opposition to the plan in the Jewish community, there also has not been the same widespread support as there was for last year's aid disbursement, when another

\$20 million was deposited in P.A. coffers when Mahmoud Abbas took over briefly as prime minister and sparked hopes for a revival of peace talks. Abbas is the front-runner to be elected president in January.

"You'd like to think all American Jewish groups would get behind the president and the prime minister at this very important hour," said Lewis Roth, assistant executive director of Americans for Peace Now.

But some noted that Congress has reasons to be wary.

"We don't want to go back to the period where money pours in and it is used and misused," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents

of Major American Jewish Organizations. "That's what Congress is saying."

DeLay's position, as both the second-ranking Republican in the House and one of Israel's most vocal backers, has forced the Bush administration to tread carefully when discussing direct aid to the Palestinians.

A U.S. official said the State Department reached out to DeLay and other lawmakers this year because they were chastised for not doing so sufficiently last year.

The official said State Department aides touted the success of last year's aid package. While hopes for a peace deal under Abbas never materialized, there were positive steps.

"There weren't strings attached, but there were enough people on the ground to make sure the money wasn't going in the wrong pockets," the official said.

Jewish groups on the left and right of the political spectrum have felt freer to speak than those in the center.

In a statement Monday, Americans for Peace Now praised Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for their efforts and took a swipe at DeLay, implying his hard-line views may actually exacerbate terrorism.

Morton Klein, national president of the Zionist Organization of America, opposed the aid plan, noting that Abbas was Arafat's deputy for 40 years and co-founded the Fatah movement, which has been linked to numerous terrorist attacks during the intifada.

**'We don't want to go back to the period where money pours in and it is used and misused.'**

**Malcolm Hoenlein**

Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations

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# Israel: Only Orthodox conversions count

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Maya Gabai considers herself a Jew.

Last week, the 25-year-old Romanian celebrated her conversion under the auspices of Israel's Conservative movement.

But this week Gabai, who has lived in Israel for six years, was miffed by an Israeli government opinion submitted to the High Court maintaining that only conversions overseen by official, state-sanctioned, Orthodox rabbinical courts should be honored.

"I am 100 percent a Jew," said Gabai, who married an Israeli man last year and plans to stay in Israel. "All this is about politics, not about what I feel."

In the latest battle over conversion in Israel, the state opinion was submitted in response to an appeal by a group of 15 foreigners wishing to have their Conservative or Reform conversions in Israel recognized by the state.

But the state, wary of foreigners in Israel converting en masse for the citizenship benefits that follow, said Nov. 17 that they would not recognize what they termed "private conversions" — conversions that are not overseen and approved by the Orthodox-run rabbinate.

"The moment they convert everybody that comes, this contradicts the meaning of conversion because conversion should stem from a real desire to be a Jew, not a real desire to be an Israeli," said Yochie Gnessin, who is representing the state in the case.

Gnessin said the government's position is intended to protect the integrity of Israel's Law of Return, which gives Jews the automatic right to Israeli citizenship.

Last week's government opinion was the latest salvo in a debate that has long roiled both Israel and the Diaspora. Non-Orthodox Jews, who represent the majority of Jews outside Israel, see the issue as a critical one in their efforts to gain acceptance by Israeli authorities.

The Israeli courts have played an active role in the conversion controversy over the years. In 1989, the High Court ruled that Reform and Conservative conversions conducted overseas would be recognized in Israel.

The High Court is expected to rule on the current case, which was filed in 1999, in the coming months.

Reform and Conservative officials in

Israel insist the move is just the latest government attempt to entrench the Orthodox monopoly on conversion.

Furthermore, they said the state is engaging in baseless scare tactics. There is no danger of their movements converting large numbers of foreign workers and tourists, they said, because both movements have pledged only to convert those who are legal residents of Israel and who have a genuine desire to become Jews and live their lives in Israel.

"The state continues to pull out these excuses in order to keep up the Orthodox monopoly on conversions," said Nicole Maor, a lawyer at the Reform movement's Israel Action Center who is representing petitioners in the case.

"These are just excuses to justify the desire, which the Supreme Court has said is illegal, to keep up the Orthodox monopoly."

Rabbi Shlomo Amar, the Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel who is in charge of conversion in the country, told JTA he stood by the government opinion.

He said that an Orthodox conversion is the only conversion considered valid according to halachah, or Jewish law.

He said the Conservative and Reform movements do not do conversions according to halachah, "they do not know halachah, they themselves do not follow halachah."

"Conversion is not a contract for renting an apartment or starting a business," he said, adding that "conversion means accepting the mitzvot and it is important that a convert knows and observes them."

In a highly unusual development, the state's opinion notes that Interior Minister Avraham Poraz has a dissenting opinion.

Poraz, whose ministry oversees immigration, said he believes non-Orthodox conversions conducted in Israel should be recognized by the state.

Poraz is concerned that the stringent conversion used by the Orthodox rabbinate seems to deter immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are not halachically Jewish from attempting to convert.

As many as 300,000 of the nearly 1 million immigrants who came to Israel in the 1990s from the former Soviet Union pay taxes and serve in the army, but can't marry Jews or be buried in Jewish cemeteries.

"We think that many Jews in the world are Reform and Conservative and are no less Jewish than Orthodox Jews," Tibi Rabinovic, Poraz's chief of staff, told JTA. "The government needs to take this into account."

Rabbi Ehud Bandel, president of the Conservative movement in Israel, said in response to the government filing: "I trust the court to reject this reply and declare that the Conservative and Reform conversions are equal to the Orthodox."

Bandel suggested that the government was motivated by political considerations, trying to maintain the status quo on conversion because Prime Minister Ariel Sharon needs the support of the religious parties to maintain his shaky coalition.

The government's opinion marked "the latest episode of the 'Who is a Jew' controversy that for years dominated the agenda in Israel-Diaspora relations," Bandel said.

"We were hoping that finally the state would realize that any discrimination against non-Orthodox streams is unacceptable and illegal."

Orthodox authorities say Jewish law requires that converts undergo traditional ritual conversion and commit to adhering to all the precepts of Jewish law, or halachah. Non-Orthodox streams contend that these authorities inevitably interpret halachah strictly as Orthodox observance.

Bandel said the state's opinion also takes advantage of the good will the Conservative and Reform movements tried to foster in 1998 when they agreed to the recommendations of a government commission on conversion.

The recommendations included the establishment of a joint institute for conversion taught by a combination of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis.

The liberal streams agreed that those wishing to convert would then go to a Beit Din, or Jewish law court, for an Orthodox ceremony that would be universally recognized. Orthodox representatives did not sign on to the final recommendation, but the conversion institute has since been established, with branches across the country.

Currently, it serves 2,500 students and is funded by the Jewish Agency for Israel and the government.

**An Israeli government decision on conversion is seen as motivated by political considerations.**

# NEWS IN BRIEF

## NORTH AMERICA

### 'Pressure Israel' letter runs in Times

Almost 4,000 people signed an open letter to The New York Times calling on the Bush administration to pressure Israel to return to pre-1967 boundaries.

The letter that appeared Tuesday said, "Our country has an extraordinary leverage on Israeli policy, if only our government would dare to use it."

Organized by an American Jewish group called [www.peacemideast.org](http://www.peacemideast.org), the paid advertisement has appeared in a number of publications over the years, starting with an appearance in the Times in June 2002.

### Jewish groups against volunteer program

Two Jewish groups joined two church-state separation groups in seeking to shut down a federally funded volunteer program.

The American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League joined People for the American Way and Americans United for Separation of Church and State in filing a brief Monday in a U.S. appeals court seeking to strike down the AmeriCorps Education Reward program.

The program uses federal funds to help pay tuition for people who have completed volunteer programs. In a news release, AJCommittee said the service includes teaching in religious schools.

### Christians give for Israel

Texas Christians raised a record amount of money for Israel at an annual fund-raising event.

This year's "Night to Honor Israel," held Sunday, raised more than \$2 million.

John Hagee, a San Antonio-based Evangelical pastor, presented a check for \$250,000 to Nefesh B'Nefesh, a U.S.-based group that promotes aliyah; \$1 million to Migdal Ohr, a school in Israel for troubled children; and \$1 million to the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston to help Jewish refugees from "troubled lands" make aliyah.

In the last four years, the group has given some \$8.5 million to Israel.

## MIDDLE EAST

### Officer charged with shooting a dead girl

An Israeli army officer was indicted for shooting a Palestinian girl after she already had been killed by his unit.

The defendant, a captain, was charged Monday with illegally discharging his weapon and conduct unbecoming an officer over the Oct. 5 incident in the Gaza Strip.

Comrades had accused the man of firing repeatedly at the 13-year-old schoolgirl in Rafah, even after it was clear she was dead.

According to the army, lethal force was used against the girl after troops mistook her for a terrorist.

It was not immediately clear how the captain would plead to the charges, or how much jail time he could face if convicted.

### Palestinian lyncher sentenced

A Palestinian who participated in the lynching of two Israeli reserve soldiers in October 2000 was sentenced to life in prison.

An Israeli military court sentenced Azziz Mustafa Salha, 23, on Sunday for his involvement in the murder of Yosef Avraham and Vadim Nourzitz in the West Bank city of Ramallah, the Jerusalem Post reported.

A photo of Salha holding up his bloodstained hands to show the Palestinian mob gathered outside the police station was shown around the world.

The attack, in the first weeks of the Palestinian intifada, shocked Israeli society.

A second Palestinian involved in the lynching was sentenced to life in jail earlier this month.

### No 'Sex' in the Holy City?

An Israeli ad campaign featuring a revealing picture of "Sex and the City" star Sarah Jessica Parker was replaced following complaints from Orthodox Jewish groups.

The Unilever corporation told Ha'aretz on Tuesday that the company issued posters with a more modestly dressed Parker after religious groups threatened to boycott the soap she was advertising. Instead of the original version where the actress appears in a sexy slip, she is now wearing a long-sleeved gown.

"We decided to make her dress more suitable for the winter weather," a Unilever marketing manager quipped.

## WORLD

### Jewish group presses Chirac on Hezbollah TV

A Jewish organization urged France's president to prevent a Hezbollah TV channel from broadcasting in France.

In a statement issued Tuesday, the CRIF umbrella organization of French Jews said last week's decision by France's broadcasting authority to allow the Al-Manar channel to continue broadcasts "gives official authorization to anti-Semitic propaganda."

### Australians campaign for river

More than 800 people in Australia attended the launch of a campaign to raise funds for Israel's Yarkon River.

The Jewish National Fund campaign is aimed at raising money to clean the polluted river, where four members of the Australian team died in 1997 when a makeshift bridge collapsed during the opening ceremony of the Maccabiah Games.

### JNF leader dies

Moshe Rivlin, a former leader of the Jewish National Fund/Keren Keyemeth Lelsrael, died Tuesday at age 79.

Rivlin died from a heart attack while visiting his daughters in New York.

Rivlin, who lived in Israel, served as world chairman of JNF/KKL from 1976 until he retired in 1997. He was a "visionary who shaped the country" of Israel, said Russell Robinson, CEO of JNF America.

Among his achievements, Rivlin shaped the Jerusalem 3000 anniversary, identified water preservation as a key issue for JNF, helped plan fish farms in the desert and river rehabilitation, and began relationships with the U.S. Forest Service and Ben-Gurion University, according to the JNF.

Rivlin's body is being flown to Israel for burial.

### Magazines honored in ex-USSR

Three Jewish magazines were recently honored in the former Soviet Union.

Mishpoha, a Jewish historical and literary almanac from Belarus, Odessa's Migdal Times weekly and the Shalom weekly from the Siberian city of Omsk received the 2004 Charles Hoffman Award for outstanding achievement in the field of Jewish journalism in the former Soviet Union.

The award was established by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Hoffman family in 2001 in honor of Hoffman, a senior JDC staff member in the former Soviet Union who died of cancer after almost a decade at JDC in Russia and Ukraine.