

IN THE NEWS

Israeli budget gets nod from committee

Israel's 2005 budget was moved on for a make-or-break ratification vote.

The Knesset Finance Committee approved the \$61 billion package early Wednesday by 10-9 after a marathon debate.

The budget awaits ratification on March 29, but Prime Minister Ariel Sharon may not have a majority due to so-called rebels in his Likud Party who have threatened to vote against the plan or abstain. [Story, Pg. 3]

Putin visits Israel — Moscow on the Jordan?

Russian President Vladimir Putin will make a historic visit to Israel next month.

The trip, planned for late April, will be the first to Israel by a Russian leader, officials said Wednesday.

As well as meeting with officials in Jerusalem, Putin plans to visit the Palestinian Authority.

The move is being seen as a bid by Russia to counter Israeli ire at its support of Iran's nuclear program and its willingness to supply Syria with weaponry.

U.S. politicians meet Sharon in Israel

U.S. lawmakers met with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.), the Democratic leader in the Senate, and his House of Representatives counterpart, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), are both in the region leading delegations during the congressional break.

They met with Sharon on Monday and discussed peace prospects and the danger Iran poses to regional stability.

They also met with Palestinian Authority leaders, including finance minister Salam Fayyad.

The Senate will soon consider \$200 million in funds for the Palestinians, and whether it should preserve restrictions on the cash imposed by the House when it approved the aid earlier this month.



WORLD REPORT

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As Sharon, Abbas visits approach, both leaders hope for real dividends

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Ariel Sharon's visit next month to President Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, is guaranteed plenty of pomp and circumstance.

There won't be much substance, though, until a week or so later, at a lower-key meeting between Bush and Mahmoud Abbas in Washington.

That's when Bush will assess whether the Israeli prime minister and the Palestinian Authority president are getting enough dividends from the revived peace process to survive serious challenges to their leadership.

Sharon and Abbas hope that progress in the peace talks keep at bay political opponents who are mounting challenges — in Sharon's case, to his planned withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in July, and in Abbas' case, in legislative elections planned for the same month.

Palestinians say they're not receiving enough concessions to beat back a challenge that could bring the terrorist group Hamas into Abbas' government. Chief among their complaints is that Israel is expanding West Bank settlements in defiance of its commitment to a settlement freeze under the internationally backed "road map" peace plan.

"They're building like crazy," said Edward Abington, a lobbyist who represents the Palestinian Authority in Washington. "The Israelis are making many meaningful statements, but the Palestinians don't see any meaningful policy that backs it up."

The Bush administration appears to be paying attention. Bush's top Middle East advisers — Elliott Abrams, a deputy national

security adviser, and David Welch, the top State Department envoy to the region — arrived in Jerusalem on Tuesday and plan to raise the issue of settlement expansion.

"They are there on previously scheduled travel, but they will certainly have the opportunity or certainly use the opportunity to raise this issue with the Israeli government, to seek clarifications and to, I think, make the point that U.S. policy on this issue is very clear," State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said, referring to Israel's recent announcement that it will carry out old plans to build 3,500 apartments in the settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim outside Jerusalem. "There needs to be an end to settlement activity."

Speaking on background, U.S. officials are even tougher: They believe Abbas has taken "concrete steps" to fulfill anti-terrorist obligations he made at a summit with Sharon and the Egyptian and Jordanian leaders last month, though he has not moved on the Palestinians' central road map commitment to dismantle terrorist groups.

The official referred to increased P.A. policing of the Gaza Strip, which has led to a sharp reduction in missile attacks on Israel; and a cease-fire Abbas negotiated with terrorist groups, which has helped — in conjunction with Israel's policy of retaliation — to reduce terrorist attacks.

Additionally, outrage this month at revelations by an Israeli investigator that successive Israeli governments covertly financed unauthorized settlement outposts led to unusually strong words from the State Department, which called on Israel to "meet its previous pledges on stopping construction

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ANALYSIS

■ Real progress possible when Bush meets with Sharon, Abbas

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of unauthorized outposts.”

Such statements usually do not remind Israel pointedly that it is lagging on its obligations. Officials also say it's significant that the statement was drafted by Abrams, who is considered Israel's best friend in the Bush administration.

On the other hand, other administration officials are strongly sympathetic to Israel's claim that Sharon has enough on his plate right now trying to guide the withdrawal from Gaza and part of the northern West Bank to its July 20 launch.

Sharon barely has parliamentary support to pass the budget — something he must do by March 31 to avert new elections — never mind to force violent confrontations with settlers before the first full withdrawals later this year.

■
Israel's ambassador to the United States, Daniel Ayalon, said Israel deserved at least as much understanding as Abbas has received for co-opting terrorist groups instead of confronting them.

“I do appreciate what the PLO representative said about the Palestinians trying to do everything to avert civil war among themselves,” Ayalon said at a Capitol Hill forum this month, where he appeared for the first time with Hassan Abdel Rahman, the Palestine Liberation Organization representative in Washington. “You also have to be mindful of the explosive situation in Israel, and we do not want to be in a situation of a civil war with our own communities and brothers, so things have to be dealt with in a manner

which will be both timely and effective.”

There may be other ways, however, for the United States to pay Abbas dividends without forcing Sharon into difficult concessions.

One outlet would be the \$200 million in immediate aid to the Palestinians that the U.S. House of Representatives approved earlier this month. The cash is much greater than any recent U.S. handout, but the House has attached provisions that channel the money through nongovernmental organizations. That measure was prompted by past P.A. corruption, but it slows the process.

The Senate might remove obstacles to direct aid, something Jordan's King Abdullah II urged Tuesday when he met with U.S. Jewish officials in Washington. The era of corruption ended with P.A. President Yasser Arafat's death last year, he told them, adding that Abbas' government is trustworthy.

“The king said it was important for Palestinians to see that President Abbas receives money for the positions he had taken,” said Marie Abrams, who attended the meeting in her capacity as chairwoman of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

Direct aid reaps faster political dividends, said Larry Garber, who until last year was the U.S. Agency for International Development administrator in the West Bank and Gaza and now is executive director of the New Israel Fund.

“In 2003, when we wanted to move money quickly, we created a rapid road repair project. We repaired 70 kilometers of road, working with officials in the Palestinian Authority,” which not only facilitated transport but created jobs, he said. “That

'The king said it was important for Palestinians to see that President Abbas receives money for the positions he had taken.'

Marie Abrams
Chair, Jewish Council for Public Affairs

got rave reviews.”

Such steps will be high on the agenda when Bush and Sharon meet at Crawford on April 11, Sharon's tenth visit with Bush but his first to the ranch. Bush reserves such invitations for leaders he admires — and, often, from whom he wants to extract concessions.

On the surface, observers can expect to see ranch tours, open-shirt photo-ops and farming patter, since Sharon also owns a ranch.

What goes on behind the scenes won't be clear until Abbas arrives two or three weeks later for a meeting in Washington.

“There are advisers to Abbas who are telling him, ‘If this will be a failure, it's better if you don't go,’” Abington said. ■

Jews in Kyrgyzstan feel safe

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — The small Jewish community of Kyrgyzstan is remaining calm as protests mount in the Central Asian country following a parliamentary election that some allege was rigged.

Protests have been gathering momentum in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan since runoff elections on March 13. This week, people opposing the country's longtime authoritarian leader, Askar Akaev, took over two major cities in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Boris Shapiro, the president of the country's Jewish community, said Monday that Jews remained calm amid mounting protests in this country, and that no anti-Semitic incidents have been reported lately.

Shapiro said there were only five or six Jewish families, or about two dozen people, living in the south of the country. The majority of the country's Jewish population — about 1,200 people — lives in the country's capital, Bishkek, in the north. There have been no open protests in northern Kyrgyzstan.

Officials at the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress in Moscow, of which the Jewish community of Kyrgyzstan is a member, said they have been following the situation closely. “The Jewish communities in the region seem to remain calm, and from what we are hearing they do not believe their safety and well-being is threatened by what's going on in the south of Kyrgyzstan,” Roman Spetktor, a spokesman for the EAJC, told JTA. ■

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Budget passes first test, Sharon faces deadline

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — It appears to be budget or bust for Ariel Sharon. The \$61 billion belt-tightening package has to be ratified by month's end, or the Israeli government falls.

That's exactly what many right-wingers opposed to the Gaza withdrawal plan, including some in the ruling Likud Party, are banking on. But the prime minister scored a coup Wednesday when the Knesset Finance Committee approved the 2005 budget by a vote of 10-9, clearing the way for a parliamentary reading on March 29.

Political sources said Likud rebels on the panel had agreed to back the budget in return for a promise by Sharon's party loyalists to push for a plebiscite on the withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank slated for this summer.

Buoyed by wide support in newspaper polls, Sharon has ruled out a referendum, seeing it as a delay tactic to put off his "disengagement plan" indefinitely. But the brinkmanship has raised fears of a Likud split.

"I don't see how we can run together in the next elections when I support the disengagement plan and you don't," the

prime minister told the dozen or so party lawmakers who oppose him.

Sharon's coalition commands 67 of the Knesset's 120 seats, but without the rebels this majority may not stand. He has made up for the lack of a cushion by courting opposition parties eager to see Israel withdraw from some of the land the Palestinians want for a state.

But that, in turn, has deepened the budget imbroglio, with the secular Shinui Party conditioning its support on funding being cut from religious institutions.

"A prime minister who depends on the mercies of the opposition — now that is something new," political commentator Yoel Marcus wrote in Ha'aretz.

"But how can we complain about the opposition toying with Sharon and blackmailing him, if members of his own party, his own flesh and blood, have turned him into a hostage?"

Many analysts believe the Likud rebels

will back down, that they will not risk bringing down the government.

"Going to elections would not be good for Israel right now, because the voting process would take at least three months and another three months would pass until a new government was set up," Shimon Peres, whose Labor Party is the main coalition partner with the Likud, was quoted as saying on Army Radio.

But some believe the ruling party's credibility has been hit hard by the infighting, and that early elections would be an opportunity for Labor to emerge refreshed and lead peacemaking efforts.

Yet most believe that Sharon can weather the storm.

"Sharon has no reason to be afraid of going to the polls. The majority of the public is behind him — not the zealots and the loonies," Marcus said. ■

'A prime minister who depends on the mercies of the opposition — now that is something new.'

Yoel Marcus
Political commentator

The Israel Project, Philadelphia federation agree to disagree

By RACHEL POMERANCE

NEW YORK (JTA) — The Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia and The Israel Project have dissolved a partnership they had formed to promote Israel's image.

Their reason for doing so isn't entirely clear.

The federation withdrew \$100,000 it donated to open an Israel-based office for The Israel Project, a Washington-based firm that tries to promote Israel's image in the media.

That office would have served as a media-resource center in Israel, furnishing reporters with translators or camera crews so they could gain a better understanding of the Jewish state.

The Israel Project says it still hopes to open the office.

Today, its efforts to promote Israel's image are focused on the government's "disengagement" plan, which calls for Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements this summer.

The federation liaison to the project was Lori Lowenthal Marcus, president of the Philadelphia chapter of the Zionist Organization of America, which vehemently opposes disengagement. The ZOA's national president, Morton Klein, characterizes his group's position as "anti forced deportation."

But Marcus insists disengagement wasn't the reason for the partnership's collapse.

"It was a difference in methodology, not ideology," she told JTA. The federation wanted a project without a political agenda, she said.

Roy Freundlich, public-relations manager for the Philadelphia

federation, said the idea for an "on-site media support operation" grew out of federation activists' frustration at news reports they considered biased against Israel.

The Israel office would have been about "ensuring and promoting credible reporting, not about advocating one thing or another," Freundlich said.

Federation official Gary Erlebaum told the Forward that "the minute it appears you're an advocate, that's it, you've lost your credibility" with journalists.

But Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, the Israel Project's president, said, "it's always been clear since the beginning that The Israel Project is about bringing more support for Israel."

"The Israel Project is just like AIPAC," she said, referring to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a pro-Israel lobby.

"We never campaign for a policy," she said, but once a policy is decided, "we help educate people about that."

The Israel Project released polling data last week showing that support for Israel increased when people became aware of the disengagement plan.

The federation and The Israel Project issued a joint statement saying that they "have different visions for a potential operation in Israel and have decided to pursue them independently. Each organization understands that the other is working to help Israel and the Jewish people and each wishes the other success."

Both organizations told JTA they're seeking new partners to further their goals. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israel rejects Arab offer

Israel rejected a revived Arab peace overture.

The Arab League, meeting in Algiers, said Wednesday it was extending anew a Saudi peace proposal first approved at its 2002 summit.

Known as the Arab Peace Initiative, the proposal calls for comprehensive normalization of ties with the Jewish state if Israel were to withdraw from the West Bank, Gaza Strip, eastern Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, and agree to a "just solution" to the problem of Palestinian refugees.

As in 2002, Israel spurned the call, saying its regional recognition should not be preconditioned.

"This was another wasted opportunity by the Arab League," Israel Radio quoted Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom as saying.

At the meeting, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan reminded the Arab League about his proposal for a convention on terrorism, which proscribes the use of terrorism to resist occupation.

"Legitimate causes cannot be advanced by illegitimate means," he said, referring specifically to the Palestinian struggle.

Radicals eye politics

Two more Palestinian terrorist groups announced they would run in elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, both Marxist movements begun in the 1970s, said Tuesday they sought seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council.

The leading Islamic terrorist group in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Hamas already has said it will run in the July elections for the council.

All three groups boycotted the last elections, in 1996, to protest the Palestinian Authority's official platform of coexistence with Israel.

Crooning against conflict

Israeli and Palestinian musicians produced a bilingual song of peace.

"In My Heart," performed by Israeli folk singer David Broza and his Palestinian counterpart, Wisam Murad, will be broadcast simultaneously on Israel's Army Radio and Voice of Palestine Radio on Sunday.

Commentators credited the initiative to the improved diplomatic mood since Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas declared a cease-fire last month.

NORTH AMERICA

WJC official's mea culpa

A World Jewish Congress official apologized to leaders of two Jewish organizations for comments criticizing Jewish organizations.

"Several of the comments attributed to me in New York Magazine suggesting that Jewish organizations made misstatements to the government or misused funds were unfortunate and without foundation," Stephen Herbits, the WJC's secretary-general, said in a March 16 letter to Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, and David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

"I apologize for them." Foxman and Harris had demanded an apology after the comments were published in a long February magazine article.

Herbits said in his letter that the comments were made to a reporter off the record.

But Harris wondered why Herbits's response came nearly a month after he said he and Foxman demanded an apology.

"Frankly whether he made these comments on the record or off the record, he doesn't deny making the comments, and for an individual whose resume includes stints with the Defense Department

and Edgar Bronfman, they were rather unseemly and irresponsible," Harris told JTA. Bronfman is WJC's president.

Foxman could not be reached immediately for comment.

Testimony in Jewish jury case

A former prosecutor in the United States testified that he worked with a judge to keep Jews off juries in death penalty cases.

On Tuesday, John Quatman told a California court that a late judge, Stanley Golde, told him he wanted to keep Jews off juries in capital cases because they would never vote for the death penalty.

Quatman's testimony will be forwarded on to the California Supreme Court, which is considering whether to grant a new trial for Fred Freeman, an inmate who was convicted of murder and robbery at a bar in 1987.

El Al threatens to end flights to Canada

El Al Israel Airlines may stop flying to Canada because it cannot afford a landing fee at Toronto's airport.

There is a "very real possibility" that Israel's national airline would end its service to Pearson International Airport because of the nearly \$10,000 in fees per landing, the airline's national manager told a federal transport committee Tuesday.

Stanley Morais, El Al's general manager for Canada, said the landing fees have left the airline with razor-thin profit margins for its five weekly flights into the country.

"We want to continue flying to Canada, and to Toronto in particular, but we simply will not be able to continue doing so if costs keep increasing," Morais said.

Group helps Israel's Christians

A U.S.-based charity plans to help Christians targeted by a race riot in Israel to rebuild their lives.

The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews said Wednesday that it would donate \$116,280 to nine Christian families from the northern Israeli village of Mughar who lost property during attacks waged by their Druse neighbors last month.

The Mughar riots were sparked after a false rumor spread that a local Christian youth had posted nude pictures of Druse women on the Internet.

WORLD

Anti-Semitic posters in Serbia

Three men were arrested for allegedly putting up anti-Semitic posters in Serbia.

Wednesday's arrests came after the men allegedly plastered posters that showed the logo of a local radio and television station inside the Star of David with the message: "Boycott because of anti-Serbian influence, dangerous influence on the Serbian youth, supporting the independence of Kosovo, supporting the spreading of drug use, homosexuality and other Western sicknesses and supporting the multiracial new world order."

The posters were placed in front of the Jewish cemetery and the headquarters of several nonprofit groups.

Group steps up tsunami relief efforts

A Jewish group established a base in Sri Lanka to help distribute and coordinate tsunami relief.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee soon will send two staffers to help the group's projects in Sri Lanka.

The JDC has raised more than \$17 million to help those affected by the Dec. 26 tragedy.