

IN THE NEWS

Israel passes national budget

Israeli lawmakers passed a \$61 billion national budget by a vote of 58-36.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon managed to consolidate support before Tuesday evening's vote by promising funds to Shinui, the main opposition party. [Story, Pg. 3]

Lawmakers concerned about detainee abuse

A lawmaker is planning to write to the U.S. Defense Department to investigate anti-Semitic remarks by interrogators.

The New York Times reported Sunday that some military detainees being held in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have been told by military interrogators not to trust their Jewish lawyers.

"This is a travesty twice over," Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) said in a statement issued Tuesday. "It's a violation of American principle that military personnel at Guantanamo are trying to scare prisoners away from legal representation. To do so by encouraging cultural hatred is despicable."

A Defense Department spokesman had no comment on the allegations but noted there is an ongoing investigation into alleged detainee abuse in Cuba.

Israeli Supreme Court to rule on conversions

Israel's Supreme Court is scheduled to rule on whether or not to recognize non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel.

Thursday's ruling by a panel of 11 judges, headed by Chief Justice Aharon Barak, is expected to be a landmark decision.

Only conversions performed by Israel's Orthodox establishment are now considered valid for those choosing to convert in the Jewish state.

The ruling comes after six years of debate on a petition filed by 17 tourists and foreign workers who studied for conversion with non-Orthodox rabbis and sought to convert to Judaism in Israel.

WORLD REPORT

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Selling withdrawal plan to U.S. Jews poses major challenge to community

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The hardest sell for American Jewish groups signed on to promote Israel's planned withdrawal from the Gaza Strip might be other Jews.

Many of the major Jewish religious streams, lobbying groups and civil rights groups are encouraging the Bush administration, lawmakers and opinion makers to maintain political support for Israel's July 20 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements.

In Washington, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby, is working to help win approval of \$200 million in aid money for the Palestinians when the U.S. Senate returns next week.

The U.S. House of Representatives already has approved the cash.

"AIPAC is strongly supportive of aid to the Palestinians, provided the proper oversight is in place to ensure the money is not misspent," said AIPAC spokesman Andrew Schwartz. "Congress is currently working on making sure that such oversight is in place."

It should be smooth sailing, except that a coalition of Israeli settlers and their U.S. supporters are making themselves heard loud and clear. They are raising hard questions about the historic — and traumatic — removal of thousands of long-established Jewish settlers and whether their removal is worth the risks associated with turning over the region to the Palestinians.

The difficulty of the situation means hav-

ing to explain the withdrawal to American Jews first of all, said Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the community's foreign policy umbrella body.

"It's an internal issue, in that we educate people about what Israel is doing, why it's doing it," Hoenlein said. "The trauma is great."

The conference's own rocky path to endorsing disengagement reflects the divisions: It held back until late last year — almost a year after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced the plan — when it issued a statement of qualified support.

On a recent mission to Israel, the group endorsed the plan more explicitly.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the umbrella body for the nation's Jewish community relations councils, is taking measures to keep the shouting down to a civil discourse, said Martin Raffel, the acting executive director of the JCPA, which has endorsed the withdrawal.

"We're urging that disagreement with policy be expressed in a civil manner, within Israel and within our community," Raffel said.

Fierce opposition to the disengagement plan is a concern for the Reform movement, which has emerged as one of its most avid backers.

"We're always concerned that a fairly small minority of Jews in the United States have a disproportionately loud voice," said Rabbi David Saperstein, the director of the

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BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

American Jewish groups face a challenge — selling disengagement to U.S. Jews

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Reform movement's Religious Action Center.

"We have an obligation to make clear where the vast majority of Jews are. We must make sure that political leaders, opinion leaders have the right perspective."

To that end, Saperstein is encouraging hundreds of Reform rabbis meeting this week in Houston at this year's Central Conference of American Rabbis to tackle the issue.

"We will be urging our congregations to speak to elected officials, communicate with Israeli leaders and with this administration not to allow it to be distracted on issues that would undermine its clear, present support," Saperstein said.

Much of the American Jewish opposition is being fueled by the Zionist Organization of America, and its president, Morton Klein, who scored an impressive victory last year when his group funded an advertising campaign in Israel that helped opponents of withdrawal win a Likud Party vote.

Klein calls the ZOA stance "anti-forced deportation," and was behind an abortive effort in the House earlier this month — led by Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) — to scuttle aid to the Palestinians altogether.

Meanwhile, the Yesha Council, which represents settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, has sent representatives to the United States to enlist support for

their opposition to the withdrawal.

They focused especially on the Orthodox Union, which has not taken an official position. Many Orthodox Jews in America have family members in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and feel a particular empathy for those who will be uprooted.

Against such determined opposition, getting out the message of support is hard but necessary, said Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

"In any situation, those who are pro come out in the tens of thousands, those who are against come out in the hundreds of thousands. We need to find incentives for people to come out there," said Foxman, whose group supports the disengagement.

For some groups, supporting disengagement is so important that it trumps other issues on their agenda.

The Reform movement, for instance, encouraged the Shinui secular rights party — its closest ally in Israel's parliament — to swallow its objections to funds for the fervently Orthodox and back Sharon's budget, guaranteeing the government's survival.

The Reform movement, which has long sought official recognition and funding for its programs in Israel, sees further funding for the fervently Orthodox, who oppose recognition of the Reform, as anathema to that goal.

Each organization is working its bailiwick: The ADL, which has a long-established presence in Israel, has focused on condemning calls for violent opposition in that country and soliciting pledges of moderation from settler supporters.

The American Jewish Committee, with its extensive ties to international leaders, is mustering overseas support for the transition.

In Washington, support for disengagement has created an unlikely alliance between AIPAC and the dovish pro-Israel

groups that work the Hill, Americans for Peace Now and the Israel Policy Forum — although there are substantive differences over the details.

AIPAC and the dovish pro-Israel lobby groups disagree over what conditions should be attached to the \$200 million in aid for the Palestinians.

AIPAC was behind an effort to remove the presidential waiver, which traditionally is attached to such bills, meaning every dollar must be subject to congressional review.

Peace Now and the Israel Policy Fo-

rum want the Senate to restore the waiver, and make sure the waiver is in the final version that lands on Bush's desk for his signature.

"Adding new conditions on aid — and eliminating the president's authority to waive them — sends the Palestinians a message that the U.S. Congress seeks to thwart the president's efforts to assist them," Seymour Reich, president of the Israel Policy Forum, said this week in a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Another difference is over Israel's continued settlement activity. Peace Now sharply criticized Israel's recent announcement that it would move ahead with an old plan to build 3,500 new units in Ma'aleh Adumim, a West Bank settlement that serves as a bedroom community for Jerusalem.

Others say Israel is not obliged to freeze settlements until the Palestinians make good on their own commitment to dismantle terrorist groups.

Controversy over the Ma'aleh Adumim expansion underscores another task for Jewish organizations backing disengagement — reminding non-Jewish leaders of Israel's sacrifice.

"The risks inherent in what Israel is doing, I don't think people appreciate it," said Hoenlein of the Conference of Presidents. "It's taken for granted. We have to remind people what's involved."

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Knesset approves budget, preserves government

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Thanks to his trademark tactics, patience and political savvy, Ariel Sharon has overcome the biggest political hurdle of his career as Israeli prime minister.

The Knesset approved the 2005 state budget on Tuesday. The budget vote always is a big event, but this time the 120 lawmakers were making a far more fateful decision for the Jewish state.

If the Economic Arrangements Bill hadn't been ratified by Thursday, the Sharon government would have fallen and new elections would have been necessary.

That likely would have scuppered withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank scheduled for this summer. Sharon has staked his political legacy on the plan, but many Israeli right-wingers were praying to defeat it.

Sharon managed to push through the \$61 billion after debate on Tuesday, by a 58-36 vote, with one abstention, removing the last legislative obstacle to his plan to "disengage" from the Palestinians by withdrawing from settlements in the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank.

"We will implement the disengagement and bring new hope to the State of Israel," an upbeat Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told Israel Radio before the vote.

The budget earmarks more than \$3 million for birthright Israel, one-third of a total \$10 million the program will get. Philanthropists and Jewish organizations will pay the remainder, Rivka Kanaret, a spokeswoman for Natan Sharansky, Israel's minister for Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs, told JTA.

Funding birthright Israel "is like earning money, because students are coming and bringing money into Israel," she said. "It's a very big success. The young people who come back after the program become young ambassadors for Israel."

Last year, budget constraints forced the Israeli government to cut its funding for the program — which provides free trips to Israel for Jewish youths who have never visited Israel on a peer tour — to a token amount. But at the 11th hour, the government agreed to restore its commitment to the program for 2005.

Still, Kanaret said, Sharansky had to push to make sure the program was not left out again this year.

"He had to push because last year there was no budget" for birthright, she said. "Everything where you had no budget the year before, it's hard" to get money appropriated the following year.

On the overall budget, Sharon consolidated his majority by promising the main opposition party Shinui some \$160 million in funding for its favored causes. In a deal aimed at further weakening opposition to the budget, the two-member United Arab List agreed to abstain

from the vote after receiving a similar guarantee of funding for pet projects.

Sharon managed the maneuvering quietly, with a certitude that few found surprising in the former maverick army general, who has easily stared down challenges from right-wingers who believe the disengagement will encourage Palestinian terrorism — including a dozen "rebels" in Sharon's own ruling Likud party.

"And so Sharon, despite his wild, reckless past and history of doing whatever he damn well pleased, has become one of the strongest, most pragmatic prime ministers since Ben-Gurion," Ha'aretz commentator Yoel Marcus wrote.

The prime minister has been helped by

polls showing that most Israelis support leaving Gaza as a means of containing the conflict with the Palestinians, and perhaps even kick-starting negotiations for a final peace agreement.

That general optimism apparently has flooded Jerusalem, where a bill to require a plebiscite on the withdrawals was blocked Monday by a decisive 72-39 Knesset vote.

Sharon had firmly rejected a referendum, seeing it as a tactic by the pro-settler camp to delay withdrawal past its July 20 start date. The govern-

ment hopes to complete the withdrawals within a few weeks, so evacuated settlers have time to begin life anew in Israel proper before the new school year begins.

But many settlers still vow to fight — not through force of arms, but by passive resistance. Jarred by the loss of the referendum option and perhaps feeling the ebb of its popular support, the Yesha Council convened Tuesday to rethink its strategy.

"It's a serious dilemma — ensuring that the struggle is directed at the political leadership rather than the police or military," Yesha official Pinchas Wallerstein told Army Radio. "But we cannot give up."

(JTA Staff Writer Chanan Tigay in New York contributed to this story.)

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Yoel Marcus
Ha'aretz columnist

Shimon Peres to visit D.C. to discuss Gaza withdrawal

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Shimon Peres will consult with a U.S. think tank about transferring property in the Gaza Strip to Palestinians.

Israel and the United States have given the Aspen Institute the responsibility to devise a formula for transferring settlements and other Israeli holdings in the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank to the Palestinians, and another for promoting investment in the Palestinian economy, after Israel's withdrawal this summer.

The institute is hosting a forum April 6 on "Building Peace: Engaging U.S. Business in Making Gaza." Peres, Israel's vice premier, will attend, along with Israeli Housing Minister Yitzhak Herzog and former U.S. Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright.

A week later, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is slated to meet with President Bush to discuss the planned withdrawal.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Jewish living will

A U.S. Orthodox rabbinical group reissued guidelines for a living will based on Jewish law.

The Halachic Living Will issued by the Rabbinical Council of America comes amid media spotlight on Terri Schiavo and the issue of the "right to die."

The document is available at www.rabbis.org.

Iraqi Jew meets Bush

A representative of the Iraqi American Jewish community discussed the rights of religious minorities in Iraq with President Bush.

Maurice Shohet of Congregation Bene Naharayim in New York met Bush in the Oval Office Tuesday, before the president spoke on democratic initiatives in the Middle East.

Shohet told JTA the president was curious about the number of Jews left in Iraq — there are only about 20, he said — and agreed on the need to include provisions for the rights of minorities in Iraq's new constitution.

Shohet was one of nine Iraqi Americans from different ethnic backgrounds who Bush recognized for voting in Iraq's January elections.

Congress to focus on Lubavitch books

U.S. lawmakers scheduled a hearing on Chabad-Lubavitch's efforts to recover Jewish books from the Russian government.

The Helsinki Commission will hear from Jewish leaders about efforts to garner the "Schneerson Collection" April 6.

Edward O'Donnell, the State Department's special envoy for Holocaust issues, will be there as well, and a representative from the Russian government also has been invited.

A few years after the Russian Revolution in 1917, the books — the Lubavitch say there are 12,000 volumes — were seized from the fifth Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, as part of a crackdown on religion.

E-mail from a trickster

An e-mail claiming the Conservative movement would begin ordaining gay and lesbian rabbis is fake, a movement spokeswoman said.

"It's a hoax," Elise Dowell told JTA, adding that she had no idea who was behind the false news release sent out Tuesday to members of the media.

The e-mail said the movement would use an event Tuesday evening focusing on women rabbis to unveil a plan to "achieve gender and sexual equity in all ranks of the Conservative movement."

It also said the movement would begin ordaining gay and lesbian rabbis by the year 2010, by which time all Conservative synagogues would be required to become "fully egalitarian."

Declared gays and lesbians are officially barred from the Conservative movement's rabbinical seminaries; each synagogue is free to make its own decision about egalitarian practice.

The e-mail was sent by someone purporting to be "Lisa Goldberg" and was from a domain name that Dowell said was made up.

A call to the phone number on the fake release was not immediately returned.

Jewish groups back Supreme Court decision

Several Jewish groups backed a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that a gender-equity law shields people who report violators.

The high court ruled Tuesday that an Alabama girls basketball coach had legal protection for reporting a violation of Title IX, a law that bars sex discrimination in educational programs that receive

federal funding. Several Jewish groups, including the Anti-Defamation League and Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, joined civil rights groups in an amicus brief, arguing that the coach deserved legal protection.

WORLD

Indonesia would welcome Israeli aid

Indonesia would welcome tsunami assistance from Israel, a diplomat said.

Suhardjano Sastromihardjo, the minister counselor for political affairs at the Indonesian Embassy in Washington, attended a B'nai B'rith International colloquium on tsunami aid Tuesday and was asked about his country's attitude to Israeli aid.

"Indonesia welcomes all kinds of assistance from the international community," said Suhardjano, who greeted the lunchtime crowd with a "Shalom." "We have opened agencies, which can receive all kinds of assistance, including from Israel."

Israel's hopes that a planeload of assistance it delivered to Indonesia within days of the tsunami would foster ties with the world's most populous Muslim nation were dashed when an Indonesian minister appearing on al-Jazeera denied any knowledge of the aid.

Since then, Jewish organizations delivering aid to Indonesia — which suffered the worst tsunami losses by far, with a death toll of 120,000 — have pressed behind the scenes for friendlier ties with Israel.

MIDDLE EAST

Fearing a hit

Ariel Sharon may be courting assassination, a right-wing Israeli politician said.

Arieh Eldad of the National Union bloc said Tuesday that by successfully fighting a proposal to hold a referendum on the Gaza Strip withdrawal, the prime minister had inflamed some Israeli right-wingers.

"I think that, yesterday, Sharon missed the opportunity to prevent an assassination," Eldad told Israel Radio, referring to Monday's Knesset vote, which rejected the referendum bill.

"In my view, a leader does not behave like this."

But Eldad made clear that he supports only nonviolent means of resisting the upcoming withdrawals.

Eyes on Gaza

Two Israeli human-rights groups accused the government of a "policy of strangulation" against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The 100-page report published Tuesday by B'Tselem and HaMoked disagrees with Israel's assertion that after its forces withdraw from Gaza this summer, it will no longer have legal responsibility for the coastal territory.

The report blames Israeli security policies for Palestinian poverty and suffering.

"Israel's right to self-defense does not permit it to trample on the rights of an entire population," said the report, titled "One Big Prison."

Israeli officials declined comment, saying they are studying the report.

Doctors without borders

An Israeli university launched a medical program aimed at North American students.

The program at the Technion in Haifa, which will begin in fall 2006, is a four-year program based on the American model, the Baltimore Jewish Times reported.

Other schools, including Ben-Gurion University in the Negev and Tel Aviv University, also have medical programs geared for American students.