



IN THE NEWS

Gaza withdrawal price tag: \$1.6 billion

Israel will ask the United States for \$1.6 billion in assistance related to its Gaza Strip withdrawal.

The request will encompass the transfer of Gaza military bases and development of the Negev and Galilee, areas likely to absorb most of the thousands of settlers who will leave Gaza and part of the northern West Bank in the evacuation, which is planned for this summer.

No money will go directly to the settlers, a senior Israeli official familiar with the proposal told JTA.

Gaza Strip withdrawals delayed?

Ariel Sharon hinted that upcoming withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank could be postponed by several weeks.

Controversy over the scheduling of the withdrawal plan, slated to begin July 20, surfaced this week when it became clear that it would clash with the traditional three-week mourning period leading up to Tisha B'Av, which falls this year on Aug. 14.

U.S. Jews to protest withdrawal

American Jewish activists are planning a massive protest against Israel's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip.

The protest concert in Manhattan's Central Park will follow the annual Salute to Israel parade, a solidarity march up Fifth Avenue, on June 5.

Dr. Joseph Frager, a New York-based physician and former president of American Friends of Ateret Cohanim, a right-wing Jerusalem yeshiva, has run the protest concerts for the past 12 years, taking up causes such as freeing Jonathan Pollard and Israeli MIAs.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon spoke at the 1994 concert, which protested the Oslo accords, Frager said.

WORLD REPORT

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Israeli political system in uproar over reported plan for further withdrawals

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Buoyed by American support for his plan to evacuate Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon reportedly is considering a second unilateral "disengagement" that will determine Israel's permanent borders.

Though Sharon strongly denies such a plan, and President Bush continues to insist on a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian agreement based on the internationally approved "road map" peace plan, the Israeli political establishment is in an uproar over the idea.

At their mid-April summit in Crawford, Texas, Sharon and President Bush agreed on the potentially historic importance of Sharon's first disengagement, scheduled for the summer, and agreed that the next step should be Israeli-Palestinian peace talks based on the road map.

But Sharon fears the road map may prove unworkable. And though he denies that he is now working on plans for a follow-up, second disengagement, one of Sharon's closest aides has acknowledged that if the Palestinians are unable to deliver on their road map commitments — principally, dismantling terrorist groups and eradicating the terrorist infrastructure in Palestinian society — a second unilateral disengagement will be one option Israel considers.

Such a plan is not without its problems: It's likely to meet opposition from the international community, the Palestinians and Israeli politicians on both the left and right of the political spectrum.

The international community, the Palestinians and the Israeli left almost certainly would prefer bilateral negotiations toward a final peace deal. On the right, settler leaders accuse Sharon of planning another step in "the sell-out of the Land of Israel."

And, more significantly, leading members of Sharon's own Likud Party say they're determined to block any attempt to push through a second disengagement plan.

Nevertheless, speculation in Israeli political circles about a second disengagement is rife. Some analysts argue that it may yet prove to be Israel's best option, and that the Americans may come around to supporting it.

Though Bush has expressed great admiration for the planned pullback from Gaza and the northern West Bank — describing it as a seminal event that could change the face of the Middle East — Sharon insists that he has not broached the subject of a second unilateral disengagement.

On the contrary, he says he made clear to Bush at the Crawford summit that Israel will renew peace talks with the Palestinians if they first dismantle terrorist militias and carry out promised security, economic and governmental reforms.

But Sharon will face a major dilemma: If the Palestinians don't carry out their commitments, will Sharon accept a situation of political inertia that could easily degenerate into renewed violence? And if they do, will he embark on peace talks that he thinks are bound to blow up over the issues of Jerusalem and refugees?

In both cases, some members of Sharon's

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NEWS ANALYSIS

■ Reports of plans for more withdrawals have Israelis in uproar

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inner circle believe the way out could be a new Israeli initiative for an additional withdrawal. Like the first disengagement, the idea behind the second would be to pre-empt other "dangerous" peace plans and — because it largely would be a unilateral move — to give Israel control over precisely which territory it gives up.

The furor over the second disengagement idea came last Friday, when political analyst Shimon Shiffer, who covered the Crawford summit for the Yediot Achronot newspaper, wrote that Sharon's close circle was considering such a move if, as they fear, Abbas proves unable or unwilling to carry out his road-map commitments.

According to Shiffer, the idea would be to evacuate isolated West Bank settlements while annexing large settlement blocs, essentially setting Israel's permanent borders.

Well aware of the likely political fallout, Sharon vehemently denied that any such plan was in the offing. His office put out a statement saying the prime minister "is not planning another unilateral step of evacuating settlements in the West Bank, after implementation of the disengagement plan."

But Dov Weisglass, one of Sharon's closest advisers, was far less categorical. He said Israel's preferred option was to negotiate with the Palestinians within the framework of the road map, but if

the Palestinians fail to carry out their commitments, Israel would consider other options. A second disengagement, as outlined by Shiffer, was one of them, he declared in an Israeli television interview.

Top Likud leaders are taking the scenario seriously enough to come out strongly against it. Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom warned that the Likud "won't allow a second disengagement from parts of the homeland in Judea and Samaria," the biblical names for the West Bank.

Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said a second disengagement would be a big mistake, giving away key territorial assets while getting nothing in return.

Further to the right, reactions have been even more scathing. Uzi Landau, leader of the rebel group among Likud legislators, said he would demand another Knesset vote on the first disengagement plan, given the new information on where it was leading.

In a prepared statement, the Yesha Settlers' Council issued a statement accusing Sharon of selling out: "We have been saying for some time that the settlements in Gaza and northern Samaria are only the first dominoes. Sharon will continue the clearance sale of the Land of Israel after the disengagement."

Despite the denials and criticism,

right-wing moderates and some independent analysts continue to tout the second disengagement idea. Yossi Alpher, the former head of Tel Aviv University's Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies and now editor of the Israeli-Palestinian Web site bitterlemons.org, predicts that after the first disengagement is implemented in the summer, international pressure on Sharon to negotiate a peace deal with the Palestinians will grow, leading to the collapse of the Likud-Labor unity

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Yossi Alpher
Editor, bitterlemons.org

government.

Then, perhaps in spring 2006, a re-elected Sharon will emerge with a plan for a second, limited, unilateral West Bank withdrawal, Alpher predicts. Sharon will present his new plan to Bush, and the American president will be sorely tempted to go along with it, in this scenario.

"The last thing Bush wants is to fail the way Clinton failed. And if Sharon says to him, 'You won't get a full-fledged peace agreement on your watch or on my watch, but you'll get progress,' Bush may well want to hear more," Alpher told JTA.

All things considered, by next year Sharon may decide to pursue the second disengagement route. But will the international community be prepared to listen? Will the Palestinians? And will he have the domestic political base to make the move? ■

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Divine will vs. disengagement

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A leading Gaza Strip rabbi said he hopes God will stop Israel's impending withdrawal from the area.

"It would not be outrageous for there to be divine intervention here. Miracles would be no less feasible than implementation of the plan to uproot us," Yigal Kaminsky, rabbi of the Gush Katif settlement bloc, told Ha'aretz on Monday.

He declined to discuss how the summer evacuations might be thwarted by a heavenly hand, saying only that this likely would become clear when the time comes.

"Gush Katif is a living miracle," Kaminsky said.

"Last Shabbat, when hundreds of mortar shells fell here, hundreds of people walked the streets and no one was hurt."

Israeli ambassador to meet with Pollard

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Arrangements are being worked out for Israel's ambassador to the United States to meet with Jonathan Pollard at his North Carolina prison in the next few weeks.

Daniel Ayalon will meet with Pollard at the request of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who called for the meeting during his talks last week in the United States. An Israeli official in Washington said Sharon informed the Bush administration that Ayalon would meet the former U.S. Navy intelligence analyst and convicted Israeli spy at the Butner Correctional Institution.

"The goals are to check on his situation, see how his conditions are and give him a message of concern from the government of Israel," the official said, on condition of anonymity.

The meeting, a first by an Israeli ambassador to the United States, comes at a delicate time for Israeli politics and in relations between the Jewish state and America. Israel's plan to disengage from settlements in the Gaza Strip has infuriated the right wing in Israel, many of the same people who long have advocated for Pollard's release.

It also comes as Pollard's legal recourses seem to be dwindling. While a federal appeals court has not yet ruled on Pollard's request for a new trial and to review classified information that was used to sentence him, the three-judge panel that heard oral arguments in the case last month seemed resistant to Pollard's arguments.

Pollard was sentenced to life in prison in 1987, after pleading guilty to spying for Israel. The sentence was considered harsh at the time, and went against a plea bargain between Pollard and government officials.

A classified 40-page declaration written by then-Secretary of State Casper Weinberger outlined damage Pollard caused to U.S. interests, and is considered responsible for the severity of the sentence.

Jews in the United States and Israel have pressed successive American administrations for clemency for Pollard.

Reports of the meeting were seen in Israel as a gesture to Israel's right wing, and renewed speculation that Pollard's release could play a role in future negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The Israeli newspaper Yediot Achronot reported Friday that Israeli sources hinted that Bush would pardon and release Pollard in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

But that remains unlikely because the withdrawal was Sharon's brainchild, not something Bush had to sweeten for Sharon to accept. However, Bush has become invested in the plan since approving it last year, and could be interested in making it more politically viable for Sharon, who faces strong opposition to the plan within his ruling Likud Party.

It wouldn't be the first time that Pollard has been dangled as an incentive for Israeli concession. President Clinton reportedly agreed to release Pollard to get Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to back the Wye Peace Accord in 1998, but Clinton changed his mind after strong objections from George Tenet, who was CIA director at the time.

The Israeli official in Washington denied that the planned meeting was related to discussions of Pollard's release.

"There's a feeling it's something that needs to be addressed in and of itself, with no connection to anything else," he said of the meeting.

Settler groups noted last month that Ayalon spoke at a North Carolina synagogue but did not go to Pollard's nearby prison, even as Sharon has said publicly that he has directed the U.S. ambassador to visit Pollard.

Pollard long has contended that U.S.

officials will not take his case seriously until he has regular visits from Israel's U.S. ambassador.

"Unless and until the ambassador is activated and deputized to deal with my case on a regular basis, and for the duration, Washington will not relate to you or the rest of your colleagues with any degree of seriousness," he wrote to Israeli supporters in August. "They know that Jerusalem is just allowing you to 'go through

'The goals are to check on his situation, see how his conditions are and give him a message of concern from the government of Israel.'

Israeli official

the motions.' "

A visit to a federal prison requires coordination with various government officials, sources said. Ayalon's planned visit must be coordinated with the Department of Justice's Bureau of Prisons, as well as the U.S. Navy.

A spokesman for Butner was unavailable for comment.

Pollard has received Israeli officials before, including several Knesset members, who have been accompanied by the Israeli consul general in Atlanta. Pollard also traveled to Washington in September 2003 for a hearing before the U.S. District Court.

Joseph Winter, a spokesman for Justice for Jonathan Pollard, the Toronto-based campaign founded by Pollard's wife Esther, said the group had not heard about any pending visit. Winter said he believed it was disinformation.

"The only time one hears these rumors is when an Israeli prime minister negotiates away parts of Israel," he told JTA. ■

(JTA Bureau Chief Ron Kampeas contributed to this report.)

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Holocaust, Oklahoma bombing remembered together

NEW YORK (JTA) — Holocaust survivors took part in a ceremony marking the 10th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people.

Six Holocaust survivors placed a stone

on a sculpture that symbolized the Jews killed in the Holocaust.

The ceremony was part of 10 days of remembrance of victims of hatred, in Oklahoma and throughout the world. ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Bush wants clarification on settlement

The White House wants Israel to explain a decision to add 50 homes to a West Bank settlement.

"We will be seeking clarification from the government of Israel," spokesman Scott McClellan said Monday. Israel announced plans Monday to build 50 new homes in the Elkana settlement, on the Israel-West Bank border.

Congressman scolds Peres on Christians

A U.S. congressman berated Shimon Peres, the Israeli deputy prime minister, about Israel's treatment of Christians in the West Bank.

Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), chairman of the House of Representatives' International Relations Committee, read out talking points about the effects of Israel's security policies on the dwindling Palestinian Christian community when Peres met in private with the committee two weeks ago.

Hyde referred specifically to Israel's West Bank security barrier. He said he appreciated the need for the barrier, but complained that in areas around Jerusalem it divides Palestinians from each other.

He said the barrier and Israel's settlement policy are "drastically undermining the mission of Christian institutions and the social fabric of their communities in the Holy Land."

Peres was caught off guard by Hyde's complaint, sources familiar with the meeting said, and replied that Palestinian Christians face graver threats from Muslims than they do from Israel.

He acknowledged, however, that Christians "are in an uneasy situation."

The notes from the private meeting were leaked to columnist Robert Novak, a longstanding critic of Israel, in an extremely rare breach of the committee's private meetings.

The comments were confirmed to JTA by others at the meeting.

Lutherans invest in peace

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will invest in a strategy to promote Middle East peace.

The church council, or governing board, last week approved \$100,000 to fund the campaign, "Peace Not Walls: Stand for Justice in the Holy Land."

The strategy aims to promote coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians, reduce Palestinian poverty and achieve a negotiated settlement that includes shared control of Jerusalem.

To that end, the council will partner with groups on the ground like B'Tselem, Seeds of Peace and Physicians for Human Rights in Israel, said Peter Pettit, a member of the church's consultative panel for Lutheran-Jewish relations, who helped formulate the strategy.

The council also called for the dismantling of Israel's West Bank security fence.

The strategy of divestment, which other church groups are considering, was given only passing reference in the resolution.

Koch named to Holocaust council

President Bush named Ed Koch and 12 others to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council.

Last Friday, 13 men and women were named to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, which oversees the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Koch, the Democratic former mayor of New York City who backed President Bush in last year's election, served as chairman of the U.S. delegation to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's conference on anti-Semitism last year.

Former Massachusetts Gov. William Weld, a Republican, also was named to the council.

Bush also appointed several Jewish Republican activists to the board, including Michael Lebovitz, who led Jewish outreach for Bush's re-election campaign, and Marilyn Fox, whose husband Sam is national chairman of the Republican Jewish Coalition.

MIDDLE EAST

Gaza attack wounds 2 Israelis

A Palestinian wounded two Israelis in an attack on a group of construction workers in the Gaza Strip.

One of the Israelis wounded in Monday's attack was a soldier, the other a civilian.

The Popular Resistance Committees, a Palestinian group that has not joined the current cease-fire, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Israeli officials said the number of attacks against Israelis in Gaza has risen dramatically during the past week.

Disengagement in stages

Israel's evacuation of Gaza Strip settlements will be carried out in geographical blocs over three weeks.

According to a Defense Ministry blueprint published Monday by Ha'aretz, the northern Gaza settlements of Elei Sinai, Dugit, Nisanit and Netzarim will be removed in the first week of the withdrawal plan.

The Gush Katif settlement bloc will follow in the next two weeks, as well as more remote communities such as Morag and Pe'at Sadeh.

The remainder of the five-week schedule will be dedicated to relocating Israeli security forces to the northern West Bank, where they will evacuate another four settlements.

Israeli sources confirmed the Ha'aretz report but noted that top military brass hope for a quicker evacuation schedule if the security situation allows it.

Court: Gaza withdrawal OK

Israel's Supreme Court rejected several petitions filed to prevent Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

The high court ruled Monday that there was no reason to grant the injunctions sought by activists opposed to the plan.

The court's ruling removes another roadblock to the withdrawal, slated to begin July 20.

WORLD

Mr. Erdogan goes to Israel

Turkey's prime minister is slated to visit Israel next month.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan will visit Israel on May 1-2 in a trip seen as an attempt to mend fences between Israel and its strongest Muslim ally.

Ties between Israel and Turkey grew during the 1990s but have frayed during the past few years as a result of Israeli-Palestinian violence and the ascension of Erdogan's Islamist party in Turkey.

Jewish official talks anti-Semitism in France

Muslim anti-Semitism in France topped the agenda when a U.S. Jewish leader met with the French Parliament.

"Only a failure of imagination could prevent us from seeing the ominous possibilities that might lie ahead," David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, warned the French National Assembly's Committee on Foreign Relations on April 14.

Democratic nations are in a "race against time," pitting those who would "build a more harmonious world" against "those who would use violence, particularly in the name of religion, to keep us in a state of permanent tension," Harris warned.