

IN THE NEWS

Church to begin divestment process

The United Church of Christ called on members to employ "economic leverage" against Israel, including possible divestment.

A resolution passed at the UCC's biennial synod Tuesday urged local churches "to use economic leverage," including "divesting from those companies that refuse to change their practices of gain from the perpetuation of violence, including the Occupation."

A separate resolution called upon Israel to remove its West Bank security barrier.

The resolutions drew a sharp reaction from Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, who described them as "functionally anti-Semitic."

Cooper said the resolutions represented the efforts of a small group of activists and not the rank-and-file members of the UCC.

Religious groups call for nominee consultation

Eleven Jewish groups joined a coalition of religious organizations calling for bipartisan consultation in the selection of a new U.S. Supreme Court justice.

In a letter sent Monday to U.S. senators and President Bush, the 29 groups said Bush and the Senate should engage in "non-partisan and thorough debate" on the nominee's qualifications.

The letter, organized by the Reform movement's Religious Action Center, also asserted that faith should not play a role in the selection process.

Hamas refuses to join P.A. government

Hamas declined Mahmoud Abbas' offer to join the Palestinian Authority government.

"Forming a unity government at this late time will not be useful," Mushir Al-Masri, a spokesman for the Islamic terrorist group, said Monday.

The proposal was seen as a bid to avoid a showdown in parliamentary elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

WORLD REPORT

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Groups gird for nomination fight as O'Connor leaves Supreme Court

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The retirement of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor is expected to add intensity to the Jewish community's plans to weigh in on the high court's future.

Many Jewish groups already had been mobilizing for an anticipated vacancy on the court, but had expected to be discussing a successor to Chief Justice William Rehnquist and watching President Bush replace a conservative vote with another conservative.

Orthodox groups take a different view, but many Jewish groups concerned about protecting abortion rights and the separation of church and state plan to fight to make sure the balance of the court doesn't change.

"This ratchets up the stakes tremendously," said Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism. "Instead of replacing a conservative justice with a conservative nominee, we face the prospect of replacing the swing vote on so many of our issues."

Several Washington Jewish leaders said they were feeling pressure from colleagues to speak out about Bush's choice for an anticipated vacancy, and to actively fight potential "extremist" nominees. That pressure is expected to increase now that the debate concerns a replacement for O'Connor.

The plan to affect the deliberations is two pronged. The first stage involves emphasizing guidelines they hope the Bush White House will follow in picking the next justice.

"He has the opportunity now to unite us together," Phyllis Snyder, president of the

National Council of Jewish Women, said of Bush. "If he'll work with the bipartisan group of senators, he has the opportunity to pull people together."

Many Jewish groups are urging Bush to step back and deliberate before nominating a replacement, hoping he will seek someone who has respect among diverse groups.

"There really are a lot of people on the short list who have a good shot at fitting into our criteria," said Mark Waldman, director of public policy for the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the movement's congregational arm.

A second, more controversial phase includes joining like-minded religious organizations and liberal groups in a planned offensive if Bush picks a conservative jurist they consider "extremist."

As a first step, many Jewish groups are joining other faith organizations in a letter to senators, stressing the importance of the "advise and consent" process for judicial nominees, which gives members of the minority party and others an opportunity to weigh in on nominations.

Crafted by the Religious Action Center, the letter was sent last Friday, signed by 29 organizations, including the American Jewish Committee, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, Jewish Council for Public Affairs, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, Jewish Women International, National Council of Jewish Women, Progressive Jewish Alliance, Union for Reform Judaism and Women of Reform Judaism.

Jewish leaders caution that their actions depend on whom President Bush chooses,

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HEADLINES

■ Jewish groups want a voice in who will replace Justice O'Connor

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and on that person's credentials.

Using Bush's selections to lower federal courts as a guide, however, they assume they'll eventually need to mount a campaign against his nominee.

Jewish leaders say it's unclear whether their community can add to the debate or whether it merely would be repeating arguments made by others. Some say they would prefer not to expend resources if they don't have much to add.

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The campaign takes on added impetus, however, as the Christian Coalition, whose views are antithetical to those of many Jewish groups, launches its own campaign on judicial appointments.

So far, organizers of the Jewish campaign have been able to get some Jewish groups to consider more active engagement, and hope to have a few weeks to galvanize more of the Jewish community before the Bush administration makes an announcement on the choice of a replacement.

Many say upcoming nomination battles could mirror the struggle against the nomination of Robert Bork in 1987, which included many Jewish groups. Jewish groups are expected to be particularly vocal if the nominee opposes abortion.

The letter to senators stressed the need for "openness and bipartisan consultation throughout the nomination and confirmation process."

"The confirmation process must also be free of the divisive and dangerous practice of using Senators' and nominees'

faiths as a wedge," the letter said. It was also sent to the White House.

Bush said last Friday that he would consult with advisers and senators, and hoped to have a nominee confirmed by the start of the new Supreme Court session in October. Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), who is Jewish, heads the Senate's Judiciary Committee, which will review the nomination.

"The nation deserves, and I will select a Supreme Court justice that Americans can be proud of," Bush said. "The nation also deserves a dignified process of confirmation in the United States Senate characterized by fair treatment, a fair hearing and a fair vote."

Sources said much of the pressure for increased involvement is focused on two high-profile Jewish groups that largely stay out of nomination battles, the American Jewish Committee and Anti Defamation League.

The AJCommittee signed the letter to senators, but Richard Foltin, the group's director of legislative affairs, said his organization rarely endorses or rejects specific nominees, viewing confirmation battles as partisan and personal.

"We're always getting helpful advice from our friends," Foltin said sarcastically. "We expect to be getting a lot more helpful advice."

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The ADL has not signed on to the letter. Michael Lieberman, the ADL's Washington counsel, said the organization would continue its practice of analyzing Supreme Court nominees and sending letters to Senate Judiciary Committee members, suggesting areas on which to question the jurists.

But the ADL has taken positions against some federal court nominees, such as William Pryor, who first was nominated to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in 2003 but was approved only this month.

"The idea that the president could pick someone we oppose is obvious," Lieberman said. "It's axiomatic that the stakes are higher because it's the Supreme Court."

Orthodox groups largely will stay out

of the nomination battle. The Orthodox Union will weigh in on issues relevant to the debate but not on specific nominees, said Nathan Diament, director of the O.U.'s Institute for Public Affairs.

Orthodox groups have not been asked to participate in the interfaith letter, Diament said. Many Orthodox Jews take a more politically conservative view on separation of church and state and other contentious issues.

The National Council of Jewish Women launched its Bench ark Campaign several

years ago against conservative judicial nominations. Many Jewish groups were lukewarm at the time but said they might decide to participate if a Supreme Court vacancy came up, according to Sammie Moshenberg, NCJW's Washington director.

The group sent a separate letter to senators Tuesday, signed by 270 rabbis from 32 states, stressing the need for a justice who will protect religious freedom and reproductive choice.

The Conservative movement has surprised many by speaking out. It sent letters to Bush and senators earlier this month, comparing justices to rabbis and other spiritual leaders.

The movement suggested that nominees should be well trained, "eschew an ideologically defined approach to judicial interpretation" and show a "balanced respect for foundational documents, reasonable interpretation and societal realities."

Waldman said it was important to show the Bush administration what the movement wants in a justice. Waldman left open the possibility that the movement would oppose or endorse particular nominees.

Several groups, including the AJCommittee, spoke out against Republican plans to use the "nuclear option" — changing Senate rules to require only a majority vote on judicial nominations. Current rules require a cloture vote, which requires a super majority of 60 votes, to end filibusters.

O'Connor's resignation 'ratchets up the stakes tremendously.'

Mark Pelavin

Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism

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Ariel Sharon struggles to stay the course

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — With Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip just six weeks away, escalating right-wing and settler protests threaten to plunge the country into anarchy and could provoke a strong anti-settler backlash.

Protesters last week blocked major highways, poured oil and scattered spikes across a busy road, occupied buildings in Gaza and stoned Palestinians and Israel Defense Forces soldiers. The army and police responded by temporarily declaring the Gaza Strip a closed military zone, ejecting the extremists from occupied buildings and making dozens of arrests.

In an unprecedented spate of interviews and public statements, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon condemned what he called the "hooliganism" of the far right, and vowed that he would not be deterred by it.

But will authorities be able to maintain law and order in the face of even more extreme protest plans?

Even if they do, Sharon faces other serious challenges: Right-wing soldiers have begun refusing to obey orders, a phenomenon that some fear will spread. There also is talk among rebels in Sharon's own Likud Party of a move to replace him as prime minister with the more hawkish finance minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

On the other hand, there are signs that the settlers and other withdrawal opponents may have gone too far and seriously undermined their cause: The media is rife with angry anti-settler columns, and the latest polls show a dramatic increase in support for withdrawal.

The last week of June may prove to have been a turning point. The repeated blocking of traffic on major thoroughfares has incensed ordinary Israelis, and the cat-and-mouse games that anti-withdrawal teenagers played with police trying to keep the roads open have exasperated authorities.

But more devastating for the settler cause have been the images of violence: The near-lynching of an 18-year-old Palestinian by right-wing extremists, and an Israeli soldier who suffered a concussion after being hit by a large boulder.

Even worse for the settler cause was the realization of how far protesters are prepared to go: Oil and spikes on the highways could cause fatal accidents.

Right-wing leader Moshe Feiglin made things worse when he said that the possibility of a few Israelis dying now as a result of the protests pales in significance next to the large numbers of Israelis he says "will surely die" if the withdrawal goes ahead.

The oil and spikes prompted outspoken attacks on the protesters in the press. The most vehement came in Yediot Achronot from crime correspondent Boukie Naeh: "If the police don't break your bones, I will," he wrote.

"The Israeli army and the police should kill a few members of your criminal Jewish gangs and stop the anarchy," Naeh wrote. "Because if they don't deal with you today, tomorrow you'll burn down my house just because I don't agree with you."

Avi Bettelheim, deputy editor of the rival Ma'ariv newspaper, was more sanguine. He argues that the mayhem of the past few weeks has done much to discredit the settler cause, and says he now believes the withdrawal will go through more smoothly.

A poll in last Friday's Yediot Achronot seemed to bear Bettelheim out: After a steady decline to 53 percent at the start of June, the poll showed support for the government's withdrawal plan climbing back to 62 percent.

But other observers aren't convinced police will be able to handle future protesters, and see in the mayhem a sign that things will get worse.

Writing in Ha'aretz, Amos Harel asked, "If the police deploy a 6,000-strong force throughout the country but are unable to prevent roads from being blocked, what will happen during the pullout when a larger number of police will be busy evacuating" the Gaza Strip?

There is another looming threat that could compound the manpower issue: soldiers refusing to carry out evacuation-related orders. Three soldiers already have refused to participate in withdrawal-related operations, and have been sentenced to up to 56 days in jail.

Moreover, Orthodox soldiers, serving according to a special arrangement with their

yeshivas, known as hesder yeshivas, are asking to be exempted from having to evacuate settlers.

The key to the extent of the refusal phenomenon probably depends on influential rabbis. Some, such as Avraham Shapira, a former Israeli chief rabbi, have come out forcefully in favor of refusal. Others, such as Shlomo Aviner of the Beit El settlement, and Mordechai Elon, head of the Western Wall Yeshiva, are staunchly against any form of refusal.

The army does not intend to make it easy for soldiers who refuse orders. The military chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, has warned that if hesder rabbis continue telling students to refuse evacuation-related orders, the IDF may reconsider the whole hesder project, which mixes religious study with army service.

Sharon, clearly disturbed by the threat of anarchy and refusal, gave brief interviews to all the major Hebrew dailies. He told Ha'aretz that "under no circumstances can we allow a lawless gang to take control of life in Israel."

Despite all the opposition, Sharon is determined to go through with the withdrawal, scheduled to begin Aug. 15. As bad as they might get, the demonstrations and protests are unlikely to deter him.

One thing that could still stop him would be a coup in the Likud to oust Sharon and install Netanyahu in his place. Addressing a major economic conference in Jerusalem, Sharon declared that he was aware of how his opponents "are planning my political ouster." Though Sharon didn't mention him by name, everyone knew he meant Netanyahu.

Indeed, Netanyahu's moves will be crucial. He is under pressure from the far right to put himself at the head of the Likud rebels and move to topple Sharon. But, as a would-be prime minister himself, Netanyahu needs to be careful not to ally himself too closely with the far right.

Netanyahu did vote Sunday to delay the withdrawal by three months, although the Cabinet defeated the proposal by a vote of 18-3.

Some Israelis are losing patience with the settlers' tactics.

NEWS ANALYSIS

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Jewish coalition wants end to poverty

The Make Poverty History Jewish Coalition demonstrated at the weekend's G-8 "global justice" protests in Scotland.

Around 70 activists from the British coalition — which produced hundreds of white "Make Poverty History" yarmulkes — joined some 220,000 people rallying in Edinburgh, Scotland, to call for the cancellation of Third World debt.

Congressmen hail OSCE resolution

Two U.S. lawmakers praised a European resolution seeking an end to the Arab boycott of Israel.

Reps. Benjamin Cardin (D-Md.) and Chris Smith (R-N.J.) hailed the resolution, passed Tuesday by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's parliamentary assembly, which calls on the OSCE Mediterranean Partners to work with the Arab League to end the Arab League's 50-year boycott of Israeli products and businesses.

"The boycott has been in existence for nearly 50 years, and has served only to exacerbate tensions between the United States, Israel and our partners in the Middle East," said Cardin, who introduced the legislation.

Ross criticizes E.U. on Hamas

The European Union shouldn't hold contacts with Hamas, Dennis Ross said.

"If you're dealing with them, I think you're undercutting the Palestinian Authority," Ross, the former U.S. envoy to the Middle East, told the Jerusalem Post on Tuesday.

Recent revelations that junior E.U. diplomats have met with Hamas municipal leaders in the West Bank drew Israeli condemnation, and reaffirmation from Washington that Hamas remains on its terrorist list.

To E.U. officials "who say, 'Well, they're in municipalities where I have projects,' then I say, 'Direct your projects elsewhere,'" Ross said.

Romania facing up to history?

Romania's foreign minister said his country is working to come to terms with its Holocaust-era behavior.

The Jerusalem Post reported Tuesday that Mihai-Razvan Ungureanu, speaking Monday at Hebrew University's Vidal Sassoon Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism, said Romania has been "desperately seeking absolution" since survivors began describing their experiences over the past few years.

Ungureanu said Romania would be establishing a voluntary curriculum on the Holocaust in secondary schools.

Romania has made strides toward acknowledging its complicity in the Holocaust, including the establishment of a Holocaust Remembrance Day, since a Romanian government statement denying that the Holocaust took place on Romanian territory sparked an uproar.

NORTH AMERICA

Rabbis call for choice-friendly nominees

More than 250 U.S. rabbis encouraged lawmakers to consider judicial nominees who will uphold "religious freedoms" such as reproductive choice.

The 270 rabbis expressed concern about nominees whose judicial records display an "inconsistent commitment to upholding basic constitutional rights," they said in a letter, coordinated by the National Council of Jewish Women and sent to senators Tuesday.

"It is imperative that nominees to the federal bench protect fundamental religious and personal freedoms, such as reproductive choice," they said.

"Any infringement on these rights subverts the basis upon which our nation is built."

Jews rock the Web

The founders of a Web site on Jews settled a lawsuit with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

The latter institution dropped its lawsuit against Jewsrock.org after the Web site agreed not to use the phrase "Jewish Rock and Roll Hall of Fame" in connection with the site.

The site features a "Challah Fame" and a quiz titled, "Jews or Not?"

MIDDLE EAST

Security chief meets sage

The chief of Israel's Shin Bet security service and a leading Israeli rabbi discussed ways of avoiding Jewish infighting during the Gaza Strip withdrawal.

Yuval Diskin traveled to Jerusalem on Monday night for a discreet audience with Avraham Shapira, a former Ashkenazi chief rabbi.

Though Shapira has raised eyebrows in the government by endorsing soldiers who plan to disobey orders to evacuate settlers from Gaza and the northern West Bank, the rabbi assured Diskin he opposed violent resistance.

"There is a public dispute, but we must understand each other," Shapira was quoted as telling the security chief.

Film simulcast

A documentary on a possible Mideast peace deal was aired by an Israeli cable channel, the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation and Abu Dhabi satellite TV.

The film, the first two parts of which were broadcast Saturday, examines what a future Israeli-Palestinian peace deal could look like, through interviews with leading figures and thinkers on both sides of the conflict.

The "Shape of the Future" series was produced by Search for Common Ground, a Washington-based nonprofit organization that works to prevent and resolve conflicts.

The film focuses on the future and deliberately does not have scenes of violence or historical footage.

Cutting the competition

Israel's Health Ministry endorsed traditional circumcision methods.

In an advisory issued this week and quoted by Israel Radio, the ministry said mohelim are better trained to handle the surgery than urologists, to whom secular couples increasingly are turning as an alternative to the Orthodox ritual.

Circumcision by a mohel takes just a few seconds, while a urologist can take up to 10 minutes, the ministry said.

But Israeli authorities receive frequent complaints over malpractice by unlicensed mohelim.

Conservative school recognized in Israel

The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies received official recognition as an Israeli academic institution.

The Jerusalem affiliate of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary until now had been granting degrees through New York's JTS, but it was recognized recently by Israel's Council for Higher Education and now can give graduates Israeli master's degrees.

Separating the fanatic from the fan

Israeli fans now can be jailed for taking banned items into athletic stadiums or yelling racist chants at sporting events.

On Monday, the Knesset passed legislation that allows for up to three years for taking banned items such as flares and firecrackers inside arenas.

One year jail time is possible for offensive or racist abuse. The legislation comes after several incidents at sports stadiums occurred during the past 18 months.