



IN THE NEWS

Sharon mends fences in France

On a visit to Paris, Ariel Sharon vowed to improve France-Israel ties.

"I decided to come here despite the difficult situation in Israel," the Israeli prime minister told reporters Wednesday before a lunch meeting with French President Jacques Chirac. "I am convinced that my visit will allow for relations between our nations to be bolstered and for there to be progress in the Middle East peace process, which is so important for us."

Chirac echoed Sharon's sentiments, adding that he places a high priority on fighting anti-Semitism.

Settlers vow to march again

Israeli settler leaders plan another march on the Gaza Strip aimed at preventing the evacuation of settlements there.

The Yesha settler council announced Wednesday that thousands of its supporters in Israel would take to the streets next week, intent on reaching the Gush Katif settlement bloc despite an army blockade on Gaza.

A similar march earlier this month was blocked by police, who restricted the protesters to a Negev town outside Gaza for three days until they dispersed.

Yesha said the new march, scheduled for Tuesday, would aim to circumvent security forces by setting off from three different points.

Israel: No summit with Palestinians now

Israeli officials say they intend to keep the Palestinian Authority to its commitments under the "road map" peace plan.

On Wednesday, the Jerusalem Post cited a senior Israeli official as saying that Israel would not agree to any international peace summit until the first stage of the plan, which requires the Palestinian Authority to dismantle terrorist groups in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, is implemented.

WORLD REPORT

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As it pushes peace in Mideast, administration faces resistance

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Bush administration faces three fronts of resistance in selling its complex, nuanced plan for Mideast peace: Israel, the Palestinians and Congress.

Condoleezza Rice's lightning visit to the region last week — tacked onto an Africa tour at the last minute — underscored the U.S. secretary of state's determination to make sure that Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip next month jump-starts the peace process.

The Bush administration is concerned that the recent acceleration of violence by Palestinian terrorists, the fierce political resistance displayed by pro-settler Israelis, and a failure by Israelis and Palestinians to coordinate ahead of the withdrawal could bury the hope of reviving peace talks.

Rice made it clear that she's ready to wade into the process if there is further resistance.

"What I'm doing is making sure that the Israelis and the Palestinians understand where the United States stands on various issues, where necessary trying to facilitate an answer if one does not appear self-evident to each of the two parties," she said after meeting Saturday in Ramallah with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Each side blames the other for preventing cooperation: Palestinians say they want more details on the settlements so they can plan for the takeover; Israel is concerned that such information could make its way to terrorists and facilitate attacks before and during the withdrawal.

Israel says it has shown goodwill by authorizing the transfer of at least 5,000 P.A. policemen from the West Bank to Gaza to oversee the withdrawal and offering to discuss the rebuilding of a Gaza seaport and airport, despite concerns that such outlets could be used to bring in arms.

"It's all on the condition of improved security, which we haven't seen yet," an Israeli official said.

While Rice was making the case for cooperation in the Middle East, her proxies were making the case for its funding on Capitol Hill. That followed surprising victories by members of Congress seeking tough oversight provisions on assistance to the Arabs, especially the Palestinians and Egyptians.

The administration is especially eager to keep Egypt onboard, believing its role in smoothing Israel's exit from Gaza by securing the borders is central to the plan's chances of success.

The terrorist attack this weekend in the Sinai resort of Sharm el-Sheik — that killed 64 people, according to the Egyptian Health Ministry, and as many as 88 local hospitals — could exacerbate Egyptian concerns about playing too central a role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Al-Qaida, which claimed responsibility for the attack, released a video describing the presence of Israeli tourists in Sinai as a "defilement" of Arab land.

Three measures, all attached to a State Department authorization bill passed last week by the U.S. House of Representatives, especially irritated the White House. One by Rep. Shelley Berkeley (D-Nev.) restricted

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■ *The U.S. faces resistance as it pushes for Mideast peace*

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direct assistance to the Palestinian Authority; another longstanding initiative by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) shifts \$240 million in aid for Egypt from military to economic assistance; a third would require the State Department to accede to requests by U.S. citizens born in Jerusalem to attach "Israel" to their birthplace in their passports.

The provision on Egypt was of special concern to the administration.

"Such changes could be viewed in a way that may undermine our efforts to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals in the Middle East and could have a negative consequence for political and economic reform in Egypt," said a Statement of Administration Policy distributed in Congress last week just before the vote.

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Cutting Egypt's military budget while increasing Israel's would be seen as an affront in Egypt.

The bill's supporters say it addresses the glacial pace of democratic reform in Egypt, another plank of Bush's Middle East policy.

"Our military aid for Egypt is more than twice our aid for economic development and political reform," Lantos said after his initiative passed. "Never has a prescription been so at odds with the symptoms it's designed to treat."

Israeli spokesmen refused to comment on what they said was a U.S.-Egyptian matter but noted that negotiations with Egypt on policing the Gaza border after Israel withdraws are advanced.

"The agreement is all but finalized," an official said.

Considering the stake that Israel now has in a cooperative Egypt, it was a surprise to many on the Hill that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee emphatically endorsed the Lantos amendment.

AIPAC Executive Director Howard Kohr wrote to members of Congress that the amendment's language "will help deal with the many challenges Egypt faces — challenges that eclipse any outside military threats."

The July 23 terrorist attack in Egypt, which took place just days after that letter reached legislators, might undermine claims that Egypt no longer faces a military threat, said Rep. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.), who opposed the change.

"It would be counterproductive to handcuff in any way the Egyptian military and security forces at this point in time," said Wexler, who, like Lantos, is Jewish. "The Israelis fully appreciate the importance of a strong American-Egyptian relationship."

The administration's opposition to the passport provision on Jerusalem drew criticism from the Orthodox Union, usually a reliable Bush-administration ally on foreign policy.

"While we appreciate the administration's institutional interest to direct America's foreign policy, we nonetheless appeal to the president — as one who has been a staunch friend of Israel throughout his tenure — to withdraw the administration's opposition to these modest and sensible provisions," said Nathan Diament, the O.U.'s director of public policy.

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Berkeley's amendment, which would require direct aid to the Palestinian Authority to be distributed in quarterly installments and withheld unless P.A. officials meet accountability standards, was almost purely symbolic. Congress has already passed a host of provisions banning direct U.S. assistance to the Palestinian Authority, though Bush used his national-security waiver to get \$50 million to Abbas.

In any case, none of the provisions passed by the House are likely to survive negotiations with the Senate. Still, the

Bush administration was concerned by the symbolism of such measures.

"Such provisions limit the president's flexibility to conduct the nation's foreign policy," it said in its statement of policy.

'What I'm doing is making sure that the Israelis and the Palestinians understand where the United States stands.'

Condoleezza Rice

U.S. Secretary of State

That seems especially true now that Rice wants to act quickly in the three weeks before Israel begins pulling out of the Gaza Strip. In her meetings with Abbas, she praised him for taking some measures to rein in terrorists but also made clear that he was not doing enough.

"Important steps have been taken, but much remains to be done to ensure that areas vacated by Israel will not once again be used as bases for terrorist actions," Rice said.

There also were signs that the Bush administration wants Israel to hold back on retaliatory attacks after terrorist attacks. A recent internal State Department memo said such attacks had a "profoundly negative effect" on Abbas' ability to contain violence.

Meeting with Sharon, the secretary of state said Israel must ensure that its withdrawal from Gaza does not isolate the Palestinians.

"When the Israelis withdraw from Gaza, it cannot be a sealed or isolated area, with the Palestinian people closed in after that withdrawal," she said. "We are committed to connectivity between Gaza and the West Bank."

Rice singled out Israel's security fence, departing somewhat from previous support for the passive device that has proven effective in preventing terrorist attacks.

"We've expressed our deep concern about the route of the wall," she said, using the Palestinian term for the barrier, "particularly around Jerusalem. And we have expressed the American policy on settlement activity, which remains that it should stop." ■



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Central American Jews push for free-trade pact

By BRIAN HARRIS

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica (JTA) — Members of Central America's small Jewish communities have played an uncommonly pivotal role in pushing for the approval of the United States-Central America Free Trade Agreement.

With the U.S. Congress on the verge of giving final approval to CAFTA, American Jewish groups that have weighed in on the issue are divided. But in Central America, the final push to make the pact a reality highlights the prominence of individual Jews in lobbying for the deal.

The agreement would eliminate import duties and quotas on the vast majority of goods that Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica trade in. The deal also includes the Dominican Republic, which is not part of Central America.

While the combined gross domestic product of these nations is less than that of the Czech Republic, CAFTA's passage has become a top policy priority for President Bush and has stirred deep partisan divisions in Congress.

The American Jewish World Service issued a scathing condemnation of the pact last month, calling it a "disaster" and arguing that it would increase poverty while doing nothing to improve labor conditions in the region.

In contrast, the American Jewish Committee has come out in support of the agreement.

"It's not going to solve everything in the region, but it will open borders not just for free trade but for the trade of ideas," said Dina Siegel Vann, director of the AJCommittee's Latino and Latin American Institute. "It will put pressure on governments to modernize areas that have to do with the well-being of their citizens. It will be a catalyst not just for growth but for strengthening democracy."

The U.S. Senate approved the deal, 54-45, earlier this month. A final vote in the U.S. House of Representatives is due by the end of July.

In their local legislatures and business organizations, Central American Jews insist that CAFTA is not a "Jewish" issue per se and that their participation is strictly on a personal level, but they have made CAFTA their cause.

The clearest example of Jewish involvement is in Costa Rica, where the deal faces the strongest popular opposition and where the legislature hasn't even begun a debate on the pact.

The country has the largest Jewish community in the region. Many of its members hold leadership positions in business groups, including Samuel Yankelewitz, president of the country's Union of Business Chambers, Costa Rica's largest private sector organization.

During CAFTA negotiations, Yankelewitz met regularly with Costa Rican and American trade negotiators and acted as the private sector's de facto spokesman, attempting to sway public opinion at home to favor the pact. With Costa Rican President Abel Pacheco now dragging his feet on sending the deal to the Legislative Assembly for approval, Yankelewitz has returned to the spotlight, lambasting the president and urging speedy approval.

Economist Saul Weisleder, who served in the Costa Rican legislature from 1994 to 1998, edited a book analyzing the agreement that was released earlier this year. One of the chapters favorable to the deal was written by a textile industry power player, Miguel Schyfter, who also plied strong ties with negotiators during bargaining sessions.

Not all of Costa Rica's estimated 3,500 Jews are pro-CAFTA, though none has taken a leading role among groups opposing the deal. Those groups object to CAFTA's provisions requiring Costa Rica to break up state monopolies in insurance and telecommunications; they also feel the accord leaves rice and potato farmers in an unfavorable position.

Local Jews who have expressed opposition to the agreement cite stricter patent enforcement on medicines, which may mean that the country's once-proud but now grossly underfinanced health-care system will be unable to purchase low-cost generic medicines.

If CAFTA reaches the Legislative Assembly before her term ends next May, Deputy Aida Faingezicht de Fishman will

be the only Costa Rican Jew with a chance to vote on the agreement — and she'll reluctantly vote yes.

"I agree that CAFTA has some clauses that to me have nothing to do with the level of social and economic development levels of Central America," she told JTA.

"Nevertheless, if

I have to choose between CAFTA or no CAFTA, and the benefits of the Caribbean Basin Initiative are taken away, I will vote for CAFTA."

Jaime Rosenthal, an opposition congressman and one-time presidential hopeful in Honduras, who is reputed to be the country's wealthiest man, was the first Jew to vote on the agreement in any country — casting a yes vote when the deal sailed through the Honduran Congress in March.

His lobbying, focused on the hundreds of thousands of jobs in the local textile industry, helped ensure near-unanimous support for the agreement in the legislature.

"I am a supporter of integrating Central America and the U.S. more," he told JTA in a telephone interview. "CAFTA well managed could be a great opportunity."

Members of the smaller Jewish communities in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua generally have backed the agreement with enthusiasm.

Since the local Jewish communities are small minorities in a mostly Catholic region, they tend to shy away from the spotlight as a collective. That has left them a bit perplexed at the public lobbying in Washington by American Jewish groups.

"It seems to me that when we have a name of this type that uses the word 'Jewish,' we must be very careful," Faingezicht said, rebuking the American Jewish World Service for opposing the deal. "There is a whole series of very important topics that Jewish organizations can take positions on."

'I am a supporter of integrating Central America and the U.S. more. CAFTA well managed could be a great opportunity.'

Jaime Rosenthal

Honduran Jewish legislator

FOCUS
ON
ISSUES

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Lebanon frees anti-Syrian warlord

Lebanon freed a notorious anti-Syrian warlord who had allied himself with Israel during the 1982 Lebanon War.

Samir Geagea, 53, had been serving three life sentences for the 1987 assassination of pro-Syrian premier Rashid Karami and others.

Geagea's release is viewed as the latest in a series of steps taken to reunify the country following years of civil strife and Syrian control, and he is expected to play a political role in Lebanon.

His Christian Lebanese Forces militia formed an alliance with Israel during its 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

In Gaza City, dozens of Palestinian refugees protested Geagea's release, calling him a war criminal for his role in the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, the Qatari Gulf Times reported.

Sderot residents want out

Residents of an Israeli border town want to be evacuated along with the Gaza Strip.

Seventeen families from Sderot put their houses up for sale this week after a Palestinian rocket, fired from Gaza, landed in the middle of their neighborhood.

There was no serious damage, but the residents said such salvos make them as much of a security burden to Israel as are the Gaza settlements.

They demanded relocation and compensation. An Israeli official said Sderot had been allotted special funding as a "confrontation-line" community to offset massive municipal losses caused by the Palestinian attacks. But he dismissed the relocation demand as unrealistic.

An unimpressive Parliament?

There is a crisis of confidence in the Knesset, a new poll suggests.

According to a survey published Wednesday as the Israeli Parliament began its summer recess, 87 percent of Israelis believe the Knesset doesn't represent them.

One in two Israelis believes that lawmakers do not take their work seriously.

Recent months have seen public outcry at the behavior of some members of the Knesset, which refused to suspend the parliamentary immunity of one lawmaker accused of fraudulent voting.

But Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin played down the poll.

"The public doesn't like to like the Knesset," he said.

A place at the table

An Israeli nonprofit praised the Knesset for passing a law requiring that peace negotiating teams include women.

Isha L'Isha-Haifa Feminist Center called the law a "major milestone in the advancement of women's rights in Israel."

Members of the group, which believe that female voices can help bring peace, helped organize support for the legislation.

Egyptian: Canal a bad idea

A proposed canal linking the Red Sea and Dead Sea would increase the risk of an earthquake, an Egyptian official said.

Ahmed Ali Fadel made his comments Tuesday.

Jordan, Israel and the Palestinians signed an agreement earlier this year to examine the idea of building a canal, which would help prevent the Dead Sea from drying up and alleviate the region's ongoing water crisis.

Fadel added that he also opposed the project because the increase in water production from the canal might help Israel's nuclear reactor at Dimona or promote Israeli settlement in the Negev Desert.

WORLD

Straw condemns Livingstone

Britain's foreign secretary condemned anti-Israel remarks made by London Mayor Ken Livingstone.

In the wake of the July 7 terrorist bombings in London, Livingstone justified Palestinian suicide bombers and compared Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud Party to Hamas.

"There can be no excuses for terrorism, none whatever," Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said during a London news conference with visiting Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom. "Mr. Livingstone's remarks were as wrong as they were unacceptable," Straw added. "There is no and there can be no moral equivalence between a democratic party and its supporters, operating in a democracy that is Israel, and a terrorist organization whose policy is the slaughter of innocent civilians."

Shalom, who said he also had raised the issue of Livingstone's comments in a meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair, laid a wreath at the site of the bus bombing in which Israeli Anat Rosenberg died.

Toilets removed from Jewish cemetery

Public toilets are being removed from the site of a former Jewish cemetery in Poland.

Authorities in the town of Szczekociny agreed to remove the toilets, which were seen as defacing the site, after pressure from Jewish groups, including the World Jewish Congress.

NORTH AMERICA

Synagogue strife in New Jersey

Plans to open a high school for Orthodox Jewish boys at a New Jersey synagogue have run into opposition from local residents.

The Asbury Park Press reported Wednesday that townspeople in Roosevelt, including many Jews, have initiated a petition to recall Mayor Neil Marko, a synagogue trustee, for supporting the plans.

While opponents of the synagogue say the small town of 950 people lacks the financial and physical resources to house a high school, others suspect a subtle, anti-religious bias.

"That's the most disgusting thing about this whole thing, that Jews should be so vile and bigoted against other Jews," said Elly Shapiro, who serves as president of the synagogue.

Lynn Lawson, a local Reform Jew who opposes the school, said she is concerned that Orthodox Jews are too insular.

"I've had a problem with Orthodox Jews looking down on me," she said.

Group calls for Niger aid

The American Jewish Congress-Council for World Jewry called on the international community to urgently address the prospect of mass starvation in Niger.

Monday's call comes after the inaugural meeting last week of the group's Consultative Committee on Africa-Jewish Relations at the United Nations.

The meeting with 19 African diplomats sought issues on which the AJCongress and African nations could collaborate, and the issue of the critical food shortfall facing Niger was raised.

Two and a half million people — including 800,000 children — are in dire need of emergency food aid, the AJCongress-Council for World Jewry said in a statement.

"Action must be swift and on a scale big enough to have an impact," Council Chairman Jack Rosen said. "We cannot allow mass starvation in 2005."