

IN THE NEWS

Mubarak calls Sharon peacemaker

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said only Ariel Sharon can bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

"Sharon, of all the Israeli politicians, is the only one capable of achieving peace with the Palestinians," Mubarak said Sunday in an interview with Spain's ABC newspaper. "He has the ability to take difficult decisions, commit to what he says and carry it out."

Mubarak praised Sharon's decision last week to quit the Likud Party.

Red Cross accord seen as imminent

Magen David Adom and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society have reached agreement on the adoption of a new neutral symbol.

The understanding between the two aid societies on the "red crystal" emblem is expected to be signed Monday in Geneva, according to a report by The Associated Press citing the Swiss Foreign Ministry.

The agreement could help smooth the way for Geneva Convention signatory nations to accept the emblem, a red square perched on one of its corners.

Russian bill causes alarm

Some Russian Jewish activists voiced concern that a new Russian bill on nonprofit organizations would harm Jewish groups.

The bill that passed the Russian Duma on Nov. 23 would place nonprofits under greater state scrutiny.

The measure could also prevent foreign nonprofits from operating branches in the country and force Russian nonprofits to reject money from abroad.

The bill now requires two more readings in the Parliament, expected to take place by the end of the year, before President Vladimir Putin can sign it into law.

WORLD REPORT

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As it prepares for an election, WZO seeks to assert its relevance

By CHANAN TIGAY

NEW YORK (JTA) — Earlier this year, Yossi Beilin, leader of Israel's Meretz-Yahad Party, called for the establishment of an assembly of Jewish lawmakers from around the world to address issues of consequence to global Jewry.

Beilin's call echoed an idea two years earlier from Israeli President Moshe Katsav, who recommended creating a "second chamber" of the Knesset to provide a forum for Diaspora Jews to advise the State of Israel on matters of import to world Jewry.

Such calls leave proponents of the World Zionist Organization scratching their heads. After all, they say, their organization has been doing all those things for more than 100 years.

"This is the congress of the Jewish people," says Karen Rubinstein, executive director of the American Zionist Movement, the WZO's U.S. wing.

Elections got under way earlier this month for U.S. representatives to the WZO's 35th Congress of the Jewish People, to be held in Israel in June. Balloting will run through Feb. 28.

Twelve different slates are running for 145 available slots. Two new groups are among those contending: the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, running for the first time on its own slate; and RAJI: Russian American Jews for Israel.

Founded at the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, the WZO — whose original goal was establishing a

Jewish homeland — has convened more than 30 times to debate issues facing the Jewish people.

Among the WZO's most important functions is providing roughly half of the decision-making power of the Jewish Agency for Israel. Half of the agency's board of governors are from the WZO, as are many members of its committees.

"The people who go and vote in this congress represent world Jewry," says David Borowich, founder of the Dor Zion slate, which is running for spots in the WZO Congress. "They have a chance to put forth new ideas. They influence the leadership of the Jewish Agency. You may say, 'Why is this important?' The Jewish Agency has a budget. That money can be going to broad programs and big ideas."

The Jewish Agency boasts an annual budget of some \$350 million and dispatches its emissaries around the world.

But with a functioning Jewish state governed by a democratically elected Parliament, some wonder whether the WZO has outlived its usefulness.

The WZO "is a pathetic vestige of the organization founded by Theodor Herzl, which was most relevant in the years leading up to the founding of the State of Israel," Beilin wrote in a Ha'aretz Op-Ed earlier this year. "Instead of being disbanded in 1948, with the establishment of the state, it continues to exist as an anachronistic framework, which represents a tiny fraction of the Jewish people."

He added that the content of the

Continued on page 2

FOCUS
ON
ISSUES

■ Elections are under way for the 'congress of the Jewish people'

Continued from page 1

WZO congresses "is of no interest to the Jewish community around the world."

WZO officials, along with members of the dozen American slates running for seats in the upcoming congress, acknowledge that the organization has flaws, but bristle at the notion that it ought to be replaced.

"So they want to change the name of the structure, and by changing the name believe they are changing the purposes?" asked Mel Salberg, past president of the AZM and now its American election committee chair. "I don't see giving up a structure and an organization that has served Israel and served the Jewish people."

Still, in the United States at least, interest in the WZO has been limited.

Of the estimated 5 million to 6 million American Jews, just 107,832 voted in the elections for U.S. representatives to the Zionist congress in 1997. The number fell to 88,753 in 2002.

"We have not had, in the past, the kind of response to this that we would like," Rubinstein says.

But some observers say the figures may be misleading. Some 50 percent of U.S. Jews aren't affiliated with synagogues or other Jewish organizations, says Rabbi Robert Golub, executive director of MERCAZ USA, the Zionist arm of the Conservative movement, which cuts the number of potential voters down to 3 million. Of this figure, roughly half are children,

cutting the number again to 1.5 million potential voters.

One need not be a member of a Jewish organization to vote; individuals older than 18 who accept the fundamental beliefs of Zionism can register and vote through the AZM at www.congressofthejewishpeople.org. Registration costs \$7 for adults and \$5 for students.

The AZM will be launching a radio and Internet campaign in coming weeks to educate American Jews about the WZO's activities and encourage greater awareness and involvement.

The WZO also has passed a rule stipulating that 25 percent of each slate's delegates be under age 30, a step aimed at addressing the WZO's aging membership and ensuring future leaders.

Hatikva, a slate of progressive Zionist groups, has put forth candidates including the well-known Jewish entertainer Theodore Bikel and Ruth Messinger, president of the American Jewish World Service and a former candidate for New York City mayor.

At least one group in the running hopes realpolitik offers some free publicity: Likud's U.S. arm thinks that Ariel Sharon's recent decision to leave the Likud to form a new party could boost the electoral fortunes of the Likud's U.S. branch.

"The fact that we are in the news and the name of our slate is 'Likud,' I think it definitely helps," said Ari Harow, executive director of American Friends of Likud. "For the past couple of years, nobody really knew what the Likud stood for. For the first time in a number of years I think there's some ideological clarity."

Also running to represent the United States are the Green Zionist Alliance; Herut, North America: The Jabotinsky Movement; Hatikva: The Progressive Zionist Coalition; ARZA: Association of Reform Zionists of America; the Religious Zionist Slate; Dor Zion; Bnai Zion, World

Confederation of United Zionists and Dor Zion; MERCAZ USA: the Zionist organization of the Conservative movement; the American Zionist Coalition; Baltimore Zionist District and Fuel for Truth; and the Zionist Organization of America.

In the last WZO election in 2002, ARZA / World Union, the Reform movement's slate, came out on top, with 42 percent of the vote, followed by the Conservative MERCAZ USA with 22 percent and

the Religious Zionist Movement with 20 percent. Coming in fourth with less than 4 percent of the vote was Meretz USA.

The religious streams' success in WZO elections began in the late 1970s when ARZA made its first big splash, AZM says. Since then, other religious movements have been trending upward as well.

Observers say one reason the religious streams are dominating the ideological groups in these ballots is that the religious groups have a built-in platform for spreading their message: synagogues.

Systemic shifts have contributed as well.

"The main thing is that Zionism in America historically was seen as separate from the synagogues," says MERCAZ USA's Golub. "Today, the ideological Zionist groups have declined dramatically because we're now dealing with an existing State of Israel, and the ideological battles have shifted to Israel."

He added, "In the Diaspora, the religious movements have embraced Zionism, certainly since the 1967 war, and since the affiliated community is found in the synagogues today, that's where you're going to find the bulk of Zionists and the bulk of Zionist activities."

The WZO also passes resolutions on issues that range from support for religious pluralism in Israel to allocating money to encourage aliyah to developing rural settlements on the Israeli periphery.

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THIS WEEK**MONDAY**

■ Jonathan Sacks, the Orthodox chief rabbi of Britain, addresses the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on relations between Muslims and Jews in Europe.

TUESDAY

■ Saeb Erekat, the top Palestinian negotiator, is in Washington to meet with Bush administration officials.

■ The American Jewish World Service launches a curriculum on AIDS. It is the second in a series of curricula integrating Jewish education and social justice issues aimed at Jewish day schools, Hillels, congregations, Jewish community centers and other Jewish organizations.

WEDNESDAY

■ The U.S. Supreme Court considers New Hampshire's parental consent abortion law. Jewish groups are watching the case closely to see how John Roberts, the new chief justice, approaches the hot-button issue.

■ Rachid Mohamed Rachid, the Egyptian trade minister, is in Washington to discuss a free trade agreement with the United States. One factor in the dramatically higher role Egypt has taken in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is its hopes of improving its relationship with the United States.

■ The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, a branch of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, will celebrate its first commencement exercise as an accredited Israeli academic institution in Jerusalem.

■ A two-day conference on the relationship between evangelical Christians and Jews opens at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

SUNDAY

■ The 40th anniversary of the papal declaration, absolving Jews of responsibility in Jesus' death, is held in Paris. The event is organized by the European Jewish Congress and the Conference of European Rabbis.

■ The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism holds its biennial convention in Boston. Highlights of the four-day conference include a talk on "what it means to be a Conservative Jew," a panel discussion on where the Conservative movement is headed and a discussion of the movement's outreach initiative.

■ The Jewish Outreach Institute holds a leadership conference in Atlanta to share ideas and best practices for outreach to intermarried and unengaged Jews. The institute's concept of "public-space Judaism" will be explored during the three-day event.

■ A consortium of Jewish social action groups convenes a national training conference for Jewish social justice organizing in Chicago. Participants in the three-day event will learn techniques for organizing and building coalitions, as well as studying Jewish texts related to social justice. Major sponsors include the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Boston, the Jewish Fund for Justice and the Progressive Jewish Alliance.

Ukraine's orange year

By VLADIMIR MATVEYEV

KIEV, Ukraine (JTA) — A huge stage and soup kitchens were set up in downtown Kiev last week to make the city's central square look the way it did a year ago.

Part of official festivities as Ukraine marks the anniversary of the "Orange Revolution," the props were intended to remind Ukrainians of the days when tens of thousands of them braved freezing temperatures in a two-week protest over rigged presidential elections in which Viktor Yushchenko was deprived of victory.

Wearing orange, the color of Yushchenko's campaign, the protesters helped force new elections that brought him to power.

But a year later, the official celebrations are doing little to improve the mood of most Ukrainians — including Jews — who now believe the revolution made little difference in their lives.

Regardless of whom they backed in last year's elections, local Jews today seem to agree that Yushchenko's government has not shown enough political will or ability to implement economic and political reforms and combat anti-Semitism.

This has been a year of "grand but useless declarations," sighed Yevsey Kotlyar, 70, a Kiev retiree, as he visited a Kiev Jewish community center one recent morning. "How can I trust this government if it only makes declarations?"

Yushchenko's rise to power was built on promises of rapid economic improvement and measures to root out corruption that permeated Ukraine under his predecessor, Leonid Kuchma. But in September Yushchenko fired his own government in response to allegations of corruption in his inner circle.

On the economic front, his government has been blamed for scaring off investors and prompting an increase in food and gas prices.

A year ago, the country's estimated 250,000 to 450,000 Jews, like other Ukrai-

nians, found themselves split between supporters and opponents of the Orange Revolution.

Today people from both camps seem to share the disappointment over the lack of achievement in Yushchenko's first year. Yet some still believe the revolution was the right thing for Ukraine.

Reaction in the Jewish community is mixed, said Rabbi Azriel Haikin, one of Ukraine's three chief rabbis.

"Some Jews say it's too early and we should give the government more time, but others say that the government has no direction," he said.

To Yushchenko's credit, many agree that Ukraine has more free speech and other political freedoms as a result of the Orange Revolution.

Some in Washington believe so as well. Earlier this month, the U.S. Senate passed a bill to graduate Ukraine from the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment, a piece of Soviet-era legislation that linked trade with the United States

to a country's willingness to let Jews emigrate.

The sour mood of Ukrainians, including Jews, stems from the country's lack of economic progress.

Yushchenko promised to introduce liberal economic reforms, but the country's economic growth has slowed during his first year in office.

At least the Jewish community feels as safe today as it did before the revolution.

"There are no changes for the worse for the Jewish community," said Mikhail Frenkel, head of the Association of Jewish Media in Ukraine.

But some believe Yushchenko should do more on this front as well. He has made several strongly worded statements against anti-Semitism, but anti-Semitic propaganda continues to emanate from MAUP, a business management school in Kiev that is believed to be the country's largest private college but which also has become the major purveyor of anti-Semitic ideology and publications in Ukraine.

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'grand but useless
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Yevsey Kotlyar
Kiev retiree

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

E.U. draft report slammed

Israeli officials criticized a draft report by the European Union that does not recognize Israel's right to Jerusalem as its undivided capital.

The report refers to Jewish neighborhoods of east Jerusalem as "illegal settlements," according to the Jerusalem Post, which obtained a copy of the report.

Mark Regev, a spokesman for Israel's Foreign Ministry called the statement on east Jerusalem, a "throwback to the past," the Post reported.

The report is being prepared for adoption by the E.U.'s External Relations Council on Dec. 12.

Arrest made in terrorism funding issue

Israel arrested a Hamas activist suspected of funneling money from abroad to support terrorism inside Israel.

The arrest of Ahmad Saltana, also known as Abu Asama, who was arrested on Sept. 25 in Jenin, was only released for publication on Sunday.

The fund that Saltana headed had an annual budget of \$1 million dollars that was earmarked for families of Palestinian prisoners, Hamas activists and Muslim terrorists and suicide bombers who died as a result of their terror activity, Israel says.

Saltana was indicted Sunday in an Israeli military court.

Israel: Palestinian leader to stay in jail

Top Israeli officials said they had no plans to release jailed Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti.

Israeli President Moshe Katsav and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom made the comments Sunday after Barghouti won primaries of Fatah, the main Palestinian movement, last Friday in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Shalom told Israel Radio that Barghouti would never be released because he "is a murderer whose hands are covered in the blood of many Israelis."

Barghouti is serving five life sentences in an Israeli jail for his role in terrorist attacks.

Yeshiva student stabbed in Jerusalem

A yeshiva student was stabbed in Jerusalem.

The teenager was reported to be in moderate condition at a Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem after being stabbed last Friday, apparently by Palestinians in eastern Jerusalem.

Responding to the attack, fervently Orthodox Jews threw rocks at cars being driven by Arab residents of eastern Jerusalem, wounding two.

WORLD

Israel, Germany in Holocaust grave probe

Israel is helping German police identify the recently discovered remains of 34 Holocaust victims.

The skeletons were uncovered last September in a suburb of Stuttgart that was formerly the site of the Echterdingen concentration camp.

German authorities, who have a manifest of the camp's inmates, turned to Israel for help in identifying the bodies.

Yad Vashem said Sunday it would search its Holocaust archive for information that could be of use.

"This is a very rare case — a mass grave with a relatively small number of bodies, accompanied by an orderly list of Jewish prisoners who were kept there at the time," said Nadia Cohen of Yad Vashem's information department.

"All of this allows us to turn to our database in hope of identifying some of those buried there."

Russian rabbi meets with nationalists

A Russian chief rabbi met with leaders of two political parties with a history of anti-Semitism.

According to his press service, Rabbi Berel Lazar, the leader of the country's largest Jewish organization, criticized the anti-Jewish and xenophobic statements of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party and Dmitry Rogozin's Motherland Party.

Lazar met with both leaders in his office inside the Marina Roscha Jewish community center in Moscow.

But Lazar's group, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia said it shares the patriotic concerns of the two parties.

The federation's press office said both leaders denied their parties were anti-Semitic.

Members of the Motherland faction in the Russian Parliament were among the 19 lawmakers who early this year signed a letter that urged the Prosecutor General's Office to open a probe of Jewish religious organizations and have them shut down if they are found guilty of disseminating anti-Russian and anti-Christian ideas.

Moscow bans anti-fascist rally

The city of Moscow's decision to ban an anti-fascist march that was slated for Sunday was criticized.

"The authorities have made it clear to us who they consider as their allies. Anti-fascists are not counted among them," the organizing committee of the march said in a statement on Nov. 25.

The proposed march was seen by its initiators as a response to the Nov. 4 procession of some 1,000 ultra-nationalists in downtown Moscow with xenophobic and anti-Semitic banners and chanting.

The participants in that march — which was held with permission of the city administration — also called for Russia to cleanse itself of immigrants and non-Russian minorities.

Some of them were seen giving Nazi salutes and sporting swastikas.

On Sunday, police briefly detained some of the organizers of the anti-fascist event for holding an unapproved rally near the Moscow mayor's office to protest the cancellation of the anti-fascist march.

Orthodoxy to rise in Germany?

U.S. Orthodox Jewish officials proposed exchange programs to help build traditional Judaism in Germany.

The proposal came during meetings last week in Berlin between Orthodox Union officials and German Jewish leaders.

In the works are teen exchange programs, volunteer training programs and apprenticeships that would bring young volunteers from Germany together with American counterparts, said Rabbi Steven Burg, national director of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth.

Programs are projected to start in the summer of 2007.

NORTH AMERICA

Latkes handily defeat hamantashen

Support for latkes far outpaced backing for hamantashen in an annual Jewish food debate.

Seventy-two people backed the Chanukah potato pancake, while only 44 people picked the Purim pastry after the annual debate, held Nov. 22 at the University of Chicago.

"In Jewish tradition, scholarship is serious but is also irreverent," said Ruth Freedman Cernea, an editor at the University of Chicago Press who attended the event. "Challenging the text, making fun of the text, is encouraged."