

IN THE NEWS

**Conservatives
back abortion rights**

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism passed a resolution Tuesday affirming a woman's right to a halachically permitted abortion, but did not accept an amendment dealing with judicial nominees.

The resolution on reproductive choice calls on the USCJ to "register its opinion" on court cases and government actions that impact a woman's access to an abortion that meets Jewish law.

An amendment that would have added "or judicial nominations" to the sentence was struck down.

The USCJ also passed resolutions on hunger relief, family violence, U.N. treatment of Israel, divestment from Israel, religious freedom in the workplace and immigration reform.

**Israel kills
terrorist in Gaza**

A top Palestinian terrorist was killed in an Israeli air strike in the Gaza Strip.

Wednesday's operation signaled a return to the policy of "targeted killings" following this week's suicide bombing in Netanya.

A leader of the Popular Resistance Committees, a coalition of terrorists who broke off from more mainstream factions, died when a missile struck his car.

**Hanegbi joins
Sharon's Kadima Party**

The acting head of Israel's Likud Party quit to join Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Tzachi Hanegbi, a Cabinet minister who took the Likud's helm after Sharon quit last month to set up the new Kadima Party, surprised colleagues by resigning Wednesday.

He said he would join Kadima to help Sharon push for peace with the Palestinians.



WORLD REPORT

PUBLISHED WEEKDAYS BY JTA—THE GLOBAL NEWS SERVICE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE · WWW.JTA.ORG

Talks about Syria's future show differences between Israel, U.S.

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — When it comes to Syria today, Israel and the United States agree that President Bashar Assad is bad news.

The subject of Syria tomorrow, however, exposes differences between the allies.

The United States already is thinking about a post-Assad Syria as a building block in its efforts to spread democracy in the Middle East. But Israel fears Assad's departure could make the situation even worse.

Israel does not regard the differences with the United States as urgent, since it doesn't believe Assad is going anywhere soon. But the Bush administration's hard line is jarring enough that the Israelis now raise the issue in the U.S.-Israel dialogue.

Israel raised three possible post-Assad scenarios at a strategic dialogue session with the United States last week, none of them good: chaos, an Islamist regime or another strongman from Assad's minority Alawite sect who might roll back the few civil rights and economic reforms Assad has allowed.

The Americans at the meeting, led by Nicholas Burns, an undersecretary of state, dismissed the notions of an Islamist regime or chaos, according to various sources familiar with the meeting.

Instead, Burns said Assad's departure could be "transformative." He suggested it could even lead to elections, as happened in Lebanon when Syria finally ended its three-decade occupation earlier this year.

If another strongman takes Assad's place, the Americans said they would regard it as just a temporary step until democracy comes about.

Burns' comments were of a piece with recent hints that the administration could ratchet up pressure on Syria, including new sanctions. President Bush also has called on Syria to unconditionally release political prisoners.

The pressure has rattled the Syrians.

"The Syrian people and the Syrian government are very worried because of the intransigent attitude of the United States administration toward Syria," Imad Moustapha, the Syrian ambassador, said last month on PBS' "One on One" with John McLaughlin.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Moshe Maoz, a Hebrew University scholar considered Israel's foremost Syria expert, marveled at the American confidence about a peaceful post-Assad Syria. Even if democracy does rise in Syria, there's no way of predicting which party would emerge triumphant, Maoz said, considering how opaque Syrian society is and how fluid the situation would become.

The Israelis are profoundly unhappy with Assad's continued backing of Hezbollah terrorists in Lebanon and his headquartering of Palestinian terrorist groups in Damascus. But some Israeli analysts have suggested that the government prefers to have Assad in power because of his rogue status: If he were replaced by a more moderate leader, the thinking goes, Israel might be pressured to resume peace talks with Syria and return the Golan Heights, which Israel conquered in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Israel also recognizes that Assad does give in under intense pressure, as evidenced by the Lebanon withdrawal.

Assad also has increased patrols along the Syria-Iraq border under threat of fur-

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

ther sanctions, and this week allowed five top Syrian officials to cooperate with the U.N. investigation into the murder of Lebanon's former prime minister.

Assad could do more, Maoz said, but holding back on concessions "is a card in his hands; he cannot give up his cards," Maoz said. "There are no free lunches."

What concerns Israelis is that nothing Assad does appears to dent the Bush administration's determination to keep up the pressure. Asked by JTA about Syria, a State Department spokeswoman would only repeat months-old talking points: "Their cooperation is crucial with the U.N. investigation, they must take action on any use of their territory by the insurgency in Iraq."

When it was noted that Syria now was cooperating with the U.N. inquiry and had taken some measures to secure the border with Iraq, the spokeswoman refused to comment further.

Another sign of Bush's seriousness is his signing last month of a bill extending to Syria sanctions currently in place on Iran.

Their severity is an unmistakable signal: The new bill targets third parties and nations that deal with Syria, which could force countries to choose between the Syrian and U.S. economies, hardly a dilemma.

Maoz suggests a carrot-and-stick approach.

"There is always the possibility of changing the behavior of Bashar," Maoz said. "Show him they mean business, bribe him, induce him."

JTA WORLD REPORT

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JTA WORLD REPORT is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For more information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
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Meeting with Jewish educators, Bush stresses vouchers, choice

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — President Bush brought his controversial support for school vouchers and charitable choice to a receptive Jewish audience, and expressed support for opportunities to help Jewish day schools.

Bush met Tuesday with 13 Jewish educators and day-school leaders, and focused the talk on his support for school vouchers and other education initiatives. Later in the day he hosted the White House's annual Chanukah party, attended by several hundred Jewish leaders. The event was held before the holiday this year because Bush won't be available later in the month.

Bush's annual Chanukah meeting with representatives of the Jewish community has been controversial in past years because of who was invited and who was snubbed. Bush has brought congregational rabbis and political leaders to the table before, as well as heads of major Jewish organizations, but has been accused of neglecting Jewish leaders who have opposed some of his policy initiatives.

This year, meeting participants and White House officials said the choice of participants reflected a desire to highlight education issues. Bush's focus on school vouchers and faith-based initiatives — issues that long have been counted as administrative priorities but have received scant attention in recent years — suggests he may be trying to bring those issues back to the forefront, and may be seeking support from the Jewish community.

Other controversial issues in the Jewish community — such as the nomination of Judge Samuel Alito to the U.S. Supreme Court — were not broached.

"He didn't say anything that extraordinary that anyone would be surprised about," said one participant, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He certainly wasn't challenged, but he was asked questions that dealt with educational issues."

Many Jewish organizations have opposed

school vouchers and charitable choice, believing federal funds for religious programs violate the separation of church and state. Day-school leaders could be a more receptive crowd, however, because they stress the value of religious education and because vouchers would help their schools' bottom lines.

Participants told Bush they've struggled to receive aid and resources they're entitled to from public schools, and were looking for ways to streamline the processes. Bush seemed to enjoy the exchange, participants said, and one leader even remarked that Bush could be a good teacher after he left the White House.

"As educators who dedicate themselves to teaching the faith and to teaching, they are fulfilling the true lesson of Chanukah every day of the year," Bush said later Tuesday at a Chanukah candle-lighting event. "Just as the Maccabees reclaimed their holy temple, these teachers help ensure that Jewish traditions are passed from generation to generation."

Many of the educators said they were awed by the invitation, and overwhelmed by the audience with the president.

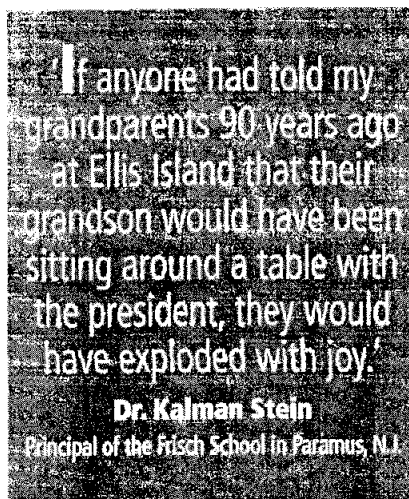
"If anyone had told my grandparents 90 years ago at Ellis Island that their grandson would have been sitting around a table with the president, they would have exploded with joy," said Dr. Kalman Stein, principal of the Frisch School in Paramus, N.J.

Attendees said they got to see a different side of the president.

Later in the day, Bush listened to the West Point Jewish Cadet Choir and then hosted the annual White House Chanukah party.

The event was fully kosher for the first time, at the insistence of First Lady Laura Bush, officials said. Representatives from the Bergen County, N.J. rabbinical council and the Washington office of Chabad certified the kitchen as kosher Monday.

While the Bush White House has hosted kosher dinners before, this was the first time the White House's kitchen was used for the meal.



Nationalists fare poorly in Moscow vote

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — Many voters who took part in recent elections to the Moscow city legislature said the vote was undemocratic and further evidence of Russia's slide toward authoritarianism — yet they had reason to celebrate.

Jewish voters were gratified that none of the nationalist parties made it to the Moscow City Duma.

"There was an election without a real choice," Iosif, a Jewish man in his 60s, said after voting at a downtown Moscow polling station. "In my neighborhood, I haven't seen a single poster of any party other than United Russia."

The pro-Kremlin party comfortably won the elections, securing 28 of the Duma's 35 seats. Critics say they aren't surprised, since United Russia dominated the airwaves and the billboard and poster campaigns in the Russian capital.

Opposition parties repeatedly complained about the difficulties of campaigning against a party whose leader, Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, is an ally of President Vladimir Putin, adding that the ruling party's campaign greatly exceeded campaign spending limits.

This week's municipal election, which was seen as a dress rehearsal for Russian parliamentary elections in 2007 and a presidential election in 2008, drew enormous attention in the Russian media.

The municipal contest also was deemed important because of the legislature's expanded powers, including choosing the next mayor in 2007. The Moscow mayor is seen as the most powerful official in Russia after the president.

Though no statistical data was immediately available, the Jewish vote seems to have been split between the liberal opposition bloc Yabloko, which won three seats, and United Russia, whose many voters, especially the middle-aged and elderly, said they saw the party as a symbol of stability.

The third party that crossed the 10 percent threshold needed for Duma representation was the Communists, who won five seats.

A spokesman for Russia's largest Jewish group said the election results were good for the Jewish community.

"For Jews, stability is better than revolution," said Boruch Gorin of the Federation of Jewish Communities, or FEOR, a Chabad-led group that is widely seen as pro-Kremlin. "These results show a real balance of power in society."

Gorin added that Yabloko's representation in the assembly was good "because many Jews voted" for the liberal opposition group.

Some Jewish voters said the overwhelming support United Russia received was

the result of a rigged vote count or at least the extensive use of administrative power.

"This election is just another of the Kremlin's successful political projects, which shows to me the country is heading in the wrong direction," said Lia Alperovich, a musician who voted for the liberal opposition. "Ever since Putin became president elections in Russia have less and less sense, and the Sunday vote was no exception."

But others said it was more important for Russian Jews that none of the parties that actively exploited xenophobic rhetoric made it to the Moscow legislature.

"My hope is that the country will finally say no to the presence of chauvinists in power," said Tankred Golenpolsky, founder and publisher of the International Jewish Gazette, a Moscow weekly newspaper.

He was referring to the fact that the Liberal Democratic Party, headed by nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, garnered only 7 percent of the vote and will not send its deputies to the city assembly.

Another nationalist party, Motherland, was banned from the election at the last minute after Russia's Supreme Court ruled that a party commercial likening dark-skinned migrants to garbage incited racial hatred.

Members of these two parties were

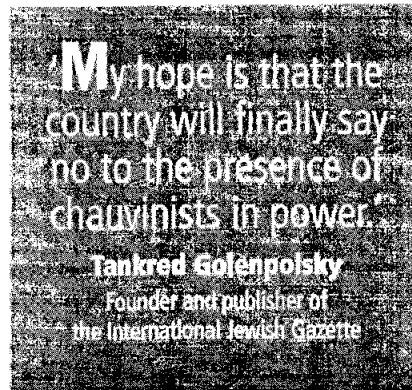
among the State Duma deputies who signed an open letter to the prosecutor general earlier this year urging a probe into the activities of Jewish organizations in Russia, suggesting that they should be shut down if authorities found their activities to be anti-Russian or anti-Christian.

However, some observers suggested that United Russia's success wasn't convincing.

Because of the high electoral threshold of 10 percent — which automatically adds votes received by underachievers to the winners' slates — the party that got 80 percent of the seats received only 47 percent of the popular vote.

With all the pressure on people to vote for the party in power, "the majority still did not vote for United Russia," Golenpolsky said. "If the authorities don't put excessive pressure with their resources, there's a chance that this party won't come in first in the next election."

ACROSS THE FORMER SOVIET UNION



Palestinians to punish peace team

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The Palestinian Football Association intends to punish soccer players who played on a joint "peace team" with Israelis.

Last week's game against Barcelona was greeted internationally as a sign that Israelis and Palestinians could cooperate for peace.

"The Palestinian F.A. will form a committee to investigate the players who participated in the match" and "every-

one involved will be punished," Reuters quoted Jamal Zaqout, a senior association official, as saying. "We act in accordance with the attitude of our people, who are against normalization" of relations with Israel "before the end of the occupation."

The Peres Center for Peace, which sponsored the peace team, called the Palestinian reaction "annoying."

The squad lost to Barcelona, 2-1.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Israel passes euthanasia bill

Israel passed a law allowing the terminally ill to cut off life support.

The bill, which was held up by years of debate between religious legislators, was approved by the Knesset on Tuesday by a vote of 22-3, with one abstention.

Under the new law, patients deemed to have six months or less to live can opt to have a special timer installed on their life-support systems, whose countdown system can be continually extended — or not.

Bibi eyes West Bank

Benjamin Netanyahu accused Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of planning unilateral Israeli withdrawals in the West Bank.

"There is a clear plan here for one big withdrawal," Netanyahu, the front-runner for the leadership of Sharon's former Likud Party, told reporters Wednesday. "A weakened Israel, which is on the retreat and makes no end of concessions to terror, will achieve neither peace nor security."

Sharon quit the Likud last month to form the centrist Kadima Party. He has said repeatedly that the recent Gaza pullout won't be followed by additional unilateral withdrawals, but many analysts believe they will.

Fence behind schedule

Israel's West Bank security fence will be completed by the end of 2006, officials said.

Netzach Mashiach, the government official overseeing the project, on Wednesday informed the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the new target date, months behind previous projections.

Maj.-Gen. Moshe Kaplinski, the army's deputy chief of staff, said just 171 miles of the 474-mile route are complete.

Officials blame the lag on High Court of Justice orders to reroute the fence in places where it was found to cause undue hardship to Palestinians.

NORTH AMERICA

ADL: Keep restrictions on Ukraine

The Anti-Defamation League urged Congress not to remove trade restrictions on Ukraine.

The organization said anti-Semitism persists at "worrying levels" in Ukraine, and thus the country should be denied normal trade relations.

The Senate passed a bill last month, graduating Ukraine from trade restrictions placed on former Soviet countries in 1974, because of human rights and emigration concerns.

Other Jewish organizations have supported Ukraine's graduation from restrictions.

Gibson developing Holocaust mini-series

Mel Gibson is developing a television mini-series about the Holocaust. Gibson, accused by some Jews of dabbling in anti-Semitic stereotypes with his "Passion of the Christ" — and whose father has denied that the Holocaust occurred — is planning the ABC series with his production company, The New York Times reported.

The show is to be based on the memoir of Flory Van Beek, a Dutch Jew who survived the Nazis by hiding with non-Jewish neighbors.

House urges U.N. to curb Israel bashing

The U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a resolution calling on the United Nations to end its bias against Israel.

The resolution, initiated by Rep. Steven Rothman (D-N.J.) urged "member states of the United Nations to stop supporting resolutions that unfairly castigate Israel and promote within the United Nations

General Assembly more balanced and constructive approaches to resolving conflict in the Middle East."

Reform Jews join Darfur call-in

Reform Jews participated in a call-in against genocide in Darfur, Sudan.

Jews around the country joined in the effort on Tuesday by calling members of Congress targeted by the "Save Darfur" coalition.

A similar call-in in October helped bring about a Senate bill that would expand funding for peacekeeping in southern Sudan and level penalties on those benefitting from ethnic cleansing there.

Tuesday's call-in was aimed at getting the measure through the House of Representatives.

Parliamentarians condemn anti-Semitism

An international forum for lawmakers condemned anti-Semitism.

The International Conference on Human Rights and Religious Freedom, which brings together lawmakers from 40 nations, held its third annual meeting in Washington last week.

Its concluding document called anti-Semitism "a global concern and never a function of Jewish conduct."

It also recognized Islamophobia as a threat.

Activist for Soviet Jewry dies

Lynn Singer, a prominent activist for Soviet Jewry, died Nov. 30 of cancer at age 80.

In the early 1970s Singer founded and led the Long Island Committee for Soviet Jewry, which became a pivotal chapter of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry, a national coalition that she served as president.

WORLD

Righteous Austrians honored

Yad Vashem honored 85 Austrians who saved Jews during the Holocaust.

Among those recognized in the Vienna ceremony were Hermine Riss, posthumously recognized as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations," for hiding a Jewish woman in her home, and Danuta and Ewald Kleisinger, who hid several Jews in their home in Warsaw, the Washington Post reported.

Austrian President Heinz Fischer said at the ceremony that after a long process, there now is a recognition in his nation that some Austrians bore responsibility in the Holocaust.

Soccer team fined for chants

A Hungarian soccer team was fined after fans chanted anti-Semitic slurs.

The Hungarian Football Federation fined Ujpest FC \$23,250 for last month's incident against MTK Budapest, and the referee was suspended for more than two months for failing to take action.

The Budapest team has Jewish roots, and the Hungarian Jewish community protested the behavior of Ujpest fans.

Bielski 'touched' in South America

Zeev Bielski said he felt "deeply touched" by his first trip to South America as head of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

At a Buenos Aires news conference Tuesday during a week-long trip to Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, Bielski said he also felt "deep sorrow" at the lack of progress in the government investigation into terrorist attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets in Argentina in the 1990s.

Bielski pledged to strengthen links between South American Jews and Israel, particularly the Masah project, which sends young Jews to Israel for several months.