

IN THE NEWS

Bush: Israel needs democracy in Mideast

President Bush urged supporters of Israel to heed his call for the democratization of the Middle East.

"If you're a supporter of Israel, I would strongly urge you to help other countries become democracies," Bush said at a speech Monday at the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia. "Israel's long-term survival depends upon the spread of democracy in the Middle East."

Sharon soars in election polls

Ariel Sharon's Kadima Party will sweep the upcoming Israeli election, a new poll says.

A Yediot Achronot survey Monday said Kadima, which Sharon formed after quitting the ruling Likud Party last month, is expected to take 41 of the Knesset's 120 seats in the March national poll.

The prime minister's standing has been boosted by several high-profile Likud defections.

Arabs oppose Israel mention at U.N.

Arab states are trying to block the mention of Israel in a U.N. resolution on the problem of arable land turning into desert.

The resolution, expected to be debated in the coming days, recognizes 2006 as a year devoted to examining deserts and the problem of desertification.

A handful of member states, led by Syria and Iran, fought efforts to include mention of an upcoming Israeli conference on desertification, according to sources at Israel's U.N. mission.

Israel's U.N. mission has circulated an amendment to the measure that mentions the Jewish state.

Several countries — notably the Latin Americans — said Israel should not be treated differently than other countries. The United States is also backing Israel's wish to be included.



WORLD REPORT

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Iranian threat already surfaces as hot issue in Israeli elections

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Iran may be just months away from being able to produce a nuclear bomb, and a fierce debate is raging in Israel over how to react.

The critical date could come in March, when a series of developments will converge:

- It will be too late to stop Iran from making a bomb, according to Israel's chief of military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Aharon Farkash-Ze'evi.

- The International Atomic Energy Agency is due to issue a report that month on Iran's nuclear drive that could lead to sanctions against Tehran or highlight the international community's inability to act in concert on the issue.

- Israeli elections are scheduled for March 28, with the Iranian nuclear threat already shaping up to be a hot campaign issue.

- The London Sunday Times claims Israel has ordered elite forces to be ready by late March for a possible strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.

Both Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's office and Israeli defense officials dismissed the Sunday Times story as a "baseless fabrication."

At the same time, Sharon says Israel will not be able to tolerate a nuclear Iran and that the Jewish state has the capability to act to prevent it.

"We have the ability to deal with this and we are making all the preparations to be ready for such a situation," he declared in an early December news conference.

But does Israel really have a military option against the Iranian nuclear threat? And can it go it alone, as it did against Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981? Most leading

Israeli pundits are skeptical. And some fear election rhetoric could compromise Israeli policy, hurt Israel's international standing and generally prove counterproductive.

Iranian statements over the past few months underline just how dangerous the threat to Israel could be.

In October, Iran's hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Israel should be "wiped off the map," and earlier this month he said Israel should be dismantled and re-established in Europe.

Israeli officials say a bomb in the hands of leaders with ideas like these adds up to a rogue regime with a predisposition and the means to destroy Israel.

Israel's dilemma is acute: how to get the international community to act without seeming to be goading it into action; or alternatively, how to act itself without incurring international opprobrium or aggravating the situation.

Powerful voices in the international community are cautioning Israel against attacking. In Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize over the weekend, the IAEA's director, Mohammed ElBaradei asserted that force simply wouldn't work.

"You cannot use force to prevent a country from obtaining nuclear weapons," he told the Oslo-based Aftenposten. "By bombing them half to death, you can only delay the plans. But they will come back, and they will demand revenge."

It is precisely because of the complexity of the issue that Sharon has been keen to put it on the election agenda. His message is plain: Labor leader Amir Peretz is too inexperience-

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BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Will Israel bomb Iran's nuclear facilities?

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rienced to handle it, and Likud front-runner Benjamin Netanyahu too unreliable.

Indeed, Netanyahu seemed to play into Sharon's hands by declaring that if he became prime minister, he would bomb Iran's nuclear facilities the way Israel bombed the Iraqi reactor under Menachem Begin. This drew a sharp response from Ha'aretz. "Whoever publicly recommends an Israeli military option sins doubly. He incites the Israeli public unnecessarily; presents Israel as pushing the U.S. into a major new war; drags this sensitive subject into the overheated rhetoric of an election campaign; and invites Iranian threats and various anti-Israel reactions," Ha'aretz wrote in an editorial.

Official Israeli policy remains deliberately vague.

On the one hand, Israeli officials insist that for now the policy is to help mobilize international pressure on Tehran, but they refuse to rule out a future Israeli military strike.

"At the moment, in the current phase, the focus is in the sphere of international diplomacy," Amos Gilead, head of the Defense Ministry's strategic policy team, explained on Israel TV. But then, commenting on the Sunday Times story, he said he denied "the specifics" of the report, including the timetables and the Israeli intelligence operation in northern Iraq. But, he added, "it's impossible to say in advance that all the options will be ruled out."

Leading Israeli pundits, however, doubt whether Israel really has a military option.

Writing in the Ma'ariv newspaper, analyst Ben Caspit pointed out the chief difference between Iraq in 1981 and Iran today: Whereas Iraq's nuclear capacity was concentrated in one weakly guarded reactor, Iran's fuel enrichment program is via centrifuges housed in several well-protected sites across the huge country.

"To attack, we would need a lot of intelligence, multiple strikes, the ability to hover over Iran for long periods and in large numbers, lots of luck, lots of bunker-busting bombs, and with all that, the chances of success would be slight," Caspit wrote.

The former commander of the Israeli air force, reserve Maj. Gen. Eitan Ben-Eliyahu, said that if there is an attack some time in the future, Israel would only be part of a larger force — partly because the job is just too big for Israel to handle alone.

There would be too many targets, each target would need several fighter-bombers, protected by fighters, accompanied by rescue planes to pick up crew members who might be shot down.

"Maybe," Ben-Eliyahu said, "there will be a joint decision for joint action one day, involving countries like the U.S., Britain, Germany and Turkey."

Reuven Pedatzur, a strategist at the Netanya Academic College, said he doubts that any such joint action will ever materialize. Nor is it likely that Israel or any of the other players will take action to stop Iran alone.

"Iran may well come to possess nuclear arms," he said. "And if that happens, Israel will have to learn to live with the Iranian threat and to neutralize it by means of credible deterrence."

Israel's deterrent capacity is impressive. Its Arrow anti-missile defense system is the most advanced of its

kind in the world.

Israel, according to foreign sources, also has an impressive second-strike capability: F-15 fighter bombers that can reach Iran without refueling, Dolphin submarines that can launch nuclear weapons from the sea and long-range missiles of its own. Theoretically, an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel could be blocked by the Arrow system, while an Israeli second strike could destroy Iran.

That equation, strategists like Pedatzur believe, should be enough to deter Ahmadinejad and the ayatollahs who effectively rule Iran, even if they do finally manage to produce a bomb.

Israeli pundits doubt that Israel has a military option when it comes to Iranian nuclear facilities.

French Interfaith dialogue wanted

By BRETT KLINE

PARIS (JTA) — Relations between Jews and Catholics in Europe have never been so good — but now it's time to reach out to Muslims.

That was the message at the third European conference of Jews and Catholics in Paris, held Sunday in Paris' City Hall.

The conference was organized by the European Jewish Congress to mark the 40th anniversary of Nostra Aetate, the Catholic Church's formal apology for its poor treatment of other religious groups, including Jews, over the ages. The Nostra Aetate document marked the formal repudiation of church teachings blaming Jews for the death of Jesus.

The conference examined anti-Semitism today, discussed major changes in the church since Nostra Aetate and paid tribute to the late Pope John Paul II.

It also shed light on a humanitarian project to manufacture and distribute drugs for AIDS-related diseases and malaria in Africa. Cumviviun, a Catholic association, is trying to manufacture drugs in Gabon, and talks reportedly are underway to involve Israel's Teva Pharmaceuticals, a major manufacturer of generic drugs.

Many speakers at the conference noted how markedly relations between European Christians and Jews have improved since the Holocaust.

"The history of Jews in Paris is an old one. There have been good moments and bad moments, but the fight against anti-Semitism is still here," said Andre Vingt-Trois, archbishop of Paris. "We must replace disdain with respect, jealousy with gratitude, and animosity with friendship."

Now that Jews and Catholics have improved their relations, it's time to reach out to Muslims, several speakers said.

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Court decision opens door for survivors

By TOBY AXELROD

BERLIN (JTA) — A U.S. court decision has paved the way for final compensation payments to Holocaust survivors from Austria.

The Dec. 7 decision by a U.S. District Court in New York to dismiss class-action lawsuits against Austrian businesses was greeted with relief by survivor organizations and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, parties to a settlement negotiated with the Austrian government.

The resulting legal closure means payments are imminent, Gideon Taylor, Claims Conference executive vice president, said. Neither the Austrian government nor businesses would agree to payments without insurance against future lawsuits.

"This fund has been tied up in legal knots in courts in the U.S., and this had deprived many Austrian Holocaust survivors and their heirs of the symbolic payments," Taylor told JTA in a telephone interview.

But, "like most restitution payments, this is not an issue of money," he emphasized. "The amounts are small, but the property losses were large. This is about symbolism. People are frustrated that what was supposed to be a symbolic gesture turned into a legal argument."

In all, Austrian restitution funds totaled about \$500 million. But the component from the \$210 million General Settlement Fund for Austrian Jews created in January 2001 through negotiations with the Claims Conference was held up until Dec. 7. That's when Judge Shirley Wohl Kram of the Southern District of New York dismissed the cases brought against the government and industry of Austria by some Jews of Austrian background, and by some heirs.

Kram threw out the suits after the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which had dismissed remaining Holocaust-related lawsuits against Austria, ordered her on Nov. 23 to resolve the cases within 60 days. The Appeals Court called GSF a preferable method of ensuring payments to victims of Nazism.

"We look upon this with great favor," said Henry Wegner, a survivor from Austria who in 1966 co-founded the American Council for Equal Compensation of Nazi Victims from Austria.

The organization submitted a decisive

amicus brief in the case — quoted in the judge's opinion — urging the court to "take affirmative action to ensure that compensation is paid to Holocaust survivors during their lifetimes."

The group also was party to negotiations with the Austrian government, together with Israeli survivors, the Claims Conference, the Austrian National Fund and attorney Stuart Eizenstat, who had also handled compensation negotiations on behalf of the Clinton administration.

Wegner told JTA that he had faced resistance from some Jews in Austria who wanted to press ahead with their lawsuits brought in American courts. But Ariel Muzicant, head of the Jewish Community of Austria, said he was delighted by the dismissal of the suits and expected "people may get their first payments on December 16th."

He told JTA that he had convinced "26 plaintiffs to consent to withdraw their claims and there is just one left. And the one guy is suing everybody now."

He did not identify this person, but said that the court action on Nov. 23 and Dec. 7 "means people will finally get their money. We never expected it to go so fast."

It was not fast enough for many claimants. In some cases, heirs will be the beneficiaries, said Hannah Lessing, director of the Austrian National Fund, which will distribute the payments out of the GSF.

Lessing told JTA that of the 30,000 claimants who filed for compensation, only 15,000 are still living. The fund tries to

reach the oldest claimants first, she said. In all, there are some 19,000 valid claims.

"Everybody who handed in a claim and has been" approved "will receive a letter" asking them to sign a waiver, according to which they will now receive 10 percent of the amount they claimed. Those who agree will likely later receive an additional payment

from funds that remain after the initial distribution.

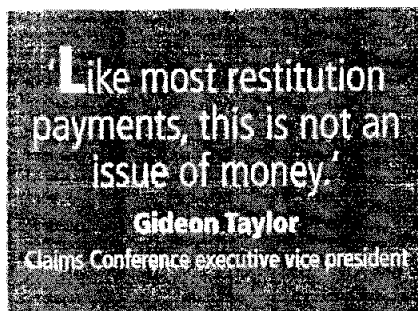
The other option is to reject the waiver and hope that the remaining funds will be sufficient to provide a compensation of more than 10 percent.

The GSF funds amount to symbolic compensation for stolen assets, including real estate, liquidated businesses, bank accounts, securities, mortgages, insurance policies, personal effects, and the loss of education and jobs.

According to Lessing, three homes already have been returned to their former owners or heirs. Two previous components of the negotiated agreement with Austria — \$150 million from the Austrian National Fund and payments for pensions and nursing care have been implemented.

Wegner, who survived several concentration camps and lost most of his family in the Holocaust, said he now has written a letter thanking Andreas Kohl, president of Austria's Parliament, for endorsing the legal closure and urging him to see that payments go out quickly.

"Nothing will ever be fair," Lessing, whose father fled Nazi Austria for Palestine, said. "Whatever we do will always be a little piece of a puzzle."



Israelis advise France on riots

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israeli security chiefs are advising France on riot control.

Israel's security minister, Gideon Ezra, and the chief of police, Moshe Karadi, flew to Paris this week for meetings with Ezra's French counterpart, Nicolas Sarkozy, Ha'aretz reported Monday.

According to the newspaper, the French, who last month endured a wave of rioting

by disaffected Arab immigrant youths, want to learn from Israeli security experts.

Also on the agenda is Russian Jewish billionaire Arkady Gaidamak, who France wants extradited from Israel on international fraud charges, Ha'aretz reported.

French officials confirmed the trip by Ezra and Karadi but declined further comment.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTH AMERICA

Republican Jews to show war support

The Republican Jewish Coalition will take out ads in The New York Times and other newspapers to express support for the war in Iraq.

The ad campaign comes after the Union for Reform Judaism called last month for the United States to begin withdrawing from Iraq.

The ad says "Freedom is Worth Waiting For," over a picture of an Iraqi woman whose finger is stained with ink, presumably after voting in the recent elections. It expresses support for President Bush and the war on terrorism, and calls recent comments by URJ President Rabbi Eric Yoffie "misleading and wrong."

Said Matthew Brooks, RJC's executive director: "We want to make the case that on this issue, they don't speak for all Reform Jews and they don't speak for all American Jews."

The ad is signed by several prominent Jews and members of the U.S. Congress, including U.S. Rep. Eric Cantor (R-Va.) and Sen. Norm Coleman (R-Minn.).

A Reform Jewish leader took issue with the ad.

"All American Jewry agrees on the goal of creating a safe and Democratic Iraq, but the public opinion polls of the last year and a half show that two-thirds of American Jews, and even higher levels of Reform Jews, agree with the general concerns and views embodied in the URJ resolution," Rabbi David Saperstein of Reform's Religious Action Center said.

Jackson slams Iranian leader on remarks

The Rev. Jesse Jackson called on Iran's president to retract anti-Israel and anti-Semitic comments.

The comments by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "are a threat to the fragile fabric of the world community," Jackson said in a statement.

In comments made last week, Ahmadinejad said: "If the Europeans are honest they should give some of their provinces in Europe — like in Germany, Austria or other countries — to the Zionists and the Zionists can establish their state in Europe. You offer part of Europe and we will support it."

Clinton backs Israel's security fence

Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) backed Israel's right to construct its West Bank security barrier.

Clinton, speaking after receiving an honorary degree from Yeshiva University on Sunday evening, said that a recent visit to Gilo, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, gave her "an even greater appreciation for the importance and rationale" of the fence, which has helped reduce Palestinian terrorist attacks.

At the height of the intifada, Gilo was the target of frequent shootings from the neighboring Palestinian town of Beit Jalla.

Jewish students protest Wal-Mart

Children from a Jewish Sunday school in Boston rallied outside of a local Wal-Mart.

The students from the Boston Workmen's Circle school were protesting the company's alleged use of sweatshop labor. Sunday's rally by the fifth-graders occurred as part of a lesson on labor history in the school.

MIDDLE EAST

Activist in custody in Israel

Israeli police arrested a foreign pro-Palestinian activist who entered the country under false pretenses.

The Shin Bet said Monday that the International Solidarity Movement member from Britain, who was expelled from Israel in 2003,

returned in August after changing his name and passport.

He was arrested last month for scuffling with security forces in the West Bank city of Hebron, and put aboard a flight to London.

But he was removed from the plane after threatening to cause a disturbance, and is currently in police custody in Tel Aviv.

Spielberg expected in Israel

Steven Spielberg reportedly plans to attend the Israeli premiere of his controversial film "Munich."

Ma'ariv reported Monday that the Hollywood director would come to the Jewish state for the screening expected in mid-January.

Spielberg has weathered a storm of controversy over his sources for the thriller inspired by Israel's hunt for Palestinian terrorists who killed 11 of its athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

The film is slated to have a limited release in the United States later this month. Spielberg's office did not immediately comment on the report.

Israeli 'rabbicops' probed

Hundreds of Israeli policemen are believed to be obtaining rabbinical ordination to boost their salaries.

Citing Justice Ministry sources, Ha'aretz reported in a weekend expose that as many as 600 policemen have taken courses for the Orthodox clergy so they could receive \$430 monthly stipends.

According to the newspaper, some of the "rabbicops" are openly secular, and the sages administering the ordination courses have been known to allow their students to abbreviate the studies for the sake of convenience.

Police spokesmen declined comment on the affair, citing a probe already under way.

WORLD

E.U. contacts with Hamas, Hezbollah slammed

Israel accused the European Union of illegal contacts with Hamas and Hezbollah.

A Foreign Ministry document leaked to the media Monday deplored "certain states" in Europe that had sought political engagement with the Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist groups.

"This policy has entailed official contacts with Hamas and/or Hezbollah representatives as well as refraining from acting aggressively against their involvement in terrorism," the memorandum said. "From a legal perspective, political considerations cannot justify conduct that contradicts the counterterrorism obligations imposed upon states under international law."

Argentine Jews press country on Iranian comments

Argentine Jews called on their political leaders to condemn anti-Semitic remarks by Iran's president.

The request was made in a letter by the country's leading Jewish groups last week to Argentine President Nestor Kirchner.

There has been widespread criticism of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for questioning the Holocaust and calling for Israel to be moved to Europe.

Brazilian police search for Nazi

Brazilian officials are investigating whether a Nazi war criminal is hiding in the country.

During World War II, Alois Brunner was an assistant to Nazi official Adolf Eichmann, the chief organizer of the "Final Solution." Brunner is believed to have lived in Syria for 40 years before moving to South America.