

IN THE NEWS

Mahmoud Abbas calls Ehud Olmert

Ariel Sharon's interim replacement spoke with the Palestinian Authority president.

Mahmoud Abbas called Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Thursday to express his concern for the well-being of Sharon, who is in an induced coma after undergoing surgery for a brain hemorrhage.

Florida voucher ruling divides Jewish groups

Jewish groups were split on the Florida Supreme Court's decision to strike down a school voucher program.

The court ruled Thursday that the program, which affects some 700 children and has been under way since September, violates the constitutional separation between church and state.

Criticizing the decision, the Orthodox Union said the program afforded "children who represent Florida's future a decent and high quality education." The American Jewish Committee welcomed the decision.

Robertson: Sharon punished for actions

The Rev. Pat Robertson said Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was punished by God for dividing the Land of Israel.

Speaking on the "700 Club" on Thursday, Robertson suggested that Sharon and former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, assassinated by an Israeli extremist in 1995, were being treated harshly by God for dividing Israel.

"He was dividing God's land," Robertson said.

"And I would say, 'Woe unto any prime minister of Israel who takes a similar course to appease the E.U., the United Nations or the United States of America.' God says, 'This land belongs to me. You better leave it alone.'"

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WORLD REPORT

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Amos Ben Gershon/GPO/BP Images

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, left, and then-Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

With Sharon ailing, Ehud Olmert, a career politician, takes top spot

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Ehud Olmert, who has taken over as acting prime minister following Ariel Sharon's debilitating stroke, is a career politician with a clear ideological focus. If he becomes prime minister in his own right, Olmert can be expected to carry on peacemaking efforts with the Palestinians where Sharon left off.

Olmert was one of the chief architects of Sharon's main foreign policy achievement — last summer's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank. When Sharon

broke away from his ruling Likud Party to form a new centrist party, Kadima, last November, Olmert was one of the first to follow him.

In late 2003, it was Olmert who first outlined Sharon's new thinking on the Palestinian issue.

In a string of interviews in Israeli media, Olmert argued that Israel could not allow itself to remain stuck forever occupying territory where Palestinians lived, which could undercut the Jewish and democratic nature of the state.

If agreements with the Palestinians

Continued on page 2

**A
SHAKEN
ISRAEL**

■ *The former mayor of Jerusalem assumes the job of Israeli prime minister*

Continued from page 1

proved impossible, Olmert said, Israel would have to set its borders on its own. It soon became clear that Olmert was floating the ideas as trial balloons for Sharon, but the same thinking probably will inform his decision-making as prime minister.

Olmert, 60, has been in politics all his adult life.

Supporters see him as an experienced and savvy politician with proven leadership qualities; opponents denigrate him as an opportunistic wheeler-dealer.

Olmert first was elected to the Knesset in 1973, at age 28. At 43 he was minister without portfolio responsible for Israeli Arab affairs, at 45 he was health minister and at 48 he became mayor of Jerusalem, a post he held for 10 years before returning to politics on the national stage.

Olmert was born in Israel into a politically active right-wing family associated with the Herut movement.

But he showed his intellectual independence by joining Shmuel Tamir's Free Center, a breakaway faction from Herut, in the mid-1960s.

The formation of the Likud in 1973 brought the Free Center, Herut and three other parties together, and in 1977 Olmert played an active role in Menachem Begin's successful bid for prime minister.

As a young Knesset member, the highly articulate Olmert gained attention for his anti-corruption efforts.

He also was part of a group of Likud rebels who voted against Begin's 1978

Camp David peace agreement with Egypt.

Since then, Olmert's views on the territorial question have changed dramatically. In a recent newspaper interview he declared that "I am sorry Begin is not alive for me to be able to publicly recognize his wisdom and my mistake. He was right and I was wrong. Thank God we pulled out of Sinai."

Olmert is trained as a lawyer, with degrees in philosophy and psychology. He exercises frequently, speaks excellent English and can be extremely charming, but also can be very aggressive in response to media questioning.

His wife, Aliza, is a playwright and artist, on the left of the Israeli political spectrum.

They have four children and one adopted daughter. Olmert often jokes that, as the only right-winger, he's often a minority within the family.

In 1993, running on a right-wing ticket, Olmert defeated the legendary Teddy Kollek to become mayor of Jerusalem. He made a political pact with the fervently Orthodox to cement his power in the city, alienating many left-wing and centrist secular voters.

In 1996, when the Likud regained power under Benjamin Netanyahu, Olmert was not invited to take part in the government. He and Netanyahu have remained bitter rivals ever since.

In 1999, Olmert incurred the wrath of many Likudniks when he mocked the party's election slogan that Labor candidate and future prime minister Ehud Barak "would divide Jerusalem." Olmert later was humiliated when Barak indeed backed a division of the city.

In 1999, after Netanyahu lost the premiership to Barak and resigned as Likud chairman, Olmert challenged Sharon for the Likud Party leadership. He won about 24 percent of the vote, less than half of Sharon's tally.

In 2003, Olmert returned to national politics as one of Sharon's closest allies against Netanyahu.

Deeply disappointed when Sharon

gave the finance portfolio to Netanyahu, Olmert insisted on a deputy premiership as compensation.

Now the wheel has come full circle: He succeeded Netanyahu as finance minister last August and now, as Sharon's deputy, is acting prime minister.

But it will not be easy for Olmert, who lacks security credentials, to fill Sharon's shoes.

A lot will depend on the extent to which his Kadima colleagues unite round him, and for now they say they intend to do so.

Olmert is not the most popular politician in Kadima.

Recent polls indicate that voters would prefer ex-Laborite Shimon Peres or Justice Minister Tzipi Livni to step up and lead the party.

Still, he hopes that their support, and a few weeks in the top job, will convince the public that he has what it takes to be prime minister full time.

Pundits note that when Golda Meir took over the national leadership from Levi Eshkol in 1969, she had only 3 percent public support, but within months had become a very popular prime minister.

Olmert, who starts off with higher levels of support, hopes incumbency will create the same widespread acceptance of his leadership.

Supporters see Olmert as an experienced and savvy politician with proven leadership qualities; opponents denigrate him as an opportunistic wheeler-dealer.

Raising money for kibbutz businesses

JERUSALEM (JTA) — An investment fund was launched to invest in kibbutz businesses and real-estate enterprises.

The Katzir Fund hopes to raise \$60 million over the next few months, including \$20 million from abroad, the Jerusalem Post reported.

Once bastions of agricultural and communal socialism, kibbutzim increasingly have privatized in both living and economic arrangements over the past few decades.

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Israelis have ailing Sharon on their minds

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV (JTA) — As Israelis work, shop and hang out at cafes, the undercurrent of every conversation is the uncertainty of the country's future without Ariel Sharon as prime minister.

"There's no figure who can take his place," Nir Rosen, 26, of Netanya, said as he waited in line at the airport Thursday to check in for a flight to Italy. "It's a difficult time for Israel."

Sharon's condition was described as stable but serious after a long night of surgery Wednesday to stop a cerebral hemorrhage that followed a severe stroke. He is expected to remain in an induced coma for at least 24 hours to relieve pressure on his brain.

Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has taken over Sharon's powers.

The emergency surgery followed a mild stroke the prime minister suffered Dec. 18.

Israelis read the banner newspaper headlines announcing Sharon's grave condition and watched round-the-clock news broadcasts as a steady stream of doctors and politicians speculated on the possible outcomes of Sharon's health and the health of the country.

"Struggling for his life," read the headline in Ma'ariv, and throughout the day rumors swirled that Sharon already had died. Officials at Hadassah's Ein Kerem hospital in Jerusalem made repeated announcements to clarify that while he was in serious condition, the prime minister was still alive.

Israelis were puzzled about more than just the latest bulletins.

"It's a confusing situation. The country was unified behind Sharon and would have probably voted for him in large numbers," said Ilan Amir, 50. "Even though he made mistakes, including the war in Lebanon and the corruption scandals, people seemed to forgive him."

Sharon had been at the height of his popularity in recent months following Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip last summer, and he seemed assured of an easy victory for his new party, Kadima, in March 28 elections.

Israelis from all walks of life and political persuasions realized that the entire political map appeared to have changed overnight. Many Israelis craved the stabil-

ity and strength of Sharon's leadership and seemed to feel a bit lost after it suddenly had been taken away.

Among those holding out hope was Itay Bootel, 24.

"We are crossing our fingers. He is a national symbol," Bootel said as he served a customer a sandwich at a cafe.

Yossi Shahar, 41, on his way home after a vacation in Eilat, said it wasn't easy to imagine Israel without Sharon, but he was certain the country would find its way.

"Israel is not built on one person alone. If we got through the Rabin assassination, we can get through anything," said Shahar, a government worker.

The sudden uncertainty cast a veil over everything, however.

Sigalit Katz, 38, pushed her toddler son in a stroller through a mall but did not seem to be in the mood for shopping.

"It's sad for all of us. Again we have plunged into uncertainty. Who will lead us?" she asked.

Until Wednesday, she said, she had planned to vote for Kadima, but now she doesn't know if she will vote at all.

"People are a bit puzzled and are asking what's going to happen next," said Adrian Daniels, a 36-year-old lawyer.

But Daniels was optimistic that Kadima, the party that many have seen as Sharon's one-man show, would persevere because it represented what Israelis want: a stable centrist voice.

"Kadima represents the zeitgeist, and that does not change with Sharon disappearing," Daniels said.

Now the party has to step up to the plate and articulate a clear platform, he said.

"It's a chance for them to say, 'we are a real party with a real policy,' and if they do that then they will do well," he said. "I think it's still a three-horse race."

Shlomo Wasseteil, 56, a greenhouse owner who was among those Israelis evacuated from the Gaza Strip over the summer, disagrees about Kadima's future.

Wasseteil said he thinks the party will not be able to push through an agenda of

additional withdrawals without Sharon.

"I think we paid a high price, but at least Judea and Samaria," the biblical names for the West Bank, "will be saved from all this," he said.

He added of Sharon: "I had respected him. That was the problem. We all had loved him even though he hurt us so deeply."

Hadassah Ein Kerem, the hospital where Sharon is being treated, has received hundreds of calls and visits from Israel and around the world wishing the prime minister well.

The Jewish Agency for Israel has created an e-mail address for people to send their wishes to the prime minister.

The address is thoughtsandprayers@jewishagency.org.

A weary looking President Moshe Katsav said he had last spoken to Sharon on Wednesday afternoon.

"All Israeli citizens pray for his health and recovery," Katsav told Channel Two.

"We need to be optimistic, we need to hope for a miracle," said Ronit Tirosh, a Kadima member.



Close call in Gaza

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The parents of the late pro-Palestinian activist Rachel Corrie narrowly escaped kidnapping in the Gaza Strip.

Craig and Cindy Corrie were visiting the southern Gaza town of Rafah on Wednesday when Palestinian gunmen arrived, intent on abducting them.

But the Corries, whose daughter was run over and killed by an Israeli bulldozer as it tried to uncover gunrunner tunnels in Rafah in 2003, were spared thanks to the intervention of a Palestinian Authority policeman.

The incident appeared to be linked to widespread unrest in Rafah, where gunmen went on the rampage after one of their colleagues was arrested for the abduction last week of three British citizens.

U.S. Jews answer SOS of Katrina victims

By LARRY LUXNER

NEW ORLEANS (JTA) — At the home of a Jewish family in Metairie, La., Rabbi Elka Abrahamson of Columbus, Ohio, hammers nails into a new wooden fence with the help of Daniel Held, an Orthodox Jew from Toronto.

About 15 minutes away, inside the moldy, storm-ravaged Congregation Beth Israel in Lakeview, La., Suzanne Wolk of Washington balances herself on a ladder in what was once the synagogue's library, emptying the shelves of waterlogged history books for eventual disposal in a landfill.

At the New Orleans Jewish Community Center, Tamara Rushovich and Adi Rattner — 17-year-old seniors at Baltimore's Pikesville High School — chop vegetables for the JCC's kosher "meals on wheels" program for stranded seniors.

New Orleans put out an SOS for help in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and Jews of various stripes throughout North America — lured by a sense of compassion, responsibility and even adventure — have been answering the call.

The volunteer corps grew over Chanukah. Jewish federations, the Reform movement and Chabad-Lubavitch were among those who sponsored volunteers, as did smaller Jewish groups.

"As soon as this happened, I wanted to do something," said schoolteacher Erica

Berson of Alexandria, Va. "The Red Cross was saying 'just send money,' but I felt so helpless."

So did Berson's friend, Renae Gross, also of Alexandria.

"I was waiting for an opportunity to be part of a group that was supporting this effort," said Gross, a government consultant. "We look at these houses and think about the Jews who are scattered throughout the world. Whatever we can do for these people, we're here to help."

Berson and Gross were among 40 Jewish volunteers, slightly more than

half of them from the Baltimore-Washington area, who spent the last week of 2005 in New Orleans, flying here at their own expense.

Ashley Klapper, assistant director of the Baltimore-based Jewish Volunteer Connection, a project of the Baltimore federation, said her team worked on 20 houses selected by the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans for gutting, renovation or general repairs.

"I think every homeowner we worked with was able to come away feeling that they had moved forward," she said, "either because their house was being gutted in order to rebuild it, or for those whose houses will not be rebuilt, they were able to salvage some memories so they could rebuild their lives."

We look at these houses and think about the Jews who are scattered throughout the world. Whatever we can do for these people, we're here to help.

Renae Gross
Alexandria, Va., resident

ible and so willing to do whatever work we asked them to do," Klapper added. "Some people struggled with the challenge of knowing who to help and where we could

be of most use, but I think that by the end, everyone understood that this is a tragedy that has affected absolutely everybody in New Orleans."

This group of volunteers stayed on the eighth floor of the Touro Infirmary, a Jewish hospital that's running at only 50 percent capacity and therefore had plenty of extra space.

But it wasn't the only game in town.

Fifty college-aged volunteers sent by

Chabad are currently in New Orleans, working on storm-damaged houses. The men are staying at the JCC, while the women stay at the homes of local Jewish families.

Yet another group did hurricane cleanup work in the vicinity of New Iberia, about 150 miles west of New Orleans. Amanda Bowen has been coordinating disaster relief efforts for the Jewish community of southwestern Louisiana.

She said the 17-member group — sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council of Boston — helped clean out the moldy houses of non-Jews destroyed by Hurricane Rita, which followed only three weeks later.

All told, at least 135 Jewish volunteers have done stints in Louisiana and Mississippi since Katrina, according to Adam Bronstone, community relations director at the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans.

"We started a relief effort right after the storm, helping evacuate elderly Jews who didn't want to leave with the regular rescue teams. We also sent a group of boys to Mississippi," said Rabbi Yochanan Rivkin, who grew up in New Orleans and oversees Chabad's activities here. "President Bush recently mentioned our efforts in a speech to the Republican Jewish Coalition, telling them what we did and what the Reform temple in Baton Rouge did."

**HELPING
KATRINA'S
VICTIMS**



Larry Luxner

Volunteers Daniel Held of Toronto, with hammer, and Rabbi Elka Abrahamson of Columbus, Ohio, repair the flood-damaged fence of a Jewish resident of New Orleans on Dec. 26.

"I was so proud to be affiliated with this group of volunteers, because they were so flex-

When tragedy hit the Gulf Coast, U.S. Jews were quick to contribute

By LARRY LUXNER

Like other volunteer leaders, Rivkin said the decision about which Jews to help was not based on their financial status or ability to pay, but rather on matching their needs with volunteers' skills.

"If somebody calls me and asks for help, I'm not going to ask to see their tax returns," he said. "We're four months after the storm, and those people who could have paid for help would have done so already."

That attitude is shared by the Union for Reform Judaism, which sent 19 volunteers to New Orleans. Members of this group, known as "Tzevet Mitzvot," have done this kind of work before — in places ranging from Lexington, Ky., to Burlington, Vt. — are generally older and have some skills in home repair, insulation, electrical work and plumbing.

Rabbi Joel Soffin of Temple Shalom in Succasunna, N.J., said his group finished three houses, putting up more than 100 sheets of drywall.

"There's very severe emotional trauma here," he said. "Our presence alone was a kind of spiritual, emotional healing. In that sense, everyone's poor. And it's difficult for people who are traumatized to organize anything."

One recipient of Tzevet Mitzvot's help was Laszlo Fuchs, a retired Tulane University mathematics professor living in Metairie, home to some 40 percent of the New Orleans Jewish community.

The Hungarian-born Holocaust survivor, who with his wife, Shula, is temporarily living in a rented one-bedroom apartment in Baton Rouge, said Katrina represents the third personal tragedy in his 81 years.

"The first time was when the Nazis sent me to a forced labor camp in Yugoslavia, in 1944. The second time was in 1956 during the Hungarian uprising, when Soviet tanks shot a cannon at our building in Budapest and destroyed our apartment. The third time is now," he said.

Interviewed in his trash-strewn front yard, Fuchs said he couldn't believe how in one day, this group of Jews did more to help him and his wife than anyone has done in the four months since Katrina shattered their lives.

"I'm not really accustomed to asking for help, so it's very difficult to find words to express how we feel about complete strangers coming to help us," he said.

Added Shula, "It's beyond words. It's overwhelming. This is our people. It makes us believe."

NEW ORLEANS (JTA) — Major Jewish organizations have raised more than \$30 million to house, feed, educate and relocate thousands of victims of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi.

The biggest chunk of money has come from the United Jewish Communities, which represents 155 Jewish federations and 400 independent communities across North America. As of Dec. 13, UJC said it had collected \$25.5 million in Katrina disaster relief, of which \$7.9 million already has been allocated to Jewish and non-Jewish hurricane victims.

The single largest beneficiary of UJC's generosity has been the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans, which received \$4 million for programs ranging from emergency assistance for individual Jews to general funding for social services.

UJC funds also have gone to the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston, as well as groups such as Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger, to aid 13 food banks and other groups along the storm-ravaged Gulf Coast.

Smaller amounts have been allocated to groups such as the Dallas Mayor's Housing Initiative, to provide housing assistance to evacuees (\$250,000); the Jewish Federation of Northern Louisiana to provide Wal-Mart gift cards to evacuees in shelters (\$153,900); and the Jewish community of Jackson, Miss., for emergency aid to evacuees (\$50,000).

The American Jewish Committee also has been active. In mid-December, the group's executive director, David Harris, visited New Orleans to present a total of \$575,000 in hurricane relief funds to four institutions.

Dillard University, a predominantly black college, got \$200,000 to help rebuild its Information Technology Center, while \$125,000 went each to Clement of Rome, a Catholic church, and two synagogues — Congregation Gates of Prayer, a Reform synagogue next to St. Clement, and Congregation Beth Israel, an Orthodox shul

in suburban Lakeview that was severely damaged by Katrina.

"Each of us is potentially vulnerable to the fury of Mother Nature, irrespective of where we live, the religion we practice, or the lifestyle we lead," Harris said. "Responding to the needs of our fellow Americans in New Orleans was a moral imperative, and we are glad to be able to contribute significantly to the long-term rebuilding and recovery efforts."

In addition, the Union for Reform Judaism, which represents over 900 Reform congregations, has raised \$3.4 million in general hurricane relief.

Rabbi Deborah Hirsch, director of regions at URJ, said about half of that is going to general assistance for both Jews and non-

Jews, and the other half to Reform congregations throughout the Southeast that suffered damage this fall from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma.

"Whenever there's a disaster of this kind, there are often high uninsured losses. Obviously, the fund won't be able to cover all those losses," Hirsch said. "Between these three hurricanes, the losses are going to exceed whatever is in the fund."

The URJ also has raised \$225,000 for SOS New Orleans, a new fund-raising campaign to help four New Orleans-area Reform congregations maintain their operations, programs and services. The four are Gates of Prayer in Metairie; Temple Sinai and Touro Synagogue in New Orleans; and the Northshore Jewish Congregation of Mandeville.

According to a URJ press release, some 500 to 600 of the 2,000-plus families that belonged to these four synagogues before Katrina may not return. This puts an added burden on the synagogues' fund-raising efforts at a time when they need money more desperately than ever.

Eric Stillman, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans, said that besides the institutional grants, his federation has received over \$100,000 in private, individual donations from outside the New Orleans area since the hurricane.

The United Jewish Communities has raised \$25.5 million in Katrina relief.

As Alito hearings approach, groups gear up

By MATTHEW E. BERGER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Amid the Chanukah parties and the New Year festivities, the organized Jewish community has been gearing up to make itself heard on the next nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court.

Several Jewish organizations already have spoken out against Judge Samuel Alito Jr., who will go before the Senate Judiciary Committee for confirmation hearings beginning next week. Those groups and others are pushing key lawmakers to ask pointed questions about Alito's record on abortion and the separation of church and state.

The goal is to prevent the feeling many in Washington had last year about the nomination of Chief Justice John Roberts — that it was a fait accompli.

Alito is considered a more controversial jurist, with a longer record that has raised concerns among liberal groups, including the National Council of Jewish Women and the Union for Reform Judaism. Both organizations, which announced their opposition to Alito last year, are getting members in touch with key senators, pushing them to reject Alito.

Eleanor Katz, an NCJW leader in Pennsylvania, took the train to Washington on Tuesday to meet with Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), who chairs the Judiciary Committee. Katz met with the Jewish lawmaker for more than 15 minutes, and Specter assured Katz and others that he would raise reproductive rights and executive-power questions with Alito when hearings begin Monday.

"Specter's staff was very interested in the probing questions we want raised," Katz said.

The organization plans to reach out to other lawmakers, including Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), a moderate Democrat and one of 14 moderates who likely will decide whether the nominee is filibustered. NCJW members planned to present the Connecticut offices of Lieberman and Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) with a petition Thursday, asking them to oppose Alito.

The Reform movement also planned significant outreach to its members, asking them to call their senators.

"Part of our challenge is putting

together for our people all the stuff that has come in in dribs and drabs over the past months," said Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism. "Every day there has been something in the press about Alito that has been of concern to our members and our activists."

Both groups believe Alito's nomination will get more attention than Roberts' hearings last year. The key reason, they say, is because Alito was nominated to fill the vacancy of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the court's most moderate voice.

Roberts' hearings also were overshadowed by Hurricane Katrina, which reached the Gulf Coast one week before the session commenced.

"I have a different feeling of where Democrats in the Senate are right now," Pelavin said, noting that several were gearing up for a "serious fight."

Orthodox groups are expressing their own views on Alito. While not endorsing the nominee, the Orthodox Union sent a letter to Judiciary Committee members last week countering the view that Alito's position on the separation of church and state is outside the mainstream.

"When people say a record like his is outside the mainstream on religion-state issues, it's a distortion of the mainstream," said Nathan Diament, director of the O.U.'s Institute for Public Affairs. "We are very encouraged by Alito's record."

Diament also noted Alito has a "very vigilant understanding" of the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment, contrasting it with the view of Justice Antonin Scalia, who authored a much-maligned decision limiting an individual's right to religious expression.

Agudath Israel of America, which announced its support of Alito last month, plans to send a letter to senators as well, but hasn't planned an advocacy campaign.

"The course of events during the next two weeks might dictate that," said Rabbi David Zwiebel, Agudah's executive vice president for government and public affairs.

The Conservative movement has not spoken out on Alito. The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism made headlines last year when it deemed Roberts qualified for office after evaluating his judicial record, which was a first for the movement. But the organization's

Social Action and Public Policy Committee crafted a new charter last month that says the group won't routinely weigh in on nominees.

Lewis Grafman, UCSJ's director of social action and public policy, said the committee hadn't yet met to discuss Alito.

Several major Jewish groups have chosen not to give Alito an up-or-down vote, keeping to traditional positions to not endorse presidential nominations.

But the American Jewish Committee and Anti-Defamation League are readying letters to the Senate Judiciary Committee with questions they want posed to Alito.

Jeff Sinensky, the American Jewish Committee's counsel, said the letter would mirror a letter sent to lawmakers last year on Roberts, focusing on concerns about reproductive rights and the separation of church and state.

The Anti-Defamation League's letter, obtained by JTA, questions Alito's support for student-initiated prayer in public school graduation ceremonies, and his position on key civil rights issues.

"As an appellate judge, Judge Alito dissented in several cases where people were found to have been discriminated against on the basis of race in employment," said the letter, signed by ADL President Barbara Balsler and National Director Abraham Foxman. "Regarding discrimination based on gender and disability, Judge Alito's dissenting opinion in several cases would have made it considerably more difficult for victims of gender and/or disability discrimination to prove their cases."

Liberal Jewish groups are pushing lawmakers to ask pointed questions about Alito's record on abortion and church-state separation.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Ethiopian immigration delayed

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Plans to accelerate the immigration to Israel of Ethiopia's remaining Falash Mura community apparently have been delayed.

The government previously had said the operation to bring 600 Falash Mura to Israel every month would begin in January. The plan is to determine who is eligible to come — somewhere between 13,000 to 20,000 — and bring them all in the next two years.

However, there's no fixed date for the process to begin — and the issue seems to have receded on the list of national

priorities as Israel prepares for March 28 general elections.

Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom has expressed his frustration with the apparent bureaucratic foot-dragging over bringing the Falash Mura, descendants of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity but have since returned to Judaism.

A government decision was made last year to bring the community after heavy lobbying from some American Jewish leaders. Shalom oversaw an agreement with the Ethiopian government to double the number of immigrants coming to Israel from 300 to 600 a month.

"Foreign Minister Shalom is greatly disturbed by the possibility of a delay," his office said in a statement given to JTA.

Officials in the Prime Minister's Office would neither confirm nor deny a delay but did say that during the third week of January a high-level meeting would be held to "determine the arrival of the remaining Falash Mura."

The officials said the commitment to bring the community to Israel still stands, but the timetable is uncertain.

Some blame the delay on interministerial squabbling, others on the upcoming elections. At the root of it all is the issue of funding.

To date the Finance Ministry has yet to approve the budget of some \$850 million, to be paid out over the next three years, to absorb the new immigrants. The government also is awaiting funding promised by the United Jewish Communities, which pledged to raise \$100 million from federations for the operation.

UJC officials in New York said much of the UJC money is dependent on the implementation of the accelerated immigration. Some \$23 million is expected to go toward aiding the Falash Mura while they're still in Ethiopia; another \$40 million will go to supporting them once they land in Israeli absorption centers; and about \$37 million will go to long-term absorption needs like education.

"We expect and look forward to the implementation of the Israeli govern-

ment's policy accelerating the aliyah," said Jim Lodge, UJC's associate vice president for Israel and Overseas. "What we don't know is the exact time, the exact numbers."

A large portion of the government money will be earmarked for apartment mortgages for the new immigrants. The mortgages are worth roughly \$50,000 per family, a sum that may not go over well during an election season focused in part on the grievances of Israel's poor.

For months, the Jewish Agency for Israel has had a team of staff members ready to go to Ethiopia as soon as the government gives final approval to the accelerated immigration.

The agency plans to send Hebrew teachers and other facilitators to a camp in the Gondar region where most of

the Falash Mura are being housed. The idea is to prepare them as much as possible for life in Israel through classes in Hebrew, Judaism and modern living.

"The Jewish Agency for Israel has learned important lessons from its previous experience in the initial absorption of immigrants from Ethiopia and is confident that the immigration and absorption of the current wave of immigration from Ethiopia will be successful," Zeev Bielski, the agency's chairman, said in a recent statement.

(JTA Staff Writer Chanan Tigay in New York contributed to this report.)

COMMUNITY

TRANSITIONS

- Sybil Kessler was appointed B'nai B'rith International's director of U.N. affairs.
- Orthodox Union senior rabbinic coordinator, Rabbi Elyahu Safran, was named vice president for communications and marketing of O.U. Kosher.
- Americans for Peace Now elected a new group of officers to a two-year term. Franklin Fisher was named chair; Martin Bresler, vice chair; Elaine Hoffman was re-elected to her position as national treasurer; and Jo-Ann Mort was named secretary.
- Rabbi Kenneth Kanter was named acting director of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's rabbinical school in Cincinnati.
- London's Institute for Jewish Policy Research named Antony Lerman its executive director. Lerman, JPR's founding director, spent the past six years as chief executive of Hanadiv Charitable Foundation.
- Rabbi Sheldon Miller, an official with the Orthodox Union, died suddenly in Teaneck, N.J., at age 55. Miller directed the ParnossahWorks program, which finds jobs for members of the Jewish community.

HONORS

- IDT Chairman Howard Jonas received the American Jewish Congress' 2005 Stephen S. Wise Award.
- The UJA-Federation Task Force on People with Disabilities and The J.E. and Z.B. Butler Foundation presented the 2005 Zella Bronfman Butler Award to Dr. Jed Luchow, Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, and Christopher Long, F.E.G.S. Health and Human Services.
- The American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists named Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff and the late Simon Wiesenthal the recipients of its 2006 Pursuit of Justice Award.

Bureaucracy and the upcoming elections are blamed for the delay in bringing the Falash Mura to Israel.

Zaka dives deep

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Zaka, the volunteer Israeli emergency response society, launched a new underwater unit.

Two dozen amateur divers turned out Wednesday for their first practice outing on behalf of Zaka, which won hard-gained fame in recent years for its cleanup work at the sites of terrorist attacks and traffic accidents. The divers will be on call to search for Israelis lost at sea.

Unlike the main Zaka group, which mostly is made up of religious men, the diver unit is predominantly secular and includes women.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Poll: Peres would be top Kadima replacement

Shimon Peres would lead the Kadima Party to more Knesset seats than any other leadership candidate, according to polls.

Under Peres, Kadima would win 42 seats in the 120-seat Knesset in the March 28 election, according to the survey by Ha'aretz and Channel 10.

Ehud Olmert, currently serving as prime minister in Sharon's absence, would lead Kadima to 40 seats, Justice Minister Tzipi Livni would lead the party to 38 seats and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz would lead Kadima to 36 seats.

Settler drive-by shooting

West Bank settlers wounded two Palestinians in a drive-by shooting. The army said it had mounted a manhunt Thursday for an Israeli-owned car from which settlers opened fire on Palestinians waiting at a checkpoint outside Nablus.

Two men in their 20s suffered leg injuries in the attack. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

Group: Civilians victims of conflict

Fifty Israelis and 197 Palestinians were killed in political violence in 2005, B'Tselem reported.

Of the 50 Israelis killed, 41 were civilians; of the 197 Palestinians, 124 were civilians, the human rights group reported. But the Israel Defense Forces took issues with the numbers, saying that more Israelis had been killed and that more of the Palestinians were involved in acts of terrorism.

Eshkol proposed transferring Palestinians

Israel's prime minister during the 1967 Six-Day War proposed moving Palestinians to Iraq en masse, declassified documents showed.

According to minutes of a Cabinet session in 1967 published by Ha'aretz this week, Levi Eshkol made the proposals as ministers debated what to do with the sizable Palestinian population that came under Israel's control in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. "We took in a population from Iraq, we took in 100,000 Jews, so let them take in 100,000 Arabs. It is the same language, same cultural level, there is water and land there," he said.

General quits smoking

Israel's chief of military staff quit smoking after being reminded he is a role model.

Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, a former fighter pilot who was at times known to smoke as much as two packs of cigarettes a day, gave up the habit shortly after taking his current post, Yediot Achronot reported recently.

According to the newspaper, what prompted the decision was an e-mail from a military doctor who urged Halutz to quit and serve as a role model for his subordinates.

NORTH AMERICA

Abrams, Welch postpone Middle East tour

Two top U.S. Middle East envoys postponed a visit to the region in the wake of Ariel Sharon's stroke.

Elliott Abrams, the deputy national security adviser, and David Welch, the top State Department envoy to the region, had planned to leave Wednesday night.

"After consulting with all the parties with whom they were going to meet, they decided that they would postpone the trip to a later

date," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said.

The Israeli prime minister was hospitalized Wednesday night with a massive stroke. Abrams and Welch planned to encourage the Palestinians to keep a Jan. 25 date for legislative elections and to press Israel to open trade crossings for the Palestinians.

Canadian Jewish poet dies

Irving Layton, once described as "the Picasso and Mae West of poetry," died Wednesday in Montreal at 93.

He was suffering from Alzheimer's Disease. Born Israel Pincu Lazarovitch in Tirgu Neamt, Romania, in 1912, his family immigrated to Canada in 1913.

His first collection of poetry, "Here and Now," was published by First Statement Press in 1945.

Layton was known for his self-centered and abrasive personality and his dark view of humanity.

WORLD

Norwegian politician backs boycott

Norway's finance minister backed a boycott of Israel. Kristin Halvorsen, a leader of the Socialist Left Party, caused outrage after telling a Norwegian newspaper that she backed the boycott and had stopped buying Israeli products herself.

The country's foreign minister, Jonas Gahr Stoere of the Labor Party, called a government-backed boycott of Israel "unthinkable."

Extremist party can run in Ukraine

Ukrainian officials will allow an ultranationalist political party to run in parliamentary elections, despite protests from Jewish and human rights leaders.

Only four out of 14 members of Ukraine's Central Election Committee voted Dec. 31 against the registration of the Conservative Party of Ukraine in elections set for March. The party is headed by Georgy Schokin, president of MAUP, a private Kiev university known for its anti-Semitic activities.

Jewish leaders have vehemently protested the party and urged officials to ban it from the election because its program contains hate propaganda.

British Jewish dating site erects poster

A British Jewish dating site launched an advertising campaign based on "nagging" Jewish mothers.

"Mother still nagging?" begins the ad posted by SomeoneJewish.com in a Jewish neighborhood of northwest London.

"When I told people we were taking out this billboard they were somewhat surprised to hear it, especially when it would have the word Jewish in such large letters. Many Jewish organizations and businesses often hide the Jewish word behind acronyms or just use the letter J and hope people get it," said Eamonn Ozerovitch, managing director of JMT Ventures, the parent company of SomeoneJewish.com.

B'nai Mitzvah in Poland

David and Rachel Goodman will celebrate their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs this Saturday at Warsaw's liberal Jewish community. The children celebrating at Beit Warszawa are the son and daughter of an American father and a Polish mother.

"This is the first double Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration in Poland since World War II, and possibly the first ever, since girls did not have Bat Mitzvahs in Poland before the war," said Jan Weinsberg, president of Beit Warszawa.