

IN THE NEWS

Sharon due to be wakened

Ariel Sharon, in a coma following major brain surgery, may be revived Monday.

Doctors said Sunday that, having stemmed the Israeli prime minister's massive cerebral hemorrhage and stabilized his vital organs, it was time to end sedation keeping him in a coma.

"As a result of all these indicators, the team of experts has decided to start the process of reducing the prime minister's sedation tomorrow morning, on condition there are no significant events between now and the morning," said Hadassah Hospital's director, Shlomo Mor-Yosef.

U.S. lawmakers press E.U. to shun Hamas

A bipartisan slate of 20 members of Congress urged the European Union not to meet with Hamas representatives.

The European Union recently reversed a policy against meeting with members of the terrorist group, saying it would allow such meetings for electoral matters.

E.U. monitors will observe the Jan. 25 Palestinian legislative elections.

Terror victims sue British bank

Families of American victims of terrorism sued a British bank for providing services to Hamas.

The lawsuit, filed last Friday, alleges that National Westminster Bank, Plc., channeled tens of millions of dollars to Hamas by taking online contributions for the terrorist group via MasterCard and Visa.

The bank allegedly allows Interpol, deemed a global terrorist organization related to Hamas by the United States in 2003, to access banking services.

Separately, the family members filed suit against Credit Lyonnais, saying the French banking company maintains accounts for CBSP, another terrorist group with ties to Hamas.



WORLD REPORT

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With Sharon ailing, election in Israel suddenly up for grabs

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Ariel Sharon's massive brain hemorrhage has thrown Israel's upcoming election wide open.

What looked like a foregone conclusion — with the prime minister's Kadima Party headed toward a landslide victory — could now become a close three-way race among Kadima, Labor and Likud.

"We have an entirely different political situation: Three parties are now running toward the finish line, and no one can say who the next prime minister will be," political analyst Sima Kadmon wrote in *Yediot Achronot* after Sharon was hospitalized.

Doctors remained guarded about the prognosis for the 77-year-old leader, but the stroke — Sharon's second within three weeks — seemed likely to end the political career of a man who had outgrown his past as a polarizing figure to unite a broad swath of the public behind his plan to separate Israel from the Palestinians and set the country's final borders.

Sharon was elected prime minister twice by huge margins and appeared poised to win another landslide in March at the head of Kadima, which he formed after leaving the Likud in November.

Though he was extremely overweight, Sharon was known for his energy and drive and — before suffering a mild stroke Dec. 18 — had seemed generally healthy.

Latest polls still give Kadima a huge lead, but it's not clear how much of that support might be a fleeting sympathy vote or what will happen once the party chooses a new leader who is subjected to negative electoral campaigning by his opponents.

And there's a deeper question: Will any successor have the political clout to continue Sharon's policy, which could entail a significant Israeli pullback from the West Bank?

Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert appears to have the inside track to Kadima's leadership, as all the party's top people have come out in support of his candidacy.

It was clear to them that a bitter fight over the succession could tear the new party apart.

Faction Chairman Roni Bar-On, a close supporter of Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, a potential rival for the top spot, called on the party to unite behind Olmert.

Livni herself declared that "I will do all I can to help the acting prime minister carry out his job, and I am sure the other ministers will too."

Haim Ramon, who crossed to Kadima from Labor, might have been expected to back ex-Laborite Shimon Peres as Kadima leader, but he too called on party members "to restrain their egos" and give their support to Olmert.

The first polls taken after Sharon's serious illness show that Kadima under Olmert would win around 40 seats in the Knesset, compared to 18-20 for Labor and 13-16 for Likud — figures similar to those forecast for Kadima under Sharon.

The early polls are significant not so much as an election forecast but because they will help Olmert consolidate his leadership position.

A former Jerusalem mayor who has held numerous Cabinet posts, Olmert has been one of Sharon's closest associates in recent

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NEWS
ANALYSIS

Support for Kadima looks strong, but will it be fleeting?

Continued from page 1

years, often testing the waters by proposing controversial policies that later were seen to have come from the prime minister.

Before taking over as acting prime minister, Olmert was not the most popular figure in Kadima: He trailed Peres, Livni and even Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz as the people's choice for potential successor to Sharon.

But Olmert's still-brief term as Israel's temporary leader already has changed that.

He will hope that further incumbency strengthens his image as a national leader among Israeli voters; conversely, his opponents in Labor and Likud will hope that targeting him and focusing on his perceived weaknesses will cut Olmert down to size.

The public saw Sharon as a pragmatic centrist who could take difficult decisions and sell them to moderate right-wingers because of his security credentials.

Many Israelis believed Sharon was uniquely positioned to separate Israel from the Palestinians and delineate the Jewish state's permanent borders.

A legendary and controversial general, as prime minister since early 2001 Sharon was instrumental in defeating the Palestinian intifada.

Despite a reputation as a hard-liner, he appeared to have undergone a profound ideological transformation in recent years and pulled Israeli settlements out of the Gaza Strip last summer, giving the

Palestinians a testing ground for autonomy and creating a new window of opportunity for the peace process.

Many believed Sharon would initiate a similar withdrawal from most of the West Bank if elected to a third term.

With Sharon no longer the dominant force setting the election agenda, all the leading parties are likely to build competing leadership teams.

Instead of Sharon against Labor's Amir Peretz and Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu, the election likely will be recast as Olmert and his team against the Peretz and Netanyahu panels.

Olmert's team probably will include Livni and Peres.

Last Friday he began political talks with Peres in an apparent effort to agree on the former Labor prime minister's place in the new Kadima set-up.

In Labor, Peretz may try to bring in former Prime Minister Ehud Barak as his No. 2 to boost his security and foreign policy credentials. He also is desperately trying to persuade Peres to return to Labor.

For his part, Olmert may well try to lure Barak, a close personal friend, to Kadima.

How this post-Sharon fallout settles could decide the election.

Trailing in the polls, Netanyahu cannot be ruled out altogether.

Another former prime minister, he could pick up support at the expense of rivals who lack Sharon's political heft.

Netanyahu's leadership ticket will include Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, and he will try to persuade ex-Likudniks who joined Kadima, including Mofaz and Cabinet minister Tzachi Hanegbi, to return to the fold.

Netanyahu also will allow Likud Cabinet ministers, who were to resign Sunday, to remain in government.

The resignation was meant to signal a break with Sharon and his policies; the decision to stay is intended to highlight the

stature of Likud's leadership team.

Despite the wall-to-wall support Olmert seems to enjoy, he still could encounter problems within Kadima.

Drawing up the party's Knesset list could prove a minefield.

Sharon had the authority to do this more or less as he pleased but Olmert will have to tread carefully, and will risk flak from people who feel they have been placed too low on the list.

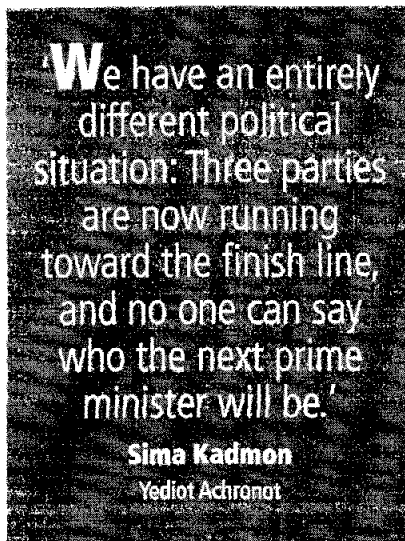
If the results of the current polls hold up and Kadima wins the election, will Olmert or some other Kadima leader be able to fur-

ther Sharon's groundbreaking withdrawal from territory the Palestinians demand?

Under Sharon, the idea would have been to reach agreement on this with the Palestinians and — absent an agreement — to get international sanction for new borders Israel would set on its own.

Whether an alternative Israeli leadership will be able to proceed in this vein is perhaps the most important political question in a post-Sharon era.

Along with Sharon's medical condition, it's this question, more than any other, that is troubling Israel, the region and the international community.



Iranian hopes Sharon dies

NEW YORK (JTA) — Iran's president said he hopes Ariel Sharon dies. "Hopefully, the news that the criminal of Sabra and Shatila has joined his ancestors is final," Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Jan. 5, according to the semiofficial Iranian Student News Agency.

Ahmadinejad was referring to the 1982 massacre of Palestinian civilians by a Lebanese Christian militia at two refugee camps. An Israeli commission of inquiry held Sharon, who was Israel's defense minister at the time, indirectly responsible for not anticipating the carnage, and he was forced to resign.

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Hillel students rebuild post-Katrina Mississippi

By LARRY LUXNER

BILOXI, Miss. (JTA) — Southern Mississippi's Jewish population has suddenly mushroomed — at least for the next week or so — as 135 members of the campus organization Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life fan out through the area, repairing roofs of houses severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

The Hillel students, wearing distinctive orange T-shirts that say "Rebuild and Repair: Tzedek Means Justice," arrived New Year's Day and will be leaving Jan. 15. They constitute the largest single group of Jewish volunteers to visit the storm-ravaged U.S. Gulf Coast since Katrina struck the area last August.

In addition to Hillel, other Jewish groups have been active in Mississippi relief work. Shortly after Katrina struck, the Chabad-Lubavitch movement dispatched a group of emissaries to Biloxi to assist with emergency search-and-rescue efforts.

Last week, the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center sent its director of interfaith affairs, Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, to Biloxi to assess the progress of one of its affiliate organizations, the Mississippi Coast Interfaith Disaster Task Force.

"We are a human-rights organization and disaster relief is not the focus of the work of our center," Adlerstein told the Biloxi Sun Herald. "But it is the interfaith part that got us involved through a back-door channel, and who knows where it will lead us."

The Hillel volunteers, each of whom paid \$125 plus transportation, are split into various teams and expect to replace the roofs on 16 houses, all of them belonging to non-Jews. At night, they sleep on the floor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Gulfport.

The program is being coordinated by Weinberg Tzedek Hillel, a Washington-based international social-service initiative sponsored by Hillel, and is getting

THIS WEEK

FRIDAY

■ Jews of all backgrounds gather for four days of Jewish learning at Limmud NY in New York's Catskill Mountains. Sessions at the conference focus on topics ranging from Talmud to psychology, film to Bible, drama to Israeli politics.

\$108,000 in funding from United Jewish Communities.

"During the past few days, the destruction we have seen has been devastating," said University of Georgia sophomore Joseph Beker. "Before coming down, I had no idea how bad the situation was, and after seeing it first hand I realized how important it is that we are down here. The work we're doing is a very small part of what needs to be done."

One building Hillel won't be fixing is Beth Israel Synagogue, which was severely battered by the hurricane; the congregation's board of directors hasn't decided whether to rebuild the shul at the current site or move to a new site.

"If we make no improvement on it at all, it'll cost \$350,000, and that's low-balling it," said the congregation's president, Stephen Richer. "For what we want to do, the cost ranges from \$500,000 to \$1.5 million."

Founded in 1958, Beth Israel, a Conservative synagogue, had 60 member families before Katrina, representing about half the coastal region's Jewish population.

"A few people have left, and some like me are waiting for their homes to be fixed," said Richer, interviewed in the crowded 36-foot Coachman trailer that's parked in his front yard.

Richer, who's also executive director of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau, bought the trailer used for \$50,000 and drove it up from Florida; he's been living in it ever since because his own house is full of mold and uninhabitable.

So is Beth Israel, which sits on the corner of Southern Boulevard and Camelia Street, only a few blocks from U.S. 90, which parallels the Gulf of Mexico. Evidence of Katrina's destruction is everywhere along the coast, from the twisted remains of a local Waffle House to the floating Treasure Bay Casino barge that ended up on the beach, half a mile away from its moorings.

The synagogue's administrator, Bonnie Kidd, said she was able to save the office computer, fax machine and important

books. Mark Tabor, who lived in an apartment on top of the synagogue and was its caretaker, rescued the Torah scrolls just before Katrina hit.

As bad as Beth Israel is — with its damaged roof, cracked wooden pews and mold — it's nothing compared to the destruction elsewhere in the Biloxi-Gulfport area.

"We know about 15 Jewish families who lost everything. They have nothing except the clothes on their back," Kidd told JTA. "Some of them left, some of them are staying with family or friends, and some of them have been able to go through the ruins and see what they could salvage."

Since the storm, the Conservative congregation has been holding Shabbat services regularly at Beauvoir Methodist Church in Biloxi.

"Our particular congregation is very ecumenical. We've participated in Friday evening services" at Beth Israel "for over 20 years, but this is the first opportunity we've had to bring in a non-Christian group," said Rev. Marilyn Perrine

of Beauvoir, which is also hosting Hands On USA, a church volunteer group that includes Jewish and non-Jewish volunteers. "My folks are very open and excited about having Beth Israel in our building."

Local churches also offered to host Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, but the visiting rabbi and cantor that had been sent by the United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism keep Shabbat, and with most Biloxi-area hotels destroyed by Katrina, there was nowhere within walking distance for them to stay.

In the end, nearby Keesler Air Force Base invited the congregation to use its chapel, said Richer.

"Wayne Lord, the commanding general at Keesler, came to Kol Nidre services before we started and made the most gracious remarks about the role of the U.S. military in preserving religious freedom," Richer said. "We had probably over 100 people there — not only our members but also FEMA workers and Red Cross volunteers. We had a national audience."

Meanwhile, members of Biloxi's dwindling, older Jewish community wonder what the future holds in store for them. ■

HELPING KATRINA'S VICTIMS

The work we're
doing is a very small
part of what needs
to be done.

Joseph Beker
Hillel volunteer

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Peres backs Olmert

Shimon Peres dismissed speculation that he would not support Israel's acting prime minister.

Peres, who quit the Labor Party last year in support of Ariel Sharon's new centrist movement, Kadima, said Sunday that acting prime minister Ehud Olmert had his full backing.

"He supported the policies of Mr. Sharon and even occasionally was ahead of him," Peres told Britain's Sky Television. "The policies for peace, the continuation of the policies of Sharon, will have my full support."

Peres, who never formally joined Kadima, stopped short of announcing that he would remain with the party, but his spokesman said this was a given.

According to media reports, Peres has been offered one of the top five places on Kadima's candidate list for the March 28 elections.

Settler leader: Sharon still impure

A leader of Israeli settlers said Ariel Sharon's medical condition does not "purify" his actions in withdrawing settlers from the Gaza Strip. Rabbi Chanan Porat, a founder of the Gush Emunim settlers movement and a former member of the Knesset, said Sharon's condition "does not purify" the prime minister's "negative actions."

Porat also said: "While he totters between life and death one must pray for the personal welfare of Sharon, but need not regret the end of the political era of the man."

Sharon, long a champion of the settlement movement, was vilified by some settlers after he orchestrated Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the West Bank last year.

Gilon attended U.S.-Israeli security meeting

An Israeli diplomat at the center of classified-information charges against two former pro-Israel lobbyists met recently with top U.S. officials.

Naor Gilon, who until last summer was the political officer at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, helped organize the renewal of the U.S.-Israel strategic dialogue in November.

He attended a White House meeting led by Nicholas Burns, an undersecretary of state, and Tzachi Hanegbi, an Israeli Cabinet minister.

The sensitive dialogue was renewed after three years of suspension over U.S. anger at Israeli arms sales to China. Gilon was a central figure in the indictment last summer of Steve Rosen, the former American Israel Public Affairs Committee foreign policy director, and Keith Weissman, AIPAC's former Iran analyst. Rosen and Weissman are alleged to have relayed classified information to Gilon.

Larry Franklin, a former Pentagon Iran analyst who pleaded guilty last year to leaking classified information, also has admitted to meeting with the Israeli diplomat.

Gilon, whose presence at the strategic dialogue was first reported by Ha'aretz, was promoted within the Foreign Ministry after completing his three-year stint at the Washington embassy.

Lawyers for Rosen and Weissman say Gilon has not cooperated with their efforts to get him to testify.

NORTH AMERICA

Leaders gather to pray for Sharon

American Jewish leaders, Israeli officials and New York politicians gathered in Manhattan to pray for Ariel Sharon's recovery.

"When your father is desperately ill, we his children feel very worried, nearly orphaned and very, very sad," Dan Gillerman, Israel's

permanent representative at the United Nations, said during the Jan. 5 event at the Israeli Consulate in New York.

Clergy read psalms and prayers for the health of Sharon, who is in an induced coma after suffering a serious stroke.

Others offered recollections of encounters with Sharon.

Also addressing the gathering, sponsored jointly with the Conference of President of Major American Jewish Organizations, were Arye Mekel, Israel's consul general in New York; Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.); New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver; the new speaker of New York's City Council, Christine Quinn; Harold Tanner, chairman of the Presidents Conference; and Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the conference.

Hoenlein said Sharon "embodies all that we had hoped for Israel."

White House: Robertson comments 'offensive'

A White House spokesman called Pat Robertson's comments about Ariel Sharon's stroke "wholly inappropriate and offensive."

Spokesman Trent Duffy responded last Friday to the Christian leader's suggestion that the Israeli prime minister, who suffered a massive stroke Jan. 4, was being punished by God for dividing the Land of Israel by evacuating Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip last summer.

"I think those comments were wholly inappropriate and offensive, and really don't have a place in this or any other debate," Duffy said onboard Air Force One.

Robertson's remarks have been repudiated by a range of religious leaders.

WORLD

Norwegian backs off boycott call

Norway's finance minister apologized for calling for Israeli exports to be boycotted.

Israel's embassy in Oslo announced over the weekend it had received an apology for the remarks made by Kristin Halvorsen, which drew widespread censure.

"My goal and the Socialist Left's goal is for Norwegian consumers to decide to drop products and services from Israel, and make other choices in the shops," Halvorsen was quoted as saying in an interview given before Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a stroke Jan. 4.

Man confesses in synagogue vandalism

A synagogue in a Paris suburb was vandalized early Saturday morning, according to the National Office of Vigilance Against Anti-Semitism.

A male, 21, identified as being of African origin climbed onto the roof of the Sarcelles synagogue, and engraved the words "Juden raus," or "Jews get out," and "Death to Sharon" with an ice pick.

The man has confessed to the crime.

Jewish lawmakers' meeting hits the Web

An international meeting of Jewish lawmakers is being streamed over the Web.

The meeting of The International Council of Jewish Parliamentarians can be seen by visiting the World Jewish Congress' Web site, www.worldjewishcongress.org, and clicking on the ICJP banner.

The council is a global network of Jewish Cabinet ministers and Members of Parliament, created to exchange ideas and cooperate Jewish and global concerns, which is convening in Jerusalem through Tuesday.