

IN THE NEWS

Sharon improves, moving his left side

Ariel Sharon's condition is improving.

On Tuesday, a day after he moved his right side, the Israeli prime minister showed movement on his left side for the first time since his Jan. 4 stroke, according to Israeli media.

The damage to Sharon's brain is believed to be concentrated in the right side of his brain, which controls the left side of the body.

But doctors at Jerusalem's Hadassah Hospital at Ein Kerem, where Sharon is being treated, cautioned that Sharon remains in critical condition, and that it could be several days before they could assess the damage caused by his stroke.

Iran's nuke program to go to U.N. council?

The United States threatened to take Iran to the U.N. Security Council over the Islamic republic's nuclear program.

The threat came Tuesday, after Iran resumed nuclear fuel research at a uranium enrichment plant. Israel considers Iran's nuclear program an existential threat.

High Court denies religion case review

The U.S. Supreme Court denied a petition from the American Jewish Congress to review a decision allowing Americorps teachers to teach religion in religious schools.

The court did not act on the organization's petition Monday, essentially denying them a Supreme Court review, after a federal appeals court ruled last year on behalf of the Corporation for National Service, which oversees Americorps, because the government was not using the money to promote religion.

Due to the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, the JTA World Report will not be published on Monday, Jan. 15.



WORLD REPORT

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With Sharon sidelined, Bush team reaches out to potential successors

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Bush administration is juggling two stages of grief in dealing with the absence of Ariel Sharon: denial and acceptance.

Sharon has been the premier agent of change in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since Bush took office. One message the administration is pushing is to deny that Sharon's disappearance from the political scene substantively changes anything.

Two top Bush administration envoys are set to fly to the region Tuesday to remind all parties that systems are still go, despite the massive stroke Jan. 4 that has kept the Israeli prime minister incapacitated and likely has ended his political career.

The other message is to accept the reality that Sharon is gone, establish the same level of trust with his deputy, Ehud Olmert, now the acting prime minister, and feel out the other two leading candidates in March 28 elections in Israel.

It's a delicate balance for a delicate time.

The Bush administration has dramatically increased its investment in the peace process, successfully betting last year that Sharon's longstanding reputation as Israel's last lion of war would guide the Jewish state through its most searing peace move, evacuating Gaza Strip settlements.

In the coming year, the administration hoped Sharon would begin to evacuate substantial portions of the West Bank.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Elliott Abrams, the deputy national security adviser to the White House,

and David Welch, the top State Department envoy to the region, would press the Palestinians to hold legislative elections as scheduled on Jan. 25, and would push Israel to open up transit points between the Gaza Strip, Israel and the West Bank.

"We all know that Prime Minister Sharon is in the hospital, and we continue to hope for his recovery," McCormack said Monday.

"There are still agreements in place that require follow-up. We are following up, as are others on implementation of those agreements."

Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. secretary of state, stepped in personally in November to broker the transit agreement, and is anxious that Israel has yet to open the transit points.

Israel is worried that the Palestinian Authority is not taking control of terrorists in the Gaza Strip.

Yet while it's business-as-usual on the micro level, Bush administration spokesmen make clear that they understand the tectonic political changes underway in Israel ahead of the March elections.

As Sharon's front man on the peace process, Olmert was already a known quantity to the administration.

He has spoken extensively with Rice since assuming the acting premiership. Rice canceled a planned tour of Indonesia and Australia to keep a close watch on developments in Israel.

"We stay in close contact with the government of Israel and we have officials that travel there on a fairly regular basis as well," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said Monday. "I expect we'll be going back

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NEWS ANALYSIS

■ U.S. makes overtures to potential Israeli successors

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there in the near future, too.”

A breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian peace success might purchase Arab and international goodwill and help the Bush administration navigate its other grand plan loaded with potential booby traps: the transition to democratic self-rule in Iraq.

Sharon broke away from his Likud Party late last year because it continued to defy his plans to withdraw from some Palestinian areas.

He established the centrist Kadima party, bringing over leading figures from Likud and Labor.

The question is whether Olmert or his competitors — Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu and Labor Party leader Amir Peretz — have the strength or the will to push for additional withdrawals.

“Olmert has a very solid reputation in terms of intelligence and decision making, but he’s not known to have the same personal stature and leadership skills as Sharon had,” said Lewis Roth, assistant executive director of Americans for Peace Now, a group that backs withdrawal.

“The question is can he deliver on what will presumably be a more difficult evacuation of settlers from the West Bank.”

U.S. diplomats also have reached out to Netanyahu and Peretz, but there are even greater questions concerning how the two of them would pursue peace.

Netanyahu quit Sharon’s government

over the Gaza withdrawal last summer and is not likely to campaign for further pullouts, though that could change if he wins.

In 1996, Netanyahu ran on a platform criticizing the Oslo process.

Once in office, however, he eventually embraced its land-for-peace precept, though not as willingly as his Labor Party predecessors.

Peretz, by contrast, is a security and diplomacy cipher, having wrested the Labor Party leadership from Shimon Peres last year in a campaign run purely on socioeconomic issues.

Peres has since backed Kadima. He has said he is committed to making peace with the Palestinians quickly, but has given few details.

“Peretz is fairly well-known within the Labor Zionist movement, but he’s not been over on speaking trips so there’s additional work to do,” Roth said.

One obstacle is that Peretz reportedly has substantial difficulties communicating in English.

Some Jewish leaders said the solid U.S.-Israel relationship makes the personality of the next prime minister less important.

“The relationship is so institutionalized and so important that while each prime minister puts his own stamp on the relationship, whatever differences there are can be addressed,” said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

That applies not only to relations with the administration, but with the pro-Israel community as well, Hoenlein said.

An official of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the premier pro-Israel lobby, confirmed that.

“AIPAC has a relationship with all three men,” the official said, speaking anonymously because AIPAC avoids comment on internal Israeli politics.

“They’re well-known to the leadership of the Jewish community,” he said.

“They’ve all expressed a desire to

have a strong relationship with the United States.”

M.J. Rosenberg, policy director for the Israel Policy Forum — another group that backs withdrawal — agreed that the U.S.-Israel relationship would

not be a factor in the March 28 elections.

“The only foreigners who determine what happens are the Palestinians,” Rosenberg said, referring to the Palestinian leadership’s failure to contain violence in Gaza since Israel’s withdrawal in September.

The Bush administration agrees, and per-

sistently has pressed Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to assert control before the Palestinian elections take place on Jan. 25.

“The Palestinian Authority needs to provide an atmosphere of calm and safety for the citizens of the Gaza Strip, that’s important,” McCormack said last week.

“It is the primary responsibility of any government entity to provide for the welfare of its citizens in terms of safety. Clearly we don’t have that right now in Gaza.”

The message-sending doesn’t stop in Washington.

The international community, embodied by the diplomatic “Quartet” guiding the Middle East peace process — the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia — says a Palestinian government that includes terrorists would be unacceptable.

The rush of warnings reflects widespread concern that Abbas, favored for his relative moderation, is losing control as the Gaza Strip, which Israel evacuated in September, descends into internecine violence.

Dennis Ross, the Clinton administration’s top envoy to the region, said continued violence against Israel also undermines Abbas’ claim that the Palestinian polity is moderating.

“Israel got out of Gaza, but Kassam rockets are still being shot out of Gaza,” Ross told JTA.

“The impulse is to say, ‘What are the Palestinians doing?’”



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Hillel students assist Israel's foreign workers

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV (JTA) — At the end of an alcohol-soaked alleyway where prostitutes from an adjacent brothel mingle with clients, a tall gate pushes open to reveal a day-care center.

A smiling Asian girl in pigtails appears. Shouting "Shalom! Shalom!" she leads the way inside, where North American Jewish college students are painting the walls with hearts and rainbows

The students are part of a Hillel-sponsored weeklong visit to Israel which brings young Jews face-to-face with some of Israel's toughest social issues.

The students spent three days helping fix up several day-care centers for children of foreign workers in south Tel Aviv neighborhoods.

"It seems to me this is a much more 'real' way to see Israel," said Yael Hammerman, 21, explaining why she chose to spend her winter break helping Israel's foreign workers and learning more about their situation.

Hammerman, who is studying for a joint degree at Barnard College and the Jewish Theological Seminary, was one of 20 students who worked in the day-care centers, painting their walls in bright colors and indulging the children with attention, games and hugs as part of Hillel's Tzedek program.

Hillel brought 350 students to spend their winter break in Israel. More than 1,000 students applied and underwent a competitive application process.

The program offered students four tracks to choose from in Israel: advanced advocacy; business and hi-tech; Jewish learning and pluralism; and Tzedek, for those students with a special interest in social issues.

Students on the Tzedek track selected from among four volunteer projects, one of which was working with the children of foreign workers.

The other projects were working with Bedouin in the Negev, Ethiopian immigrants in Kiryat Gat or elderly Israelis in the southern town of Dimona in a joint project with Israeli university students.

There are more than 200,000 foreign workers in Israel.

Some of them spend many years here and become rooted, even having children

who eventually attend Israeli schools.

They come from countries such as the Philippines, China, Romania, Thailand, Columbia and Ghana, often working as house cleaners, in construction or as home health aides.

The Israeli economy began depending on them in higher numbers following the outbreak of the intifada in 2000, when restrictions were placed on the number of Palestinian workers allowed into Israel.

More than 6,000 workers were deported in 2005 — far fewer than the 18,000 deported in 2004 — as part of a recent crackdown on workers with expired work visas.

The Tzedek students attended lectures on a range of social and economic issues facing Israel.

In Jerusalem, they attended salon meetings on various topics including hunger, environmental concerns and human trafficking.

Students working in the day-care centers also met the children's parents, all of whom are in Israel illegally.

The parents work long hours.

Many of them drop their children off not long after dawn and return only at 8 p.m. or 9 p.m.

Taking a break from painting an orange heart on the wall of a room usually full of cribs, Meredith Herman, 20, said the program spoke to her.

"Unlike other Israel experiences I've been on, I think this trip teaches you what you can do for Israel and how you can use your skills to better the community," said Herman, who grew up in Toronto and is a student at McGill University in Montreal.

"We've been able to meet lots of different types of people who are often ignored," Herman said.

"The trip has given me the opportunity to think about what it means to have a just society."

Wayne Firestone, executive vice president of the United States for Hillel, said the Tzedek track, which has the highest demand, is designed to attract Jewish students interested in tikkun olam, or social

action.

"They may not be a student who participates in any other Hillel activity but what draws them is social action," Firestone said.

By "giving them a program where they are looking at very difficult aspects of Israeli society with needs, we're essentially saying, 'we need you to help make an impact on your trip.'"

A woman who runs one of the day-care centers said she was overwhelmed by the help and energy of the students.

"They are a big help to me," said the woman, herself a foreign worker, who would identify herself only as Myra.

The students also toured south Tel Aviv neighborhoods where many of the foreign workers live in small, cramped apartments amid drug dens and sex shops.

"It's been a very honest trip, exposing us to many sides of Israel," said Allyson Marvin, 20, from Boston University, who came to Israel last year on birthright Israel

and was looking for a way to return and see more of the country.

Marvin, who grew up in Austin, Texas, said she looks forward to bringing what she has learned in Israel back home with her and into the classroom, where she teaches seventh graders about tikkun olam.

'They may not be a student who participates in any other Hillel activity but what draws them is social action.'

Wayne Firestone
Executive V.P. of the U.S. for Hillel

Indian Jews to Israel

NEW YORK (JTA) — A group of young Indian Jews, perhaps the first to go on birthright Israel, is visiting Israel.

Forty Indian Jews, aged 18-26, are in Israel for a weeklong trip that ends Wednesday.

The trip was organized by ORT India, which provides training courses in Jewish education and computers within India.

Tens of thousands of young Jews have visited Israel on trips organized by birthright Israel in its first five years of operation.

**FOCUS
ON
ISSUES**

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Hadassah disputes Sharon report

Hadassah Hospital disputed a report that questioned Ariel Sharon's medical treatment.

Ha'aretz reported Tuesday that Sharon's brain hemorrhage could have been caused by a blood vessel disorder that doctors initially failed to detect.

The article then raised questions about the administration of anticoagulants, given Sharon's condition.

But Dr. Shlomo Mor-Yosef, director-general of the Hadassah Medical Organization, rejected the report, saying, "Everything we know today about P.M. Sharon's condition we diagnosed when he was admitted to the hospital the first time with a mild stroke."

Kidnapping plot foiled

Israel thwarted a Hamas kidnapping plot. The Shin Bet announced Tuesday that it had arrested a Palestinian who was dispatched by Hamas from the Gaza Strip with orders to set up a West Bank unit to kidnap Israelis.

The terrorist made his way last month from Gaza to Egypt and from there to Israel, but was caught after crossing the border.

Hamas has said it will renew efforts to kidnap Israelis and trade them for Palestinians in Israeli jails.

'Passover massacre' mastermind sentenced

The mastermind of the 2002 "Passover massacre" bombing received 35 life sentences.

Abbas Al-Sayed received the sentence Tuesday for his role in the bombing of Netanya's Park Hotel in March 2002, which killed 30 people. Sayed, a Hamas chief in the West Bank city of Tulkarm, also was found guilty of masterminding another attack in Netanya in 2001 that killed five people.

Iran to host Holocaust forum?

An Iranian journalists' association reportedly is preparing to hold a conference on the Holocaust that will be open to those who question it.

The conference being organized by the Association of Islamic Journalists comes after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently denied the Holocaust in what he later said were remarks aimed at galvanizing Muslim youth.

Inaction seen in olive-tree attacks

An Israeli security chief blamed a lack of vigilance for the failure to stop settlers from attacking Palestinian olive trees.

At a Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee session Tuesday where the recent vandalism of West Bank orchards was raised, the chief of the Shin Bet, Yuval Diskin, said there had been advance warning that radical settlers might carry out the attacks.

The Shin Bet passed the information to the police and army forces in the West Bank, but it was greeted by "eye-rolling" and inaction, he said.

NORTH AMERICA

Jackson to speak at Israeli Embassy

Rev. Jesse Jackson will address the Israeli Embassy in Washington as part of a commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. Jackson will speak Thursday at the event, co-sponsored by the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, as will Daniel Ayalon, Israel's ambassador.

The annual Civil Rights Leadership Award will be presented to Carolyn Goodman, mother of a civil rights worker murdered in Mississippi in 1964, and Richard Womack, assistant to the president of the AFL-CIO.

Prep-school students meet on Holocaust

A leading Holocaust scholar is headlining a meeting of Jewish prep-school students on the issue.

Deborah Dwork of Clark University in Massachusetts is speaking at Monday and Tuesday's event at Choate Rosemary Hall in Connecticut.

The event is sponsored by the Curriculum Initiative, which supports Jewish students at private schools.

WORLD

U.S. congressman to head lawmakers' group

The International Council of Jewish Parliamentarians selected Rep. Gary Ackerman (D.-N.Y.) as its president.

The group this week unanimously elected Ackerman, a 12-term member of the U.S. House of Representatives, at the end of a four-day conference in Israel that brought together more than 60 Jewish lawmakers from around the world.

Participants also visited the Jerusalem hospital where Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is being treated after suffering a major stroke.

"I am deeply honored by the confidence of my fellow Jewish parliamentarians from around the world and I look forward to building on the great work done by this founding conference in Jerusalem," Ackerman said.

A dozen vice presidents were also chosen.

Poll: French see Sharon as war criminal

Nearly 58 percent of French voters in an online poll said they consider Ariel Sharon a war criminal.

Out of 369,439 who voted between Saturday and Tuesday afternoon in the poll conducted by the *Le Nouvel Observateur* newspaper, 57.9 percent consider Sharon a "war criminal," while 42.1 percent see him as "the De Gaulle of Israel."

'Red Ken' not going to Jewish party

London's controversial mayor is unlikely to be invited to celebrations later this year marking the 350th anniversary of the readmission of Jews to England.

According to the London Jewish Chronicle, Ken Livingstone's refusal to apologize for comparing a Jewish reporter to a concentration camp guard is the main sticking point.

Livingstone faces possible disciplinary action for this name-calling. He also is fiercely critical of Israel, has called Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a war criminal and courted an Egyptian cleric who is openly anti-Zionist.

Trying to make amends, he recently held a reception to celebrate Chanukah.

Chabad house opens in Warsaw

Chabad recently opened its first full-time center in Poland.

The center, under the direction of Rabbi Shalom Ber Stambler and his wife, Dina, will host 10 rabbinical students and will also work as teachers for Poland's estimated 10,000 Jews.

The new center includes a library, study rooms and a kosher restaurant.

The center is operating in part with the financial support of the Rohr Family Foundation and Joseph Neumann of New York.