

IN THE NEWS

Ariel Sharon may have opened eyes

Ariel Sharon, in a coma, may have opened his eyes.

Aides and relatives said the Israeli prime minister briefly opened his eyes twice Monday when a tape-recording of his grandson's voice was played.

It was the most encouraging response since Sharon was placed in a coma as surgeons treated a massive stroke he suffered Jan. 4.

But doctors played down hopes of a speedy recovery, saying Sharon's eyelids may have simply moved in a reflex reaction.

Man attacks synagogue in Russia

A young man tried to attack worshippers at the synagogue of the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don.

The attacker was wrestled down last Friday and handed over to police.

No injuries were reported in the incident.

According to local police, the man said he was inspired to act by the Jan. 11 stabbing incident at a Moscow synagogue, RIA-Novosti reported.

Amazon.com pulls odd Haggadah link

Amazon.com pulled a link that recommended users who purchase a Haggadah aimed at Orthodox Jews also purchase a "messianic Jewish" one.

The link was pulled Monday, following questions to the e-retailer posed by JTA.

Before the change, the Messianic Passover Haggadah was recommended for those visitors to the page where the Family Haggadah: Haggadah Shel Pesah produced by Artscroll is listed.

A spokeswoman for Amazon.com explained that the recommendation was originally made because the same customers had bought those two books.



WORLD REPORT

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Iranian's anti-Semitic tirades a factor in intensifying pressure

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's strategy of trying to turn Israel and the Jewish people into scapegoats is helping to get his country into international hot water.

A Western alliance appeared close Monday to nudging Russia — which has resisted previous efforts to punish Iran for its nuclear program — into referring Iran to the U.N. Security Council for sanctions.

Ahmadinejad's relentless targeting of Israel has also proven central in Iran's gathering isolation, although the principal factor fueling the tide against Iran has been its brazen defiance of entreaties to slow its nuclear program down.

Late last week, President Bush connected Ahmadinejad's threat against Israel and the broader nuclear threat posed by Iran.

"The current president of Iran has announced that the destruction of Israel is an important part of their agenda, and that's unacceptable," Bush said last Friday after meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. "And the development of a nuclear weapon, it seems like to me, would make them a step closer to achieving that objective."

Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful. The West believes it is close to manufacturing a nuclear bomb.

Israel has been warning the West for more than a decade that Iran and its nuclear ambitions pose the gravest threat to stability in the Middle East, but concern about the prospect of an Iranian bomb only began to gain traction after Ahmadinejad's election last summer.

That's when Iran declared its intention to roll back some of the inspections regime that had kept a lid on western worries about Iran's plan to build a bomb. Those concerns came to a head last week when Iran removed U.N. seals on some of its uranium enrichment facilities last week.

Complementing the defiance were Ahmadinejad's declarations that Israel should be "wiped out" and his denial of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust denial especially helped turn around Europe's hopes that Iran could be swayed by diplomacy and promises of assistance in developing a peaceful nuclear capacity.

"To us Germans, too, it is totally unacceptable what Iran has said recently, for example, as regards the questioning the right of existence of Israel, the statements that were made with relevance to the Holocaust," Merkel said at her meeting with Bush. "And

it's essential, we feel, that the E.U.-3 together with the United States take a common position here, become active, that we try to persuade as many other countries as possible to join themselves to us."

The E.U.-3 refers to Germany, Britain and France, the three major European powers negotiating with Iran on behalf of the European Union.

The E.U.-3 despaired of Iran in September, after an unusually tough report from the U.N. watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, accused the Islamic Republic of being in noncompliance with a 2-year-old freeze and of concealing some of its nuclear activity.

The Bush administration wanted Iran immediately referred to the Security Council, as did Israel, much of the U.S. Congress and the

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BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

■ Iran's anti-Semitic tirades and Holocaust denial widening gap with the West

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American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. But it relented in the face of a strategy proposed by the E.U.-3, which wanted to address the likelihood that China and Russia would exercise their vetoes should it come to the Security Council.

Both nations do a lot of energy-related business with Iran. Russia has a major stake in building Iran's nuclear reactor, and China gets most of its oil from Iran. Both nations also traditionally resent international community monitoring of sovereign nuclear programs.

The E.U.-3 strategy was to bring Russia on as a negotiating partner. Russia, eager to restore international prestige that collapsed with the Soviet empire, eagerly agreed to new terms: Iran could run a nuclear program as long as the final

stages of uranium enrichment were left to Russia. That would keep Iran from obtaining weapons grade uranium.

Israel once again played a role, when Ehud Olmert, the acting Israeli prime minister, lobbied Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last week after the Russian foreign minister called to express his concern over the health of comatose Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

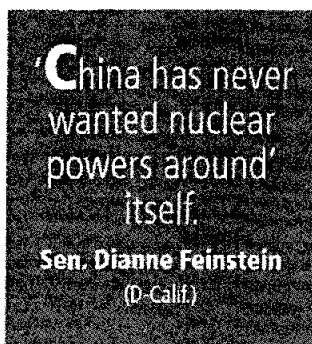
The strategy appears to have paid off. "As for Russia, and Germany, and our European partners and the United States, we have very close positions on the Iranian problem," Russian President Vladimir Putin said Monday after meeting with

Merkel in Moscow.

He still urged caution, especially because Iran has threatened to end all cooperation with U.N. inspectors should the matter go to the Security Council.

China is much less likely to exercise its veto in isolation, and it too might consider the dangers of a nuclear Iran so close to its predominantly Muslim western provinces.

"China has never wanted, you know, nuclear powers around its country," Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) said Sunday on "Face the Nation" on CBS. "I think China should recognize the devastation that Iran could bring about."



Olmert named temporary leader of Kadima

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) — He inherited power from Israel's ailing prime minister, but Ehud Olmert looks set to prove his worth at the polls.

Having been named interim prime minister after Ariel Sharon was hospitalized with a stroke, Olmert was on Monday confirmed as temporary head of the ruling Kadima Party, virtually guaranteeing he will be its candidate in the March 28 elections.

Aides to Sharon, who has been in a coma since suffering a massive stroke Jan. 4, said he briefly opened his eyes Monday.

But doctors played down hopes this could herald a recovery. The best-case scenarios speak of Sharon being hospitalized for months — well past the upcoming elections.

Election surveys predict an easy win for Kadima, thanks to public perceptions that it is best equipped to build on last year's Gaza Strip withdrawal and end the past five years of Palestinian-Israeli violence.

But that assumes the current relative calm holds — a prospect that may prove illusory if Hamas, which is running in a Palestinian Authority parliamentary ballot later this month, again escalates its terrorism campaign.

Unlike ex-general Sharon, Olmert, 60, is an apparatchik.

But in his first two weeks in the top office, Olmert has already flexed his political muscles.

His first challenge was the Palestinian Authority's demand for its parliamentary campaign to take place in eastern Jerusalem, a de-facto challenge to the city's status as Israel's capital.

Aided by the resignation of four

Cabinet ministers from the rival Likud Party, Olmert won approval for limiting the electioneering to those Palestinians not tainted by terrorism.

But Olmert found it tougher to tackle rioting by hundreds of settler youths in an area of Hebron where Israelis squatting in Palestinian-owned properties are slated for eviction.

"The government will not accept such wild and unrestrained behavior," Olmert told fellow ministers in broadcast remarks Sunday.

But the crackdown did not come until Monday, when police flooded Hebron and arrested at least three settlers for disorderly conduct. By that point, most of the youths had fled.

"Someone who, like Olmert, supported the disengagement and sees himself as Ariel Sharon's heir cannot explain away his weakness on this matter when confronted by a group of hooligans," the liberal Ha'aretz newspaper editorialized.

To replace the departed Likud foreign minister, Silvan Shalom, Olmert has tapped Tzipi Livni, whom Sharon was widely believed to be grooming as a potential successor.

Livni, a former Mossad agent, would be the second woman to fill the prestigious post after Golda Meir.

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Amid rent worries, JCC in Russia remains empty

By YASHA LEVINE

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia (JTA) — Flashback to Sept. 9, 2005: the opening ceremony of YESOD, a first-of-its-kind Jewish community center in the heart of St. Petersburg.

This three-story modern stone-and-glass building — built by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee with funds raised primarily from North American federations and private donors

THIS WEEK

TUESDAY

■ Shimon Peres, Israel's deputy prime minister, arrives in Washington to meet with Condoleezza Rice. Peres will be a guest of the Center for Middle East Peace, a think tank led by Danny Abraham and Sara Ehrman, U.S. Jewish leaders closely identified with the Oslo process. Peres is slated for the second slot in the centrist Kadima Party list in Israel's March 28 elections.

■ Some public-school teachers in New York City will learn how to address hate and Holocaust denial found on the Internet. The Jan. 17 event will involve 60 teachers from across the New York City school system. The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, the New York City Department of Education and the New York Tolerance Center are sponsoring the daylong program.

■ Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, a dovish grassroots group, opens a Washington office. Marcia Freedman, a former Knesset Member who heads the group, and Rabbi David Saperstein, the director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, will attend the launch.

SATURDAY

■ The Sixth Annual Herzliya Conference held by The Institute for Policy and Strategy at The Interdisciplinary Center, takes place at the Daniel Hotel in Herzliya. A tentative program of the three-day event can be viewed at <http://www.idc.ac.il/ips>. Typically, the Israeli prime minister's address at the Herzliya Conference, to be given this year by Ehud Olmert, is considered to be his main policy speech of the year.

■ The president of the U.N. General Assembly speaks at a New York synagogue to mark the first International Day of Commemoration of the Victims of the Holocaust. Jan Eliasson, the Swedish ambassador who presides over the current General Assembly, will speak at Shabbat services at Park East Synagogue, ahead of the Jan. 27 commemoration. Eliasson led the efforts to get the United Nations to mark the day, which is the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

— was pitched by the JDC as the new heart of the St. Petersburg community.

Now, four months after the impressive opening ceremony that brought together JDC leadership from New York and Israel, North American donors and local community leaders, the center is fully built — but stands empty.

The center is also the focus of criticism from some of its would-be occupants, who say that they haven't been kept in the loop about planning the center from the beginning, that its opening has been delayed and that they are unsure about when they will be able to move in.

For its part, the JDC says that it always planned to open the building in January — and that any delays are a result of bureaucratic snafus in obtaining zoning approval. Officials said the JDC plans to move local Jewish organizations into the building later this month.

The JDC also wants to make the building economically self-sufficient; sources suggest that the project has stalled because the JDC is also looking for commercial tenants to help achieve this goal.

YESOD, a bright and open space, is similar to state-of-the-art JCCs in cities across North America. It has space to house half a dozen Jewish organizations, a gym, a concert hall and a kosher cafe.

Although hailed as a landmark space uniting many Jewish organizations — which have been scattered around the city — under one roof, the center was received with mixed feelings by community leaders.

At the time, some criticized the JDC for organizing the center from afar and for not bringing the local bodies into the organizational process.

When the center held its ceremony, with Jewish federation guests from North America in attendance, its administration hoped that it would be ready for operation by the end of the year at the latest.

But the center is still not open.

"Everything has stalled and it is not certain when and how we are going to move," Leonid Kolton, director of St. Petersburg's Hesed Avraham welfare center,

which provides food and other services to Jewish elderly, told JTA.

The JDC-run Hesed Avraham gave up some of its space in anticipation of the September move — space that it will need in its more active winter months.

Hillel's predicament is more serious: The student group's lease is ending at the end of the month.

In an e-mail message, the JDC's Jonathan Porath, JDC's country director for Russia, said Hillel will move into the JCC before the end of the month.

But according to Leonid Smirnov, director of JDC in St. Petersburg, the finished building is still going through the lengthy process of receiving final approval from the zoning commission.

Local Jewish organizations should be able to move in at the end of January and "general activity" in the building

should begin in the late winter or early spring, Porath said.

Meanwhile, the amount that local groups will be expected to pay in rent is still unclear.

Local Jewish leaders worry that the groups will be expected to pay commercial rates that some organizations just cannot afford.

Porath said the JDC would provide subsidies to help Jewish organizations pay their rent.

According to Leonid Kolton, the overall situation puts a stain on the JDC's image and could even damage the structure of the Jewish community.

The JDC's Smirnov says any large-scale operation spanning almost four years and involving the transfer of many organizations to a newly constructed building will inevitably run into difficulties and complications.

Added Joshua Berkman, a spokesman for the JDC: "JDC and its partners built YESOD to serve as a first-class facility where Jewish life in St. Petersburg can continue to flourish. Rest assured, we will do everything we can to make sure the organizations that are driving this historic Jewish rebirth can make YESOD their home."

The JDC says local organizations will move into the St. Petersburg JCC later this month.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDDLE EAST

Palestinian vote in Jerusalem approved

Israel will allow limited voting in eastern Jerusalem for the Palestinian Authority's parliamentary election.

The Cabinet approved participation in the Jan. 25 vote by Jerusalem Arabs, on condition that Hamas and other terrorist groups are not on the candidate list.

"Israel will under no circumstances allow Hamas to enter or conduct any electioneering in Jerusalem," said Ehud Olmert, the acting prime minister.

The Palestinian Authority decried the limitation, calling it undemocratic. Hamas has vowed to run in eastern Jerusalem despite the Israeli ban.

Confrontations in Hebron

Hundreds of settlers scuffled with Israeli police and troops in Hebron.

The two days of confrontations came as Israeli forces prepared to evict eight settler families squatting in Palestinian-owned stalls in the West Bank city's markets.

Witnesses said hundreds of settlers tried to occupy another property nearby, coming to blows with local Palestinians. When security forces intervened, the violence turned on them.

Ehud Olmert, Israel's acting prime minister, vowed a crackdown Sunday.

"The State of Israel is a state of law, and those who raised their hands against the security forces will be punished in the most severe manner," he told the Cabinet.

Two Palestinians killed

Two Palestinians died in a clash between Israeli troops and West Bank gunmen.

An army unit patrolling near Nablus on Sunday opened fire after being shot at from a house. Palestinians said a woman and her 20-year-old son were killed.

The incident appeared to have been provoked when the son spotted the troops and, mistaking them for car thieves, opened fire.

Four other Palestinians were wounded in the clash.

Katsav warns on Iran nukes

Israel's president said international terrorists could benefit from the Iranian nuclear program.

"We cannot allow a totalitarian country, an exporter of international terrorism, to have nuclear capacity," Moshe Katsav said in an interview with Spain's ABC daily newspaper published Monday.

"It would be the first step toward atomic bombs, for example, falling into the hands of Hezbollah, Hamas or Al-Qaida terrorists."

Pollard not a Prisoner of Zion

Israel's High Court of Justice rejected Jonathan Pollard's petition to name him a Prisoner of Zion.

The court ruled Monday that Pollard, a former U.S. Navy analyst serving a life sentence for spying for Israel, does not meet the criteria for the designation, mainly because the United States is not considered a country hostile to Israel or to Jews.

Pollard and his supporters had hoped the designation would help efforts to get him released.

In a statement, a group backing Pollard's release said that the court has "simply turned a blind eye to Jonathan Pollard's documented claims of harsh treatment and abuse, to the anti-Semitic nature of his life sentence."

WORLD

Benedict blasts anti-Semitism

Pope Benedict XVI denounced global anti-Semitism.

"We cannot but denounce and fight hatred and incomprehension, injustice and violence that continue to sow concern into the souls of men and women of good faith," Benedict said Monday during his first meeting with Rome's chief rabbi, Riccardo Di Segni. "How can one not be hurt and worried by the renewed displays of anti-Semitism that sometimes appear?"

Austrian Holocaust fund endowed

An obstacle in Austrian Holocaust property compensation was overcome with the full endowment of Austria's General Settlement Fund.

The fund announced last Friday that the required \$210 million mark had been reached, enabling disbursement of payments for properties seized by the Nazi regime in Austria.

Contributions to the fund came from the Republic of Austria, the city of Vienna and Austrian companies.

The oldest applicants directly affected by the Nazi persecution and property looting are being given priority in receiving the initial payments, according to a news release from the fund.

Latvian law would return Jewish property

A proposed law in Latvia would return around 200 Jewish properties back to the country's Jewish community.

The Latvian government currently has possession of the properties. Arkady Suharenko, of the Council of Latvian Jewish Communities, told JTA the law is in the final stages of being drafted.

It will then have to be approved by the cabinet and passed by the Saeima, the Latvian Parliament.

According to Suharenko, a 1992 law allowed for the restitution of religious property to Jewish communities, but Jewish communities around Latvia were poorly organized and many missed the 1996 deadline to make their claims.

As a result, only a handful of properties were returned.

To minimize anti-Semitic sentiment, the bill will not make claims on Jewish property in private hands, JTA has learned.

Similar comprehensive restitution laws to benefit the Jewish community have not been adopted yet in any of the former Soviet republics.

NORTH AMERICA

Sasha Cohen is U.S. skating champ

Figure-skater Sasha Cohen is the new American champion and will represent the United States at the upcoming Winter Olympics.

The 21-year-old skater clinched the championship on Saturday in St. Louis after coming in second in her last four tries.

Another Jewish skater, Emily Hughes of Great Neck, N.Y., came in third and normally would have been named to the Olympic team.

However, the judges decided to give the spot to Michelle Kwan, who was unable to compete because of injuries, if she recovers sufficiently to skate in Turin during the Feb. 10-26 Games.

Hughes was named an alternate to the Olympic team.

Competition on Tel Aviv-New York flights?

Israir was given regular routes to compete with El Al on Tel Aviv-New York flights. Israel's tourism minister, Avraham Hirschson, made the announcement Monday.

Until now, Israir has only operated charter flights on the route. The decision increases competition on the route.