

IN THE NEWS
Israel backs U.S. on Iran standoff

Israel endorsed a direct overture by the United States to Iran on ending the nuclear standoff.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in a major policy shift, said Wednesday that the United States would be willing to join European powers in negotiating with Iran if it abandons its uranium enrichment program. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said Rice had told her about the initiative beforehand.

Privately, pro-Israel lobbyists welcomed any effort to exhaust all diplomatic options with Iran, but were skeptical of the Islamic republic's intentions, noting that it has reneged on negotiated deals in the past.

Pope speaks out against anti-Semitism

Pope Benedict XVI referred specifically to anti-Semitism and wartime Jewish suffering. "Today's humanity must not forget Auschwitz and the other 'factories of death' where the Nazi regime tried to eliminate God in order to take his place," he said Wednesday.

Many saw his remarks as a response to Jewish groups' criticism that he did not explicitly mention anti-Semitism and the Jewish victims of the Nazis when he spoke at Auschwitz on Sunday.

Rockets land near Peretz's home

Palestinian rockets landed near the home of Israel's defense minister. No one was hit in Wednesday's salvo against the Israeli border town of Sderot from the Gaza Strip, but there was damage to the home of one of Defense Minister Amir Peretz's neighbors.

Peretz toured the town and promised tough action against the rocket launches. Security sources said that Israel, which sent troops into Gaza on Tuesday, could do so again.

WORLD REPORT

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Effort to limit aid to Palestinians exposes rifts in Congress, community

By **RON KAMPEAS**

WASHINGTON (JTA) — It brought rifts among pro-Israel groups out into the open. It was behind a very public food fight between a congresswoman and the premiere pro-Israel lobby.

And it probably won't matter in the end.

The trees that fell documenting the fight over U.S. legislation that would severely limit American economic assistance to the Palestinians have left the forest very much intact: President Bush will treat the Palestinian Authority and its Hamas rulers however he deems necessary.

"In the end, the president does what he wants," said one congressional staffer, whose boss strongly favors the legislation, known as the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act.

Bush has made unprecedented use of the "signing statement" — the presidential declaration accompanying signed legislation — to declare his constitutional prerogative to ignore legislation banning torture and requiring oversight for domestic surveillance.

Less significant legislation such as PATA, as the proposed measure is known, will surely get the same treatment, said congressional staffers involved in its drafting.

JTA spoke with four senior congressional staffers about the legislation; all spoke without authorization and asked to remain anonymous because of the sensitivity of the issue.

The fight over the act is more important for revealing rifts in Congress and in the Jewish community over how to treat the Palestinians.

The divisions stem from the vacuum created by the unresolved power struggle between the Palestinian Authority Cabinet, led by the

Hamas terrorist group, and P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas, a relative moderate. They also stem from the effort by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to come up with a policy that will satisfy his diverse and difficult government.

Bush favors keeping lines to Abbas open, and his allies in the U.S. Senate have taken longer to consider the legislation to make sure those provisions are enacted into the law. The Senate was to have voted on the measure last Friday, but a security scare in the Rayburn House Office Building helped postpone its consideration

until next week, when Congress returns from the Memorial Day holiday break.

One key difference between the version passed last week in the U.S. House of Representatives and the version under consideration in the Senate is that the Senate would grant Bush a waiver to fund troops loyal to Abbas.

The Senate version also removes oversight restrictions on emergency aid to the Palestinians through non-governmental organizations.

Skepticism about Abbas, who failed to control Hamas even before its election in January, runs much deeper in the House, where Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) spearheaded the lopsided 361-37 vote in favor of the bill last week. There, the sense is that the refusal to renounce terrorism and recognize Israel permeates not just Hamas, but the Palestinian polity.

The House bill imposes a blanket ban on assistance to the Palestinian Authority, whereas the Senate version is careful to designate the "Hamas-led Palestinian Authority," suggesting that its provisions would lapse if and when

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ANALYSIS

■ The Palestinian aid initiative galvanized dovish groups to challenge AIPAC

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Hamas were ousted from power.

The sweep of the House version is what prodded three dovish pro-Israel groups to marshal unusually forceful lobbying against it.

In a statement, Americans for Peace Now said the bill was "irresponsible" for "failing to include a sunset clause for draconian performance requirements that will stay on the books regardless of who is running the Palestinian Authority, and by failing to distinguish between Hamas and Palestinians who support a two-state solution."

Brit Tzedek v'Shalom flooded offices with calls and letters, the first time in memory a dovish group went toe-to-toe with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which supported the bill, on the grass-roots level.

Some lawmakers were reporting a 3-1 ratio of calls against the bill.

Also for the first time, Peace Now directly challenged AIPAC in its releases to Congress members. "APN Corrects the Record on the AIPAC 'FAQs' Regarding HR 4681," was the headline of one memo.

"We were compelled to explicitly confront AIPAC over H.R. 4681 because they were the main driving force behind the legislation and because they put out misleading information about the content of the bill and its implications," said Lewis Roth, Peace Now's assistant executive director. "APN isn't looking for a fight with AIPAC, but we won't shy away from one either."

APN singled out AIPAC's claim in its

materials that the bill targets a " Hamas-led PA." The bill is "a laundry list of mandatory reforms and benchmarks that are totally unrelated to Hamas or stopping terror," the APN release said. That "undermines the very moderates the U.S. should be supporting," it said.

AIPAC officials would not speak on the record but sources close to the group dismiss the APN claims as nonsense. "APN is virtually irrelevant on Capitol Hill, and its effort to oppose the PATA in the House proved an embarrassing failure, with the bill passing 361-37," said a pro-Israel lobbyist sympathetic with AIPAC's case.

AIPAC has been open about supporting both the House and Senate versions of the bill, these sources say, because it is important to get a message out as soon as possible that the United States will not fund terrorist groups.

Ultimately, the AIPAC sources say, the House and Senate versions will be resolved in conference, and the message will be out.

But it will come after a nasty fight that

burst into public when Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.) published a letter she had sent to AIPAC's executive director, Howard Kohr, banning AIPAC lobbyists from her office until he apologized for an AIPAC volunteer who allegedly accused her of supporting terrorism because she opposed the bill.

The Minnesota-based volunteer, Amy Rotenberg, denied making the accusation in a conversation with McCollum's chief of staff, Bill Harper. Harper stood by his notes from the conversation with Rotenberg.

Ultimately, Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), who is close to

both Kohr and McCollum, brokered a meeting last week between the two which ended with an agreement to disagree — and to reinstate AIPAC in McCollum's good graces.

Israel's friends in Congress breathed a sigh of relief: McCollum is a good friend of the Jewish state and "we didn't want to turn her into a Moran," said one, a reference to Rep. James Moran (D-Va.), one of Israel's most consistent critics. ■

'Peace Now isn't looking for a fight with AIPAC, but we won't shy away from one either.'

Lewis Roth

Assistant executive director
Peace Now

Local funds rebuild Czech synagogue

HARTMANICE, Czech Republic (JTA) — Most people thought Michal Klima was a bit loopy when he purchased a Czech synagogue three years ago that had been doomed to destruction.

But Klima proved them wrong.

It took more than \$300,000 to renovate the 19th-century barn-like structure in Hartmanice, and no one had ever attempted to raise such a large amount locally for a synagogue restoration, in part because the average Czech wage is less than \$900 a month.

The government or Jewish communities should rebuild synagogues, some said.

The problem was that as resources are already tied up maintaining 350 cemeteries and 180 synagogues, this type of funding was unavailable. But Klima, publisher of a successful economic magazine who hails from one of Prague's so-called Jewish intellectual aristocracy — his father is the author Ivan Klima — believed that private fund-raising was the wave of the future.

"I found out about the sale of this synagogue on the Internet and I was shocked. I mean, who knew there were Jews living in the mountains?" he said. "Turns out there were something like 90 synagogues in the area at the end of the 20th century. I wanted to help other people learn about this."

His foundation to rebuild the crumbling synagogue received accolades from former President Vaclav Havel and numerous government luminaries who were impressed that he wasn't just asking for a handout. And so it was that last week, one of the few reminders that Czechs, Jews and Germans once lived harmoniously in the dreamy Sumava Mountains was reborn.

The rustic, chalet-style synagogue of Hartmanice was reopened after more than 57 years of disrepair as a museum memorializing the important role that Jews played in the region. Historic photographs displayed emphasize the long cooperation between the three ethnic streams in everything from fire brigades to barn raising. ■



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Russian Jews have learning marathon

By LEV KRICHEVSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) — The catch phrase on the colorful posters hanging in Jewish institutions across Moscow — “The entire Jewish world in 12 hours!” — was only a slight exaggeration.

The organizers of Limmud FSU, an daylong educational marathon, clearly attempted to draw from a wide swathe of Jewish life: “From a rabbi to a rock star,” another slogan on the same poster promised.

Held Sunday at downtown Moscow’s House of Scientists, a club affiliated with the Russian Academy of Science, Limmud FSU was touted by its organizers as the first-ever networking and educational opportunity for Russian Jews.

It was certainly a special event in Russia.

Several hundred people, mostly elderly, attended the event, some 700 people registered for the next Limmud — and 100 more registered to help as volunteers, according to the organizers.

The idea was simple, but rare in Russian Jewish life: to get as many people as possible to learn about anything related to Judaism.

“Everyone with an expertise can come and talk. That’s the beauty of Limmud,” said Chaim Chesler, the founder of Limmud FSU.

The idea of Limmud was based on another event of the same name, an annual conference in Britain, now in its 25th year, that in recent years has been replicated in other parts of the world.

This week’s event — which the organizers unofficially called “pre-Limmud,” referring to a five-day conference to be held next February — offered eight types of activities, ranging from lectures on Jewish philosophy and Holocaust to arts workshops, kids’ activities and even Jewish karaoke.

One of the most popular sessions was led by the well-known Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who discussed Jewish mysticism. His “Kabbalah: Is it for Madonna Esther or Is it for Me?” drew 150 participants into a packed room.

Like almost every other new undertaking in the Russian Jewish community in recent years, Limmud is imported from the West.

Conceived by an Israeli and an Ameri-

can, and funded primarily by Western sources, the initiative also involved a group of younger locals who, the organizers hope, will eventually take the entire project.

While the impulse came from the outside, the locals mainly selected topics and speakers for this week’s event, said Sandra Cahn, a Jewish activist and philanthropist from New York who headed the organizational committee of Limmud FSU.

The idea of Limmud FSU

has

already inspired Westerners and Israelis. A host of major Jewish groups and individuals from outside the former Soviet Union helped to fund it: from the Jewish Agency for Israel, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the World Jewish Congress, World ORT or Hillel, to many private foundations and a few local groups.

Like many other Western Jewish leaders who attended Limmud in Moscow, Israel Singer, chairman of the Policy Council at the World Jewish Congress believes Limmud has a chance to provide local Jews “an opportunity to inspire themselves, to invigorate Jewish culture.”

There is irony, Singer told JTA, that “this part of the world, where great Jewish culture came from, is now encountering a tremendous amount of Jewish ignorance.”

The hesitation of a middle-aged Jewish man who was perusing the 50-page program in the club’s lobby exemplified Singer’s point.

“There is a session on the differences between Litvaks and Chasidim,” said Boris Bramberg, an engineer, referring to a session co-hosted by two Moscow rabbis representing the two streams in Judaism.

“I would love to go there, but I don’t even know the difference between Orthodox and Reform Judaism.”

An hour later, Bramberg was involved in a lively conversation with a Chabad rabbi.

Those who helped organize the event say several things help Limmud stand out among other projects in Russian Jewish life.

First is the idea of a transdenominational event not organized by a specific organization.

“Nobody owns it, and nobody has a

veto,” said Deborah Lipstadt, a Holocaust studies and Jewish history professor from Emory University who was a member of the project’s advisory group and one of the lecturers at Moscow Limmud.

Then, there is the notion of voluntarism: Some 30 young professionals from Moscow, Kiev, Minsk

and other cities made up the team that helped put together the program and invite people.

Finally, those who came to listen, watch and learn had to pay.

The \$5 entrance fee for the Sunday marathon was a rather modest amount, even by Russian standards. But organizers said those attending next year’s five-day Limmud at a retreat near Moscow will pay \$120.

To persuade people to pay for their Jewish education is a step forward for a Russian community used to receiving free Jewish services, said Alexander Pyatigorsky, 25, who coordinated the event on the Russian side.

“This is a step to change the way of thinking in people who call themselves members of the Jewish community. People should give their time, money or both, and for that they can get what they want, not what the organizations have to offer them.”

ACROSS
THE FORMER
SOVIET
UNION

‘There is a session on the differences between Litvaks and Chasidim. I would love to go there, but I don’t even know the difference between Orthodox and Reform Judaism.’

Boris Bramberg
Engineer

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Jewish group threatens defection

The Executive Council of Australian Jewry is threatening to withdraw from the World Jewish Congress. The council said it would pull out in July unless the congress withdraws its defamation suit against one of its former senior vice presidents, the Jerusalem-based Australian, Isi Leibler. Leibler, who is being sued in a Tel Aviv court, was expelled from the congress' steering committee in 2004 following a published report in which Leibler alleged financial improprieties at the congress.

An investigation by the attorney general of New York state, where the congress is based, found financial impropriety but no criminal wrongdoing or loss of charitable funds.

The congress' secretary-general, Stephen Herbits, flew to Melbourne, Australia, last week to try to settle the matter. Congress officials Wednesday said they stood by the lawsuit. Earlier, Herbits told JTA that Leibler's actions had cost the organization a "huge amount of money from loss of support" and that the group is seeking \$6 million from Leibler.

"The WJC will win the case against Leibler," Herbits said in a statement this week, "but we also have made it clear that we are willing to enter into discussions with Leibler's counsel outside the courtroom."

Religious leaders in Europe talk human rights

Jewish leaders attended a high-profile spiritual meeting sponsored by the European Union. Tuesday's meeting also included Christian and Muslim leaders from across Europe, as well as the Dalai Lama.

Fifteen delegates were invited to Brussels to discuss the role religious communities should play in the promotion of freedom, democracy and respect for human rights across Europe.

Dean to Blair: Blast Israel boycott

Howard Dean urged Tony Blair to speak out against a British boycott of Israeli academics.

The leader of the Democratic National Committee told the British prime minister in a letter that the boycott approved Monday by the *National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education* threatens peacemaking.

U.S. lawmakers meet with Ukrainian leader

U.S. lawmakers discussed xenophobia and anti-Semitism in meetings with Ukrainian leaders. U.S. Reps. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) and Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) met Monday with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushenko in Kiev.

In their meeting, Blunt, the House of Representatives' majority whip, and Hoyer, the House's Democratic whip, expressed concern over the activities of the Interregional Academy of Personnel Management, or MAUP, a Kiev private university with a long history of anti-Semitism.

Ukraine, Russia get food for holiday

New lines of kosher dairy products were introduced in Ukraine and Russia for Shavuot. The Ukrainian Committee on Kashrut presented this week a locally produced line of feta cheese for the holiday, on which it is customary to eat dairy. In Moscow, a new brand of kosher cheese went on sale on Tuesday in the city's Choral Synagogue.

The cheese is produced according to an old Italian recipe by a Jewish-owned dairy farm in the Volga region. The product is believed

to be the first brand of kosher cheese produced in Russia in decades, according to a news release from Moscow's Jewish community.

NORTH AMERICA

Jewish groups welcome Senate immigration bill

Jewish groups welcomed a U.S. immigration bill that includes paths for undocumented immigrants to legalize their status. The Reform movement and the American Jewish Committee each welcomed the bill passed last week in the Senate.

The bill was an improvement over a U.S. House of Representatives version, both groups said, because the House version emphasized enforcement at the expense of amnesty.

The Senate bill "offers a comprehensive solution incorporating a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and a sensible temporary worker system," AJCommittee said.

Arab American sues to return to ballot

A candidate forced off the ballot in a New Jersey election because he refused to compare the Sept. 11 terrorists to Palestinian suicide bombers is suing the Democrats.

Sam Merhi sued this week to be returned to the ballot as the Democratic candidate in Passaic County elections. In March, top state Democrats, including U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez and Gov. Jon Corzine, forced Merhi off the ballot after it was revealed that in 2002 he said he saw no comparison between suicide bombers who targeted Israelis and the attackers who carried out the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington.

Merhi later said he was referring only to the comparative size of the attacks.

Merhi, an Arab American, says in his lawsuit that his ethnic origin was a factor in forcing him off the ballot.

MIDDLE EAST

Abdullah presses Bush on Palestinians

King Abdullah II of Jordan pressed President Bush to speed assistance to the Palestinians and to back Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Abdullah met with Bush at the White House on Monday and "stressed the need for both Israelis and Palestinians to resume negotiations as soon as possible and reiterated the need to channel assistance to the Palestinian people, in order to avert a humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian territories," according to a release from the Jordanian Embassy.

Jerusalem compensates gays, lesbians

The Jerusalem Municipality was ordered to pay out \$70,000 to the city's gay and lesbian center.

Jerusalem District Court on Monday found in favor of a petition filed against City Hall by the Jerusalem Open House, which had been deprived of funding from the municipal cultural chest since 2003. The petitioners were also awarded \$5,200 in court costs.

One-quarter of Israelis smoke

One in four Israelis smokes, a study found. Israel's Federation for the Fight Against Cancer released data on local smoking habits ahead of this week's World No Tobacco Day.

According to the federation, 32 percent of Israeli men and 19 percent of Israeli women smoke.

The federation called on Israel to enforce a ban on smoking in public places and for a significant surcharge to be imposed on cigarette sales.