

IN THE NEWS
**Natan Sharansky
quitting Israeli politics**

Natan Sharansky is quitting Israeli politics.

Sources close to the Soviet refusenik-turned-Likud lawmaker said Wednesday he would step down from the Knesset in coming days.

He is expected to take up a full-time position at the Shalem Center, a conservative Jerusalem think tank.

After spending many years in KGB custody, he was released in 1986 and moved to Israel.

He entered politics in 1996 with the new immigrant party Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, eventually serving as a Cabinet minister.

Sharansky resigned from Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government last year to protest the looming withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

**U.N. warns on
unexploded bombs**

U.N. officials said unexploded Israeli ordnance from the Lebanon war poses a "terrible" threat to children.

"The number of unexploded cluster bombs ranges from 100,000 to 1 million and it remains a primary threat to children, especially as they go back to school," said Michael Bociurkiw, a spokesman for the United Nations Children's Fund.

U.N. peacekeepers in Lebanon say they expect the problem to worsen as winter sets in.

**Arrests made in
cemetery desecration**

Police officers in Russia have arrested six ultranationalists in connection with the recent vandalism of Muslim and Jewish graves.

The leader of the group known as Russian National Unity and five others were detained but not charged over last week's attack on a cemetery in the city of Tver.

In the incident, at least 100 gravestones were toppled or defaced with swastikas.

WORLD REPORT

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Soros to support dovish Jews seeking an alternative to AIPAC?

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A top staffer for billionaire philanthropist George Soros has met recently with senior representatives of the dovish pro-Israel community to discuss setting up an alternative to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, JTA has learned.

Morton Halperin, a director of Soros' Open Society Institute and a veteran of senior positions in the Clinton, Nixon and Johnson administrations, confirmed to JTA that a meeting took place last month. He would not add details.

"It was a private meeting, it was an effort to get this off the ground," said Halperin, who directs the institute's U.S. advocacy.

The September meeting — and other related meetings — focused on how best to press the U.S. Congress and the Bush administration to back greater U.S. engagement toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and how to better represent American Jews who don't buy into AIPAC's often hawkish policies.

Contacted by JTA, an AIPAC spokesman said he was not aware of the effort, but officials with the group did not express any concern that the new initiative posed a threat.

JTA has learned that another meeting focused on funding will take place in New York on Oct. 25.

Soros is to attend that meeting, and other major Jewish liberals are invited, including Peter Lewis, who like Soros is a major contributor to MoveOn.org, the Web-based, liberal fund-raising group; Edgar and Charles Bronfman, former liquor magnates who are major contributors to Israel and Jewish causes; and Mel Levine, a former Democratic congressman

and high-powered West Coast lawyer.

If it comes to fruition, it would be Soros' first major venture into Israel advocacy. Soros drew fire from some Jews in 2003 when at a conference on funding for Israel, he suggested that Israel bore some responsibility for the outbreak of anti-Semitism in Europe because of its stiff response to Palestinian terrorism during the intifada.

One of the leaders of the initiative is Jeremy Ben-Ami, a senior policy adviser to President Clinton who now works for Fenton, one of Washington's largest public relations outfits.

In addition to Halperin and Ben-Ami, those in attendance at the September meeting in Washington included David Elcott, the executive director of the Israel Policy Forum, Debra DeLee, president and CEO of Americans for Peace Now; Mara Rudman, a Clinton-era member of the National Security Council and now a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a Washington think tank; Daniel Levy, a former adviser to dovish Israeli politician Yossi Beilin who now works at the New America Foundation, another Washington think tank; M.J. Rosenberg, director of IPF's Washington office; Jeremy Rabinovitz, chief of staff to U.S. Rep. Lois Capps (D-Calif.), a congresswoman who often backs positions taken by the dovish pro-Israel groups; Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center, and his deputy, Mark Pelavin; and representatives of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, another dovish, pro-Israel advocacy group.

Three of the groups — IPF, APN and Brit Tzedek — coordinated efforts earlier this year to counter the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act, legislation that essentially would cut off the Palestinian Authority from U.S. assistance

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■ George Soros and dovish pro-Israel groups are considering an alternative to AIPAC

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until it renounces terrorism and recognizes Israel. The act is effectively dead, and insiders credit the dovish counterattack.

AIPAC strongly backed the bill, and it passed overwhelmingly in both houses. However, the three dovish groups surprised many members of Congress with the vehemence of their response; Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives said that calls opposing the legislation outpaced those in support by a 3-1 margin.

Additionally, working behind the scenes, the dovish lobbyists helped moderate the Senate version of the act considerably, working in exceptions for assistance to Mahmoud Abbas, the relatively moderate P.A. president, allowing President Bush greater power to waive the sanctions and removing language that would have severely restricted aid to nongovernmental organizations working with the Palestinians.

The differences between the Senate and House versions ultimately were irreconcilable, and the bill never landed on Bush's desk for signing.

That success was an impetus to the current initiative, some involved in the new effort say. It fed their perception that AIPAC is not adequately representing American Jews, who polls show have overwhelmingly backed past peace plans.

Participants did not want to go on the record with JTA because goals for the Oct. 25 funders meeting are still fluid. Differences are structural as well as philosophical: Some participants speak of wrapping together a number of the existing groups at

some future date; others speak of a support structure that would back the groups as they continue to operate separately.

There also are differences about the degree to which the new structure should relate to AIPAC.

One of the organizers of the initiative insisted that the effort was not meant to replace or confront AIPAC.

"It's kind of like GM and Ford," said the organizer, who asked not to be identified because the effort was still in the planning stages.

"We put out a model of a product and go into the marketplace of ideas and compete.

We are a group of people who are looking for the best way to ensure Israel's survival and future," said the organizer, describing the initiative's aims as favoring a two-state solution and greater U.S. engagement.

"We're going into existence because this product is not being offered right now. We want to make sure that this point of view has a clear and loud voice." ■

Three dovish groups coordinated efforts earlier this year to counter the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act.

South Africans to study Holocaust

By MOIRA SCHNEIDER

CAPE TOWN (JTA) — South African schools are preparing to make Holocaust studies a mandatory part of the school curriculum.

The Cape Town Holocaust Centre helped out one province with a program it hopes to offer to the rest of the country.

The center recently conducted a four-day workshop for some 50 people in cooperation with Kwazulu-Natal province's Department of Education, training senior teachers, subject advisers and education officials who will provide support for the course.

Holocaust survivor Irene Klass, who lived in the Warsaw Ghetto for two years as a child, flew in for the day from Johannesburg to give a first-hand account of her experiences.

"Most of the people here have never heard or seen a survivor, so to them history began to live," she said.

Ravi Pather, subject adviser for history in the Port Shepstone district, said that meeting a survivor will add passion to the teaching of the subject, Pather said.

"We've had a longstanding and good relationship with the Department of Education in the Western Cape area, and their need has shown us that there's a need throughout the country," center director Richard Freedman said. "It's almost unfair to expect people who don't have the expertise to convey the content. We're drawing on years of Holocaust education — not only our own, but that of other Holocaust

centers throughout the world."

"When I'm teaching it, I'll be able to explain it beyond what the text is saying, and that's valuable for providing insight into the events." Educator Toni Peterson said. "Obviously your primary sources will not be as easily accessible as they would be in Europe, so bringing it closer to home makes it that much easier." ■

The course has another aim as well: to impart the values in South Africa's Constitution.

"We need to encourage an ethos of activism, to speak out when you see someone being maltreated," Marlene Silbert, the center's education director, told the educators.

Diversity and tolerance educator John Biyase led a session examining the similarities and differences between Nazism and apartheid.

"Let us not be tempted to compare which was the worst atrocity or who suffered more — I believe pain is subjective," he cautioned. "We're all prejudiced, but when you add power to that, it results in discrimination. The Nazis and the Nats" — as South Africa's apartheid rulers were known — "both abused their power. Atrocities occurred because they both had the power to act on their prejudices.

"Being born into the human species doesn't guarantee that you'll be human — we have to learn the path to be human," Biyase told the educators. "You're in a very critical position. You can help those children to be human beings." ■

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Little to show for Rice's Mideast trip

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — After a frustrating, mostly fruitless Middle East peace tour, Condoleezza Rice might have expected at least an E for Effort.

Instead, analysts across the spectrum are giving her a Y — as in, why bother?

Rice's tour last week of Israel, the Palestinian areas, Egypt and Saudi Arabia was meant to build on pledges by major players during last month's U.N. General Assembly opening to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Instead, Rice emerged with only a recommitment from Israel to keep border crossings open — something that was considered small-bore when she first extracted it nearly a year ago.

Rice's trip "was doomed in the first place," said Danielle Pletka, a vice president of the conservative American Enterprise Institute. "She shouldn't have gone."

Mahmoud Abbas, the relatively moderate Palestinian Authority president, was preoccupied with his failed attempt to establish a national unity government with Hamas, the terrorist group that runs the P.A. Cabinet. Hamas ultimately rejected Abbas' baseline, which was that the group recognize Israel's existence.

The international community has set three conditions for the Hamas-led government before international aid can be resumed: that it recognize Israel, forswear terrorism and accept past Israeli-Palestinian agreements. But Khalil Shikaki, a Palestinian pollster, said Palestinians were not ready to recognize Israel, preferring to reserve it as part of a final peace deal.

"Two-thirds of the public is telling us Hamas should not recognize Israel as a response to the conditions" of the international community, Shikaki said Monday on an Israeli Policy Forum conference call. "At the same time, we have a similar percentage saying there should be recognition of Israel, but only as part of a peace agreement."

After failing to get a Palestinian unity government, Rice set her sights lower: At a joint press conference with Abbas on Oct. 4, she said the emphasis should be on opening crossing points from Gaza while ensuring security for Israel, which has suffered a barrage of rockets from

the Gaza Strip.

"Security, the movement and access, economic development, well-being are all interlinked," she said.

David Makovsky, an analyst with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said that if those steps help salvage the battered Palestinian economy — and if that bolsters Abbas in his outreach to Israel — it could be considered a victory for Rice.

"If there's a way that crossing points improve without sacrificing Israeli security, then what is now being seen as a non-event will come to be seen as an important one," he said.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, meanwhile, has been preoccupied with shoring up his government, which is still struggling to survive its failure to crush Hezbollah in this summer's month-long war in southern Lebanon.

Olmert is trying to lure Avigdor Lieberman's hawkish Yisrael Beiteinu Party into the government, and was not in a position to make the gesture Rice expected: setting a date for a summit with Abbas. Instead, he offered a vague commitment to a future meeting.

Visits like Rice's often allow U.S. officials to extract a statement from Israel on settlements, or at the very least, a commitment to dismantling West Bank outposts considered illegal even by the Israeli government, said Ori Nir, an analyst at Americans for Peace Now.

"The most obvious Israeli gesture would have been to do something about settlements, removing outposts, something Israel has already committed to do," Nir said.

But no such commitment was forthcoming, and Israeli officials have said they'll deal with the outposts "after the Jewish holidays," which end in mid-October. That is often an Israeli way of saying, "whenever."

There is one possible breakthrough on the horizon: Hamas officials say Cpl.

Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured June 25 in a cross-border raid by Hamas-affiliated gunmen, will be released in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners by the end of Ramadan, in two weeks.

Absent any hope for a larger solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the best outcome of Rice's visit would be to manage the conflict, Hebrew University political scientist Gabriel Sheffer said.

"I don't think the time is proper to speak of resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It's too far-fetched," Sheffer said. "Israel has taken some steps by

opening the gates to Gaza, letting food in and by letting Palestinians move more freely in the West Bank."

True enough, Pletka agreed, but that was hardly enough for a visit by the secretary of state.

"I view the coin of the secretary of state as one of the highest value," she said. "By constantly

going and begging for good behavior, you diminish that coin and risk becoming Warren Christopher," the Clinton-era secretary of state whose frequent travels between Israel and Syria ended fruitlessly.

Rice is maintaining the momentum: She was set to address the American Task Force for Palestine on Wednesday night and outline her vision for Palestinian statehood.

Returning from the trip, Rice said it at least gave her a better understanding of what the parties expected.

"I had a chance to sit face-to-face with Mahmoud Abbas and understand better what he thinks his options are for dealing with the political crisis that the Palestinians are facing," she told reporters on her plane last Friday. "And I'm going to go back for extensive discussions with the president and with the national security principals because this is an absolutely crucial time in the Middle East, and I heard in every single place this isn't a time to stand still in terms of a policy in the Middle East."

NEWS
ANALYSIS

'Security, the movement and access, economic development, well-being are all interlinked.'

Condoleezza Rice
U.S. secretary of state

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Ex-leaders call for Mideast conference

More than 130 retired world leaders and diplomats called for an international conference on Middle East peace.

"We believe the time has come for a new international conference, held as soon as possible and attended by all relevant players, at which all the elements of a comprehensive peace agreement would be mapped, and momentum generated for detailed negotiations," say the signatories to a statement now circulating.

The premise of the conference would include a Palestinian Authority unity government that includes Hamas representation, an end to the P.A.'s isolation and the inclusion of Syria and Lebanon in the talks.

Israel and the United States reject working with Hamas or Syria until they renounce terrorism.

Prominent American signatories include former President Carter; Gen. Wesley Clark, a former NATO commander and likely Democratic presidential candidate in 2008; and Stephen Solarz, a former Democratic Jewish congressman.

Anti-Semitic graffiti in Azerbaijan

Anti-Semitic graffiti was spray-painted on several buildings in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Evda Abramov, the only Jewish member of the Azeri Parliament, told the AEN news agency that the graffiti could have been inspired by Iranian special services.

Iran, Azerbaijan's southern neighbor and major trade partner, is believed to be irritated by Azerbaijan's diplomatic relations with Israel.

The city of Baku promised to paint over the graffiti.

Israeli professor gets British fellowship

An Israeli professor received a prestigious British scholarship.

David Newman of Ben-Gurion University will fill the Leverhulme Trust Visiting Professorship for the 2006-2007 academic year, the first time it has been granted to an Israeli professor.

The nomination comes as many British academics have called for a boycott of Israeli scholars.

A political geographer and founder of Ben-Gurion University's politics and government department, Newman has been active in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

MIDDLE EAST

Israeli forces kill 3 Palestinians

Israeli forces killed three Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Two Palestinians were shot dead Wednesday during clashes in the West Bank city of Nablus.

One of them was said by Palestinian witnesses to be a member of the Al-Aksa Brigade, the second a bystander, but Israeli security sources said troops fired on combatants in both cases. Near the Gaza border crossing of Karni, soldiers shot dead a Palestinian trying to sneak into Israeli territory.

Peres invites Assad to Jerusalem

Shimon Peres suggested Syria's president visit Israel to show he is serious about seeking peace.

Israel's vice premier alluded to recent peace overtures by Bashar Assad in an interview Wednesday.

"He needs to say, 'I want to speak with Israel about peace. That is it. I want to meet,'" Peres told Israel Radio. "If Assad said, 'I'm coming to the Knesset,' would anyone stop him?"

Assad has called for new negotiations with Israel since the end of the Lebanon war, saying Israel must agree to return the Golan Heights to Syria and hinting that he could resort to war if diplomacy fails.

Israel has rebuffed the calls, saying it wouldn't accept preconditions for talks and that Assad should show his sincerity by ending his support for Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist groups.

Abdullah: Peace could be lost

Jordan's King Abdullah said time is running out for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A key Middle East power broker, Abdullah called Wednesday for the Palestinian Authority's rival Hamas and Fatah factions to put aside their differences and revive the peace process with Israel.

"A lot is at stake today and if we fail now, we risk pushing Palestinian aspirations so far behind that it will take a long time to bring us back to where we want to be," he told Reuters.

"I really think that by the first half of 2007 we might wake up to the reality and realize that the two-state solution is no longer attainable, and then what?"

Abdullah criticized Israel for expanding settlements in the West Bank, and also noted growing Iranian influence on Palestinian radicals.

Abdullah called on moderate Arab states to "engage" Israel more actively for the sake of peace.

Israel group gets \$2 million

An anonymous donor gave the New Israel Fund \$2 million to expand its work in northern Israel.

NIF is targeting what it calls "invisible Israelis" — Arabs, Sephardi Jews and immigrants — as it helps residents of the North recover from this summer's war against Hezbollah.

One of the consequences of the war "was an understanding that civil society has to be strengthened in the north of Israel," the group said in a statement.

NORTH AMERICA

Senate leaders press Poland on compensation

U.S. Senate leaders urged the Polish prime minister to enact a law on compensation for property originally seized by the Nazis.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) and Democratic leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) made the plea in a Sept. 27 letter to Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, emphasizing that many of those who would benefit are elderly.

Poland is the only country in the former Eastern Bloc that hasn't enacted a law returning property to individual owners or offering compensation to former owners.

It's estimated that approximately 15 percent to 20 percent of those benefiting from a compensation law would be Jewish.

A proposed law that would offer compensation at a rate of 15 percent of market value is under discussion in the Polish Parliament.

Mel Gibson apologizes on TV

Mel Gibson again apologized for the anti-Semitic comments he made during his arrest in July.

In comments to air Thursday and Friday on ABC's "Good Morning America" but which were posted Tuesday on ABC's Web site, Gibson said his remarks were "just the stupid rambling of a drunkard."

Gibson pleaded no contest to a drunk driving charge.

The Hollywood actor/director was placed on probation for three years and was ordered to enter an alcohol abuse program after his anti-Semitic tirade.