

IN THE NEWS

Bolton steps down

John Bolton, a staunch defender of Israel at the United Nations, resigned as U.S. ambassador. The White House said Monday that Bolton would step down once his recess appointment ends.

President Bush had given Bolton the position in August 2005, but his nomination was blocked in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The appointment will expire by early January, though Bolton may step down earlier.

Israel scales back West Bank actions

Israel ordered its forces to scale back operations in the West Bank. The order was given over the weekend amid efforts by Israel and the Palestinian Authority to build on a truce declared last month in the Gaza Strip, and which eventually may be extended to the West Bank.

While Israeli troops in the West Bank are continuing their arrest raids — 15 suspected terrorists were taken into custody Monday — missions more likely to lead to violent confrontations are being limited.

The army also is reviewing its tactic of besieging the homes of Palestinian terrorists until they surrender, as these tend to provoke gunfights.

Auditor raps Israeli army

An Israeli government audit criticized the military high command for lack of training.

State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss published his long-awaited report Monday on the condition of the Israel Defense Forces, though the findings predated the recent Lebanon war.

Lindenstrauss said top brass suffers from insufficient training.

He also rapped the army for not keeping proper logs of weapons stores and not expediting investigations into female conscripts' complaints of sexual harassment.



WORLD REPORT

PUBLISHED WEEKDAYS BY JTA—THE GLOBAL NEWS SERVICE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE • WWW.JTA.ORG

In Beirut unrest, Israel sees threat of renewed Iranian, Syrian influence

By LESLIE SUSSER

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Deeply troubled by menacing Hezbollah-led mass demonstrations in Beirut, Israel has been weighing what it can do to help prevent Lebanon's moderate government from falling.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert sees the showdown between Sheik Hassan Nasrallah's Shi'ite Hezbollah and the mainly Sunni anti-Syrian "March 14 coalition" allied to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora as a microcosm of the regional struggle for hegemony between Iran-led radicals and Western-leaning moderates — and the outcome will be crucial for Israel's future in the region.

Olmert fears that victory for the radicals in Lebanon will undo most of the gains Israel made in the war with Hezbollah this summer.

To stem the tide of Shi'ite radicalism, Olmert intends to work with the United States and moderate Arab regimes such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan that are equally concerned by the prospect of rising Shi'ite power. He also is considering making gestures to Lebanon for which Siniora will be able to take the credit.

Israeli intelligence services are unanimous in their conviction that Iran and Syria are behind the unrest in Beirut in an effort to reverse the results of last summer's war. Before the war, both Iran and Syria were in a position to strike at Israel through their Hezbollah proxy based in southern Lebanon near Israeli towns and villages. The area served as a major base for Hezbollah rockets ready for launching at a moment's notice.

The war changed that equation.

Though the Israeli army failed to eradicate Hezbollah, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, which brought the fighting to an end, effectively removed Hezbollah rockets from southern Lebanon, blunting the Iranian-Syrian capacity to strike at Israel.

Now the unrest in Lebanon could bring back Iran and Syria with a vengeance: According to most Israeli analysts, if the Siniora government falls, Resolution 1701 is likely to be the first casualty.

If Siniora backs down and gives Hezbollah the six seats it is demanding in his Cabinet, the Shi'ites will have veto power over government decisions. Alternatively, if Siniora resigns, sparking elections, the analysts maintain that Hezbollah almost certainly will increase its power in Parliament and government.

In both cases, the upshot is likely to be the end of effective multinational policing of southern Lebanon by U.N. forces as mandated by Resolution 1701. In a best-case scenario, Hezbollah would simply ignore the UNIFIL personnel. In the worst case, Hezbollah might target them the way it did American and French forces in the early 1980s, forcing them to pull out of Lebanon.

The resolution's embargo on arms supplies to Hezbollah, which in today's virtually optimal conditions is being violated on a small scale, would be rendered meaningless, the analysts maintain.

That's an Israeli nightmare: Hezbollah rearmed, back in southern Lebanon in force. In that event, Iran again would be able to threaten Israel with massive

Continued on page 2

NEWS
ANALYSIS

■ Lebanon confrontation is seen as part of a wider battle for hegemony in the Middle East

Continued from page 1

rocket attacks from Lebanon if Israel or the United States takes military action against Iran's nuclear program. In other words, the Iranians again would be able to use their Hezbollah card to deter Israel from trying to stop Iran from going nuclear.

But it's not only a case of Iran protecting its nuclear weapons program. Israeli decision-makers see the confrontation in Lebanon as part of a wider battle for hegemony in the Middle East. If Iran is able to spread its influence through Syria and Lebanon to the eastern Mediterranean, it would have major regional implications.

As one Israeli Cabinet minister put it, "If Hezbollah gains sway in Beirut, Lebanon will become the first Iranian protectorate."

Eyal Zisser, a Tel Aviv University expert on Lebanon, sees three big losers if Hezbollah gains the upper hand. First is the so-called "coalition of March 14," the Lebanese forces that came out strongly against Syria and for democracy after former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in February 2005.

Next is Israel, which would discover that "it had managed to push Hezbollah back from the border in the North, only to find it becoming the king maker in Lebanese politics," in Zisser's words.

Third is the United States because if Siniora falls, "it will mark the end of America's adventure in Lebanon, influence the way the U.S. pulls out of Iraq

and signify the end of President Bush's vision of a new, democratic Middle East," Zisser said.

Bush liked to cite Lebanon as an example of the success of his democratization policy, but if Siniora falls, that argument no longer will be available.

To arrest the process of radicalization in Lebanon and the wider Middle East, Israel would like to help stabilize the Siniora government, build a pro-American alliance with moderate Sunni countries as a bulwark against Iranian influence

and detach Syria from the Iranian axis. The trouble is that everything on this wish list is likely to prove very difficult.

Helping Siniora is a delicate matter because overt moves by Israel in that direction could have the opposite effect. In a special Cabinet meeting Sunday, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni warned her colleagues against speaking about helping the embattled Lebanese leader.

"That's the last thing he needs," she said.

Still, Israel is considering making two good-will gestures to Lebanon. Already it has agreed to allow U.N. forces to take security responsibility for the village of

Ghajar, bisected by the Israeli-Lebanon border, the first step toward the village's eventual return to Lebanon.

Israel also is urging the United Nations to redefine the Shebaa Farms portion of the Golan Heights as Lebanese, not Syrian territory, so Israel can hand the area to the central government in Beirut. The idea is that Siniora would get credit for these moves, even if Israel denies making them for his benefit.

On the Israeli right, leaders like the National Union-National Religious Party's Effie Eitam say such gestures will

weaken Israel's standing, and the army should prepare for war. Eitam argues that for much the same reasons that Israel went to war last July — to break Hezbollah and undermine Iranian influence — it should return to war now. This time, however, it should take the time to plan its operation and train its troops for the missions at hand, he said.

The summer war led to significant gains for Israel in Lebanon and in the balance of power with Iran. The question facing the country's decision-makers: What can they do to maintain them in the face of Hezbollah's push to alter the balance of power in Lebanon? ■

If Prime Minister Siniora backs down and gives Hezbollah the six seats it is demanding in his Cabinet, the Shi'ites will have veto power over government decisions.

JTA
WORLD
REPORT

Daniel J. Krifcher
President
Mark J. Joffe
Executive Editor and Publisher
Lisa Hostein
Editor
Michael S. Arnold
Managing Editor
Lenore A. Silverstein
Finance and Administration Director

JTA WORLD REPORT is published five days a week, except holidays, by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., 330 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001-5010. For more information about how to subscribe by e-mail, fax or regular mail, call (212) 643-1890, or visit our Web site at www.jta.org.
© JTA. Reproduction only with permission.

Jews, Presbyterians launch 'consultation'

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Leaders of three Jewish streams launched a "national consultation" with the Presbyterians in the wake of differences over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, who heads the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Rabbi Jerome Epstein, the Conservative movement's executive vice president; Carl Sheingold, the Reconstructionist movement's executive vice president; and Reform President Rabbi Eric Yoffie met last week in Louisville at the Presbyterian Center.

The principal focus was the Presbyterian Church's decision this year to roll

back Israel divestment initiatives.

"We discussed frankly and openly our different perceptions of the situation in the region and found some ways to begin working together in this area that has most divided us in the past," a joint statement said.

The leaders affirmed "that peace for Israel and the Palestinians should be built on the foundations of security, justice, and the establishment of two viable states."

Yoffie said, "It would be a mistake to say that we're at exactly the same place on Israel. But the significant differences that generated so much anger in the Jewish community have been addressed, so we are all at this point anxious to move on." ■

Lithuanian restitution bill delayed

By DINAH A. SPRITZER

PRAGUE (JTA) — Simon Gurevichius dreams of opening a yeshiva in Vilnius for students from across the Jewish world.

"What could be a better monument to those who had to leave or perished than a living, vibrant Jewish community?" asked the 25-year-old executive director of the Jewish community of Lithuania.

But Vilnius today doesn't even have a community kosher shop or restaurant. The community would like to offer 150 more spaces in the 250-student Jewish school, but there's no money to expand the cramped apartment rooms where pupils study.

While Chabad has a school for 75 children, the community's makeshift, 46-student Jewish kindergarten is in desperate need of new quarters.

Gurevichius is angry that the community's aspirations have been put off again as a long-awaited restitution bill for communal property sits on Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas' desk.

"We have heard one too many times that this bill is coming, and we're tired of waiting," Gurevichius said.

In September, the prime minister publicly announced that he was ready to send the bill for a vote to Parliament — but no such vote has occurred.

The bill to return or provide compensation for up to 500 properties over 11 years would begin the process of restoring the Vilnius Jewish community, once a leading light of Jewish thought that now is home to only about 5,000 Jews.

The government put the cost of the bill at \$57 million, though Gurevichius said the origin of that figure is a mystery, as the final agreement over what will be returned and paid for will come only when a joint Jewish-government commission reviews properties after the law is passed.

Communal property includes hospitals, schools, foundations and clubs that belonged to Jewish organizations. In Lithuania before World War II, even many privately run Jewish enterprises were placed under communal ownership.

Money gained through the proposed bill would go to a foundation formed by the Jewish community and the World Jewish Restitution Organization, which has been

helping the community negotiate with the government for several years.

In September, Kirkilas told Andrew Baker, director of international Jewish affairs for the American Jewish Committee, that the bill would be presented to the Parliament by October and would be supported by the opposition. The news was widely reported by international news agencies. But there's still no sign the bill is going anywhere.

Neighboring Latvia is in a similar bind. A \$58.7 million communal restitution bill did make it to the Latvian Parliament but was roundly rejected

Nov. 23.

"After seeing what happened in Latvia, maybe we need to prepare better to pass such a bill," Vilius Kavaliauskas, an adviser to the prime minister, told JTA.

Latvian lawmakers rejected the bill over concerns about its legal merits. Others expressed incomprehension that a single, unified Jewish entity could be entitled to money from the Latvian government due to a catastrophe, the Holocaust, that was not perpetrated by Latvians.

Kavaliauskas raised concerns over details of the Lithuanian bill, especially the issue of how properties are valued.

He cited a five-star hotel in Vilnius that belonged to the Jewish community before World War II. Privatized 12 years ago, the state got about \$5,000 for it; privately funded renovations have raised its value to an estimated \$1.5 million.

"According to how the proposed law stands, we would have to pay the community \$1.5 million, and that's the problem," Kavaliauskas said.

Gurevichius said the Jewish community has its own issues with the bill.

"The government wants to deduct investments made into properties, but it's not like we are charging them rent," he observed.

Reached in Washington a day after the Latvian bill's rejection, Baker said he was troubled by Kavaliauskas' comments.

"We are close to a point that the Lithuanian government will live up to its promise that it has been making for several years now," he said. "If an adviser says otherwise now, this calls into question the reputation of the prime minister and the entire government."

Just after World War I, Jews comprised more than 40 percent of Vilnius' population of 140,000. There were 110 synagogues and prayer houses at one time. Three were returned to the community after 1989; only one is functioning.

Despite its decimation, the community is known for its emotional and spiritual commitment to the faith in a region where Communist-enforced secularism made it hard to revive Jewish traditions.

Vilnius was the home of the Vilna Gaon, the 18th-century rabbi who was one of the world's greatest Talmudic scholars.

"Restitution could help us to at least put a plaque to show where the Vilna Gaon studied, and even start up a Jewish heritage route for tourists," Gurevichius said.

There still is a twice-daily minyan in Vilnius, and 1,500 people show up for the

annual Chanukah celebration put on by the Jewish community.

With help from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Claims Conference, the community sponsors a summer camp for 600 kids. In February it will host a Baltic version of the Limmud educational conference, which is expected to attract 1,000 people.

Gurevichius said the government and the Jewish community have very minor disputes over the bill, which he hopes might be submitted to Parliament in February after municipal elections.

"Nobody wants to be responsible for giving away state money to Jews before elections," he said.

That sentiment, he believes, is the real holdup for the bills in both Lithuania and Latvia, among the last two former Soviet-controlled countries to provide compensation for communal property taken by the Nazis and then the communists. ■

AROUND
THE JEWISH
WORLD

Money gained through the proposed bill would go to a foundation formed by the Lithuanian Jewish community and the World Jewish Restitution Organization.

NEWS IN BRIEF

WORLD

Chavez wins re-election

Hugo Chavez, who has been accused of encouraging anti-Semitism, was re-elected president of Venezuela.

Chavez's victory was announced late Sunday night.

He won at least 61 percent of the vote to challenger Manuel Rosales' 38 percent.

With his victory, Chavez gains another six years in power to pursue his Socialist-inspired policies.

In August, he drew fire for saying that Israelis "are doing what Hitler did against the Jews" and that Israel is carrying out "a new Holocaust" against the Palestinians.

Critics have also cited Chavez's support for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president who has denied the Holocaust and called for Israel's destruction.

Young Jews attacked in Belgium

A group of Chasidic teens from Antwerp was attacked by young Muslims in northeast Belgium. The group of 60 13- to 15-year-olds arrived in Beringen on Nov. 30.

As they arrived at their hostel in a largely Muslim neighborhood, 10 local Muslims approached the building, throwing stones at it and shouting anti-Semitic epithets.

Leaders of the Jewish group called police.

Undeterred by the police's arrival, the youths continued throwing stones at the building.

The group returned to Antwerp that night, accompanied to the highway by a police escort.

The attackers appeared in a district court over the weekend and were sentenced to community service.

Claude Marinower, a Jewish member of the Belgian Federal Parliament, announced that he "will raise the issue with the ministers of justice and the interior."

MIDDLE EAST

Money for Olmert-Haniyeh talks?

An Israeli billionaire offered to pay Hamas a small fortune to arrange a meeting between the Palestinian Authority prime minister and Ehud Olmert.

Ahmed Yussuf, a senior aide to P.A. Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas, said in a television interview Monday that he was contacted recently by Avi Shaked, an Israeli magnate.

Shaked offered to donate \$100 million to the cash-strapped Palestinian Authority if Haniyeh would meet his Israeli counterpart, Yussuf said.

He did not describe Haniyeh's response. In any event, Olmert would be extremely unlikely to accede to any such meeting given that Israel, like the United States and European Union, shuns Hamas as a terrorist group.

El Al Shabbat flight sparks outrage

Fervently Orthodox rabbis in Israel protested after an El Al plane flew on Shabbat.

The Jerusalem Post reported that the Committee for the Sanctity of Shabbat called on the public Monday to "distance themselves from El Al" after the airline authorized a flight to leave Miami on Shabbat in order to make up for time lost by a daylong strike at Ben Gurion International Airport last week.

A group called the Council of Torah Scholars is to reach a decision by the end of the week regarding the airline and the fervently Orthodox community's relationship with it.

French candidate condemns Nazi comment

A French presidential candidate condemned a Lebanese lawmaker's comparison of Israel to Nazi Germany.

Segolene Royal, who is on a Middle East tour to bolster her campaign to succeed President Jacques Chirac, described as "unacceptable, abominable and odious" the comments made to her in Beirut over the weekend by a Hezbollah lawmaker who likened Israeli forces that recently invaded his country to the Nazi occupation of France during World War II.

He was referring to Israel's monthlong war with Hezbollah, sparked by the militant group's cross-border raid in July.

Royal's condemnation came a day after the exchange, when she was already en route to high-level meetings in Israel and the Palestinian Authority. She explained her late response by saying she did not hear the Hezbollah lawmaker at first.

Katsav son accused of harassment

The son of Israeli President Moshe Katsav was accused of sexual harassment.

Israel Railways said Monday that Ariel Katsav, a senior member of its PR staff, was accused of verbally harassing a coworker.

Katsav, whose father has been dogged by a sex scandal for months, denied the charges.

He said the coworker was disgruntled after he complained about her performance, and threatened to file a libel suit against her.

Minister favors Barghouti release

An Israeli Cabinet minister said he would favor freeing Marwan Barghouti.

Barghouti, 47, a Fatah lawmaker, was captured in the West Bank in 2002, tried and sentenced to five life prison terms for masterminding terrorist attacks that killed five people.

But Israeli Environment Minister Gideon Ezra said Monday that releasing Barghouti, which successive Israeli governments have ruled out, would be worthwhile if it won the release of an Israeli soldier held captive in the Gaza Strip and led the Palestinian Authority to halt violence.

"Even the prime minister has talked about the need to release prisoners once Gilad Shalit is freed," Ezra told Israel Radio, referring to the captured soldier.

"It depends how big a deal we are talking about and what the other side promises in return."

NORTH AMERICA

B'nai B'rith gets new president

More than 200 B'nai B'rith International members gathered in New Orleans to inaugurate a new president.

Moishe Smith, a Canadian and the first non-American in the post, will be inaugurated at this week's convention, where attendees also will hear about Jewish and Israeli issues, and learn what BBI is doing to help rebuild New Orleans and other Gulf Coast communities devastated by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Nazi hunter Welles dies at 79

Nazi hunter Elliot Welles died at age 79. He died of a heart attack last week at his home in the Bronx, N.Y. The Vienna-born Welles, a Holocaust survivor, came to the United States after the war, married and opened a restaurant in New York City.

He began Nazi hunting in 1979, starting with the SS officer who ordered the murder of his mother.

Until his retirement in 2003, Welles headed the Anti-Defamation League's Nazi-hunting operations.